

“Let Us Therefore Come Boldly to the Throne of Grace”
(Hebrews 4:16)

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This address was given Thursday, May 1, 2014 at the BYU Women’s Conference

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Hebrews 4:16 reads, “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” For many years this has been one of my most favorite scriptures in all of holy writ. I love the emphasis that it has on the mercy and grace of our Savior Jesus Christ, and I love the invitation that it extends to me personally, and to all of us collectively, to come boldly to the throne of Christ’s grace. Of course, this is only one verse from the epistle of Hebrews. In isolation and out of context I believe that it has power, but I believe that the richness of this verse is enhanced when we place it in its context. The epistle to the Hebrews is a fascinating and rich book of scripture. Although we know very little about its dating and provenance, Hebrews seems to be written to Jewish Christians who were struggling to remain firm in their profession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. They had begun to “cast away their confidence or boldness,” which led them to “draw back” or “retreat.” To paraphrase President Dieter F. Uchtdorf (“Come, Join with Us,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2013), they were beginning to doubt their faith, rather than to doubt their doubts, or, as Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught, they were beginning to “pitch their tents out on the periphery of [their] religious faith” (“A Prayer for the Children,” *Ensign*, May 2003).

The author of Hebrews uses Old Testament people and stories and images to help encourage his audience to appreciate Christ and his mission and to renew the fire of testimony in their souls. Today I would like to consider just two ways that the greater context of Hebrews helps us to better understand and appreciate the nuances and power of Hebrews 4:16. The first, in chapters 3 and 4, is an appeal to learn from the mistakes of the Israelites in the wilderness as they rejected the invitation to enter the presence of God. The second, in the two verses that immediately precede Hebrews 4:16—and frankly, is scattered throughout the book of Hebrews, is a description of Jesus as a great high priest. These verses give us the reason that we can have boldness to come to the throne of His grace.

First, Hebrews 3:8–11 exhorts: “Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness: when your fathers tempted me, proved me and saw my works forty years. Wherefore I was grieved with that generation, and said, They do always err in their heart;

and they have not known my ways. So I swear in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest.” Here the word “rest” is a metaphor for the Promised Land. The Old Testament provides many examples of times when Israel provoked the Lord with their murmurings. Even after the spectacular displays of God’s power in helping them to escape from Egypt, they frequently complained about not having any water, or food, or that the promised land was too full of giants. Sometimes they even complained that it would have been better if they had stayed in Egypt! All of these incidents emphasized the physical challenges that Israel faced and their immature understanding of God and His plan for them.

But there was another event where they provoked the Lord that had what I think were more spiritual ramifications. When the children of Israel were camped at Mount Sinai, Moses went up into the mountain to commune with God. As he prepared to return from the mountain, “the Lord said unto Moses, Go unto the people, and sanctify them to day and to morrow, and let them wash their clothes, and be ready against the third day . . . the Lord will come down in the sight of the people upon Mount Sinai” (Exodus 19:10–11). Unfortunately, as the time drew near for that to happen, “all [of] the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off. And they said . . . Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die” (Exodus 20:18–19). The Israelites, like the brother of Jared and many of the ancients, feared that if they saw God they would be consumed. And to be sure, the thunderings and lightnings that associated God’s presence on Mount Sinai probably didn’t do much to alleviate that fear!

The Doctrine and Covenants 84 gives us some additional information that we don’t find clearly in the Exodus account. First, it puts it in the context of the importance of the Melchizedek priesthood and its ordinances to enable people “to see the face of God, even the Father, and live” (verse 22). In other words, Doctrine and Covenants 84 is teaching us that through the power of the Melchizedek Priesthood, humans, even in their mortal condition, can enter the presence of God without being consumed by His glory. Then verses 23–24 read like this: “Now this”—meaning that through the Melchizedek Priesthood we can enter the presence of God—“Now this Moses plainly taught to the children of Israel in the wilderness, and sought diligently to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God; But they hardened their hearts and could not endure his presence; therefore, the Lord in his wrath, for his anger was kindled against them, swore that they should not enter into his rest while in the wilderness, which rest is the fulness of his glory.” Notice how this revelation defines “rest.” It is not the physical rest of the promised land, but the spiritual rest of the fulness of God’s glory. The Israelites refused the opportunity to enter the presence of God because they allowed their fear of the thunderings and the lightnings to cast out their faith.

Sisters, we live in a world where fear is a part of our mortal experience. Frankly, fear can be a positive thing that helps us to avoid dangerous situations. It’s not always the antithesis of faith, but, if we’re not careful in spiritual matters, it can be. In Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*, Lucio declares,

“Our doubts are traitors,
And make us lose the good we oft might win
By fearing the attempt.”

For the Israelites at Sinai, their doubts made them fear to attempt to participate in a supernal spiritual opportunity. Their doubt was not the normal fears of mortality: it was a fear to believe the Lord's prophet when he taught them that they could see God and live; it was a fear to move to a higher spiritual level; it was a fear to have God come and dwell with them.

Hebrews 3:12–15 then gives this exhortation to avoid the pitfalls of the ancient Israelites: "Take heed . . . lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. . . . For we are made partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence [or boldness] stedfast unto the end; While it is said, To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the [day of] provocation." At the end of the discussion on rest, chapter 4, verse 11 exhorts us: "Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest." Not just the promised land, but I would suggest, the rest meaning the fulness of God's glory. Now the word "labour" here suggests certainly that we have work to do; but the Greek word, *spoudasōmen*, also has the sense of hastening, suggesting that there is an urgency to participate in the journey that will lead us into that kind of rest.

It is in response to the fears that keep us spiritually stagnant that Hebrews 4:16 issues the call for Israel to "come boldly to the throne of [His] grace." In other words, Hebrews is a clarion call for Israel, both ancient and modern, to learn from the mistakes of Israel and to not lose spiritual opportunities by "fearing the attempt." During the Savior's mortal ministry He repeatedly invited people to not only "come, follow me" but, perhaps more significantly, to "come unto me." He invited "all those who labour and are heavy laden" to "come unto me" so that He could also give them rest. He invited the children to "come unto me," and He invited anyone who was spiritually thirsty to "come unto me." Sometimes, like the rich young man, the people went away sorrowful because of the cost of such a call. Others, like the woman with the issue of blood, came to the Savior tentatively, in a crowd, seeking to remain anonymous, but coming all of the same, just hoping to have some kind of contact with him.

Sisters, are there ways that we sometimes allow our fear to replace our faith when it comes to our spiritual progression? For example, do we allow fear to surface when we are called to serve the Lord? President Thomas S. Monson reminds us, "Now some of you may be shy by nature or consider yourselves inadequate to respond affirmatively to a calling. Remember that this work is not yours and mine alone. It is the Lord's work, and when we are on the Lord's errand, we are entitled to the Lord's help. Remember that whom the Lord calls, the Lord qualifies" ("To Learn, to Do, to Be," *Ensign*, Nov. 2008).

Or, do we sometimes allow fear to prevent us from hastening the work of our personal salvation by fearing to move to a higher level of consecration? King Benjamin taught that we are "eternally indebted to [our] heavenly Father, to render to him all that [we] have and [are]" (Mosiah 2:34). Now frankly, I understand the "all that we have"; in the Church we often talk of consecrating our time, talents and possessions to build up the kingdom of God on earth. But Mosiah goes further to teach that we must also render to God "all that we are." Frankly, that phrase has haunted me a little over the years—not in the Halloween sense, but in the sense of maybe thinking seriously about it. What does it mean? I think that it's what Abinadi was talking about when he taught that "the will of the Son [was] swallowed up in the will of the Father"

(Mosiah 15:7). To render unto God “all that we are,” we must ultimately subordinate our will to that of the Father.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell cautions us that, “So many of us are kept from eventual consecration because we mistakenly think that somehow, by letting our will be swallowed up in the will of God, we [will] lose our individuality. . . . What we are really worried about, of course, is not giving up self, but [rather] selfish things—like our roles, our time, our preeminence, and our possessions. No wonder we are instructed by the Savior to lose ourselves (see Luke 9:24). He is only asking us to lose the old self in order to find the new self. This is part of what Benjamin’s sermon is all about—to put off the natural man in order to come into our spiritual inheritance. So, it is not a question of losing one’s identity but of finding it” (“King Benjamin’s Sermon: A Manual for Discipleship,” reprinted from John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom”* [Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998], 1–22; retrieved from <http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=931>).

At Gethsemane we see Abinadi’s prophecy fulfilled when the Savior pled, “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matthew 26:39). At a point when fear might have set in, the Savior instead exerted his faith. His will was swallowed up in the will of the Father. Our Savior led a consecrated life. In both His thoughts and deeds He gave not just all that He had, but all that He was to the work of his Father. Allowing His will to be swallowed up in the will of the Father did not diminish who He was; rather it magnified Him as it will also magnify us, if we come boldly and move forward with faith.

The second Old Testament image that I would like to discuss that gives context to our verse is the image of the high priest serving in the tabernacle. While anciently the high priest performed many functions, the most notable was that every year he represented Israel as he entered into the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement. The Holy of Holies represented the place where God sat on His throne, sitting in judgment upon His people. The high priest therefore was not just entering into the Holy of Holies; he was entering into the presence of God. This was a task he performed alone, as a representative of the people, because remember, at Mount Sinai they had rejected the opportunity to enter into God’s presence. Now Hebrews 9 gives us a description of the tabernacle, and then in verses 7–10 we read, “But into the second [veil, meaning the Holy of Holies] went the high priest alone once every year, not without blood, which he offered for himself, and for the errors of the people: The Holy Ghost thus signifying, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest [for the people], while as the first tabernacle was yet standing: Which was a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did service perfect, as pertaining to conscience; which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and [in] carnal ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation.”

When Christ came, He became *our* high priest who ministered, not in an earthly tabernacle “made with hands,” but in the heavenly temple, of which Moses’ tabernacle was merely a copy. Hebrews 9 then continues in verses 11 and 12 and reads, “But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands . . . neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered into the holy place,

having obtained redemption for us.” It is not insignificant that at the moment when Christ was on the cross and He died, the veil of the temple “was rent in twain from the top to the bottom” (Matthew 27:51). This symbolized that the barrier which prevented Israel from the presence of God was removed because of the Savior’s atoning sacrifice.

Now with this background in mind, let’s turn to Hebrews 4:14–15, the verses that immediately precede our verse. “Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities;”—and the Greek word there means our weaknesses, so it can refer not just to sicknesses, emotional, physical, spiritual kind of weaknesses that we have—“but [He] was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.” These verses give us the reason that we can come before God’s throne with boldness: because our high priest knows what it is like to be tempted. We can come boldly because “in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself . . . suffered being tempted, he is able to succour [or, to “come to the aid of”] them that are tempted” (Hebrews 2:17–18). Alma teaches likewise, in chapter 7, verses 11–12: “And he shall go forth, suffering pains and afflictions and temptations of every kind; and this that the word might be fulfilled which saith he will take upon him the pains and sicknesses of his people. And he will take upon him death, that he may loose the bands of death which bind his people; and he will take upon him their infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy, according to the flesh, that he may know according to the flesh how to succor his people according to their infirmities.”

As our high priest Jesus comes to our aid because He knows what it is like to be tempted. Frankly, He knows what it is like even better than we do. As one New Testament scholar has noted, Jesus “does not merely contemplate our weakness from a safe distance. He knows what it is like, for He came where we are and underwent temptation just as we do. . . . His temptations were greater than ours because he did not yield. The only person who knows the full force of a given temptation is the one who resists it right to the end. The one who gives in at some point along the way does not know the fierceness of the temptation that would follow at a later point. But Jesus did not give in. He knows all the power and all [of] the force of temptation, not only the small part that sinners who give way know.”

So what does all of this mean for Hebrews 4:16? The invitation to come boldly is, in part, a response to Israel’s fear to come into the presence of God at Mount Sinai. Hebrews pleads with the Christians in his day and ours, to learn from the Israelite experience. The Greek word that is translated as “boldness” in the King James Bible is *parrēsia*. It can be translated as boldness or confidence, but it also has the nuance of courage. In other words, no matter where we are in our personal spiritual journeys, the invitation to come is a call to have courage—courage to strive for something more, courage to not to settle for spiritual mediocrity, courage to pay the price to be able to enter the presence of God. After all, our Heavenly Father sent us here to earth to become gods! For us to achieve that goal, it is important that we don’t get stuck at the base of our Mount Sinais. The invitation to come boldly is also a recognition that we have an empathetic high priest who not only acts as our advocate with the Father, but who has broken down the barriers which, in the earthly tabernacle, kept us out of His presence. It is true that we must still complete the

spiritual journey, but because of Christ's Atonement we can move forward with confidence, knowing that He understands, better than any other high priest, the difficulties and challenges that we face along the way.

Hebrews 4:16 then concludes with an explanation of why we should come boldly to the throne of grace: "that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." The two words mercy and grace here seem to be near synonyms, although one scholar has noted, "it might be appropriate to see the first [meaning mercy] as relating to past transgressions and the second [meaning grace] as relevant to contemporary and future needs." Another way of translating the last phrase could also be that when we come boldly we can "find grace when we need it most." Sisters, I love that concept. We can find grace when we need it most. That thought alone is what makes this verse so important to me.

Sisters, I love the gospel of Jesus Christ. I love what it teaches me about Christ and His role as my personal Savior. In Hebrews we find taught that there is a balance between our personal responsibility to respond to Christ's invitation to "come unto me," and His infinite mercy and grace. The author of Hebrews implores his readers, and implicitly all of us, that we "cast not away therefore your boldness, which hath great recompence of reward" (Hebrews 10:35). Of this I most humbly testify in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.