

Our Great High Priest

Introduction. Hebrews 4:14-16 serves both as a conclusion and an introduction. It concludes a discussion began in chapter 3, and introduces the subject of the high priesthood of Christ. This is the main theme of Hebrews, and it occupies most of what remains in the book.

It was vitally important to show that the gospel was not inferior to the Jewish religion in respect to the high priesthood of Christ. On the priesthood and its adequacy depend the whole question of whether a man can really gain access to God. The priesthood of Christ, and His sacrificial death that went with it, opened heaven. For the author, therefore, the nature of the priesthood defined the nature of the religion.

I. ***His Perfect Priesthood (Hebrews 4:14)***

- A. Every word descriptive of Christ is important. Christians do have a great high priest, the implication being perhaps that some readers doubted this. He is great in His own right -- greater than Aaron and greater than all the priests.
 1. The priests of ancient Israel were appointed by God to be mediators between Himself and His people (Exodus 28:1). Only the high priest could offer the highest sacrifice under the Old Covenant once a year on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:1-29). All of the sins of the people were brought symbolically to the Holy of Holies, where blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat as a sacrifice to atone for them.
 2. Jesus entered into heaven itself (Ephesians 4:10). Aaron passed through a material veil into the Holy of Holies (Leviticus 16:2, 15), but He as Son of God has gone directly into the presence of God (Hebrews 6:19), where He sits at God's right hand (Hebrews 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2) making intercession for us (Hebrews 7:25).
- B. The designation, "Jesus, the Son of God," is significant, joining together the human and the divine natures of Christ. As Son of God He is strong and dependable and on intimate terms with the Father; as son of man He has behind Him a distinct human history which enables Him to understand men.
- C. Any formal religious priesthood on earth implies that the final and perfect atonement for sin has not yet been made. By faith in Christ any person can enter directly into God's presence. When Jesus died, the veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51). Access to God was thrown wide open to anyone who would come on His terms.

II. ***His Perfect Person (Hebrews 4:15)***

- A. The author puts down any supposed objection that one who is so exalted cannot be concerned about the human condition. Most people seem to think of God as being far removed from human life and concerns. He is too distant to be able to identify with our feelings, temptations, and problems. The idea that God could and would identify with man was revolutionary in the writer's time, and in our time too. Jesus was the Son of God, yet His divinity did not prevent Him from experiencing the issues of humanity.
- B. Our great high priest not only is perfectly merciful and faithful, but also perfectly understanding. He has an unequalled capacity for sympathizing with us in every danger, trial, and situation that comes our way because He has been through it all Himself.
 - 1. "Weaknesses" does not refer directly to sin, but to feebleness or infirmity. It refers to all the natural limitations of humanity, which includes liability to sin. Jesus experienced every kind of temptation and testing, every kind of reversal, every kind of circumstance that any person will ever face.
 - 2. His humanity was His battleground, and He was victorious. He has felt the full force of temptation that men do not experience, for having never given into sin, He knows its intensity and power. He understands sin better than any man.
- C. Like men physically, He was unlike them in always resisting sin. The sinlessness of Jesus is stated here for the first time in Hebrews, but it is stated elsewhere many times (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:22; 1 John 3:5; cf. John 8:29, 46; 10:32).
 - 1. How did Jesus keep from sinning?
 - a) Theoretically, one could say that man does not have to sin because he is a creature of choice. Therefore, a choice could be made to not sin.
 - (1) The ability to sin does not equate into a foregone conclusion that one will sin. However, we know practically that this is not the case (Romans 3:23; 1 John 1:8). Mankind chooses to do their own will instead of the will of God.
 - (2) If we say that man had to sin, does not the blame lie with God who created all men upright (Ecclesiastes 7:29)?
 - b) Could He have yielded to temptation? Theoretically He could have, but then He would not have been a perfect sacrifice and the plan of God would have failed.
 - (1) How did He keep from sinning? No scripture definitively tells us if Jesus resisted temptation as a man or as God in the flesh. No divine prerogative is necessary to withstand temptation. Jesus bore temptations that are far greater than

any we face, but He bore them as a man would. Otherwise, someone would use the excuse that he could do as well as Jesus if he possessed the same powers, thereby negating the need for a perfect sacrifice for sins.

(2) Did Jesus have an "edge" because of His deity? If Jesus could resist because He was deity, then His temptation would not have meant much to us. The fact that God the Father did not sin does not mean that Jesus could not have sinned (James 1:13). Jesus had freewill (John 10:17-18), and He kept from sinning because He chose to do the will of the Father (John 8:29).

2. No one has ever existed upon the earth with a dual nature except Jesus. We accept how He lived perfectly by faith. Jesus shared in "flesh and blood" and His suffering allows Him to be our merciful, faithful, and helpful high priest (Hebrews 2:14-18).

III. ***His Perfect Provision (Hebrews 4:16)***

A. The One who understands us perfectly will also provide for us perfectly.

1. By Christ's sacrifice of Himself, God's throne of judgment is turned into a throne of grace for those who trust and obey Him.

2. Furthermore, because Jesus Christ knows the temptations of a Christian, He can lead us out of them (1 Corinthians 10:13).

B. The exhortation to "draw near" strikes one of the doctrinal keynotes of the epistle, for the religion of Christ is the religion of access to God. As we have seen, under the Old Covenant, only the priests could draw near -- and then only on stipulated conditions -- and the people could not draw near at all. But Christ's sympathy and suffering for mankind make access possible. It is therefore possible to speak of the throne of grace on which God sits, with Christ at His right hand, and deals benevolently with all who approach Him.

C. Because it is a throne of grace and not a judgment seat, we can approach it with confidence.

1. *Parresia* in ancient Greece denoted the right of a full citizen to speak his mind on any subject in the town assembly -- a right the slave did not have. In the epistle it stands for freedom to approach God on the basis of the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 10:19).

2. Most ancient rulers were unapproachable by the common people. Some would not even allow their highest-ranking officials to come before them without permission (Esther 5:1-2).

a) At God's throne there is "timely help," help that is needed in the hour of temptation. Any penitent person, no matter how sinful and undeserving, may approach God's throne at any time for

forgiveness and salvation -- confident that he will be received with mercy and grace.

- b) Men cannot save themselves or remedy their problems by their own strength; and because their times of need are many, the implication of the author is that they should come regularly and often to the divine throne.

Conclusion. Christians must not lose their rest (Hebrews 4:1). The writer reminds the readers that in the Old Testament God's own people failed -- the ones who started out from the land of slavery died short of the land of promise. The thought -- so tragic and horrible when he realizes that the same fate might befall any Christian -- never leaves him. So he pleads with his readers that they pay attention to the all-powerful message of God's word, and that they remember that they always remain within the scope of the divine gaze. And for their aid he points them to Jesus, their great high priest, and to the graceful throne in heaven.

How can anyone reject such a high priest, such a Savior -- who not only permits us to come before His throne for grace and help, but pleads with us to come with confidence? What a high priest we have. He sympathizes and He saves. What more could He do?