

The Sympathetic Priest

Hebrews 4:14-16

Turn to Hebrews 4 please. Hebrews teaches us something about Jesus that we do not get in any other Scripture. Hebrews openly teaches us about the human weakness of Jesus. That it, Hebrews shows us that Jesus was far more like us than we thought. This does not contradict other Scriptures. Other Scriptures assume this. But Hebrews makes this plainer than other Scripture.

Three different sections of Hebrews make this plain: the end of Hebrews 2, the end of Hebrews 4, and the beginning of Hebrews 5. Two weeks ago we covered the end of Hebrews 2, Jesus our perfect champion, who was fully human, who was made like us in every way, who was tempted, and who suffered when he was tempted, and because of this he became merciful.

Today we'll cover the second of these three, the sympathetic priest, at the end of Hebrews 4. Next week we'll read Hebrews 5.

Let's read Hebrews 4:14-16. *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

“Approaching God's throne of grace” in the Old Testament (Exodus and Leviticus)

Our Scripture says, *let us then approach God's throne of grace*. In the Old Testament, that is a loaded line. At Mt Sinai, after they came out of Egypt and crossed the Red Sea, they made the tabernacle. It was a portable temple, an elaborate tent about 45 feet long and 15 feet wide.

It had two rooms, the Holy Place at the front, and at the back the Most Holy Place, also called the Holy of Holies. In the Holy of Holies was the ark of the covenant, and on top of the ark were two gold cherubim, two golden angels with wings.

Seven times in the OT, we read that God's throne was between the cherubim, or above the cherubim. The whole tabernacle was God's palace, and the Holy of Holies was his throne room. It is not that God actually sat on those angels, but that God rested in that space in the Holy of Holies, between or above the two cherubim. That was his throne.

In Hebrews, the tabernacle is the earthly model, and the real temple of God is the original in heaven. In heaven is the real Holy of Holies, the real ark, and the real cherubim. What the Israelites had was a replica. But that's what God's throne of grace is: it is God's resting place in the Holy of Holies.

And in Israel, who could approach God's throne of grace in the Holy of Holies? Only one person, only the high priest. No other Israelite ever went into the Holy of Holies, God's throne room. And how often did the high priest approach God's throne in the Holy of Holies? One day a year, on the day of Atonement. One day a year one person approached God's throne of grace.

And now, who could approach God's throne of grace? Anyone who trusts in the Lord, Israelite or Gentile! When can we approach God's throne of grace? Any time we want! In fact, we are urged to come again and again, come boldly, come with confidence. The change from Leviticus to now is unbelievable, it is immense, and wonderful.

God did not change, God's holiness did not change, not a speck. Something changed, but not that. God did not decide to relax, don't go near that. So what changed? We got a new high priest. This high priest can cleanse and purify us so completely that Hebrews can say, "come boldly to God's throne of grace."

Since we have Such a High Priest in Heaven (Heb 4:14)

Now we will talk our way through our text, the last three verses of Hebrews 4.

Hebrews 1 tells us that after the Son had made purification for sins, he sat down on the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. Our high priest is permanently stationed at God's right hand. The OT high priest went in there one day a year, but our high priest never leaves. He is always there to bring our requests and needs to the Father.

Let us Hold Fast to our Faith

Our Scripture today urges us to do two things, and this is the first: let's hold fast to our faith. In the past I have been confident and cocky about this. I thought there was no way I would leave my faith. Now I sometimes wonder. Hebrews thinks we really could walk away from our faith. In Hebrews, God urges us to make a real effort to hang on tight to what we say we believe.

This will come up again in Hebrews 10. There we will read, *Let's hold tight without wavering to the hope we say we have*. Let us not say to ourselves, "my faith is rock solid, I would never leave the faith." Hebrews does not think that is the right way to talk. It is better that we would encourage each other to hold fast.

And the end of Paul's life, he was pleased that he had kept the faith. He summarizes his life this way, "I fought the fight, I ran the race, I kept the faith." That's my bucket list, folks. I want to fight the fight, and run the race, and keep the faith. This is how we should pray for each other.

Paul says, “I kept the faith.” That line prunes me. If Paul was pleased with himself that he had kept the faith, where does that put me? I’ll tell you where – needing to hold fast to what I say I believe. (This goes along with, “*today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.*”)

We should assume that powerful forces want to separate us from our faith in Christ and our hope in his return and our future with God. Strong relentless powers want to draw us away. What should we do? Hold on tight, hold fast without wavering, keep encouraging each other.

What we Don’t Have – Heb 4:15

What we don’t have is a high priest unable to sympathize with our weaknesses. The Hebrews did not believe this, and I also have trouble believing it. Hebrews is telling us that Jesus knows from personal experience what our weaknesses feel like. Our high priest can sympathize with us.

What we Have

We have a high priest who was tempted in all the common ways, just like we are, without sin. Our Scripture puts “weaknesses” and “temptations” together here. So when we read that Jesus can sympathize with our weaknesses, we’re not talking physical health or other challenges and disabilities, we’re talking specifically about weakness in the face of temptation.

And I tend to think, “if Jesus was without sin, then he cannot be weak in temptation like I am.” But that’s not true. Don’t think about the times when you give into temptation, think about the times when you have been tempted, but you have not sinned, you did not give in, you did the right thing. Think about those. Some of them were a real battle, but you made it.

Sometimes you were rescued by the skin of your teeth, you would have sinned but something interrupted you. I’ve had that. Imagine Jesus living whole life like that. What we do sometimes, he did always. Even when I resist temptation, if it is a struggle, I don’t come out feeling strong, just relieved, and wishing I was not tempted at all.

Jesus never sinned, but it all left him with a great sense of his own weakness. I have trouble believing that Jesus was weak in the face of temptation, but Hebrews insists on it.

Jesus was fully human, made in every way as we are. Jesus was tempted in all the common ways, just like we are, and his experience was weakness, one close call after another. And in Hebrews 2, this makes him merciful. In Hebrew 4, it makes him sympathetic. In Hebrews 5, it makes him gentle with the ignorant and wandering. Merciful, sympathetic, gentle.

That’s the kind of priest we have, so let’s hold firmly onto the faith we claim.

Where do we Go? (Heb 4:16)

Let us then approach God's throne of grace. This is our second urging. The first was to hold tight to our faith and hope. The second is, approach God's throne of grace. Hebrews assumes, all the way through, that whenever we go to God, we are going into the heavenly Holy of Holies, the real Most Holy Place in heaven.

When our congregation prays together, we are all in the heavenly Holy of Holies, in front of the cherubim and the throne, and Jesus the high priest seated at God's right hand. Approach God. Go to God. Other places in Hebrews say this. Hebrews 7 tells us about drawing near to God, about coming to God through Jesus. In Hebrews 9 we read that the way into the Most Holy Place was not known before, but now it is! And Hebrews 10 urges us to draw near to God.

What a thing we have stumbled upon, like the man finding a treasure in a field. What a marvel has found us: we have the way into the heavenly Most Holy Place, the real throne of grace. And what a tragedy if we don't use this. Let's hang on to the faith we profess, and let us approach God's throne of grace.

How do we Approach?

Confidently, boldly. In Hebrews 10, with full assurance. Don't hang back. Don't sneak in. Don't go in shaking and trembling, because you are afraid God will smite you.

It is true that on our own, we have no business there. If it was about us, we should tremble and fear that God would smite us. But we have a priest who is merciful and compassionate and sympathetic, and he is so totally for us, and that is why we approach confidently and with full assurance.

And God, for his part, loved us immeasurably, and he insisted in us having a high priest who would be that merciful and sympathetic. So the Father led the Son through an awful lot of temptation and weakness and suffering, an experience neither of them enjoyed, *so that* we could have such a priest, and could approach God confidently.

Where? The throne of grace. How? Boldly, confidently.

Why do we Go?

Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find helping grace in our time of need.

We go for two things: for mercy, and for gracious help right now. The way this is written, we don't even have to ask for it. We go to the throne to get it.

The way this is written, when we approach God, we receive these things, just for showing up. But they don't come in the mail, people, or by Purolator. We go directly to the Real Source for these things. Approach God.

The teaching of Jesus about prayer convinced me that when we pray, God never does nothing. God always, always, always gives us something meaningful. I don't find this in my experience, at all. Nor do you. But Jesus did not think there was any asking with out receiving, and he says that quite a few different ways.

The last line of our Hebrews text says the same thing. We will *find grace to help in our time of need*. Other translations say, "*at the right time*" or "*just when we need it.*"

I go to God from a desperate place, and I say, "God, help me, help me now please." And often I do not think anything is happening. I do not pray because I'm confident, but because nothing else is working. God is not always the first place I go, but I do get around to him. Even then, I do not think anything is happening. But people, it always is. God always acts right away.

The help is for the time of need, and Hebrews agrees with the Lord on this: everyone who shows up receives mercy and help.

So let's hold fast to the faith we profess, and let's approach God's grace throne with bold confidence. You are guaranteed a merciful and sympathetic welcome. You have that in writing, you can put your finger on the words right there in Hebrews. Amen.

PRAYER: Father, thank you for this High Priest. Thank you for the invitation. Thank you for putting it in print. Thank you for the promise of mercy and grace, and of help just when we need it. We will do our best to hold onto you. Please hold onto us. Amen.

BENEDICTION: To him who is able to keep us from falling, and to present us before his glorious presence, without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power, and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.