

# Confidence to Draw Near

## Ezekiel 17:11-20; Hebrews 10:12-25



What is the opposite of fear? We are used to thinking of fear and courage as opposites, but perhaps confidence is the better answer. We are called to confidence. All too often, our lives reflect more fear than faith. Do our lives exhibit the faith of confidence in God, or do they express a greater sense of anxiety? Dare we approach God's unmediated presence?

There was no overall problem with the Old Testament concept of relating to God. The sacrificial system had no intrinsic problem, as it addressed all the obvious issues of forgiveness, repentance, grace, and morality. Accounts of patriarchs and judges clarify that the people always had access to God. The problem was ever one of confidence. Anxiety in approaching God was the biggest hurdle to faith.

The writer of Hebrews walks us through several elements of Hebrew faith. He compares God's speaking in the past to revelation through Jesus Christ. If we note carefully, it is not so much a change in the message, but an issue of clarity and finality. In Christ Jesus, God's revelation has come in a manner far superior to any past revelation. It is very God who has come into our midst to speak good news of redemption.

Certainly, God's revelation in Jesus Christ has changed aspects of our approach to God. We have greater clarity about God's character and redeeming will. Hebrews never debates the availability of salvation. God was ever in the process of dealing with sinful humanity on the basis of grace and mercy. We find that the sacrifices offered by the priests and high priests were effective, for God desired to accept them. In Christ's sacrifice, however, there is a difference in our understanding of God. This difference breeds new confidence in God's benevolent grace.

We hear again Jesus instructions to lay aside our anxieties. We hear Jesus' insistence that God hears our prayer. We hear Jesus' words of God's grace, mercy, and love. We find Jesus accepting the humble, the sinful, and the despised. We hear again of the God who seeks us out for fellowship.

In many times and ways, God spoke to our forefathers, but now directly through His son. The message is not so different, for it is the same God speaking. This supreme revelation in Christ, however, sounds a different tone. God is not far off in the clouds. God need not be cajoled into hearing our prayers, forgiving the repentant, or accepting us "Just as I Am." The same God who offered grace and forgiveness in the garden, redeemed a stiff-necked people out of Egypt, and offered warning and mercy to a repentant Nineveh came in flesh to offer salvation to all who would trust. Perhaps the biggest ingredient missing was confidence and desire—on our part, not God's.

In this passage of Hebrews we find a simple phrase which plays a large role in understanding the whole text. There is no major change in how God accepts our pleas for forgiveness. All along it has been grace and mercy that offered pardon. It is still the same. The sacrificial system has been replaced by a single sacrifice. While that would appear to be a radical change, it is cosmetic. The sacrificial system never enacted forgiveness. Rituals and rites of liturgical practice were never truly central to faith. Hence the words of the prophets that God did not desire sacrifice, but righteous living. Sacrifice was a means to request God's favor through a mediator. We might call it a meaningful aid to prayer.

The nations were afraid to approach their gods. Sacrifice and ritual worship were designed to avoid conflict with the will of the gods, as much as to seek means to present one's requests. Fear and anxiety motivated their worship. Israel was little different. Israel wanted some kind of mediation between them and God. They wanted a buffer to keep them out of God's presence while inviting God's favor. Forgiveness was ever a gift which God bestowed at will. God was able and willing to forgive and receive humanity, but we had a problem—we still do.

Ezekiel's words point to events in which God had been willing to rescue the people, but they would not listen. Rather than turn to *Yahweh* for guidance, the people reacted in fear. Zedekiah had continued the rebellious tradition, even using the name of *Yahweh* to seal a covenant with Egypt that was contrary to God's will. The patterns for redemption, forgiveness, and restoration had not changed. They had remained constant since David, Moses, and Abraham. Rather than displaying confidence, however, they people demonstrated fear.

Fear does not induce faith. Rather, it breeds distrust, distance, and hostility. Zedekiah had all the means of sacrifice available, but he would neither seek nor trust God. Rather than draw near to God, he drew away to his own destruction and that of the nation. He did not have the needed confidence in God to relinquish control over his life and the future of the people. His fear brought about his downfall where confidence in God could have saved him.

Abraham Heschel, a Jewish philosopher, speaks of God seeking humanity as the basic character of Judaism.<sup>1</sup> While we may not recognize it, this theme is a repeated focus throughout Scripture. It is also the repeated failing of the people to accept God's call to intimacy, confidence, and trust. If this were true for Zedekiah, it was true throughout the scope of history. Rather than being confident of God's love, the people lived in fear.

While the rituals of worship and sacrifice were designed to give the people confidence in God's love and mercy, the people used them as barriers to distance themselves from God. They depended on the priestly system to mediate God's presence and remove them from a face-to-face encounter with God. In Christ Jesus, that buffer zone is gone. With the sacrifice of Christ Jesus, we are called to approach God with confidence. Priestly mediation is nullified, for it is God who has come among humanity with the express intent to bring our needs, burdens, and pleas before the throne of heaven.

What now would be the point of priestly sacrifice? God Himself has come to us. God calls us to trust in His grace, forgiveness, mercy, and direction. Rather than worrying with how we should escape destruction, we are called to approach God's throne to find mercy, grace, and love. We have access to God's throne not simply to escape judgment, but to draw near in fellowship with the living God.

Will we accept the message of this good news? Will we lay our fears, uncertainties, and anxieties at God's feet? Will we live in the full presence of God to which we have been called? The gospel is more than an escape from judgment. It is a call to live in the presence of God today and forever. Will we lay hold of this gospel of confidence in God's love or will we be controlled by our fears? Christ came to give us the confidence we need. Will we accept such a wonderful gift?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*

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<sup>1</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, 1955.