

Hebrews 4:14-16 *“Our High Priest”*

Introduction:

These three verses represent a transition from the previous passage (3:1-4:13; in which the author demonstrated the superiority of Christ over Moses and Joshua) to the following passage (5:1-10:18; in which the author demonstrated the superiority of Christ to the Levitical Priesthood). The author closed out the previous train of thought by expressing further how his readers could succeed at attaining God’s rest; and prepared the reader for what follows by saying that the resource for attaining that success was Christ’s high-priestly ministry.

I. The One Who Represents Us in Heaven: (vs.14)

The author opened this passage with the words “*seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens*”. The author wrote that in Christ the believer has a “*great*” high priest. As the author will demonstrate, the greatness of Christ’s high-priestly role lies in the sanctuary in which He serves, and what He has accomplished as high priest. First, in regard to the sanctuary in which He serves, we are told that Christ “*passed through the heavens*”. The Hebrew conception of the heavens was three-fold. The first heaven was the atmosphere, the second was what we would call space, and the third was the abode of God. Christ is said to have passed through and remains on the other side of the atmospheric and celestial heavens and has come to the abode of God. Later in this epistle the writer revealed that the design of the Tabernacle on earth was patterned after the real sanctuary in heaven (8:5). Therefore, the idea here is that unlike all previous high priests, Christ serves in the actual sanctuary, not the earthly copy. Therefore, His priestly work represents the true substance of how believers gain access to God, whereas Levitical Priests merely fulfill a typological role picturing the work that Christ alone could do.

The title that the author ascribed to our high priest is “*Jesus the Son of God*”. The titles applied to Christ are always chosen intentionally to suit the way He was being presented in a given passage. In this case the title includes our Savior’s human name, and a messianic title. The reason this is significant is that it gives us further insight into why Christ is a superior high priest. First, it is because, as a human being He is capable of genuinely representing humanity before God. Second, it is because as the Messiah, He is both the priest who makes the offering to atone for sin and the sacrifice that accomplishes that atonement. These spiritual realities about Christ demonstrated that He was indeed greater than the Levitical Priests.

In light of the superiority of Christ as our high priest, the author exhorted his readers to join him so they could together “*hold fast our confession*”. The confession (or profession) in this case was their expression of belief in Jesus as the Divine Messianic Savior. The author was suggesting that by leaving Christ, they would be leaving behind the only high priest who could actually open up the way to God for

them; so, no matter what the cost it was imperative that they stay true to their allegiance to Him.

II. The One Who Empathizes with Us: (vs.15)

The author continued by writing “*For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses*”. It is helpful to notice that this affirmation is made in the negative. In other words what is asserted about Christ is framed as a denial of the sort of high priest He is not. This implies that the author was confronting a false conception that the readers had about Christ. In some sense they had come to think of Christ as emotionally distant or detached from their situation. Specifically, that He did not really understand how hard it was for them to remain faithful and not sin under their present conditions. Hellenistic Jewish teachers of that period tended to advance the belief that ideal piety involved the elimination of all emotion and empathy. It is likely that these Jewish Christians had been influenced by this teaching.

But the author was saying that this was not true; Christ was able to sympathize with their situation. The Greek word translated as “*sympathize*” means to share a feeling with someone else. Not in the sense that one can simply image the pain someone else is going through, but rather that they have gone through the exact same situation as the one with whom they sympathize, having experienced similar feelings and struggles. That is why the English word “*empathize*” might be a better rendering. Christ knew precisely how emotionally painful it was at times to remain faithful and obedient to God. The author added that the Savior is specifically empathetic with one’s “*weaknesses*”. The weaknesses that are in mind here are those things that make one prone to disobey God or to doubt if God can be trusted.

The author then addressed why Christ can empathize with the weaknesses of believers; He “*was in all points tempted as we are*”. The author did not mean that Jesus experienced every specific temptation that any person ever had or would. Instead, the idea was that Jesus experienced the entire range of temptations. In the Gospels we have been given accounts of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness and in Gethsemane. We can see from those accounts that He indeed knew how painful it can be to obey God in a fallen world, and what sort of temptations one will experience as one seeks to live faithfully in submission to God.

The author added however, one factor that makes Jesus unique in regard to the experience of temptation; a factor that makes Him unlike anyone else who has ever lived. He went through the experiences of temptation “*without sin*”. This means two things. Jesus had no inclination to sin (He was not born with an indwelling sin nature); nor did He commit sin. In response to this statement, some suggest that this added fact means that Jesus could not really have experienced temptation at all. However, that conclusion reveals deeply flawed thinking. It is rooted in the assumption that temptation is simply the solicitation to do what is evil or wrong. Though this is definitely a significant part of the temptation process, what is missing in that statement is the understanding that the Greek word translated as “*temptation*” can also refer to a process of testing. Therefore, to focus only on the

solicitation to do evil is to look at only one aspect of what is happening. The solicitation of evil comes from our fallen nature and from the devil. The overall test is ordained by God as an opportunity to prove one's faithfulness to God. Therefore, for several reasons, an inclination toward evil is not a necessary part of temptation. The real struggle in temptation comes from resisting it, not from giving into it. The longer one resists temptation, the longer the experience lasts, and the experience tends only to get stronger the longer one resists. Therefore, the reality is that Christ knew a degree of temptation that no one else has ever experienced because He never gave into temptation, but everyone else has eventually given in to it. Another objection that is raised by some is that even if Jesus experienced real temptation, the example is not applicable to us because Jesus had no sinful desires to stimulate and we do. Although it is true that Jesus had no sinful desires, it is not true that this diminishes the experience of temptation. If we read the accounts of Jesus' temptations, we see that they all involved matters of ministry or self-preservation. Neither of those things are bad in themselves. However, the temptation came because the devil sought to induce Jesus to pursue them in a way that was contrary to God's will. The reality is that temptation often appeals to good desires but elicits us to satisfy those desires in an inappropriate manner, context, or time. In the present context the Hebrew believers were concerned about their physical safety and well-being, which in itself was not wrong. However, they were tempted to put that concern above faithfulness to God. Theologically, many debate the question of whether or not Christ was able to sin. Neither this passage, nor any other in the New Testament, directly addresses that particular question. The Bible does not encourage us to ask hypothetical or philosophical questions; instead, it simply tells us what was and is true. Christ's temptation took place entirely apart from the factor of sin. His perfect obedience was certain. Any speculation beyond that is a form of rebellion to the clear instruction that God has given to us:

"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law."
Deuteronomy 29:29

III. The One Who is a Channel of God's Grace: (vs.16)

In light of the empathy that can be found in Christ, the author exhorted his readers to "*Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace*". The Greek word translated as "*come*" means to approach something or someone, and was a common word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for approaching God in worship. In this case the writer exhorted his readers to approach "*the throne of grace*". When one reads about approaching a "*throne*" one might get the image in mind of a magnificent chair that a king would sit upon. That imagery is precisely what is intended in the Book of Revelation; however, that is not the imagery that is being invoked here. It is important to remember that the writer was writing to Jewish Christians and writing about how Christ fulfilled Old Testament typology. So, when we read about a high priest approaching a throne, we are to envision that priest approaching the Ark of the Covenant in the holy of holies on the Day of

Atonement. In the Old Testament we find God referred to as the One who is enthroned “*between the Cherubim*” (Ex.25:22; I Sam.4:4; II Sam.6:2; II Kings 19:25; Ps.80:1), and the Ark of the Covenant is referred to as the footstool to God’s throne (I Chron.28:2). Therefore, God’s throne is above the Ark. On the Day of Atonement (and on no other day) the High Priest would enter the holy of holies and quickly sprinkle a blood offering on the lid of the Ark and then depart. It was understood that this offering covered the sins of God’s people for another year, allowing them to remain in fellowship with their God. Therefore, the author here was telling the reader that because of Christ’s high-priestly work we can come into the true sanctuary at any time. This is a fantastic expansion of access to God. But not only that we are told that the believer can approach “*boldly*”. There was nothing bold about one’s approach to God under the Levitical Priesthood; but now the believer can come without fear of being turned away or experiencing judgment and express everything that is in their heart to God through prayer.

The author then said that the believer’s purpose in this bold approach into the presence of God is in order “*that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need*”. In light of the fact that this exhortation comes in the context of a discussion of how a believer can remain faithful in our commitment to Christ in the midst of temptation, the idea is that we might gain forgiveness for our failures and secure the enabling power of God that we need in order to truly live in faith and obedience to our God. There is a promise built into this last part of the verse; that the help we need will come in a timely manner so that we can succeed in godliness, even during the most difficult temptations. The idea seems to be that whenever one is in need, one can come to God for help, knowing that God is always available because the believer has access to God twenty-four hours a day.

Conclusion:

But how does God empower us so that we are able to withstand temptation and live faithfully to Him. The answer is that God changes our hearts, so our motivations change and our desires change as well. Our natural state is to expect to find fulfillment in the material things of life or in our relationships with other people. Therefore, we act and choose in such a way so as to secure the satisfaction that we believe these things will bring. As long as that is true of us; obedience to God will always be at best a secondary motivation. So, when temptation comes and we must choose between God’s way and the way of the world that promises satisfaction, we will frequently choose the way of the world. However, the grace that God offers, leads us to discover that actually we were created to find satisfaction in our communion with God (and the reality is that nothing else will ever truly satisfy us). In this discovery, and in the cultivation of this appetite for communion with God, our priorities change and we find we are now motivated to obey so that we can enjoy the superior satisfaction that is found in God. So, the input here teaches us that the greatest commandment (Matt.22:37-40) is not just a moral responsibility, it is a spiritual necessity, if we are to succeed in Godliness.