

Our Great High Priest

Scripture: Hebrews 4:14–16

Code: 1610

INTRODUCTION

A. The Presentation of Salvation

In Hebrews 4:14-16 we have a continuation of the warning passage that began in 3:7. The writer of Hebrews has been warning his readers of the dire consequences of knowing the gospel, but failing to commit themselves to Christ. Verses 14-16 present the positive basis of salvation. The writer tells his readers to enter God's rest not only because of what will happen if they don't, but because of what will happen if they do. He urges them to receive Jesus Christ not only because of fear of Him, but also because of His beauty; not only because of His wrath, but also because of His grace; and not only because He's our judge, but also because He is a merciful and faithful High Priest.

B. The Call to Enter Salvation

1. Holding fast to our profession

a) The danger of apostasyThe individuals the writer addresses in Hebrews 3:7[en]4:16 had given intellectual assent to the gospel, and were on the edge of decision. He tells them to hold fast their profession, in spite of the persecution they were experiencing. They were being put out of the synagogue, and ostracized by their society and families. As a result, they were thinking of turning around and going back to Judaism. But that would have made them apostates, and there is no hope for such people (Heb. 6:6). Those who are truly saved will not fall away, for Hebrews 4:14 says they hold fast to their profession of faith.b) The illustration of apostasyJesus illustrates the danger of apostasy in the parable of the sower, found in Matthew 13:19-23: "When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth it not, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which receives seed by the wayside" (v. 19). Some people hear the gospel, but they don't dig into it to find out what it means and Satan snatches it away. Verses 20-22 say, "He that received the seed in stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and immediately with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself, but endureth for a while; for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, immediately he is offended. He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this age, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful." Those are two more illustrations of people who made a profession of faith but then fell away. Only the last illustration Jesus gave is of real saving faith: "He that received seed in the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth it, who also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty" (v. 23). This parable tells us why so many people who make a profession of faith end up falling away.

2. Coming boldly to the throne of grace

a) The invitationThe Greek word translated "let us come" (proserch[ma]omai) is used in several other passages in the book of Hebrews to speak of the sinner's approach to God (eg., 7:25; 10:22; 11:6). The writer urges his readers not to fall away, but to come all the way to the throne of grace, all the way up to Christ.The Theme of the Book of HebrewsThroughout the book of Hebrews the priesthood of Christ is exalted. Jesus is the mediator who bridges the gulf between sinful men and holy God. Hebrews 1:3 speaks of His purging our sins. Hebrews 2:17 calls Jesus a merciful and faithful High Priest, while Hebrews 3:1 and 4:15 also refer to Him as our High Priest. Hebrews 7-10 expounds on

the priesthood of Christ in great detail. The priesthood of Jesus Christ is the theme of the entire book of Hebrews.b) The inducements(1) Our High Priest is both God and manThe task of the high priest was to represent God before the people and the people before God. Once a year, the high priest would go into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement and offer a sacrifice to atone for the sins of the people. A perfect high priest would know both God and men perfectly and Jesus does. Because Jesus is the God-Man, He is the perfect High Priest who has brought God and man together.(2) Our High Priest is superior to all other high priestsThe book of Hebrews has already had much to say about the superiority of Christ. He is superior to the Old Testament prophets (1:1-3), angels (1:4-14), Moses (3:1-6), and Joshua (4:8). In Hebrews 4:14-16 we find He is superior to all other high priests. Jesus has none of the weaknesses of the other priests. Because He is our High priest, He calls men to come into God's rest. In verses 14-16, we see three features that make Jesus our great High Priest: His perfect priesthood, His perfect person, and his perfect provision.

I. CHRIST'S PERFECT PRIESTHOOD (v. 14)

"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."

A. The Position of Our High Priest

1. He passed through the heavens

The correct translation of the phrase "passed into the heavens" (v.14) is "passed through the heavens." That important phrase tells us that Jesus, following His ascension, passed through the heavens into God's presence.

2. He finished His work

On the basis of His finished work on earth, Jesus entered into God's presence. In John 17:4 Jesus says to the Father, "I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do." Paul tells us in Philippians 2:9-10 that God highly exalted Him and gave Him a name above every name, a name at which every knee should bow. The reason God so honored Jesus is that He perfectly accomplished His priestly work. Jesus performed a redemptive act that brought God and man together in an eternal relationship. That's something no human priest could ever do. Every year on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) the high priest would offer a sacrifice for the sins of the people for that year. That sacrifice needed to be repeated yearly, in addition to the many other sacrifices for sin that were made throughout the year. Jesus Christ, in contrast, made one sacrifice whereby He perfected forever those are His (Heb. 10:14).

Jesus did something no priest ever did when he was ministering: He sat down (Heb. 1:3). That indicates He finished His work. The high priest in Israel never sat down in the Holy of Holies--in fact, there weren't any seats, except for the mercy seat, and you didn't dare sit on that! When Jesus accomplished His perfect work and sat down, that indicated the work of atonement was finished. No more sacrifices needed to be made. Shortly after the book of Hebrews was written, the Temple was destroyed when the Romans sacked Jerusalem in [sc]A.D. 70. Since that time there have been no sacrifices. They are no longer needed because Jesus made the final sacrifice.

B. The Preeminence of Our High Priest

The Old Testament priest on the Day of Atonement would take the blood of the sacrifice and go through three areas: the outer court, the Holy Place, and then through the veil into the Holy of Holies, where he would sprinkle blood on the mercy seat. That is described for us in Leviticus 16. Before the high priest could go in to make atonement for the sins of the people, he first had to make atonement for his own sins, because he too was a sinner. He was not permitted to remain in the Holy of Holies any longer than was necessary to present the blood of the sacrifice. As soon as the sacrifice was made, he left and did not return for another year.

Jesus, our great High Priest, also went through three areas: He passed through the first heaven (the earth's atmosphere), the second heaven (interstellar space), and into the third heaven (the abode of

God: 2 Cor. 12:2). Unlike the high priest on the Day of Atonement, however, Jesus remains permanently in the presence of God. All sacrifices prior to Jesus were but pictures of His perfect sacrifice, which fully satisfied God. Hebrews 12:24 says, "To Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel." First Peter 1:2 says we're "elect according to the foreknowledge of God, the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ."

C. The Perfections of Our High Priest

The book of Hebrews exalts the perfections of Jesus, our great High Priest.

1. Hebrews 7:25-26

"He is able ... to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them. For such an high priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens."

2. Hebrews 8:1

"Of the things which we have spoken this is the sum: We have such an high priest, who is seated on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens."

3. Hebrews 9:12-14

"Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. For if the blood of bulls and goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"

The Bible teaches that God has designated the shedding of blood (sacrificial death) as the atonement for sin (Heb. 9:22). Jesus Christ shed His blood on our behalf that God might be satisfied. Through placing our faith in Him, His perfect sacrifice covers all our sin.

4. Hebrews 9:24

"Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us."

5. Hebrews 10:11-12

"Every priest standeth daily ministering and offering often the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down on the right hand of God."

D. The Purpose of Our High Priest

Jesus is now in the presence of God interceding for us. A Christian could never have any sins held against him, because Jesus is constantly interceding on our behalf. First John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." First John 2:1 says, "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." Because of Christ's intercession Paul could say, "Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect?" (Rom. 8:33). Who can accuse us of anything when Christ is interceding for us? Our Lord has accomplished what no other high priest could accomplish: He paid the penalty for our sin in full, and God is satisfied.

Do We Still Need Priests Today?

The book of Hebrews marks the end of the sacrificial system. Old Testament Judaism was based on a priesthood interceding between men and God, but when Jesus came as the final priest and offered the final sacrifice, the need for such a priesthood vanished.

There is no place in Christianity for any priesthood--that is an affront to the full and final priesthood of Jesus Christ Himself. Any priesthood on earth now implies that atonement for sin has not yet been made. Christians have no need for someone to go to God for them; Hebrews 4:16 tells us we can go directly to God's throne of grace. First Peter 2:5, 9 tells us that all Christians are priests. Every

man, by faith in Jesus Christ, enters directly into God's presence. When Jesus died, the veil in the Temple was torn from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51) indicating that access to God is now forever open to those who come through His Son.

II. CHRIST'S PERFECT PERSON (v. 15)

"For we have not an high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin."

In the phrase "Jesus, the Son of God" (v. 14), we have the Messianic title of Jesus Christ. Jesus is a human name, the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name Jehoshua or Joshua, which means "Jehovah saves." The Son of God is Christ's divine title.

A. Sinless Humanity

To many people, God seems far off and unconcerned with human affairs, but that is not true. Jesus is God the Son, but that doesn't mean He didn't experience our feelings, temptations, and suffering. Verse 15 confirms that He did. Jesus sympathizes with us. He understands us. I don't want to tell my troubles to someone who doesn't understand. When I hurt Jesus hurts. He has an unequalled capacity for sympathizing with us in every danger, trial, or situation that comes our way, because He's been through it all. He endured every form of testing that a man could endure. Some people believe Jesus can't really understand how they feel because they are weak and fall into temptation, while Jesus successfully resisted temptation. Such people forget His agony while being tempted not to follow God's will in Gethsemane. Jesus was tempted, tested, and subjected to every kind of trial that you'll ever know.

Jesus faced a much harder battle with temptation than we do. We can experience only so much pain before we lose consciousness or go into shock. When I was thrown out of a car going about seventy-five miles an hour, I felt pain for a while and then I didn't feel anything. There is a degree of pain we will never experience because our bodies turn off the pain before we get to that level. The same thing is true in temptation. There is a degree of temptation we never experience because we succumb long before we get to that point. Since Jesus never sinned He experienced temptation to the uttermost extreme.

B. Sympathetic Deity

1. The indifferent gods of men

a) Of the Jews The Jewish people tended to believe that God was incapable of sharing the feelings of men. He was too distant, too far removed in nature from man to be able to identify with our feelings, temptations, and problems. Under the Old Covenant, God's dealings with His people were more indirect, more distant. Except for rare instances, even faithful believers did not experience His closeness and intimacy in the way that all believers now can. b) Of the Greeks The Stoics, whose philosophy dominated much of Greek and Roman culture in the first century, believed God's primary attribute was apathy (Gk., *apatheia*). They said in some of their writings that God is incapable of feeling joy, sorrow, gladness, grief, or any other human emotion. The Epicureans taught that the gods live in the intermundium, the space between the physical and spiritual worlds. They believed the gods did not participate in either world, and so could hardly be expected to understand the feelings, problems, and needs of mortals, being completely detached from mankind.

2. The caring God of the Bible

In contrast to the uncaring gods of the Jews and Greeks, Christians have a High Priest who feels everything that men feel. That was a revolutionary concept. The God of the Bible is big enough to create the whole universe, yet He understands our hurts. We not only have a God who is there, but a God who has been here as well.

a) His separation from sin The Greek word translated "infirmities" (v. 15) does not refer to sin. Jesus could not relate to our sin, since He never sinned. The word refers to feebleness or weakness--all the

natural limitations of humanity, including liability to sin. Jesus knew firsthand the drive of human nature toward sin. His humanity was His battleground. It is here that Jesus faced and fought sin. He was victorious, but not without the most intense temptation, grief, and anguish. The phrase at the end of verse 15, "without sin" (Gk., *choris hamartias*) indicates the complete absence of sin. Despite the constant temptation Jesus endured, He did not sin. Not the slightest taint of sin ever entered His mind. Hebrews 9:28 says, "Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation." Jesus was just as sinless during His life on earth as He will be when He returns in glory. First John 1:5 says, "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." Jesus had no capacity to sin because He is God. Our great High Priest sympathizes with us in our trials, yet remains without the slightest taint of sin. b) His sympathy for sinners Some people wonder how Jesus could understand our struggle with sin since He Himself is sinless. A surgeon may have performed hundreds of operations without ever having had surgery himself. On the other hand, a person may know nothing of surgery in spite of having had many operations himself. If you were to be operated on, which person would you choose to perform the surgery? Merely experiencing something doesn't necessarily give us an understanding of it. Jesus never sinned, yet He understands sin better than any of us. He has seen it more clearly and fought it more diligently than any of us ever could. Hebrews 12:3-4 says, "Consider him [Jesus] that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin." If you want to talk to someone who understands the power of sin, talk to Jesus Christ. He understands the struggle we all endure. First Corinthians 10:13 says, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not permit you to be tempted above that ye are able, but will, with the temptation, also make the way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." Jesus Christ knows the path of victory over sin.

He Understood

The following story is told of a man named Booth Tucker, who was conducting evangelistic meetings in the great Salvation Army Citadel in Chicago. One night, after he had preached on the sympathy of Jesus, a man came forward and asked Mr. Tucker how he could talk about a loving, understanding, sympathetic God. "If your wife had just died, like mine has," the man said, "and your babies were crying for their mother who would never come back, you wouldn't be saying what you're saying." A few days later, Mr. Tucker's wife was killed in a train wreck. Her body was brought to Chicago and carried to the Citadel for the funeral. After the service the bereaved preacher looked down into the silent face of his wife and then turned to those who were attending. "The other day when I was here," he said, "a man told me that, if my wife had just died and my children were crying for their mother, I would not be able to say that Christ was understanding and sympathetic, or that He was sufficient for every need. If that man is here, I want to tell him that Christ is sufficient. My heart is broken, it is crushed, but it has a song, and Christ put it there. I want to tell that man that Jesus Christ speaks comfort to me today." The man was there, and he came and knelt beside the casket while Booth Tucker introduced him to Jesus Christ.

III. CHRIST'S PERFECT PROVISION (v. 16)

"Let us, therefore, come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."

The author is exhorting Hebrews who had given only mental assent to the gospel to come all the way to the throne of grace and obtain salvation. The throne of grace is God's throne. It used to be a throne of judgment, but when Jesus sprinkled His blood upon it, He turned it into a throne of grace. That's His perfect provision.

What was it that sinful men needed? Mercy and grace. So we are to come boldly before God's

throne to receive the grace He has provided for us through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ. How can anyone reject such a High Priest? The phrase "find grace to help in time of need" means you will find grace when you need it most. And that time is now, before it's too late, and your heart is hard and God's today is over.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What are some of the positive reasons the writer of Hebrews gives for receiving Jesus Christ?
2. According to the parable of the sower, what causes people to make a false profession of faith in Christ?
3. What is the theme of the book of Hebrews?
4. What makes Jesus the perfect High Priest?
5. On what basis did Jesus enter God's presence?
6. Why is it significant that Jesus is sitting down in the Father's presence?
7. True or False: It is not possible that a Christian could have any sins held against him. Give scriptural support for your answer.
8. Explain why we no longer need priests.
9. When Jesus died, the veil in the Temple that screened off the Holy of Holies was torn from top to bottom. What did that signify?
10. What qualifies Jesus to be our sympathetic High Priest?
11. What made Jesus' battle with temptation so much more difficult than ours?
12. The Stoics believed that God's primary attribute was _____.
13. True or False: The Epicureans believed the gods were actively involved in the affairs of this world and hence could sympathize with the struggles of men.
14. What does the Greek word translated "infirmities" in verse 15 mean?
15. How could Jesus understand our struggle with sin, since He Himself never sinned?
16. What is the throne of grace?

Pondering the Principles

1. In the parable of the sower, Jesus mentioned four responses to the gospel. Three out of the four soils illustrate those who merely make an outward profession, and do not manifest genuine saving faith. Many people in the church today give the outward appearance of being Christian, but have never experienced true saving faith. In light of that sobering truth, examine how you present the gospel to others. Do you stress what Jesus can do for people, or do you also warn them of the serious consequences of continuing in their sin and rejecting God? Note that the writer of Hebrews presented a balanced view of salvation throughout chapters 3 and 4. He not only stressed the benefits of coming to faith in Christ, but also warned of the consequences if people fail to come to Him. If your presentation of the gospel lacks that balance, do a study of the gospels and Acts to see how Jesus and the apostles presented the gospel. Then pattern your own presentation after theirs.
2. In his book *The Knowledge of the Holy* A. W. Tozer points out the importance of having our mental image of God correspond to how God has revealed Himself in the Bible. What comes into your mind when you think about God? Do you view Him as a stern, demanding parent ready to nail you the instant you step out of line? As a demanding coach for whom your performance is never quite good enough? As so utterly holy, He is unapproachable? As the Creator of the vast universe, indifferent to the affairs of men? The Bible does reveal God to be a holy, righteous judge who hates sin, and will judge those sinners who fail to repent. God is the Creator of all the vast reaches of the universe. Yet the Bible also reveals He is a gracious, loving, caring father, who does not wish any to be lost (2 Pet. 3:9). As we learn from Hebrews 4:15, Jesus is a sympathetic, understanding High Priest. If you find your view of God to be inadequate, why not begin a study of His attributes? In addition to your Bible, you will find such books as Tozer's *The Knowledge of the Holy*, Arthur Pink's *The Attributes of God*,

J. I. Packer's *Knowing God*, and Stephen Charnock's *The Existence and Attributes of God* to be of great value. There is no more important study you will ever undertake.

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