

ARCHIBALD ALEXANDER

Archibald Alexander (1772-1851) was born in Virginia and raised in a home with a strong Presbyterian heritage. He was converted at the age of seventeen and then studied theology under William Graham at Liberty Hall Academy. Upon licensure, he served as an itinerant missionary in Virginia and North Carolina, which generated a life-long passion for home and foreign missions. After a short settled pastorate, he served as president of Hampden-Sydney College (1796-1807) in his native Virginia, then ministered in the Pine Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia (1807-1812). Alexander was appointed to serve as the first "Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology" at Princeton Theological Seminary, upon its establishment in 1812. The remaining years of his life were spent as professor in the first Presbyterian seminary founded in the United States. He is best remembered today as an experiential preacher, teacher, and author.

Christ the Believer's Refuge and Consolation

*"That we might have a strong consolation,
who have fled for refuge, to lay hold upon
the hope set before us."*

—Hebrews 6:18

God would have His people to be comfortable. He has, therefore, laid a solid foundation in the promises of His Word for their consolation. Human faith is weak, and, unless well supported, is apt to totter and suffer the soul to sink into deep discouragement. The promises of God, on which the believer leans, are not only rich, but sure. They are all yea and amen in Christ Jesus to the glory of God.

But as among men, that which is confirmed by a solemn oath is considered more firm than that which rests on a simple promise; therefore, God, in condescension to our infirmity, has been

pleased to add an oath to His promise. And because there was none greater by whom He could swear, "he sware by himself...that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us" (Heb. 6:13, 18).

The form of expression here used is probably derived from a custom sanctioned by the law of Moses, that when any person killed a man, he had the privilege of fleeing to one of the cities of refuge. Of these, there were three on each side of the Jordan, so situated as to be in reach of the inhabitants of every part of the country. In ancient times, it was usual among most nations for the nearest of kin to a murdered person to avenge his death by slaying the murderer. And the practice still exists among many barbarous tribes. The kinsman, on whom the duty of taking vengeance devolved, was called "the avenger of blood," who was considered

bound in honor never to give up pursuing the manslayer until blood was shed for blood. Whether this custom took its rise from what God said to Noah after the flood, "whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed" (Gen. 9:6), or whether it originated in the resentful feelings of human nature, is not necessary to inquire. The Mosaic law certainly did not give rise to this ancient custom, but was intended to modify it and to prevent the injustice and cruelty which were likely often to be done, in carrying this custom into effect. For, in the case in which a man was slain by another without the deliberate purpose of taking away life, the kinsman of the slain, while in the heat of passion occasioned by the death of a near relation, would be poorly qualified to judge impartially of the motives from which the act proceeded. There was, therefore, danger lest death should be inflicted on an innocent person, or on

one who did not merit so severe a punishment.

By this law of Moses, therefore, an asylum was provided for every manslayer who chose to avail himself of the privilege, until there was an opportunity of a fair and impartial investigation, that the true character of the act might be ascertained. The gates of these cities of refuge were kept constantly open, that there might be no obstruction to hinder the ingress of the manslayer, by day or by night. The highways also, which led to these cities, and the bridges, were required to be kept in good repair.

Although all manslaughterers were permitted to take refuge in these cities, the institution was not intended to screen the malicious murderer from condign punishment. Nor could it avail such an one anything to take refuge in them; for if upon inquiry it was found that the act was pre-meditated, the murderer was imme-

diately delivered up to the avenger of blood to be put to death.

There were, however, other places to which the guilty were accustomed to flee for refuge. We find that Joab, when he feared for his life, fled to the altar of burnt-offerings, laid hold of the horns of the altar, and refused to come away or let go his hold. Solomon, therefore, directed that he should be slain there. As there is nothing in Scripture to sanction this custom, it is probable that it was borrowed from the pagans, among whom temples and altars were always places of refuge for the guilty. To slay them in these sacred places was looked upon as a sacrilegious violation of the sanctity of the place. Some particular places acquired such a reputation for sanctity that fugitives from justice might remain securely in them for any length of time. Daphne, near to Antioch, in Syria, was one of the most renowned places of refuge in the heathen world. But if the refugees were caught outside of the

precincts of these sacred places, they were liable to be put immediately to death.

It does not matter to which of the fore-mentioned customs the allusion is made in our text. The import is the same in either case.

The precise meaning of the word *hope* requires a moment's consideration. By it most understand the object of hope, namely, justification, and its consequence, eternal life; others, however, understand the act or exercise of hope. But it is more probable that, by a common figure of speech, the apostle meant the foundation of hope; that is, the promise of which the apostle had been just speaking, and which generates hope in us. Certainly, this accords best with the preceding context, and with the scope of his argument. God had given a promise and confirmed it by an oath. On this solid foundation faith could firmly rest, and hope is the fruit of faith, and ever rises and falls with it. He who believes the promise, lays hold

of hope for faith in the promises of God, is the pillar and ground of a gospel hope.

Let us, then, contemplate the soul flying for refuge, and laying hold of the sure promise of God. And here it may be remarked, that no one seeks a refuge unless he is apprehensive of some danger. The traveler who sees a storm rising, and apprehends some injury from exposure to the wind, rain, hail, and lightning, flies to the nearest shelter, and takes refuge from the gathering storm.

Similarly, he who is pursued by a vindictive enemy, as was the manslayer, bends his course, and hastens his steps, to the city of refuge. Thus, also, the sinner, when awakened to a true sense of his danger, begins to look out for a place of safety. But the person who apprehends no danger will not flee. You may call upon him, and invite him as much and as long as you will, but he heeds you not. He is urged by no motive strong enough to induce him to break off from his worldly

pursuits to seek salvation. Hence the necessity of conviction of sin, that men may feel their need of a Savior. "Those who are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick" (Matt. 9:12). The first step, then, is to see and feel that we are in a lost and perishing condition. We learn, in accordance with this, that the first work of the Spirit is to convince men of sin. Although a mere legal conviction has no tendency to renew the heart; yet, as God deals with sinners as reasonable, accountable creatures, He does not usually bestow grace and pardon on them, until they are made sensible of their wretched and helpless condition. Thus, those convicted on the day of Pentecost were first pricked in their hearts and cried out, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). And the jailor of Philippi cried out, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30).

Careless sinners and all who are at ease in Zion make light of the gospel invitation, and continue to neglect the great salva-

tion. But when, by the law brought home to the conscience, the false peace of the sinner is interrupted; when he begins to open his eyes on his true situation, and finds that he is in reality under a sentence of condemnation, and in a blind and helpless condition—that his whole nature is corrupt, and that he can do nothing to save himself—he begins in good earnest to inquire whether there is any refuge for one in his wretched condition. He will now be disposed to listen to every report of a refuge whither he may fly and be safe. This subject now occupies his thoughts, and the things of time and sense no longer engross his attention. All earthly things appear trivial, and his only concern is how he may escape impending wrath and secure the salvation of his soul. Oppressed with the burden of his iniquities, he groans in anguish. He is filled with compunction for the sins of his youth, which now rise up in fearful array before his conscience. He is ashamed to look up to the

throne of a holy God, but cries with the publican, "God be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13). He takes all the blame to himself, and acknowledges the righteousness of the sentence which condemns him. Sometimes, he is tempted to despair of any relief, but the free offer of salvation to the chief of sinners in the gospel encourages him to indulge a feeble hope that God may intend mercy for his miserable soul. He turns his face, therefore, toward the house of refuge, and resolves that he will never give over seeking and crying to God for mercy.

2. The manslayer, pursued by the avenger of blood, might, for a season, persuade himself that he could be safe in some other place, and might attempt to conceal himself in some refuge nearer home. Such a course would have been exceedingly unwise, for wherever he was, he would still be exposed to danger and, at an unexpected time, his adversary might fall upon him and take away his

life. In all the coasts of Israel, there was no place of security for a manslayer but in one of the appointed cities of refuge. Here there was legitimate protection and nowhere else.

Just such is the case of the awakened sinner. He is convinced that danger impends, and that he must seek some refuge from the coming storm. But he is unwilling to take himself to the house of safety, to which he is pointed by the gospel. This method of escape is foreign from his thoughts and uncongenial with his feelings. He naturally turns to the old covenant, under which he was created. The new is strange to him; he does not understand it. He persuades himself that by reforming his life and forsaking those sins which have particularly affected his conscience, he may be safe without fleeing to the house of refuge, which seems to him to be far off and of difficult access. If conscience is still unsatisfied with his reformation, he will add a diligent atten-

dance on religious duties. He will observe the Sabbath, attend the church, pray in his family and in his closet, and manifest much zeal in all that relates to the externals of religion. In the warmth of his zeal, he may even aspire to the holy ministry, and may be a monitor and reprover of other sinners. He fancies himself to be a religious man, fondly compares himself with the multitude who neglect all attention to religion, and infers that his condition must be safe. He compares his present with his former conduct, and congratulates himself upon the great change in his manner of life. By his fellow-professors he is viewed as an eminent Christian, and his delusion is so complete that he has no suspicion of himself, but thinks that all is well, and that when he dies, he shall be received into heaven. The awakened sinner has indeed found a refuge, but alas, it is "a refuge of lies." He has no shelter but his own rotten righteousness. He entertains high hopes, but

they are built on a sandy foundation. At some future time, he will be convinced that he has taken refuge in an unsafe place, from which he must be driven, or miserably perish. The conviction of danger may seize him while there is yet an opportunity of escaping to the true city of refuge which God has appointed, where he will still find safety and protection. But often the mistake is not detected until it is too late to seek for safety in the true refuge. Some have their eyes opened to see their miserable condition just when they are leaving the world, when it is too late to prepare for eternity; and others apprehend not their danger until the light of eternity reveals it to them.

O wretched condition! Let all convinced sinners beware of the danger of resting on a false foundation, or seeking safety in a refuge of lies. Let them never feel at ease until they have entirely escaped from the plain of destruction and have taken refuge in the mount of safety.

We must be brought to renounce our own righteousness and all dependence on our own works, or on our tears of repentance, and must put our trust solely in the all perfect righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. The figure, "flying for refuge," is as well suited to express the act of faith, when Christ is believed on, as any that could be used. And the phrase "laying hold" is strikingly descriptive of the earnestness with which the convinced sinner seizes the gracious promise of God, when his eyes are first opened to understand the freeness and fullness of the offered salvation. As a drowning man, with eagerness seizes a rope thrown to him, and grasps it with a firmness which nothing can loose, so the sinner pursued by the demands of the broken law, flies to the house of refuge which is opened in the gospel, and immediately enjoys the feeling of repose; yea, often, of strong consolation. The expression *lay hold of* would seem to have allusion to the horns

of the altar, which the guilty person who sought an asylum, grasped.

Although there is considerable variety in the exercises of sincere converts, yet there are some leading points in which the experience of all true believers agrees. As all are by nature in the same condition of condemnation and depravity; as all are equally helpless; as the same gospel is the object of the faith of all; and as regeneration in all is the work of the same Holy Spirit; there can be no essential difference in the nature of the exercises of genuine converts. All, for example, are convinced of sin, and feel themselves to be in a perishing condition. This conviction may, in some, be attended with a much livelier sense of danger than in others; but the degree of fear and terror aroused is a mere circumstance which does not determine either the depth or genuineness of the sinner's convictions, for there may be overwhelming terror where there is but little true conviction, and there may

be deep and scriptural conviction where there is little terror, and where the mind remains calm. Indeed, it often happens, that when conviction is deepest, the mind is most calm. Even when it seems to be on the borders of despair, and has almost relinquished hope, there is often a calm but sad serenity, which is not easily accounted for.

There is not only a conviction of sin in all true converts, but a thorough feeling of utter helplessness; not only a conviction of inability to keep the law, but also to repent of sin or receive the gospel. Unbelief is commonly the last sin of which the Spirit convinces the awakened soul—"of sin, because they believe not in me" (John 16:8). But the truly convinced sinner never pleads his inability as his excuse, nor feels less guilty on this account. No, this he is sensible is the very core of his iniquity. Other sins are the branches of the evil tree, but this is the bitter root out of which they grow; and,

therefore, every convinced sinner is led clearly to see the justice of God in his condemnation. He may be said to "accept the punishment of his sins," for he acquiesces in the justice of the sentence which condemns him to eternal misery. He justifies God, and takes all the blame to himself. Indeed, at this point of experience, the goodness, and especially the long-suffering of God toward him, is apt to affect his mind in a very sensible manner. He feels that if he perish eternally, he never can feel that he has been unjustly treated, but that his gratitude is due to God for His long continued and unmerited kindness. Views and feelings of the kind mentioned can only be accounted for on the supposition that a spiritual change has already passed on the soul, though nothing is further from the belief of the subject of these exercises. The sinner is often renewed before he is aware of it. Spiritual life is breathed into the soul before it is filled with the joy and peace

which arises from receiving Christ by faith. There are evident pulsations of life, and vital breathings after God, the effect of renewing grace, before the eyes are opened to behold the reconciled face of God in Christ. One of the earliest sensible feelings of the regenerated soul is a sense of ingratitude, which breaks the hard heart into a melting frame of godly sorrow. Tears flow apace. This sorrow is sweet in the experience, because it is always mingled with a sense of the mercy and goodness of God; and yet there may be no thought of being in a safe state. But, usually, such exercises are soon succeeded by views of Christ as an able and a willing Savior. These first views of a Savior are sometimes sudden and overwhelming. The soul feels itself transported, as it were, into a new world. Gross darkness is exchanged for "marvellous light." The "joy is unspeakable and full of glory." The soul exults and glories in the cross of Christ; all doubt and fear are expelled, and the

heart is at once filled with contrition and with love and peace. These first views of a Savior are often more remarkable, and more sensible in the flow of affection which accompanies them than any afterwards experienced. The blessed vision of divine truth thus enjoyed may be repeated twice or thrice, and then the soul is left to what may be called the common encouragements and hopes which the gospel inspires.

But it would be unjust and injurious to many sincere Christians to lay down the preceding as the uniform experience of all the children of God. Far from it; I am persuaded that a large majority of those converted in our day are led in a different way. Their first views are very obscure and they can point to no particular time when all darkness and doubt were banished from their minds. The light, with them, has been like the dawn of day, at first an obscure twilight, but gradually increasing to the clear light of

day. They are very sensible of a great change in their views and feelings from what they once were, but how it came about they cannot tell. All they can say is, "whereas I was once blind, now I see."

Often the first views of Christ are very partial. Perhaps the soul that had considered its case as hopeless begins to see and understand that Christ is able to save it, desperate as its condition seemed to be; and even this, which to many would seem as a small matter, is to a convinced soul almost in despair as life from the dead. Oh, to be assured that salvation is even possible fills the soul with a delight it never before experienced! Hope now takes the place of despondency; and the soul into which this first ray of light is darted, purposes never to give over seeking until salvation is obtained. And, in its progress, one of its greatest difficulties is to suppress a continually rising thought that a change has been experienced. As sincere souls are more apprehensive of

no danger than of false hope, they become alarmed when they find themselves insensibly sliding into the opinion that they are already Christians; and yet this persuasion is hard to be resisted, because it is based on the evidences of piety contained in the Word of God, and laid down by judicious divines.

4. The blessed effect of flying to this refuge which is set before us is "strong consolation." No feeling with which we have an acquaintance is more delightful than an assurance of deliverance from a great impending calamity. And as no danger to which we can be exposed is comparable to that of everlasting misery, so no enjoyment is so sweet as the joy of salvation. It is described as "unspeakable and full of glory" (1 Pet. 1:8). It cannot be otherwise, but that there should be peace and joy in believing; for he who truly believes must have some view of Christ as an all-sufficient Savior. He must have some apprehension of the refuge pro-

vided for guilty sinners; yea, must have fled to this refuge, which act cannot take place without experiencing something of that repose and comfort which must necessarily follow from the discovery of a way of escape from the impending wrath of God. But it is evident that though there is ample provision made for strong consolation to all who fly to this refuge, yet the comfort enjoyed will generally be in proportion to the strength of the faith exercised. Often, faith, in its commencement, is like a grain of mustard-seed, so small, that in the midst of the darkness and corruption of the human heart, it can scarcely be discerned. And there is in many a gloomy, melancholy temperament, or such a degree of suspicion and diffidence of themselves, that they cannot easily be persuaded that they are in a safe state. Their comfort is therefore greatly marred by doubts and fears, which accompany some pious persons through their whole pilgrimage. There

are also, often, mistakes entertained respecting the true nature of conversion. It is assumed as a truth that this change is in all cases very great and perceptible; and as they have never experienced any thing of this sort, they suppose that they are still impenitent.

There is, moreover, some degree of perverseness in some serious people in relation to this matter. They get into the habit of taking sides against themselves, and of constantly uttering complaints of their unhappy state, and also of refusing that consolation which the gospel freely offers to persons in their condition. Such persons may be said to deprive themselves of consolation. But it seems wisely orderly that our spiritual comforts should rise and fall with the degree of strength or weakness in our faith. If we could enjoy strong consolation while faith and love were feeble, it would prevent us from using suitable exertion to rise and grow in our spiritual attainments. There

is, however, in the promises of God a rich fountain, from whence streams of strong consolation may at any time be drawn by the exercise of a living faith. All other joy fades away in the near prospect of death and eternity. It is earthly in its source and cannot endure the bright light of eternity to shine upon it. But the consolations which are found in Christ become richer and stronger the more we meditate on the awful realities of the future world. Indeed, much of this strong consolation experienced by the believer arises from an assured hope of heavenly felicity. It is the anticipation of future blessedness which fills the heart with a joy that cannot be expressed.

If, then, we would partake of this "strong consolation," let us be strong in faith—not staggering at the promise through unbelief, but being fully persuaded that what God hath promised, He will surely perform. Let us hold fast the beginning of our confidence, encourag-

ing our hearts to embrace the promises in all their fullness and freeness. Let us come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy.

1. From what has been said, it may be inferred that there is good reason for the name “gospel”—“good news.” For to the sinner, justly condemned by the unalterable law of God, it opens a safe refuge to which the guiltiest may flee. I would, therefore, now invite, exhort, and entreat every sinner to avail himself, speedily, of this safe retreat. Fly from impending wrath. The storm of divine vengeance lowers over your head and, unless you get into some safe shelter, will soon overtake you, and will surely overwhelm you, and plunge you into endless perdition. Escape then—escape for your lives. There is no time to be lost. The door of mercy is now open, but none can tell how soon it may be closed, for ever.

2. Let all beware of false refuges. Of these, there are many, into which deluded

souls enter in search of safety, but by which they are only exposed to a more dreadful destruction. They can furnish no real shelter from the storm of divine wrath. The most they can do is to afford a momentary ease, by cherishing false hopes. But when the hope of the hypocrite perishes, as it certainly will, then he is left in a more miserable condition than if he had never indulged any hope. Among false refuges, we may mention infidelity, or the fond persuasion that there is no danger of future punishment; a trust in a decent, moral life, without any saving knowledge of a crucified Savior; self-righteousness, or a dependence on the exact performance of religious rites and duties; also the vain self-confidence of fanatics and antinomians, who trust to their own disordered imaginations, or deceitful hearts. Fly not to any of these, for they are all refuges of lies.

3. As long as the Christian is in this world, he needs a refuge to which he may

flee in seasons of affliction and danger. In himself, there is no help nor strength. He is like a defenseless, timorous dove, liable to be devoured by every rapacious bird of prey. If he had no place of refuge, he could not escape destruction. But having once entered the house of refuge, he is safe. No enemy dare pursue him within this sacred refuge, or if he should there be assaulted, he has at hand a mighty Redeemer.

4. The believer, having found a safe refuge, should be careful to remain within the limits prescribed. The manslayer, though acquitted, could not with safety leave the city of refuge during the lifetime of the high priest, and that might often be as long as he himself lived. But our High Priest ever lives, and therefore we must ever remain in the refuge to which we have fled. There is safety there, and nowhere else. Even when we leave this world, we are only transferred to a higher, holier refuge.

5. Let condemned and perishing sin-

ners, who are exposed daily to the wrath of God, avail themselves of the opportunity of escaping to a place of safety. Let there be no delay in fleeing from the wrath to come. While you delay and procrastinate, divine vengeance may suddenly overtake you. Behold, now is the accepted time, and now is the day of salvation. How can you escape, if you neglect so great salvation! Christ, who has provided this refuge, or rather, who is Himself the sinner's Refuge, kindly invites you to come to Him for rest. And His gracious promise is that "him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (Job 6:37). Be wise, then, oh ye sons of men, and know the time of your merciful visitation; for many who once occupied precisely the ground which you now do have eternally perished. They put off the matter too long, and now must lament their folly through eternity! Amen.

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