



Ministry of the Word

Sunday 14th October 2018

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Scripture: Hebrews Chapter 4:14-16

Subject: Part 10 - ***Christ – Our Compassionate High Priest***

Seeing then that 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 cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Little did the disciples know or even understand what we have just read here, when they beheld Jesus ascending into glory which is recorded for us in Acts chapter 1.

They had only come to terms regarding His Person and mission on earth. The great and grand theme of this same Jesus, being liken to the High Priest of the Old Testament, would have been the furthest thing from their mind. Nowhere in the gospels nor the book of Acts, is there any record of the Disciples having this knowledge. What we are seeing in this text is 'revelationary truth' by the Holy Spirit at that time, for all time. It's importance is eminence and far reaching, for it is the sole purpose of the Holy Spirit of God to glorify the Son of God, the Son of Man, Our Great High Priest. Our Great High Priest is very different than any earthly High Priest. You see, when we consider Our Great High Priest, in all His glory, from the tabernacle to the temple, we have to start from the Holy of Holies,

then walk towards the entrance because God, came amongst men, reached out in order to draw them into fellowship and communion with Himself. This is the greatest story of love and salvation.

The Old Testament priesthood was just a shadow of someone greater, even the office of the high priest.

The previous verses we look at last time, could be thought somewhat terrifying, when we considered the need to be diligent of where we stand before God. We are told that His word is a double edge sword, living and active. We are told that there is no creature hidden from His sight. All thoughts and intention of hearts are on display to God, and not only that, but we have to give account for everything. If the Lord were to mark our iniquity which one of us could stand? None! That is why even the priests in the Old Testament had to go through the entrance to the alter of sacrifice for sin before they could continue their progression towards the Holy place. For all have sinned and fallen short of God's standard so says Romans 3:23. It's not that we have skimmed by the perfection that God requires, we have fallen way short, so far it's hard to imagine that there is hope for us at all. But there is! and what a hope we have, more so than those who were holding onto tradition and religion as well as those who still hold onto these things today.

Verse 14 - Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.

Rightfully conscious, we know of our utter inability to stand un-condemned before the throne of God. Yet thank God we have assurance here in scripture, that we have a great high priest to stand in our place and one who answers for us. The theme of Jesus as our high priest starts from Hebrews 2:17 to 3:1, a passage which is in close correspondence with these verses, 14 to 16, here.

It is this high priest, Christ Jesus, that Christians should unceasingly consider and for three good reasons:

Firstly, He has made propitiation for our sins (Hebrews 1:3; 2:17)

Secondly, He has “passed through the heavens” and is preparing and securing for us that eternal rest which has been promised to the people of God (Hebrews 3:18-4:11; John 14:2.) and,

Thirdly, He, by His own experience, knows exactly what it is like to pass through the ordeal of temptation and still, He stands by to help us win the victory in the hour of our testing (2:18).

The knowledge of these truths should be a source of unfailing encouragement to the Christian as we persevere to the end. Surely our confidence should be strengthened by the further assurance that in Jesus we have a great high priest, unique in His power and supremacy.

The greatness of Jesus our high priest is indicated by the declaration that He has passed through the heavens. This is in contrast to the high priest of the Old Testament order, who only once a year, but it had to be every year, passed from the sight of the people as he took the blood of atonement into the earthly sanctuary. Yet, Jesus, our great high priest, at His ascension, passed from the sight of the watching apostles into the heavenly sanctuary; having atoned for our sin, he now remains interceding for us on our behalf. Verse 14 is speaking of something far more than a distant journey, like that of some astronaut: his language is that of transcendence. Not only did Jesus ascend physically, but in doing so he completely transcended all the limits of time and space. His transcendence guarantees His uniqueness, His greatness and our great reward.

It is necessary to emphasize that Jesus who has passed through the heavens as our transcendent Lord—is the same Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, died at Calvary and rose again on the third day. The identity between the One who walked in Israel and the One who is now crowned with glory and honour, is essential for the ultimate glorification of our redeemed humanity. In the light of all of this, it is logical that the author here proclaims that we should holdfast our confession.

If we disregard these truths, what else do we hold onto or to whom else can we turn to and have confidence in, if not our Saviour, our Kinsman Redeemer. This is the choice we are confronted with today. Will it be the Christ of Scripture, or another Jesus? Paul, in Galatians 1 and in other letters, reminds us of the contention for the heart and mind of the elect, continual urging us to hold on and not let go. Yet this was precisely what the recipients of this letter were in danger of doing, as we have already seen. Hence the need for the earnest repetition of this exhortation throughout the epistle: "we are His household, if we hold fast our confidence and our hope, we share our unique position in Christ but if only we hold our faith firm to the end. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering.. do not throw away your confidence.. let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.. lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees".

The "confession" we are to hold fast is the same as that mentioned in chapter 3 of this book. It is belief in the gospel and the person of Christ, that is both inwardly entertained by the heart and outwardly professed before men. *Peter Lombard* describes it as "*the faith of the heart together with the confession of the mouth, so that faith is present also in the mouth*" (that is, in witnessing). Paul spoke to the same effect in Romans 10:9

"that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

This is where belief in the heart and confession with the lips are closely conjoined with each other. In 2 Corinthians 4:13 Paul wrote, with reference to Psalm 116:10:

"And since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I believed and therefore I spoke," we also believe and therefore speak,

Let's move on to the next verse in our text

V15 - For we have not 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 sinning.

It goes without saying that Israel's high priest was nothing like Jesus our Great High Priest. Exalted as He is, it would be quite wrong to imagine that our great high priest is remote from the realities of our human experience. His involvement with us is guaranteed, as the

preceding verse implies, by the fact that the glorified Lord is still Jesus, the incarnate Son of God. His identification with us has not ceased because He has passed into the heavenly sanctuary.

The word Compassion could be defined as sympathetic, pity, or concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others. I believe we fall into such a description as misfortunate and suffering on account of our fallen natures.

The Gospel displays the compassion that God has on us, in that, He sent to us a Saviour in human form. Christ as our Redeemer showed great compassion upon us, not only saving us but continually supporting us in so many ways. The story of Ruth, the 'foreigner' girl, the Gentile, a stranger who followed Naomi to Israel, went and gleaned for they had lost everything. She found favour with Boaz who in turn took full responsibility and supported both of them, not with a hand out but a lift up! The high priest of Israel when set apart for service was unable to go among the people for fear of contamination. But not so our Redeemer, our High Priest reached out and touched the lepers, delivered the demon possessed, healed the sick, raised the dead, mixed with the untouchables of society, even spoke to the religious bigots. Why? Because He not only has compassion but showed that compassion in doing what He did. When God became flesh, in the man Christ Jesus, he dwelt among men and women. He knew what it was like to be a child, a teenager, an adult with all the problems each of those stages in life entail. He was in a family, which meant he knew all about family life including problems, as well as problems with friends, and as Henry said last week, betrayal. He knew what loss was like for he wept when his friend died, he knew pain and hurt, he knew hunger, he knew homelessness as much as he knew joy. Yet regardless of all of these things, not only did He not sin, but His acts of compassion are brought before us time after time in the New Testament. Mark 6 verse 34 is the account of the multitude who sat before Him. We could literally go through the New Testament and point one instance after another, and not one person was deserving of it but Jesus, our Great High Priest showed them compassion.

Surely Calvary is the greatest demonstration of compassion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for lost humanity. In that, while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. The Psalm captures this wonderfully in Psalm 78:38-39:

“But He, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity, And did not destroy them. Yes, many a time He turned His anger away, And did not stir

up all His wrath; For He remembered that they were but flesh, A breath that passes away and does not come again.”

Peter did not lose sight of this when he recorded this in 2 Peter 3:9 –

“The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”

Well, can we join with the verses 22 and 23 of Lamentations chapter 3?

It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness.

There is no question of any incapacity on His part to sympathize with our weaknesses, for it was precisely our weaknesses that He embraced and made His own when He took our nature upon Himself. The purpose of His coming was, in fulfilment of the prophecy of the Messianic servant, to make our weaknesses his own (Matthew 8:17; Isaiah 53:4). His humanity was not a pretence or a masquerade; and the reality of the temptations He endured follows from the reality of the human nature He assumed.

Temptation itself is neutral: to be tempted indicates neither virtue nor sinfulness; for the proper meaning of temptation is *testing*, or proving, and virtue is in the resistance and overcoming of temptation, whereas sin is in yielding and surrendering to temptation. Our High Priest's experience of temptation corresponded in every respect to ours. From first to last He was being put to the test, whether by enticements to self-concern, popular acclaim, and ambition for power when assailed by Satan in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1) or by the temptation in the garden to draw back rather than go through the dreadful ordeal that lay before Him (Matthew 26:38), or by the taunt's hurled at him even as he hung in agony on the cross: *“If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross”* (Matthew 27:40).

Were the recipients of this letter being tempted to lapse into apostasy? Yes, and Jesus knew temptation too, in the wilderness, at Gethsemane and Calvary, and even through the lips of Simon Peter, who had acknowledged Him to be "the Messiah, the Son of the living God,"

Satan tempted Him to abandon His mission by turning aside from the shame and scandal of the Cross (Matthew 16:16, 21-23). To have succumbed to these inducements would have been the sabotage of our salvation and a failure of trust and obedience on His part, in other words, an act of apostasy. His whole life on earth was one of testing and proving. He spoke to the members of the intimate circle of the apostles, when Calvary was approaching, as those who had continued with him in His temptations (Luke 22:28). Not only has He led the way to victory through temptation, but in doing so he gained the profoundest fellow feeling for our weaknesses, at the same time demonstrating that our human frailty is the opportunity for the power of God and for the triumph of His grace (2 Corinthians 12:9).

The fact that our High Priest did not merely survive the severe testing through which He passed but was in fact completely victorious over every single temptation, is made plain by the addition of the phrase; *“yet without sinning”*. What an example to us all! The sinlessness of Jesus, achieved by His complete conquest of temptation, was an essential prerequisite for the accomplishment of our redemption by His sacrifice of Himself on the cross. As one remarked, "the sinlessness of Jesus does not consist in an absence of human weakness, but in an ever renewed victory over temptations."

V16 - 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.

In the Levitical system that had prevailed up till the time of Christ's advent, only the high priest was permitted to approach and enter into the sanctuary of God's presence. Only then, once a year and on the Day of Atonement, when he passed from sight into the holy of holies. The people, however, were excluded from the divine presence because of their sinfulness and were prohibited from drawing near. Yet, the atonement effected by Christ's sacrifice of Himself on the Cross opened the way that had previously been closed. This was dramatically symbolized by the rending of the temple curtain from top to bottom at the time of the crucifixion, indicating that through an act of divine grace access into the holiest place was now available to all the people of God (Mark 15:38; Matthew 27:51; Hebrews 10:20). The reality corresponding to this symbolic event is pressed home here in this

verse. Sinners are no longer commanded to keep their distance in fear and trembling, but, on the contrary. They are now invited to draw near, and to do so with confidence. The passage of their great high priest through the heavens (v. 14) has opened the way for them into the presence of God himself. Christ's perfect sacrifice on their behalf has been accepted; ours sins have been cancelled; united to Him by faith we now have free access with Him into the presence-chamber of God. While it is still the throne of God's majestic sovereignty that we approach, we can now do it on the basis of the reconciliation achieved by God in Christ, the throne of grace, hence, the unhesitating boldness with which we may draw near.

The problem with those to whom our author is writing is that instead of drawing near they were in danger of drawing back. In the face of opposition, they showed signs of a loss of confidence and even turning away from the faith into apostasy. The genuineness of the faith they professed must be demonstrated by a confident approach to God at all times in Christ: to draw back is the act of the apostate. The hardness of the struggle should be an inducement to the Christian to draw near to the throne of God's grace, rather than to draw back and abandon the conflict; for just as in the tabernacle of old to enter the holy of holies was to stand before the mercy-seat, so the throne of God's grace is also his mercy-seat, with the result that in drawing near we are certain to receive mercy and to find grace which manifests itself in providing help in time of need, that is, help which is opportune and appropriate to the particular need of the moment.

Referring to the striking contrast between the former situation, under the old covenant, when the high priest alone had access to the presence of God, and the present situation, under the new covenant, in which all who participate in Christ are invited to approach the divine presence with boldness, this is nothing less than a revolution in the fundamental conception of religion and one of the most important revelations of the epistle; for only Christianity can give sinful creatures the boldness to present themselves before God.

This boldness that we read of here was not something familiar to the reader or listener then. No one but the select few in the Old Testament could come near the high priest, but

not so our High Priest. Verse 16 is not only an invitation to you personally, it's almost a like a command! Either way we are bid to "draw near". This means we are to draw close or "go to" the throne of Grace, not simply the ark of the covenant but God's throne. We do so because the blood has been applied and we have been made priests unto God in salvation of a much better order than the Levities. We are the redeemed of the Lord.

We can go at any time, in any circumstances, in any place, with boldness to the God of all Creation and cry "Abba" Father.

We can confess to Him our problem/s for though He is the sinless Son of God He is touched with the feelings of our infirmities, He knows that we cannot pull ourselves up by our boot straps. He is forever willing and able to help us. What a High Priest!

He not only offered a sacrifice for sin like the high priest of old, He was the sacrifice and He took our sin, all of it, and has cast it away, the price was paid, and the remembrance of it by Him will never come up again. His sacrifice was once for all never more to be repeated. How can we withhold praise from our Saviour and Lord? How or why would we drift back away from such as our High Priest?

Most ancient rulers were unapproachable by the common people. Some would not even allow their highest-ranking officials to come before them without permission. Queen Esther risked her life in approaching King Ahasuerus without invitation, even though she was his wife (Esther 5:1-2). Yet 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.

What a High Priest we have. He sympathizes and He saves.

Amen