

22 – The Power of the World to Come

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In reading the fifth chapter of Hebrews, we always stop with wonder and awe over the picture presented in verses 7-9. The thought of the only-begotten Son of God absolutely in the condition of the weakest man in the flesh, so that, oppressed by temptation, and with no power in Himself to resist, He was constrained to cry out with tears of anguish to Him who alone could save Him from threatening destruction, seems to some irreverent, yet it is just the picture that is presented to us by the apostle, and it is the sinner's comfort; for *He was delivered*, and it was in our flesh, and from our sins, that He was delivered; therefore in Him we have the victory and are free! But great as is this truth, the apostle writes as though he had not yet begun to say the really deep and difficult things about Christ. The dullness of his hearers, that is, our dullness, hinders him from giving utterance to all the wonderful things that he had seen in Christ.

It is a fact that to the great mass of professed Christians these things are enigmas. These things, which are the very foundation principles of the Gospel, are unknown to thousands of professors in every denomination under heaven. Therefore it is necessary that they be taught the first principles of their profession. But that is a sad condition of things. For note well, the Christian is in this world "in Christ's stead." Christians indeed are chosen as priests of God, to show forth the excellences of God, even as Christ did. Now it is true that there is always more for the Christian to learn, since no one can be a teacher who does not continually keep learning; but it is also true that the teacher must be well grounded in the first principles, else he cannot teach at all. Most people seem to think that a church is simply a company assembled to receive instruction from some man; whereas it is a people called out to be taught of God and to teach other people. The least in the church ought certainly to be familiar with the alphabet of Christian knowledge. This is so self-evident that the apostle's conclusion in the beginning of the test that follows is most natural:—

"Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits. For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame. Hebrews 6.1-6

The Whole Contains the Parts.—Some fancy that in the first two verses the Apostle speaks slightly of repentance faith toward God, baptism, etc.,

because he exhorts us to leave the first principles of the doctrine of Christ, and go on to perfection. These are indeed the first principles, but the apostle does not by any means say that they should be ignored. Quite the contrary. He exhorts us to go on to perfection, and perfection can be acquired only by adhering to first principles. It is an axiom, that the whole is equal to the sum of all the parts. If any of the parts are lacking, the whole is lacking by just so much. Every part is essential in order to make a perfect whole. The twenty-six letters of the alphabet lie at the beginning of all learning. For a time the child is wholly absorbed with them, but soon he masters them. Then we say to him, "Let us now leave these first principles, and go on to something higher." Does that mean that he has nothing more to do with the alphabet, and can ignore them?—By no means; he can never get away from them without going wrong. He must use them continually; but we should not like to have him talk of nothing else but the alphabet, however essential it is. Let us take these first principles of the doctrine of Christ, and proceed to build on them.

Only One Foundation.—"For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." 1 Corinthians 3.11. That foundation is eternal. It is the Rock of Ages. That once laid, there is no need of laying another; indeed, there can be no other. Therefore if we lay again the foundation of repentance, it can only be because we have repudiated the one, true foundation. We cannot overturn or tear down the foundation, which God Himself has laid; but we reject it, so that it will be to us as though it were not laid. The exhortation, therefore, to "go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation," is an exhortation to hold fast to the first principles. "As ye have therefore received the Lord Jesus Christ, so walk ye in Him; rooted and built up in Him, and established in the faith, as ye have been taught." Colossians 2.6, 7. The trouble, with too many is that they forget the first principles. If, having learned one truth, they would understand that it is always and everywhere the truth, and would hold to it in every case, they would never go wrong; for the highest perfection consists simply in the use of first principles. The multiplication table contains all the principles that the most accomplished mathematician can ever use; for it is capable of endless combinations. When one has accepted Christ, He has the key of all knowledge, for He is the truth. Everything is in Christ, and that is why one can go on advancing to all eternity in the knowledge of Christ.

The Laying on of Hands.—This is the one expression in the list that gives special difficulty. Not but that the others afford room for much thought and study; but they are to a degree understood and practiced, while the laying on of hands is not so well understood. It must, however, be remembered that not all the things mentioned in this list are things to be practiced, as the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. But the laying on of hands is something to be done, and the question is often asked, "Why is not the laying on of hands generally practiced?" The only reply is, "Because of ignorance of the principles of the doctrine of Christ." Suppose some one should say, "Let us all adopt the practice of laying on of hands;" then the question would be, "What for?" Certainly it would be but mockery to go through the

ceremony of laying hands on people, while not knowing the object of the act. The first thing, therefore, is to learn why hands were laid on men.

Paul wrote to Timothy: "Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the eldership." 1 Timothy 4.14. So it appears that some gift was imparted by the laying on of hands. If it were not so then the act would be a farce. What the gift was, if it was in all cases the same, is an open question.

Some will tell us that the laying on of hands was always for the imparting of the Holy Spirit. It is true that sometimes the Holy Spirit was imparted in this way, but not always. Instances may be seen in Acts 8.15-18; 19.6. But in the case of the disciples on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2.1-4), the Holy Spirit was imparted without any laying on of hands; likewise in the case of Cornelius and his friends. Acts 10.44. "One thing, however, is certain, that while the gift of the Holy Spirit was imparted both with and without the laying on of hands, so that the laying on of hands is not an absolute necessity to the receiving of the Spirit, something in the possession of the one who laid on hands was always imparted to the one on whom the hands were laid.

There is therefore one other factor in the answer to the question, "Why is not the laying on of hands universally practiced in the church?" And that is, because as a general thing no one has anything to impart by that method. To go through the ceremony, simply because we see that the apostles sometimes did it, without the apostolic power, and with no results, would be to reduce sacred things to the level of child's play. Note that nowhere have we any commandment to lay on hands. Therefore we are safe in concluding that the possession of a gift that may be imparted by the laying on of hands, will of itself direct the possessor in the matter of how, when, and why it should be done. Let us therefore pray for "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him."

The Powers of the World to Come.—What is the power of the world to come?—Since the world to come is the earth made new, it is evident that the power thereof must be creative power. In other words, it is the fullness of the mighty power of God. It is the mighty power, which God wrought in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead. Ephesians 1.19, 20. That is the power by which men are made new creatures. The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1.16), and in the things that God has made, that power—"eternal power"—is seen. Verse 20. The Word of the Gospel is the Word that plants the heavens, and lays the foundation of the earth. See Isaiah 51.16. The power of the world to come is therefore all the power of the cross, or all the power of God.

An Impossibility.—The sum of Hebrews 6.4-6 is that if one rejects and despises all this power, having once known and tasted it, it is impossible to renew him again to repentance. Of course, since there is no greater power than that which he has rejected. There is no other name under heaven, except that of Christ, by which salvation can be had. If, now, one treads under foot the Son of God, and counts the

blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing (Hebrews 10.29), it is evident that there is no hope for him. It is simply the question that we had in the beginning of our study, "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?"

The Danger of Falling.—Is it possible that one who has gone so far as to be made a partaker of the Holy Spirit, and to taste the good Word of God and the power of the world to come, having been fully enlightened, to fall away? Some say it is not, but if it were not, the apostle would not have shown the hopelessness of such a fall. How does one stand?—"By faith." Romans 11.20. The question then is, "Is it possible for a man to depart from the faith, and thus to fall?" We have only to read 1 Timothy 4.1, for an answer. We are familiar enough with the old saying that the fact that they turned away is evidence that they were never fully in the faith, but that is easily disproved. Take for example the case of Peter. While on his way to meet Jesus on the water, he sank. Why did he sink?—Because his faith wavered. He doubted. Shall we say that the fact that he began to sink is evidence that he had not walked on the water by faith? That would be to deny the fact. It is possible for a person to lose the faith by which he stands; therefore "be not high minded but fear."

A Ground of Hope.—Those of whom the apostle speaks in the text before us, are those "who were once enlightened." When they turned away, therefore, they did it with their eyes open. They deliberately turned away from the light. They have rejected everything that God has for them. Therefore it is impossible *to renew them again unto repentance*. They are hardened, and have no hatred of sin, and no desire for salvation. Cannot the poor, trembling, fearful soul, who imagines that this text cuts off his hope of salvation, see that it does not mean him at all? He would be saved, but is afraid that he cannot be. But the text speaks of those who do not wish to be saved. They cannot be moved to repentance. Christ is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him. Hebrews 7.25. The worst sinner in the world, yea, the worst backslider, may be saved, provided he repents. The only hopeless case is the man who feels no sorrow for sin. There is hope, for "the Lord upholds all who fall, and raises up all who are bowed down." Psalm 145.14. So we may say, "Rejoice not against me, O mine enemy; when I fall, I shall arise." Micah 7.8. Yet it is better not to fall, and from this we may be kept, for He "is able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy." Jude 24