GREAT PULPIT MASTERS

VOLUME VIII

A. J. GORDON

INTRODUCTION BY
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NEW YORK
FLEMING H. REVELL COMPANY
LONDON AND GLASGOW
So let us beware, since God finds His only ground of grace in the cross of His Son, how we put self in the place of the cross, and compel God to look upon that which He cannot contemplate with pleasure. Let us be careful that we are not found saying, "O Lord, look upon me a sinner," when we ought to be saying "Behold, O God, our shield, and look upon the face of thine Anointed."

A.J.G.

2. BOLDNESS IN CHRIST

Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may find mercy and grace to help in time of need.—HEBREWS 4:16.

There seems something almost contradictory in such a suggestion. We might regard it, indeed, as an affront to God to approach Him in a confident and assured spirit, when the thing we ask for is entirely undeserved. Mercy, the compassion of God toward a sinner, grace, the unmerited favor of God upon the guilty—how dare we beg for these things in other than the most abject, distrustful and desperate attitude? Only because of Him who has merited for us this unmerited favor, and deserved of justice this mercy for the unjust.

I sometimes think, when I look upon the finished work of Christ, that He has so crowded upon the domain of our spiritual obligations, and covered it with His own obedience, that He has not only left us nothing to do to be saved, but nothing to fear when asking for salvation. So that instead of an abashed and timid and venturing faith there ought to be an assurance that should simply rest on God’s oath and covenant as the end of all controversy, and say boldly, “The Lord is my keeper, I have nothing to fear.” It was not spiritual bravado which quaint George Herbert
exhibited when he said, “If I am ever tempted to doubt concerning the forgiveness of my sin, I resolve to take my New Testament with me to the judgment-seat of Christ, and putting my finger on the place where it is written, ‘He that believeth on me is not condemned,’ to hold it up before Him and say, ‘Now, Lord, remember thy word, in which thou hast caused thy servant to hope.’” Such assurance constitutes the very fiber and muscle of Christian faith. No, I will not say “fiber and muscle,” lest I might seem to imply that faith’s office is to grasp forgiveness and wrest it from a reluctant God. It constitutes “the inestimable might” of its weakness, the fearless abandon, the heroic surrender to the blood of the everlasting covenant. This is the boldness of faith, that, forsaking all self-trust, it dares to rest without a question in the atoning work of Christ.

Let us never forget this, lest while trying to improve our faith we spoil it—that the true fortitude of faith is in its power to surrender, and not in its power to struggle. I hear persons talking about “clinging to the cross.” This is not a gospel conception. We have no clinging to do for salvation. Christ has done all the clinging. And it is because He clung to the cross, clung to it in spite of the challenge, “If he be the Son of God, let him come down from the cross”; clung to it till the nails of expiation had gone clean through the “handwriting of ordinances that was against us,” until the last drop of blood needful for our cleansing had been poured from His veins—it is because He thus clung to the cross that we may boldly let go, and fall in “sovereign overthrow” upon the sure foundations of His grace. Nay, the boldness of faith is not at all in the consciousness of what it can do, but in confidence of what Christ has done.

This will appear if we reflect a moment upon the nature of faith. Its whole office is to receive Christ’s work, not to do any work of its own. It rests on such a passage as, for example, “The Lord hath laid on him the iniquities of us all,” and believes it as a divine fact, so that what was true for us in Christ now becomes true for us in our own experience. It says, “Now I understand it. I am not redeemed because I believe, but I believe because I am redeemed. I am not assured that God will give me grace because I ask for it, but I ask for grace because I am assured that he has given it in Jesus Christ. I see that every inch of ground which I had expected to occupy by my own well-doing has been pre-empted and preoccupied by the Son of God.” Indeed, if I may make what seems to be a contradictory statement, there is hardly a thing that is required of me to do that has not already been done for me.

Listen to the invitation of Scripture: “Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith.” While I am timidly complaining that I have not the trueness of heart or the strength of faith to draw nigh, these words break upon my astonished ear: “Ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.” I hear the command of Scripture, “Be ye reconciled to God.” And while trembling before the painful fact that I cannot conquer my own enmity to God, I instantly hear the news, “When we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son.” Well may faith be bold in its approach to the throne, when it finds that everything required to be done for us has been done by Him who is “mighty to save.” Oh, to know that because of God, “Christ is made unto us wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” We now have His obedience with which to obey, and His punishment to ward off the punishment due to our disobedience. As the traveler on the prairie, finding himself hemmed in
by the fires that with almost lightning speed are sweeping on to devour him knows that his only defense is to light a fire at his feet, which, feeding on the dry grasses, will sweep out to intercept and disarm the conflagration that is approaching—thus conquering fire with fire—so we, reading of that hour when the Lord Jesus shall be “revealed from heaven in flaming fire, taking vengeance on them that know not God and obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ,” can take fire from off the altar where our Saviour made himself an offering for sin, and meet fire with fire, penalty with penalty, the threatening of death for our disobedience, with the proffer of His righteousness who for us “became obedient unto death.” With such a defense have we not reason to be bold not only in our approach to the throne of grace, but in our anticipated approach to the throne of judgment? Resting in the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ, may we not make our own those grand, sweet words of Zinzendorf—

Midst flaming worlds, in Thee arrayed,
    With joy shall I lift up my head;
Bold shall I stand in that great day,
    For who aught to my charge shall lay?

But is there no place for humility in our approach to the throne of grace? Yes, most assuredly—but the humility of self-distrust, and not the humility that distrusts God. Men constantly confound these two. They fancy that it is humility to be slow of persuasion concerning the verity of God’s promises to them. In their desire to be lowly and penitent they make a virtue of doubt, and acquire a stubborn unbelief in the power of the gospel to save such sinners as they are. Such a temper is not humility; it is pride. It is thrusting self in the place of Christ, and making our sins the reason why God should not have mercy on us, when in Christ crucified He has found an all-sufficient reason why He should have mercy on us. So let us beware, since God finds His only ground of grace in the cross of his Son, how we put self in the place of the cross, and compel God to look upon that which He cannot contemplate with pleasure. Let us be careful that we are not found saying, “O God, look upon me a sinner,” when we ought to be saying, “Behold, O God, our shield, and look upon the face of thine Anointed.”

You may say, as you ought, “I am deeply and sadly unworthy of the grace of God.” Of course you are. And you can never be otherwise. For that very reason God has chosen to save you through One who is worthy. But do not, by holding your sins before your eyes, throw Christ’s righteousness into eclipse. Don’t sing forever that miserere of a lost soul, “Unworthy unworthy,” when God invited you to take up the strains of that new song, “Worthy the Lamb that was slain.” God forbid that in any word I should seem to disparage penitence and contrition. But woe to the soul which trusts in these, instead of trusting in Christ, seeking to find in them a discipline of despair through which to be fitted for the dispensation of mercy. If you are conscious of your sins, whether you have felt them for one hour or for many years, I know of but one thing to say to you: “Behold the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world.” And when, having beheld Him and believed in Him, you hear that great word of Scripture ringing in your ears, “He that believeth on the Son hath life,” you cannot be too forward in taking up the confidence that you have life. It is
not the forwardness of self-confidence that we are talking about. It is not the presumption of imagined fitness to draw near to God. Boldness—who has read the Scriptures, does not see how utterly and entirely it is grounded on the work of Christ? “Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus.” Ah, that is it! The imagery is from the Tabernacle. And there is enough to show us that “without holiness no man shall see the Lord.” There is the altar, and the laver, and the veil of the holiest, and the mercy-seat. But on the altar we see Christ “offering himself without spot unto God.” In the laver we find the Spirit giving “the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Ghost.” At the holiest we find the veil parted through the rending of the body, and the mercy-seat we find sprinkled with Christ’s blood. Why not be bold when every step to the throne is guarded and paved for us by the blood of the Holy One?” Tread softly, my soul, as thou rememberest thy sins; tread firmly as thou seest the blood of the everlasting covenant sprinkling the throne. Bow thyself in lowly contrition as thou feelest the smittings of thy guilty conscience; lift thy head with joy as thou heardest the words, “Having your hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience.” Humble thyself in the sight of the Lord, but do not fail to be exalted as He shows thee Christ, upon whom were laid the iniquities of us all.

Thus we see that in that faith that approaches God for grace and mercy there is this double character of humbleness and assurance. For faith is two-sided, having a manward look and a Godward look. In the one direction there is an intense and vehement self-questioning, in the other the most worshipful and assured reliance upon the completed work of Christ. So that while we ought to be intensely distrustful of ourselves, I know not where, in all the
gospel, you will find the requirement that we come to God timidly, distrustfully or despairingly to beg for mercy instead of coming joyfully, and in the frankness of reconciled enmity, taking that mercy.