

ACCESS THROUGH A GREAT HIGH PRIEST

Hebrews 4:14-16

I would like to talk with you all this morning about our High Priest. "Our what?" some of you may be asking. "We're Protestant, not Catholics--we don't use priests, right?" Right. . . Wrong. . . We do have one priest: Jesus, the Son of God. He is our great High Priest, and He performs a necessary ministry for you today, right now, if you are a Christian. And with the Scripture before us this morning, we're going to consider Christianity at the bottom-line level--what it's all about, in three verses. Lets turn to the book of Hebrews, chapter four.

Now the high priest among the Jews was the main religious minister of their society. The lesser priests were his deputies, and executed the parts of his office that he could not personally undertake. The high-priesthood intimated that God was offended with men, and would not have direct contact with them. But it also intimated that He desired to be reconciled to them, and that the means of conferring saving blessings on them was through substitutionary sacrifice and intercession. We must admit that culturally this is hard for us to relate to. Our mind-set is not "tooled-up" for thinking in terms of slaughtering bulls and goats, or worshipping all together at a big temple, or having our whole national picture built around religious life. Our thinking is generally more compartmentalized--we have the professional aspect of our lives, the family, the social, the recreational, the political, the educational, and then the religious aspects fit in there somewhere. Maybe. But the author of Hebrews is saying to us, "Hey!" The highest reality for you guys ought to be recognizing--all the time--what's going on in heaven right now." Let's get into the passage and see first of all the dignity of our high priest.

Verse 14

"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." The first part of chapter four continues the contrast set up in chapter three of those who died in unbelief, and those who persevered by faith, and entered into God's rest. It is a benevolent God after all that we seek, Who wants only to be trusted and obeyed in that trust. These chapters begin to describe for us the subject which takes up the most space in the book of Hebrews: (3:1), "Therefore holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, CONSIDER JESUS, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession." Whether or not a person enters God's rest in eternal life, depends upon who Jesus is to that person. For Christians then, He is the great high priest. Now this is a very hard thing for Mr. Average-Twentieth Century-Sophisticated American to relate to. But we must understand how God views the work of Jesus Christ. It is as the great high priest, who has passed through the heavens. This is a deliberate allusion to the Day of Atonement of Leviticus 16 when the high priest in Israel would enter into the holy of holies in the Tabernacle once a year only and make atonement for the sins of the sons of Israel. And it was a complicated and terrifying process. One mistake and that priest was destroyed. But for you and me today, Jesus has already passed through the heavens. He sits as God the Holy Son, face to face with God the Holy Father. Now God has not changed. He hasn't altered His plans. He is still offended with men and their sin. But He is pleased with this priest Jesus, His Son, who comes bearing the atonement himself. Brethren, this is not just lofty Old and New Testament synthesis--this is not just theology for the bookshelves--this has application for you and me! Since we have such a wonderful high

priest--such a megas archiereus, let us resolve and determine, at all cost, to grasp onto what we believe! No matter what trouble or temptation may come upon you to pull you away, to subtly and slowly cool your affections for Scripture or distract you, Jesus is ministering on your behalf right now! Hold fast to what you believe! Jesus Christ is giving His full attention to the matters of your salvation. He is not going to forget you, or ration out His help to you in meager amounts. The fact that He has transcended this world makes Him no less in touch with this world, and of no less love for His own. He is our reality! And the dignity of His priesthood needs to motivate us to grip what we believe, with all our strength. But this priest not only ministers to His brethren, He is like His brethren.

Verse 15

Here the dignity of our high priest is coupled to the tenderness of our high priest. "For we do not have a high priest who cannot be touched with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin." (I like the New English Bible here . . . "because of his likeness to us, has been tested every way, only without sin). When it comes to living the Christian life, the only difference between Jesus Christ and you, is He did it without sin. B. F. Westcott notes that "Sympathy with the sinner in his trial does not depend on the experience of the temptation to sin which only the sinless can know in its full intensity. He who falls yields before the last strain." Jesus felt the full power of temptation and the anguish to an unimaginable degree. Do you wrestle with fear? Jesus understands that. Do you struggle with some kind of lust? Jesus has shared that experience with you. Do you fight sickness, rejection by family or friends, depression, poverty? Jesus knows what you're talking about. Many times you may be struggling with something, and you share it with a Christian friend, and they can be touched by it. Maybe. But Jesus is touched with that feeling. Spurgeon says,

You are touched, He is touched, at the same time. A pang shoots through my heart: that pang has been felt by my Lord also. A grief has stirred the waters of my spirit, and the spirit of the great High Priest has moved in harmony with it.

I personally have not known a great deal of suffering in my life. But I have struggled with the sorrow and fear of having unsaved loved ones. Shortly after I became a Christian, my awareness of this fact was particularly keen--I was 20, had hair down to here still, and looked rather strange. I had been a Christian a year when my church in Blacksburg had a Bible conference with a fairly elderly but well-known Christian Bible teacher, Dr. James Jeremiah. Having shared the feelings I was having about these dear ones who rejected Christ with several Christians, it seemed all I got was platitudes: "The Lord will take care." "Leave it with Him." "Everything works out OK in the end," etc., etc. But I heard that this Bible teacher had had a Dad who rejected Christ most of his long life. I went up to him after his last message, related my heart feelings. I could tell he understood. He pulled me aside, and so deliberately it surprised me, gently encouraged me to keep praying for my unsaved loved ones, that God honored prayer, and had saved his own father at a very old age, and I could hope He might do the same here too. That brief five minute counselling session has encouraged me for ten years now. He had shared the experience with me, and could feel what I was feeling.

There is a precious tenderness to the Lord Jesus, and it is a great matter that He takes note of the trials of His people. Spurgeon again notes:

It is one thing to see pain, but another thing to be touched with the feeling of it. Treasure up this view of your Lord's sympathy, for it may be of great support in the hour of agony, and a grand restorative in the day of weakness.

Based upon the dignified ministry which is clear in Jesus' high priesthood, and the tender compassion which He has in the midst of His priesthood (a rare thing among first-century priests), we now see the sufficiency of our high priest. "Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need."

Brethren, remember again the message of Hebrews: Persevere in faith! Persevere in faith! Persevere in faith! How? By recognizing our mediator, our high priest, Jesus the Son of God. How? By relying on His ability to understand your weaknesses, and His strength to overcome them. How? By making use of the access He gives us to God's resources.

Access. That's really the name of the game in our society, isn't it? Access to enough capital for investment. Electronic access to your spending money 24 hours a day. Access to enough of the right kind of information to do a job. Access to the right people when you need it. Access to your church leaders, to your political leaders. Access to recreation. Access to enough cable TV channels so nothing will escape our notice. And in a sense we are all scrambling around, fighting for access to a million things that we think we cannot get along without; when really, the one thing which we really need the most of is freely accessible through our high priest: grace! Jesus provides 24-hour access to the throne where holiness reigns, and it is called the throne of grace. The holy God is a gracious God. The Lord would have us to make use of the access He gives us. He is totally sufficient to provide all the timely help we need, in any situation. Notice that that access provides first mercy. I don't much like the translations of this verse which say "boldly approach the throne." It is mercy first which every Christian seeks from God. And then, He can find grace to help in time of need. You see, the sovereign God is not distant from our lives and various situations. He is motivated to help you by His grace to solve whatever you are facing. And let's face it, the Christian life is a struggle, a fight--and our lives seem more filled up with struggle than with rest. When those times arrive when you need the Lord's help, recognize it! Seek His help in the person of your great high priest! He can feel for you--He will provide for you. He will aid your prayers, and meet your sense of insufficiency with His sufficiency.

J. C. MacCaulay sums up our passage well:

With Jesus standing there, the eternal throne is the throne of grace. For all the infinite majesty and glory and splendor of it, for all the justice and judgment and power that characterize it, it is for us the place of mercy and love and bounty and help. When that throne is set for judgment, heaven and earth will flee before it, and sinners will be dumb, as prostrate, they hear the doom of the unrepentant and unbelieving pronounced upon them; but with Christ there for us, that awful throne becomes the place where we freely and frankly unburden our hearts, spell out our needs, take mercy upon mercy, and find the exact help at the exact moment for every sort of need. There, sins are confessed and forgiven; there sorrows are poured out and comforted; there weakness is exchanged for strength; there questioning gives place to certainty.

Priests and altars and sacrifices may be hard for you to relate to. You may not be tempted to go back to the old covenant economy, as were the readers of this epistle.

But you need a place to go with your sins and needs, your burdens and your difficulties. They are too much and impossible for you to bear. Bring them to Jesus. Bring them to the throne of grace. Rely upon your great high priest!