

July 12, 2015

## Draw Near

Hebrews 10: 19 – 39

This section is bookended by one idea expressed in two different ways. One way is expressed positively; the other way negatively. The positive expression is 'Draw near'. The negative one is 'Don't shrink back'. And in the middle is a warning about what happens to those who don't draw near. As you read this section, you can almost hear the pleading and tears in the writer's pen as he encourages, warns, thunders, and cajoles his readers to 'Draw near – don't be among those who do not draw near – whatever happens, draw near'. And although he doesn't say it in so many words, the idea he is trying to get across is draw near to God. We've heard it before in chapter four: *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* Hebrews 4:16 We heard it again in chapter 7: *Consequently, He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.* Hebrews 7:25 We'll hear it again in chapter 11: *And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him.* Hebrews 11:6 And here in chapter 10: *Let us draw near.*

Draw near – draw near – draw near. The aim of the writer throughout this book has been and continues to be to get his readers to set their eyes and hearts on Jesus and draw near to God. And if you understand the gospel, if you understand the whole intent of the revelation of God in His word, you begin to see this is His great purpose in the universe. God wants us to draw near. When He created man in the beginning, we were near. God was close. Adam walked and talked with God in the garden. You see the barest glimpse of the depth of their fellowship. Adam wasn't doing anything to make this happen. There was nothing between them. There was no chasm to try and cross. It was sweet communion of Father and son, and the Father was not always trying to get the son to draw near. They were near. But it all changed when Adam fell. That broke the nearness; that broke the fellowship; that broke the relationship. And the rest of the story of the Bible is the story of God's plan to get us to draw near once again.

What I get when I read this section are powerful motivations to draw near. Don't think of the gospel as something that turns bad men into better men. Don't think of the gospel as a call to live a certain way so that God will accept you. Don't think of the gospel solely in terms of salvation from the wrath of God. We need to see the gospel as the call of God to draw near once again. We've been alienated; we've been estranged; we've been separated from God; and the gospel is the proclamation that God has worked in history to make the way for us to return to Him. This is why the writer is constantly calling his readers to draw near. There are powerful motivations, both positive and negative to draw near, and we see a lot of both in this book. But don't lose sight of the goal of the writer – draw near to God. Whatever else happens – draw near. Draw near because He's worth it; draw near because only His presence will satisfy you; draw near because all the promises of sin are a lie and all the allurements of the world are a mirage. Draw near because God is the only reality in the universe.

So the writer lays this out in three sections here in verses 19 – 39. He first exhorts his readers to draw near to God: *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.* And then with terrible clarity and severe language, he lays out the condition and end of those who do not draw near: *For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.* And finally he ends with an admonition not to shrink back, but persevere in the faith. *But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.* An exhortation to draw near; a warning for those who will not draw near; an admonition to persevere and not shrink back.

The writer begins this section with this magnificent invitation to draw near to God because we have something he calls 'confidence': *Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that He opened for us through the curtain, that is, through His flesh. and since we have a great priest over the house of God.*

We've run into this word before and it means a free and fearless confidence, cheerful courage, boldness. He says that we have boldness because of the blood of Jesus to come right into the place where in the Old Testament, the glory of God tabernacled – the holy place. In other words, because Jesus made a way for us to God through His eternal sacrifice on the cross, we can come into God's presence without fearing for our lives. It wasn't that way in the Old Testament. When Moses built the tabernacle in the wilderness, the holy place was where the ark of the covenant was. That was where the presence of God was. And you couldn't just walk in. Only one guy, once a year, could go in there to offer the blood of the sacrifice for the sins of the people and meet with God. And he had a rope tied to his ankle in case he hadn't been cleansed properly. But here the writer says the blood of Jesus gives us a free and fearless confidence to draw near to God. And that He stands as our great priest, interceding for us. The foundation of our confidence is the blood of Christ and His position as our great intercessor.

In other words, our drawing near to God has absolutely nothing to do with either our good behavior or bad behavior. It has nothing to do with our suitability or religious perfection. It has altogether to do with Jesus' blood and position. This is crucial for us to understand. Otherwise we won't draw near, or we'll try to draw near on our own merits, and we can't. We can't because without the cleansing of His blood, we have hearts that house an evil conscience. The writer says, *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*. You see, an evil conscience means that our hearts instinctively know that we are not fit to stand in the presence of God and they tell us. A lot of the issues we have in our lives is because our consciences are always condemning us, and we know that we are not fit draw near to God.

Little Johnny had been given his first slingshot and was visiting his grandparents. While he was practicing, he saw grandma's pet duck. On an impulse he took aim and let fly. The stone hit, and the duck fell dead. The boy panicked. Desperately he hid the dead duck in the wood pile, only to look up and see his sister watching. Sally had seen it all, but she said nothing. After lunch that day, Grandma said, "Sally, let's wash the dishes." But Sally said, "Johnny told me he wanted to help in the kitchen today. Didn't you, Johnny?" And she whispered to him, "**Remember the duck!**" So Johnny did the dishes. Later Grandpa asked if the children wanted to go fishing., Grandma said, "I'm sorry, but I need Sally to help make supper." Sally smiled and said, "That's all taken care of. Johnny wants to do it." Again she whispered, "**Remember the duck.**" Our conscience is always telling us, **Remember the duck!** And it keeps us from drawing near. And the writer is reminding his readers that our hearts *have been* sprinkled clean from an evil conscience so that we *can* draw near to God.

We need consciences that are clean in order to draw near, but the writer adds another phrase: *and our bodies washed with pure water*. What does that mean? Is he urging us to take a bath before we contemplate drawing near? Bathing your body is not the point here. The point is a clean conscience. But what makes our consciences dirty? What defiles the conscience? The reason our consciences are dirty is that our bodies are sinning. Our bodies need washing. We are doing things or thinking things we know God does not approve. What made Adam flee the presence of God? His guilty conscience brought on by doing something he knew was wrong. And here the writer is telling us that the blood of Jesus is effective to cleanse our consciences defiled by the wrongs we have done in our bodies. In effect, His blood washes our bodies clean from sinful actions. You know that clean feeling you have when you've sinned and confessed and repented? That is the conscience being cleansed and your body being washed.

And then the writer says: *Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful*. We need to keep a firm grip on the confession of our hope without wavering. What is he trying to say? What is that hope? Hope here is not wishful thinking. The hope he is talking about is tied directly to the idea of drawing near. What is our hope as Christians? The New Testament talks a lot about knowing the hope to which we have been called; that we have a hope laid up in heaven; about the hope of eternal life; about the hope of the gospel; about the hope of glory. There's a lot about hope. The Christian life is filled with hope. But ultimately hope comes down to a person. In the 1<sup>st</sup> letter to the Thessalonians, in chapters 4 and 5, Paul is writing to inject this hope back into hearts that were losing hope. And here is what he says: *But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope*. Apparently there was a message going around that those who died before Christ returned would miss Him. And they were grieving about that. But Paul says, 'Don't be like those who have no hope'.

In other words, those without Christ grieve with a sense of hopelessness for their dead loved ones because they will never be reunited with them. Death was the end. And Paul says, 'Don't grieve like that'. Christians grieve, but they don't grieve hopelessly. There's hope in the grief. And Paul says, 'Don't grieve hopelessly – because if you believe that Jesus died and rose again, then you know that Jesus will bring those who have died as Christians with Him when He returns'. And then he goes on to describe what happens when the Lord returns to gather His people, *For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.*

There it is. That's the hope. And so we will always be with the Lord. The Christian's hope is not a mansion in the sky, or endless life, or eternal joy. Our hope is Christ Himself. The goal of the gospel is to reconcile men and women to God. It's to draw near. And the writer says, 'Hold on to this hope without wavering. Hold on to the hope that one day you will see the face of the One you love and be with Him forever.' John Owen, one of the Puritan giants, wrote in a letter to a friend during an illness in 1674 that, ***'Christ is our best friend, and ere long will be our only friend. I pray God with all my heart that I may be weary of everything else but converse and communion with Him.'*** You see, the point of salvation is to be brought into relationship with Jesus. That was Paul's great ambition. He said: *'I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in his death.* That was the hope that motivated all of Paul's life. And this hope was solid and unchanging because He who promised this hope is faithful.

And the writer makes it clear that this is not some individual effort, but to hold on to our hope without wavering requires community. *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 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.* You see, a day is coming. **The** day is coming, it's drawing near, and the way to meet it is together. The writer knows us, he knows himself. Left to ourselves we tend to drift away and not draw near. He is telling us to be deliberate, intentional, even provocative with each other. Consider, he says, how to stir up one another. We could say, 'Deliberately think of ways to incite one another to love and good deeds'. He's telling us to think about one another, focus on one another, study one another, let your mind be occupied with one another – find ways to stir one another to love and good deeds. The question we need to ask ourselves is this: 'What can I say or do that would encourage my brother to love and good deeds?'

And we can't do that if we never get together: *not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some.* This is crucial to provoking one another. If we never met together regularly – we wouldn't think about each other – we wouldn't study each other – we wouldn't have a clue how to provoke one another to love and good deeds. You see, when we get together, that is an encouragement in itself, but it is also a great safeguard for us. I have heard more than one person who claimed to be a Christian say they do not need to go to church to know God or be a Christian. And what they are really saying is that they like to have a God that is created in their own image. He is only as demanding as they want Him to be. He never says a harsh word to them – He is always considerate of their feelings – He never asks them to do anything they do not want to do – it's always comfortable – it's always pleasant and not too demanding.

Our coming together is to encourage one another, and also to warn one another. We need to encourage one another to keep drawing near to God – and we need to warn one another to reject any idea of drawing away from Him. And it is easy to spot those who are drawing away – they simply stop coming to church. I can tell when someone is having a hard time – I don't see them – they stay away from Sunday mornings, they stop coming to prayer, they quit coming to their community group. It is ironic that at the very time we need the encouragement and warning of the saints – we run away. We need to encourage each other to come together – we need to warn each other that it is dangerous to be alone – that Satan delights in picking off the straggler and the struggler. We need to remind each other that the time is short, the days are evil – that life is fleeting and death is certain, judgment is sure and Jesus is coming back soon. If we are out there by ourselves, there is no one to warn us – and no one to encourage us that His promises are sure, His grace is sufficient, and His mercies are new every morning.

We need this precisely because, after the encouraging exhortation to draw near, the writer warns us of the danger of not 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 spurned 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.*

Needless to say this is a terrifying passage, and it would take more hours than we have this morning to fully unpack every part of it. What I'd like to do is give you an overall sense of the burden of the writer to his readers. Why he wrote this the way he did and what he's trying to convey. Remember, he's writing to these 1<sup>st</sup> century believers who had for the most part been saved out of Judaism to Christ. And they're in danger of turning away, they're in danger of apostasy. And he's encouraging them to look to Jesus, the author and finisher of their salvation. He's been urging them to draw near to Christ because salvation is not about what you know or what you do as much as it is about who you know. Recall how he warns them: 'Don't drift away! Don't harden your hearts! Today if you hear His voice! Don't come short of the rest in Christ!' In other words, there seems to be a very real chance that unless they persevere in the faith, they may find that eventually they are not in the faith. And it is crucial that we find ourselves continually drawing near because on the other side of drawing near waits the wrath of God.

Now I know this is not a popular topic. The common mischaracterization of Christians, particularly fundamental Christians, is the angry black-robed preacher breathing fire and brimstone at the congregation in order to scare them to heaven. And it is easy to dismiss that as a boogymen designed to scare people into behaving well. But the wrath of God was never intended to make us try harder, do better, or turn over a new leaf. The wrath of God comes to us to tell us that without Christ, all we have is a fearful expectation of certain judgment and a consuming fire. God is angry all day long over sin and this text tells that we have only two possibilities. Either we have a sacrifice for sins, or we face a consuming fire. We either embrace the Lamb of God as our sacrifice, or we go it alone to face the fire.

Now I know a lot of people have the idea that we should focus on the love of God, not the wrath of God. But they say that in ignorance. In his book, *Knowing God*, J.I. Packer said: ***'One of the most striking things about the Bible is the vigor with which both Testaments emphasize the reality and the terror of God's wrath...there are more references in Scripture to the anger, fury, and wrath of God, than there are to His love and tenderness'***. And if we ignore that, or if we downplay the wrath of God, we will never know the love of God. Bill Farley in his book, *A Gospel-Powered Humility* says, ***'As upside down as this may sound, the wrath of God is essential to our happiness. It is difficult to find real enduring rest in your relationship with God, or security in His love, until you fully embrace the biblical teaching about God's wrath'***. In other words, unless you feel the weight and horror of your sin, and God's righteous response to it, you will not fully embrace His loving provision for it. The love of God is revealed in the wrath of God, because it is His love that provides a way of escape from His wrath. God's wrath was poured out on the Son of His love so that all those whom God loves can now draw near.

The writer here is painting the darkest picture possible for his readers. But you need to understand that he's not telling his readers anywhere in this passage that it is possible to lose your salvation. You have to understand the kind of people he's talking about. In 26 and 27 he describes these people as continual, willful sinners and adversaries. That is, they know the truth, they have received the knowledge of the truth, yet they reject the truth. Furthermore they have an adversarial relationship with God; they're still enemies. In verse 29 they are described as those who spurn the Son of God, profane the blood of the covenant, and outrage the Spirit of grace. The NASB says that they 'trample underfoot the Son of God' and 'regard as unclean the blood of the covenant' and 'insult the Spirit of grace'. And if we didn't know better, we'd think the writer is talking about total pagans. But he's not.

Look at some of the language. These people have received at least some knowledge of the truth as we read in verse 26. That is, they have in some measure heard and at least acknowledged the gospel. In verse 29 he says that this kind of person has profaned the blood of the covenant, *by which he was sanctified*. But in verse 30, the writer describes these people as God's people: *The Lord will judge His people*. That's shocking.



In other words, the writer is describing those in the church who do not have a real, saving faith. They look like Christians, maybe even act like Christians. But they spurn, or trample under foot the Son of God, meaning they treat Him as merely a good moral teacher who should be listened to maybe, but not necessarily obeyed. They do not treat Him as Lord in their life. They also profane the blood of the covenant, which means that they treat it as common, nothing special. They don't trust in the saving, cleansing blood of Jesus to save them. It is not precious to them. And they have outraged or insulted the Spirit of grace by saying as some said in Paul's day, 'Let us sin so that grace abounds'. They have turned the grace of God into license to sin and justify it by saying, 'God will forgive us'.

And the writer says, '[If] *anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by [these]?*' And the thing is, he's not talking about the average person in the world, he's talking about those who have professed to belong to Christ. He is saying that these people have been under the teaching and preaching of the truth; they've been in fellowship with the saints; they've taken communion and sang and prayed; in a general sense they have been sanctified or set apart from the world; and yet God calls them His adversaries. They're on the other side. They are not drawing near to God. They're in the church, but they are the tares and not the wheat. They have an appearance of godliness without the reality.

Paul tells Timothy about these guys in chapter 3 of his second letter: *For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, 3 heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, 4 treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, 5 having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.* Paul is not describing people who are claim to be unbelievers. He's talking about people who claim to be Christians. Unbelievers don't attempt to have any kind of appearance of godliness. Only those who claim to be Christians have any concern about godliness. This is a word to the church and the writer is pleading with them to draw near to God and not prove themselves to be in this category.

If this doesn't stagger you I'm not sure you've been listening. The writer is saying that it is possible that we have had truth revealed to us. We have received some measure of the knowledge of the truth; we've understood, at least intellectually that the Son of God has laid down His life for us, His blood was shed for us, our sins were borne by Him on the cross; and in an objective way we have been sanctified, set apart and experienced the influence of His grace in many ways; and yet belong to a category of people God calls His adversaries, and all we can expect is judgment and fire. We should tremble at the fact that the Lord will judge His people, and not assume that just because we have the appearance of godliness that underneath does not lie a heart that has never drawn near to God.

Finally, the writer ends with the admonition to not shrink back. Draw near – don't shrink back. *32 But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, 33 sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. 34 For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. 35 Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. 36 For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. 37 For, "Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; 38 but My righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him." 39 But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.*

The context here is suffering. 'You endured a hard struggle with sufferings' the writer says. 'You were publicly exposed to reproach and affliction'. That is, people disapproved of your faith, and ridiculed you for it, and castigated you because you were a Christian. And because you identified as a Christian, whatever public accusations were thrown at other Christians, hit you. Not only that, your faith in Christ sometimes led to prison and great financial loss – your property was plundered. The whole background to this entire letter is one of suffering for the sake of Christ. And some of these believers were on the verge of giving up. It's too hard, it's too costly, it's too painful. And when things get hard is usually when we want to run away. But the writer says that it is here, in these places, these hard things, this wilderness, where we need to do just the opposite.

We need to draw near. He reminds them of the early days when their joy was high and their confidence unshakeable. Remember the former days, he says. Remember when you suffered for His sake and counted it all joy. Remember when you knew without a shadow of doubt that better things awaited you when Jesus returns. You see, these people lived daily with the expectation that Jesus was returning. They ended every worship service with Maranatha – Come quickly Lord Jesus! But it had been a few years. They'd been waiting and expecting and still He hadn't returned and things had gotten very difficult. Little by little, public sentiment in the Roman Empire had been turning against Christians. They were increasingly seen as intolerant and divisive within the Empire. In Rome they were publicly reproached for refusing to attend public sacrifices to the Roman Emperors and gods. Eventually this got their religion banned and they, along with the Jews, were expelled from Rome. These Christians were not persecuted for **their** religion so much as for not endorsing the **State** religion.

As a result, many were forced to leave their homes and property; Christians began to be arrested and imprisoned; and increasingly, many began to be martyred. Tacitus, the Roman historian, tells us that under Nero, the death of these Christians was '**...made a matter of sport: they were covered in wild beasts' skins and torn to pieces by dogs; or were fastened to crosses and set on fire in order to serve as torches by night when daylight failed**'. It is in light of this background of suffering, the writer tells them: *Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.* What they need, the writer says, is endurance – **hupomone**. Endurance to press through the hard times; endurance to remain in the faith and not throw it away because of a little trouble. After all, the promise of the next life is so much greater than any suffering we encounter in this life.

Endurance is drawing near to God when we want to draw away – because we hope in Him alone. Everything else will fail us, but God never fails. Endurance is only possible through hope in God. Over and over, when David is surrounded by his enemies and he's in despair, his prayer to God is: *'Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God*. Discouragement and despair and sadness come and we draw away instead of drawing near because we have placed our hope in someone or something else. So the writer reminds them that their hope is coming: *Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay.* Draw near to God because your blessed hope is almost here.

*Our gracious and merciful Father,*

*I pray that Your word this morning would fill us with hope and joy and the expectation of Your mighty power to work within us as we savor all the sweetness of its commands. Strengthen faith in our sometimes wavering souls and give us strong confidence in Your eternal promises. Build into the fabric of our faith a persistent resilience and single-minded perseverance in drawing near to You. Engage every affection for Yourself and protect us from the things that would lure us away from You.*

*For those here today, still in the bitterness of unbelief and power of the evil one, I pray Father, You would set them free and cause their hearts to draw near to You. Break through every proud thought and high tower of rebellion; grant them the gift of repentance and make Your grace abound to them so that they may draw near. For those among us who feel comfortably saved and yet are not, I pray Father that You would shake their self-satisfied world and waken them to the reality of Your word. Demolish every stronghold of hypocrisy and deceit and grant humility and repentance so that they too, may draw near with a sincere heart. Help us Father, to draw near and worship You with the white-hot affection You deserve. Help us to seek You and savor You more than life itself, and make us a people whose lives display the incomparable worth of Christ. In the strong name of the Son of God we pray, Amen.*