

THE LIVING WAY TO THE LIVING GOD

Ben Janssen | Hebrews 10:19-31 | June 30, 2019

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. ²⁶ For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. ²⁸ Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? ³⁰ For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." ³¹ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

He achieved almost all of his grand goals for Oklahoma City, including the creation of Tinker Air Force Base, the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, the FAA Center, and the development of Lake Hefner and another lake that would be named after him. And so the Oklahoma House of Representatives passed a resolution at the end of his career, officially designating him "Mr. Oklahoma City." But the greatest tribute to Stanley Draper was another namesake, the Stanley Draper Expressway, an elevated highway, "a marvel of engineering, fifty feet high and nearly two miles long, the longest bridge in the state."¹

We've come now to the end of the Preacher of Hebrews' exposition on the theology of Christ's priestly ministry, the central feature of the book of Hebrews. By now we should be well acquainted with this fact of this book of the Bible, but we should also be able to articulate its significance and the difference it should make in our lives. Here in verse 20 the Preacher says that there is this "new and living way" that Christ has opened up for us, kind of like the Stanley Draper Expressway opened up a new way to not only get across the sprawling city but also to get across the heart of America, a highway that was sure to finally put Oklahoma City on the map.

The passage before us today is a good one to go to if you need a refresher on these things. It is a good summary of these important issues addressed in Hebrews. What are the benefits of Christ's priestly ministry? How do we partake of them? And is there anything to lose if we refuse them?

THE BENEFITS OF CHRIST

What are the benefits that come to us because of Jesus serving as our priest, as our high priest? In verses 19-21, we find them summarized for us in two succinct ways.

Access to God

First, we have access to God. Verse 19 says we “have confidence to enter the holy places.” That is, we have been given direct and immediate access into the presence of God. The word *confidence* here is not subjective, describing the feeling you have about your access to God. Certainty is implied here, a certainty that is not based upon our subjective feeling but upon a reality.² It is because of “the blood of Jesus.” It is because of Christ’s priestly sacrifice, his definitive priestly sacrifice, that the barrier separating us from God has been removed.

And so, Christian, if God seems distant to you or if he seems unapproachable, then the Preacher would remind you that because of Jesus’s priestly ministry, this is no longer so. The “blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Tim 6:15-16) – you have access to him at any or all times.

But don’t forget that this is true only because of the sacrificial blood of Jesus. Through him we have been given, verse 20 says, the “new and living way” to access God. It is the way “that [Christ] opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh.”

This word *curtain* (“veil” in other translations) is found only six times in the New Testament. Three of those are in Hebrews. In Hebrews 6:19 and 9:3 it is a clear reference to the cloth that separated the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place. It was this cloth which most fundamentally represented the separation that existed between God and human beings. But in Hebrews 6:19-20 we were told that Jesus went “into the inner place behind the curtain . . . as a forerunner on our behalf.” And now he tells us not only that Jesus went behind this curtain as our representative, but that Jesus opened up for us our own way of entrance. We still go through the curtain, but notice the Preacher says the curtain is Jesus’s own flesh.

This is significant, because the other places we find this word *curtain* is once each in Matthew (27:51), Mark (15:38), and Luke (23:45) where each use it to describe the same historical event. Here’s what Matthew says. “And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two.” Suddenly, spontaneously, that inner curtain was suddenly torn apart. Imagine the startling event that must have been for the priests who were ministering in that first room of the temple at the time. Imagine sitting in your house and the curtains over your windows just rip in half. A couple of years ago, Ryan and Amy’s kitchen table shattered in the middle of the night. What do you do when something like that happens? You go looking for a cause, for something to explain how or why this happened.

Well, Matthew tells us why. Here’s the verse before the one in which he describes the shattering of the tent. “And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit” (Matt 27:50).

It’s not important *how* this happened. It’s important *why* it happened, what it means *that* it happened. When the Supreme Court strikes down a law, it means that law can no longer be in force. And when this curtain ripped in two at the very moment that Jesus of Nazareth gave up his life on the cross, it meant that now a new way into the presence of God had been made.

And it's also a "living way" into the presence of God. Previously, the way into the presence of God was characterized by the death of an animal, but now the way into his presence is characterized by the life of the once-dead-but-now-risen Christ.³

Acceptance Before God

This gets us to the second benefit of Christ's ministry as our High Priest. Not only has he given us access to God by his sacrificial death, but he leads us into God's presence through his resurrected life. We "have" access to God (v. 19) and we "have" a great priest over the house of God whose present ministry assures the Church that "their worshipful approach to God will be welcomed."⁴

PARTAKING OF CHRIST'S BENEFITS

These are the benefits we've been given because of Christ's past and present ministry as our high priest. But our Preacher is eager to show us how this should affect us, how it should change the way we live. So in verses 22-25, he gives us three ways we can partake of the benefits we've been given because of Christ's priestly ministry for us.

The Christian Life

Before we look at these three ways individually, we should notice something about them as a whole. The three exhortations we are about to read are not random ideas that our Preacher has come up with. There is a familiar pattern of faith (v. 22), hope (v. 23), and love (v. 24). You might recall the Apostle Paul putting these three together at the end of 1 Corinthians 13. Commentators tell us that these were "a familiar triad in early Christian preaching" and that these three words "embrace the whole of Christian existence."⁵

We've seen this triad before in Hebrews (Heb 6:10-12). And we have three chapters left in our study, each of which centers on these three themes (faith in chapter 11, hope in chapter 12, love in chapter 13). So what we can see in the exhortations that follow is the way of the Christian life, the distinctives of Christian living that originate out of the reality of having the Son of God as our high priest.

Three Arenas of Living

As we begin to look at each of these three exhortations individually, we can see they also give us three arenas in which the Christian is responsible to live out his faith.

Worship: The Practice of Faith

First, we have a responsibility to God. We must "draw near" to him. We've been given access to God and promised acceptance before him, so we must not neglect to do so. William Lane says that this "is the essence of being a Christian."⁶ To refuse to obey this command would be similar to claiming to be an author while never writing anything, or to be a chef who never goes into a kitchen.

Back in Hebrews 4:16, to “draw near” to God essentially meant to pray. But the expression probably includes “every expression of worship” both in private and public life.⁷ But the point is that if you claim to be a Christian but you do not regularly, frequently, intentionally worship God, then it simply brings into question your claim. You say you are a Christian. Well, what is it that Christians do? They worship God. So, do you?

The manner in which Christians worship is distinctive as well, which is what the Preacher describes in the rest of verse 22: “a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” Christians “draw near” to God, they worship God, not because they are seeking inner peace and assurance before God, but because they’ve already been granted all these things through Christ as their high priest.

Endurance: The Maintenance of Hope

Second, we have a responsibility to the world, namely, to “hold fast the confession of our hope.” The world needs some hope. We Christians have hope, the Preacher says, because we know that “he who promised is faithful.” We have been given good news—the gospel of Jesus Christ—and it is good news for all to hear!

So, brothers and sisters, as Christians we don’t have to agree on everything. There is plenty of room for debate with each other and with our neighbors on all sorts of things, from the best public service to the best public policies. But what identifies us as Christians is not our political allegiances or our parenting styles or food choices or daily routines. It is our allegiance to Christ and his gospel of salvation. We must not waver on this. It is the only message that offers real hope in our world.

Community: The Provocation of Love

Then, third, we have a responsibility to each other, according to verse 24: “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.” We have the duty of caring for one another as brothers and sisters.⁸ There simply is not such thing as true Christian living that is only personal and private. The religion of the Bible is from beginning to end communal and public. We are our brother’s keeper. We are each other’s business.

Specifically, we are expected to find ways to stir each other up to love and good works. The word translated “to stir up,” is usually a negative word, meaning “to irritate” or “to become outraged.”⁹ In Acts 17:16, it is translated “to provoke.” So our responsibility to one another is to scheme and plot ways in which we might provoke each other. It’s not hard to know how to provoke each other to wrath. I don’t have to think very long on how to do that. That’s easy. But our responsibility for one another as disciples of Jesus is not merely to *avoid* provoking each other to wrath; rather, positively, we are to give intentional effort to provoke one another to love and good works.

The Priority of the Church

So how do you do that? Any ideas?

Here's an idea. What if you got together with your Missional Family this week and discussed not only this last responsibility, but all three of them? What would it look like for us to draw near to God and to maintain hope in the world and to provoke one another to love and good works?

I think meeting together to discuss things like this is a really good idea, and it seems the Preacher would say so, too. For however we seek to go about obeying this command, we simply cannot do it without being together. So, do not neglect "to meet together," the Preacher says in verse 25. The way we can provoke love and good works in each other is "in an atmosphere of Christian fellowship," says one commentator, where we see such things exemplified in gospel community.¹⁰ If we are going to consider one another with a goal of provoking love and good works in one another, then we're going to need to be committed to meeting together for the purpose of "mutual encouragement and exhortation."¹¹

How often should we meet together? Some would say Hebrews 10:25 can only command our commitment to the weekly gathering of the church for corporate worship. But this can't be all the Preacher has in mind since he ends the verse by telling us that we should meet together for the purpose of edification "all the more" as the Day of our Lord's return draws near. Others of course use this verse to guilt and shame people into coming to all kinds of church events.

We must avoid both extremes. On the one hand, we should recognize that many professing Christians make it a habit to neglect church meetings and gatherings. Different churches have different amounts of official church meetings, and whatever church you are committed to should expect that you will be committed to its regular meetings. At Crosstown, the members are in covenant to attend the weekly corporate gathering as well as the regular gathering of their particular Missional Family. So, let's start there. If you've gotten yourself in the habit of missing these two meetings on a regular or semi-regular basis, then you should break that habit.

On the other hand, we should recognize that the principle behind this verse is that we are consistently involved in the life of the church. All of us could do more in that regard. It's not about meeting the minimum expectations. It's about valuing the church, both in worship and fellowship and in pursuing the mission of God together, so that love for God and good works for one another are provoked in healthy, but intentional ways.

So how do we partake of the benefits we have been given by grace in Jesus Christ? By participating in the life of the church where those benefits are enjoyed in relationship with God, the world, and with our brothers and sisters.

REFUSING CHRIST'S BENEFITS

Now you may have noticed that in most English translations, these exhortations begin with the words, "let us." But these are not suggestions, like, "Let's get pizza." These are imperatives, like, "Let's get out of here!" These are commands in which the Preacher is saying, "This is the course of action I have decided to take in response to Christ's priestly ministry, and you must join me in these actions."¹² And there can be no doubt that what follows are imperatives that remain in effect today for anyone who can rightly claim to be a follower of Jesus. So we are obligated to obey each

of them. If we don't, we are refusing to partake of all the benefits we have in Christ. And in verses 26-31, the Preacher warns us of what will happen if we do not participate in Christ's benefits.

Fearing Apostasy

Here we find the fourth of our five "warning passages" in Hebrews. Once again, the warning is based on the reality that as followers of Jesus we live in "an unresolved tension between peril and promise" until Christ returns. And the fact that some of the church's members have neglected the meetings indicates the reality of this spiritual peril.¹³

This has always been the case. Even in the second century we have evidence that many professing believers were too "absorbed in business" to make the time to "associate with the saints."¹⁴ At the end of the day, the question is simply whether or not we really believe God and Jesus and the Bible and the gospel. Do we really believe that nothing can be more important than accepting the gift we've been given by Christ and gladly following hard after him?

The Deliberate Sin of Neglect

Or do we evidence our unbelief by our failure to prioritize the commitments of the faith? I have no desire to shame anyone or guilt anyone into action. But we cannot ignore the warning the Preacher gives right here. It is the neglect of the imperatives in the previous verses that the Preacher calls deliberate sinning in verse 26. These are the kinds of sins that can only be committed by those who have received the knowledge of the truth; that is, those who have been baptized into the Christian faith but who distance themselves from God's grace and forgiveness.¹⁵

In such a situation, "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins," the Preacher says in verse 26. There is no salvation outside of the free offer of the gospel. But if we neglect the gospel there is no other salvation to be found. We do not receive the gospel by our obedience previously described. Nevertheless, our disobedience to the gospel implications may well demonstrate our neglect of the gospel itself. If we do not worship God through Christ, if we waver on the hope of the gospel, if we show no care for the spiritual health of our brothers and sisters in Christ, what might this say about us?

The Final Judgment

The Preacher says it may well say that despite our profession of faith, what we are really doing is what is described in verse 29. We are trampling the Son of God under our feet; meaning that we are actually denying Christ even while claiming to be a Christian. We are profaning the blood of the covenant; meaning we are treating Jesus's sacrificial death as no more significant than the death of anyone else, even though we may wear his cross around our neck or have it tattooed on our bodies. And we are causing the Holy Spirit of grace to become outraged, even though we would like to think that "grace" must mean a willingness to tolerate sin rather than the generous, undeserved power which is at work to put our sin to death.

Hear, then, brothers and sisters, a very important declaration from the mouth of our Preacher. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (v. 31). Let us not say otherwise. We dare not

“presume on the riches of [God’s] kindness and forbearance and patience,” failing to know “that God’s kindness is meant to lead [us] to repentance” (Rom 2:4).

Yes, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. But do not then run from him. You will not escape. You will be thrown into God’s hands for judgment of the most terrifying sort. Instead run *to* him. Throw yourself into his hands and find mercy.

Stanley Draper’s new highway grew quite old over the next 50 years, and by 2012 had become an embarrassing eyesore. We saw it come down, and in its place was promised a new way, what Mayor Mick called “the grandest street this generation has ever seen.”¹⁶ I hope you didn’t set your hopes on that promise.

But here’s a promise you can set your hope in. For in Christ—and Christ alone—there is a new way, a *living way* into the presence of the living God.

¹ Sam Anderson, *Boomtown: The Fantastical Saga of Oklahoma City, Its Chaotic Founding, Its Apocalyptic Weather, Its Purloined Basketball Team, and the Dream of Becoming a World-Class Metropolis* (New York: Crown, 2018), 224.

² William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), [283](#).

³ George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The NIV Application Commentary, ed. Terry C. Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), [342](#).

⁴ Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, [285](#).

⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014), [720](#).

⁶ Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, [286](#).

⁷ [Ibid.](#)

⁸ Johannes Behm, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT), ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964–74), [4:975](#).

⁹ See Heinrich Seesemann, *TDNT*, [5:857](#).

¹⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), [256-57](#).

¹¹ Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, [289](#).

¹² This is the force of the hortatory subjunctive. See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), [464](#).

¹³ Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, [290](#).

¹⁴ *Shepherd of Hermas, Similitude, 8.8.1*.

¹⁵ O. Michel (*Der Brief an Die Hebräer*, vol. 13 [Kritisch-Exegetischer Kommentar, 1975], 350), cited in Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I Howard Marshall and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), [532](#).

¹⁶ Anderson, *Boomtown*, 232.