

“A Sympathetic High Priest (Part 1)”– Hebrews 4:12-16

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July 22, 2018

[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Take your Bible and let’s meet in Hebrews 4...

[Two mission trips this week]

We have arrived at one my favorite passages in the book of Hebrews, one that I find myself returning to with great frequency in my own devotional life. I would like to spend two weeks on it given the season that we are in as a church. It ties quite nicely into the day of prayer that will begin next Sunday.

[Commercial: Day of Prayer and signing up]

So let’s have a look at these comforting verses, beginning in verse 14. You can follow along as I read. This is God’s Word...

“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.”¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:14-16)

These verses are so rich. They call to mind a great deal of truth that we could meditate upon for weeks and weeks. But for our purposes there are three major ideas that will occupy our attention today and next Sunday. In these verses we see a requirement laid upon God’s people, a reason for such a requirement, and a resource to help us fulfill such requirement. Three things—a requirement, a reason, and a resource.¹ Admittedly, we are kind of setting the table for next week, where there will be a greater applicational payoff. So let’s begin with the first item...

The Requirement: The Confession We Hold

Notice what we are called to at the end of verse 14—“*let us hold fast our confession.*” Here again the theme of perseverance is called to mind. We must, our author says, continue to hold onto our confession. We must not let it go by the way side or shrink back from it to return to our old way of life, even our old religious way of life (in their case, their Old Covenant Judaism). In the face of opposition and temptations to unbelief, believers are called to maintain their confession.

This raises an obvious question: What is this confession? He doesn’t really define it here, but given the letter as a whole, I tend to agree with Al Mohler, the president at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, that this confession is indeed “a two-fold confession: our confession of the historical Jesus and our confession of the Christian faith.”²

So, for instance, in chapter 3:1, we are told to “*consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession.*” So the content of our confession relates to a person, Jesus Christ, and our confession of that

person is shaped by what has been revealed about that person—he was sent by the Father (apostle), to mediate between God and man (high priest), as the God-man (Jesus, the Son of God) who alone can procure our salvation. These facts about His person and work lie at the heart of our confession as Christians. We confess Jesus. And we confess Him as Lord and Savior.

Furthermore, given the parallels between this passage and Hebrews 10:19ff, we might also say that it is the confession of our hope. Listen to the similarities between our passage this morning and what the author will say toward the end of the “High Priest” section of the book of Hebrews.

“Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus,²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God,²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.” (Hebrews 10:19-23)

We will cover those verses in due course, but for now we should simply anticipate the parallels between these passages and note that this Christian confession that we are called to “*hold fast*” is described “*the confession of our hope*” (10:23). What is our hope that is caught up in the person of Christ? It is that He, and He alone, is God’s means of reconciling us to God, atoning for our sin, and bringing us into the final rest and joy. All of these things we have considered in the past. All of these things will be teased out more in the pages ahead. Suffice it to say that the confession we are instructed to hold fast is none other than the confession of saving faith—that Jesus, the Son of God, is our only hope in life and in death.³ It is the Gospel,⁴ “*the faith we profess*” (NIV).

Yet again the author of Hebrews is urging us not to abandon the Christian faith. Perseverance in faith matters. But it’s not something we can do on our own. The author knows that. He recognizes that Christian perseverance in the faith is owing to the work of Christ, the object of our faith. So he grounds the call to “hold fast our confession” in the truth of who Christ is and what He has done. This leads us to the next item for our consideration...

The Reason: The Great High Priest

Look at verse 14 again. “*Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.*” Why do we persevere in holding on to our confession of faith in the Gospel despite all struggle and strife? What is the reason? It is because we have a Great High Priest who faithfully fulfills His priestly work. That role and work of Christ both motivates our perseverance in the faith *and* enables it (as we will see in some of the verses that lie ahead).

With these words the author begins a new section in this epistle, one in which the Jesus’ role as high priest will be center stage.

Here he simply states that Jesus is our “*great high priest*” and that He has “*passed through the heavens*” (4:14). With these words we are reminded of the doctrine of the ascension. We remember that after Jesus was resurrected, He ascended to the Father. You might say, He “*passed through the heavens.*” Of all the Gospel events the ascension is arguably the most neglected.⁵ Christians spend a lot of time thinking on the incarnation at Christmas and the resurrection at Easter, but the ascension is largely overlooked.⁶ Yet I agree with Augustine, one of history’s most influential Christian thinkers, who once wrote,

“[Ascension Day] confirms the grace of all the festivals together [e.g., Christmas and Easter], without which the profitableness of every festival would have perished. For unless the Saviour had ascended into heaven, his Nativity would have come to nothing...and his Passion would have borne no fruit for us, and his most holy Resurrection would have been useless.”⁷

I wish we had more time this morning to explore the riches of the doctrine of the ascension. But our text limits our focus to the role of Jesus as our ascended and great high priest, so let's dig there.

Jesus' high priestly work is the theme of this third section of the book. The entire book is one long exposition on the superiority of Christ to all substitutes. In the first section the author has labored to show that Jesus was and is superior to all former revelation and every angel (1:1-2:18). In the second section we have seen Jesus' superiority to the Great Leaders of Israel's past, Moses and Joshua (3:1-4:13). Now, in this third section, he will show us that Jesus' priesthood is superior to the Levitical priesthood we find in the Old Testament (4:14-10:18). The author spends the most time on this topic so it clearly has important implications for Christian thought and experience.⁸

This is not the first place where the writer of Hebrews has drawn our attention to Christ's role as our high priest. We have seen this idea touched on explicitly and implicitly in each of the preceding chapters (1:3; 2:17; 3:1). But this is the first time that He is referred to as our “*great*” High Priest. In fact, while high priests figure prominently throughout the Bible, there is only one who has been spoken of as “*a great high priest*” and that is Jesus Himself.

This language would have stood out more to the original audience that it does to us because most of us in this place don't read Hebrew. If you read the Hebrew Old Testament, however, then you probably remember that “high priest” in Hebrew is literally “great priest.” The author's Jewish-Christian audience would have known that. So for him to speak of (in Greek) a “*great high priest*” would have stood out. It's like calling Jesus the “great great priest,” emphasis on the *great* and hence His superiority to all other high priests.

But just as that emphasis is not at all obvious to most modern readers, the role of a high priest is also not familiar to most modern readers because there are no Jewish high priests around today. Fortunately for us there are centuries of history recorded in the Old Testament that help us to understand the role of the high priest. In the Old Testament, priests served as mediators between God and God's people. They played two important roles for God's people—they made intercession for God's people and the made atonement for God's people. They prayed and they sacrificed. This ministry helped avert the wrath of God towards His sinful people, but only temporarily. So their ministry was ongoing. It was repeated. Year after year after year after year...And this repetition bore silent witness to the fact that the whole system was inadequate.⁹

You say, “Why would God set up an inadequate system?” Because it was meant to point forward to something greater. It was meant to be a picture of something that God would do perfectly one day in the person and work of Jesus Christ. There was coming a day when God would send His own Son to make atonement on behalf of the people in a once for all fashion and to make ongoing intercession on behalf of the people to bring them safely to their eternal home. Jesus would accomplish in actuality what the priests could only prefigure.

While the author of Hebrews doesn't unpack all that for us yet, he's about to in the coming chapters. And he's already dropped a few breadcrumbs along the way to prepare us for it. For example, in chapter 2, we have seen that the incarnation of Christ—the reality that God the Son took on our full humanity—was for the purpose of being our high priest.

“Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” (Hebrews 2:17; cf. 3:1)

So He was made like us in every respect, which is to say He was made fully human, so that he could be our high priest. And what is one of the things that high priests do? They offer up sacrifices to make atonement for sin. This is what the author has in mind when he says that Jesus, our high priest, came *“to make propitiation for the sins of the people.”* Now there’s a nice theological word that has slipped out of modern use—propitiation. What on earth does that mean? I’m glad you asked. It basically means to satisfy the wrath of God. Our sin—all that wrong stuff we do and think and say—deserves God’s wrath. It angers Him. It angers Him because He is just and sin deserves to be punished.

But we don’t want to be punished. We don’t want God to be angry with us. We don’t want to be the objects of His wrath. We want to propitiate God. There’s our word. That means we want to remove His anger so that we can be at peace with Him.

So the story of religion is the story of men and women trying to do that very thing, trying to remove God’s wrath, His anger, His displeasure. Religion is the story of mankind trying to do stuff to make themselves right with God. But that’s not the story of Christianity! The Bible teaches us that we cannot make ourselves right with God because there is nothing we can do to remove God’s just anger towards us. We are sinners who deserve to be cast out of God’s presence into hell. We can’t change that through anything we do. So God, in His unrivaled grace and love, intervened by sending His Son, who in the words of Hebrews 2:17, came as *“a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.”*

Jesus did what we could not. He made propitiation. He satisfied the wrath of God toward sinners by taking upon Himself their sin and receiving God’s just judgment in their place on the cross. Like a high priest he carried a sacrifice to God to deal with our sin, only in this case the sacrifice was no animal but His very self, the spotless Lamb of God. This is why the author states, in the opening chapter, that Jesus *“made purification for sins”* and then *“sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high”* (1:3). He did perfectly what every other High Priest did inadequately. His work alone makes us right with God by grace alone through faith in Christ alone.

No other high priest was needed after Jesus. He is the Great High Priest to whom every other high priest’s ministry was but a shadow. They were the preview. He was the main attraction. They were the type. He was the fulfillment.

Now there is a bunch that I am tempted to unfold with you related to Christ’s high priestly work, but I don’t want us to get too far ahead of ourselves. The next several chapters are going to shed light on all of these ideas I have alluded to so hang tight. They’re going to teach us about the sacrifice He offered. They are going to teach us what He did with His blood when He passed through the heavens. They’re going to teach us how He continues to intercede for His people now that He is ascended. And they’re going to teach us why we have no need for any other high priest. So rest assured, we will get there.

But our text this morning doesn’t focus so much on the particulars of His high priestly ministry, but the manner in which He fulfills it—sympathetically and without sin. Look again at what verse 15 says about our great and ascended High Priest:

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15)

That is an amazing statement! Why is Jesus able to sympathize with us? Because, as Hebrews 2:17 (which I referred to earlier) states, He was made like us “*in every respect.*” When the eternal Son of God came to earth He was made human. Fully human. There is nothing that is essential or intrinsic to humanity that the incarnate Christ lacks. He was like us in every respect, save one—“*yet without sin.*” But sin is not an inherent part of humanity. Adam and Eve, the first humans, were not created sinners. They were created fully human, without sin. They fell into sin when they chose to disobey the command of God and that fall corrupted their humanity (and ours). But that sin nature is not part of what it means to be truly human. It’s part of what it means to be fallen. Jesus was truly human like us. Jesus was not fallen like us.

And just like he was made human like us “*in every respect*” (2:17), he also “*in every respect has been tempted as we are*” (3:15). Think about that. He knows all of our temptations because during His life on earth He experienced them. To be sure, He didn’t experience every *single* temptation in the few decades He walked the earth. He never experienced the temptation to watch too much Netflix or television since neither form of entertainment was available in the first century. He never experienced temptations unique to a husband or an elderly man because he was never married and was younger than me when He was crucified. You get the idea. But there is not a temptation that you experience that Jesus didn’t experience in some way. He didn’t experience every single temptation, but every *kind* of temptation. Yet he was without sin.¹⁰

Now there are two sides of this reality (each with their own set of objections)—the temptation side (which explains Jesus’ sympathy with us) and the sinlessness side (which explains why we can be saved). There is the side that shows Jesus to be like us (tempted) and the side that shows Him to be utterly different than us (sinless). I want us to consider both of these ideas next week (along with some common objections) as we wrap up this discussion on the reason our Great High Priest allows us to hold fast to our faith and then we will consider something of the resources He provides for the journey. I want so much to get into these things with you now, but we don’t have time to do them justice so let’s explore them together next week.

But as we close this morning let me whet the appetite a bit for next week by reading you some reflections by an author named Erik Raymond. He’s reflecting on the active obedience of Christ, that is, the sinlessness of Christ. He’s marveling at how different Jesus was than us in this regard. We constantly succumb to temptation, but Jesus never once did. Though He shared our weaknesses, He never failed to live the life God calls humanity to live. He was perfect in every way. And in this way He was so different from you and I and that is what Raymond was reflecting on. So let me close with this as an example of the fitting response we should have to the fact of Christ’s sinlessness and as a way to get us ready for next Sunday. Perhaps you will find his words as relatable as I do...

“Over and over again I find myself refreshed by the differentness of Jesus. In fact it is who he is and how that is so different from me that is so gloriously captivating. I have been thinking a lot recently about the active obedience of Christ and have been continually amazed by the curse-bearing, law-fulfilling, perfect Savior. (Active obedience is the Savior’s perfect substitutionary fulfillment of all of the divine precepts).

When you read a verse like Psalm 40, which was referenced and applied to Jesus by the writer of Hebrews a couple of times (2:12, 10:7), you just marvel:

Psalm 40:7-8—“Then I said, “Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me: I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.””

I read of the Savior’s incessant desire to do the divine will and I am amazed. My amazement stems from my own failure to accomplish this will. Even on my best day as a Christian I am not one who can say, looking back at this best day, ‘I have perfectly desired and accomplished your will O

God.’ It goes without mention that our preChristian days were not even close to characterized with a desire or accomplishment of what was pleasing to God, instead we all found ourselves engaged in the undermining and hatred of the Law of God (Col. 1.21; Tit. 3.3).

Furthermore, I am impressed with Jesus in this consideration because he was not obligated to obey and accomplish this law. The very statement made by Christ in John 4 is a statement that is sourced not in his need to obey for himself but for sinners like us:

John 4:34—‘Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.”’

It was my obligation to obey the law of God not Jesus. He is the Sovereign law giver, I am to be the subordinate law keeper. However, instead of crushing me with his royal scepter my King did what I could never do nor ever wanted to do.

Whenever I find myself lacking faith I remember that he was faithful, when I am unduly angry I consider his patience and kindness, when I am focused on the fading beauty of this world I rejoice that he was riveted on the glory and pleasure of the Father, when I am discontent I remember that he who had all became nothing and was content in and through everything. Whenever I sin I have to find myself looking for my Savior and when I see him I am to see his life of obedience to the Father’s law in my place. O’ the glorious reality of the active obedience of Jesus, for it covers imperfect sinners like me in his perfect and unfading righteousness.

In this I am reminded that the end of sin is not intended to be my prolonged bemoaning of my own wickedness but to be a vehicle that drives me to despise my sin, my inability, and to land thankfully and worshipfully upon the feet of the Lord my righteousness, for he is the only one who could ever truthfully say, ‘I always do what is pleasing to him [my Father].’ (John 8.29)

So be impressed with Christ, the sin-bearing substitute and source of divine righteousness. Be impressed with him because he is so different than you, he is everything that you are not and, by divine grace, ever long to be.”¹¹

To be continued...

Let’s pray...

¹ Richard Phillips frames his commentary on these verses with these same three words, which struck me as the best way to arrange this sermon for this audience and so I adopted and adapted this language and structure. See Richard D. Phillips, *Hebrews* (REC; Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006), 145.

² R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Exalting Christ in Hebrews* (CCE; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 65.

³ The confession “denotes the faith the readers have embraced and promised to uphold.” Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews* (BTCP; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 152.

⁴ Mohler, 65; cf. Romans 10:9—“If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

⁵ In a wonderful book on preaching the Gospel to yourself called *Hidden in the Gospel*, William Farley dedicates an entire chapter to the importance of the ascension. In particular shows that the ascension matters for five reasons:

- It is essential for our salvation.
- It is the precondition for the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- It means that Jesus continuously intercedes for us.
- It means that God hears our prayers.
- It assures us that Christ is in control of every detail in history [because the ascended Christ rules at the Father’s right hand].

William P. Farley, *Hidden in the Gospel: Truths You Forget to Tell Yourself* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2014), 85-95.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁷ Quoted by Peter Toon in “Resurrected and Ascended: The Exalted Christ,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140 (1983): 195.

⁸ “We should also remember that the superiority of Jesus over angels, over Moses and Joshua, and the superiority of his priesthood is not a theological abstraction. In other words the theology of the book serves the warning passages. Since Jesus is superior to the old covenant in all its dimensions, since the new covenant is better than the old, forsaking Jesus is fatal.” Schreiner, 151.

⁹ “Old Testament priests could only offer sacrifices that would delay God’s judgment against sin. Their sacrifices could only buy time. Jesus’s sacrifice, however, accomplished complete atonement for sin once and for all. This was only possible because he was without sin, totally unlike every high priest and totally unlike every other human being.” Mohler, 67.

¹⁰ “The notion that Jesus was sinless is a common theme in the NT. Even where it is not stated, it is presupposed. Nonetheless, a number of texts explicitly affirm his sinlessness (Luke 23:41; John 7:18; 8:46; 14:30; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 1:19; 2:22; 3:18; 1 John 3:5).” Schreiner, 153.

¹¹ Erik Raymond, “Finding Myself Impressed with Christ’s Obedience,” November 6, 2007, accessed online at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/erik-raymond/finding-myself-impressed-with-christs-obedience/>.