

The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 12

January 22, 2017

The Throne of Grace

Hebrews 4 :14-16

We Have a High Priest

v. 14

The first mention of Jesus Christ as High Priest is found in Heb. 2:17-3:1, and this very important theme in Hebrews now continues here in chapter 4. The High Priest was of incredible importance in the OT in the nation of Israel – perhaps overshadowed by the exploits of Israel’s kings, but nevertheless, very important. In the OT, Judges, Prophets, Kings and priests were the key individuals. Hebrews will develop this role of High Priest in greater detail in Hebrews 7-10, but at this point, let’s try to realise why the author places these 3 verses here, on the heels of the 2nd warning passage.

As believers, we must recognise our complete inability to stand before God’s judgment bar, and remain un-condemned on our own recognizance. No, we can only stand with confidence before God, if our confidence is in the righteousness of another – Jesus Christ, our Mediator, High Priest, Lamb and Saviour. He is no ordinary High Priest, and this verse tells us that by calling Him [our] “Great High Priest”. Our confidence can be fully placed in Him for 3 main reasons;

- He has made propitiation for our sins (Heb. 2:17; I JN 2:2).
- He knows by His own experience as a man what it means to be tempted under many ordeals (Heb. 2:18; 4:14) &
- “He has passed through the heavens”, preparing a place for His own (JN 14:2-3), where we will experience ‘Sabbath’ rest - (Heb. 3:18-4:11)

He is unique in power and sovereignty, and according to v. 14, we “have” Him – he is our High Priest.

The text says “He has passed through the heavens” – Note – Heb. 8:1; 9:1f & 9:24f., and cf. Acts 1:9 – His ascension. He has not just ascended in the sense of a spatial move. What is in sight here in Acts 1:9 is more in line with transcendence. This transcendence is a guarantee of His uniqueness, superiority and greatness.

To recap how this line of reasoning has developed to here; we have seen Jesus as superior to the angels, Moses and Joshua. 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.ⁱ Since he is the High Priest who has entered into God’s presence, anyone who renounces Him is cut off from God Himself. He who does not have the Son does not have the Father and thus, life. I John 2:23; 5:12.

So He is Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, the son of Mary. It is this Jesus who has passed through the heavens as transcendent Lord, born in Bethlehem and slain as a sacrifice for sin on Mt. Calvary. Hughes says, “The identity between the One who walked in Palestine and the One who is now crowned with glory and honor is essential for the ultimate

glorification of our redeemed humanity. There is no place in the NT for any *docetic*ⁱⁱ concept of the risen Christ, Resurrection means bodily resurrection or it means nothing at all.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Robert A. Pyne captures the distinctness of the fact that our Savior is human, although also God:

“No animal or angelic sacrifice could satisfy God’s wrath against our sin, for that would be far beyond their capacity. As Arthur Pink wrote, “Sin is an evil of infinite magnitude...committed against an infinite Person, unto whom every creature is under infinite obligations of rendering unceasing and joyful obedience.” Further, the penalty is only ours to pay – nonhumans cannot take our place.

However, the sacrifice of a human scapegoat could never be sufficient either. All persons born since Adam have been guilty of original sin and have not been in any position to represent the rest of us. Jesus, who was without sin and who, as the last Adam, ushered in a new humanity, is the only exception.

That is why the atonement would not have been possible apart from the Incarnation. The penalty for humanity’s sin should be paid only by a man, and only by a man who was both sinless and able to represent everyone. However, the penalty could be paid only by God Himself, because the obligation was infinite. If only God could satisfy the penalty, but only a man should do it, then only the God-man truly can.”^{iv}

A few pages farther along in his book, he comments:

“The birth of Jesus captures our imagination because we cannot fathom the idea of God in the flesh, let alone God in a manger. The life of Jesus provides inspiration as we recognize that He shared our temptations and sufferings, enabling Him to understand our experience. Yet our thoughts of the glorified Christ almost always neglect His ongoing humanity. We tend to think of Jesus as someone who is no longer a man – once God, then the God-man, and then just God again. But that approach neglects the fact that, in His exaltation, all things have been placed under the feet of a glorified man. The Incarnation does not simply mean that Jesus was one of us two thousand years ago. It also means He became one of us then and continues to reign as one of us now. Believers will follow Him in resurrection and rule with Him in eternity – not as lesser gods, elect angels or reincarnated beings, but as transformed men and women, delivered from the curse of death and renewed in the image of God.”^v

Stephen J. Wellum says this:

“The Son added a human dimension to his personal, divine life.

Moreover, the nature assumed by the divine Son is fully human and completely sinless. The incarnate Son’s human body and soul have all the attributes and capacities of original humanity in full measure, giving the divine person the experience of a fully human life. And his human nature is unfallen ontologically and morally and untainted by effects or transgressions of sin, even though the Son fully experienced in many ways the effects of living in a fallen world. The Son does not share in the guilt or disposition of the original sin of humanity, and in fact, he never committed a sin, which means that the real human temptations he did experience were that much more intense. As a man, through a fully and sinless human nature, then, the divine person of the Son has obeyed the Father in the

Spirit to experience the perfection of human pleasure and to stand against the tempest of human temptations on our behalf.

By taking on our humanity, Christ became the first man of the new creation, our great mediator and new covenant head. As this man, Christ reverses the work of the first Adam and forges ahead as the last Adam, our great trailblazer and champion (*archegon*; *Heb. 2:10*). God the Son incarnate is perfectly qualified to meet our every need, especially our need for forgiveness of sin. According to the storyline of Scripture, only the God-man – the Son incarnate – could mediate the reconciliation of God and man by offering himself as a sinless, sufficient, substitutionary sacrifice such that God himself redeems his people as a man (1 Tim. 2: 5-6; Heb. 5-10). As the divine Son, Christ alone satisfies God’s own judgment on sinful humanity and demand for perfect righteousness. As the incarnate Son, Christ alone identifies with sinful humanity in his suffering and represents a new humanity as our great and glorious Covenant Lord. As JI Packer explains, “Without incarnation there would have been no God-man, and without the God-man, there would have been no mediation, no revelation of redemption...The enfleshing of the Son was thus integral to God’s plan of salvation, and the glory of Christ’s unique person must be seen as an aspect of the glory of the Gospel itself.”^{vi}

The phrase, “Let us hold fast our confession” goes with the first word of the sentence which is v. 14, “Since...let us...”. The reason to hold fast is what rests between “Since” and “let us.” Hold fast because here is our assurance. Paul, in Romans 10:5-11 (citing Joel 2:32) says that all who put their trust in Him will not be ashamed.

He is transcendent and exalted, glorified and sitting at God’s right hand, but don’t make the mistake of thinking that He is thus remote from the realities of human experience. He is still Jesus, our Jesus, the Incarnate Son and His identification with us has not ceased because He is now in the heavenly sanctuary. Remember what He prayed just prior to Gethsemane in John 17:5,24?

Our High Priest is Sinless

v. 15

This verse is written in a negative literary form, but re-read positively, it is saying “We do have a High Priest who is able to sympathise with our weaknesses.” This is because He is one of us to, as Isa. 53:4, (cited in Matt. 8:17) says, “*Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.*” He came to seek and save us, and according to Heb. 7:25, “*...He always lives to make intercession for us.*”

Philip Hughes, in this pertinent quote, tells us without doubt that His humanity was no pretense;

“The purpose of his coming was, in fulfillment of the prophecy of the messianic servant, to make our weaknesses his own (MT. 8:17; Isa. 53:4). Thus his humanity was not a pretense 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 connotation of temptation is testing, or proving, and virtue is in the resistance and

overcoming of temptation, whereas sin is in yielding and capitulation. 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 (MT 4:1ff), or by the temptation in the garden to draw back rather than go through the dreadful ordeal that lay before him (MT 26:38ff), or by the taunt hurled at him even as he hung in agony on the cross: "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." (MT 27:40ff). Were the recipients of this letter being tempted to lapse into apostasy (6:4ff; 10:29ff)? Their high priest knew this temptation too, for relentlessly, in the wilderness and 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 (MT 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...^{vii}

So He lived out a life like ours, tested, tried, exhausted by life and all it threw at Him and yet, while experiencing first-hand what the frailty of being human is all about, He victoriously overcame (cf. JN 16:33) every single temptation and showed that our frailty is the theatre of opportunity for the limitless power of God to triumph in the giving of His grace – cf. II Cor. 12:9-10.

He understands eternally every temptation we face because He experienced the same things and worse things. Thus, he is not distant and aloof. So, "He shared in our weaknesses and frailty, but He did not – not even once – give Himself over to sin. He always obeyed the Father(John 5:19-24)."^{viii} In Hebrews 7:27, this notion is accentuated by showing that, unlike human High Priest's, He had no need to make sacrifice for His own sins. His sacrifice was only for those who needed atonement for their sins – He had none. Notice LK 23:41; JN 7:18; 8:46; 14:30; 2 Cor. 5:21; I Pet. 1:19; 2:22; 3:18; I JN 3:5.

He did not simply survive the testing, but was absolutely triumphant over it every time for His entire life (JN 16:25-39). He came as God's Lamb (JN 1:29), and could only be so if He remained sinless. As He was tried in the 'kangaroo court' of the Sanhedrin, the High Priest, Pilate and Herod, the gospels record some 14 times the declaration of others of His innocence! Notice: Matt. 26:59-60; 27:4 (Judas); 27:18-19 (Pilate's wife); 27:24-25 (Pilate); 27:54 (the Centurion); MK 15:12-14 (Pilate); LK 23:4 (Pilate); LK 23:13-15 (Pilate and Herod); LK 23:41 (the thief on the cross); LK 23:47 (the Centurion); JN 18:38 (Pilate) and 19:4,6 (Pilate).

Jesus Christ's sinlessness was an absolutely essential prerequisite to accomplish our redemption on the cross. His sinlessness meant that the temptations came to Him with a sharpness far greater than is known to us whose minds and will have become dull through frequent failures. This sinlessness, it should be stressed, is not something passive, a mere state of being, but the achievement of Christ's active conquest of temptation. (cf. Heb. 2:10; 5:8ff; 7:26; I Pet. 3:18; I JN 2:1; 3:3,5)

John MacArthur makes this comment of encouragement;

“Sinlessness alone can properly estimate sin. Jesus Christ did not sin, could not sin, had no capacity to sin. Yet His temptations were all the more terrible because He would not fall and endured them to the extreme. His sinlessness increased His sensitivity to sin. *“For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin”* (Heb. 12:3-4). If you want to someone who knows what sin is about, talk to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ knows sin, and He knows and understands our weakness. Whatever Satan brings our way, there is victory in Jesus Christ. He understands; He has been here.”^{ix}

Stephen Wellum again comments helpfully,

“In a pre-incarnate decision, the Son temporarily delegated to other members of the Trinity his usual divine duties, such as sustaining the universe (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3). Jesus’ impeccability is explained by the distinction between metaphysical and epistemic possibility. The former affirms that Jesus could not sin, due to his divine nature; the latter, that “although Jesus knew he was God, he was not certain that his divine nature would override his human nature to prevent him from sinning. Due to this uncertainty he struggled in his humanity against temptation.”^x

At the Throne of Grace

v. 16

This is a beloved verse of just about anyone who has read thoughtfully through the book of Hebrews. James 4:8 implores us to “*draw near to God and He will draw near to you.*” See also Jeremiah 30:21. Note, “*for who would dare of himself to approach Me?*” Then v. 22 supplies comfort, “*And you shall be My people, and I will be your God.*”

So v. 16 begins by tying itself to vv. 14-15, by “*Let us then..*” or IOW, “*Therefore*”; “*with confidence...*”. Where does our confidence come from in light of what we just read in Jeremiah 30:21? It’s because of our High Priest! We are not approaching a throne of wrath that is the throne of a king, expecting him to say, “How dare you!!” rather, this is a throne of grace, where we can expect mercy and grace to be given to us, not because we deserve it but because He bought this privilege for us! Note: Rom. 8:1; 8:29-39.

In the Levitical system of OT Judaism, access to the Holy of Holies, where God’s “Shekina Glory” dwelt (Ex. 25:17-22), above the Mercy Seat (lit. the propitiatory) on top of the Ark of the Covenant, between the 2 golden angels, was strictly (on pain of death) restricted to only the High Priest and only on one particular day of the year! That day was the day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), and only after an elaborate procedure of washings, changes of clothing, sacrifices, the burning of incense, etc. cf. Leviticus 16:1-34. This took place on that day only every year behind the veil which separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place – a veil which stretched from ceiling

to floor and is described in Ex. 26:31-37, and cf. 36:35ff. Once this veil was torn at Jesus' death, the mercy seat was exposed to the sight of anyone.

This was not a flimsy veil, but a thick one, some say 4 – 5 inches thick. When we get to Matt. 27:50-54, one of the most significant events that occurred when Jesus died on the cross was the rent of this veil in two – “*from top to bottom.*”! So we must surmise that it was torn by the hand of God, not man, and not the earthquake. Heb. 9:1ff shows us that Jesus, as He entered past this veil – not the copy on earth – but the original, the temple in heaven. Note Heb. 6:17-20. He is the steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain or veil. The transaction that took place there was between Him and God the Father as He presented His blood on our behalf.

Christ has passed behind this veil, thus signifying that He has opened up a way for us to access God behind this veil. In Heb. 9:12-14, we see that Christ entered by offering Himself without blemish, carrying His own blood as the blood necessary for the High Priest to sprinkle on the Mercy Seat, making propitiation by that blood for His elect – Heb. 2:17.

A.W. Pink, mentions here;

“When it is a case of sin, then it is that we are reminded, not of the atoning blood of Christ, but of our Advocate with the Father! Then it is that we are simply assured of two facts: - (1) that relationship is not broken; God is still our Father; and (2) that Christ is our all-sufficient propitiation (I JN 2:1). But it is in connection with approaching to and walking in the light of God's presence within the veil that we are reminded of the blood which must first be sprinkled before we can have either admission to Him, or preservation when there (I JN 1:7). Hence, it is not the life which Christ lived in His spotless humanity (still less our imperfect copy of it) that gives us liberty to enter, but only when that humanity had been stained by His own blood of atonement. Then it is that we have “boldness to enter into the Holiest, by the blood of Jesus, by a newly-slain and living way, which He hath newly-made (or opened) for us, through the veil, that is to say, His flesh (Heb. 10:19,20” (Dr. B.W. Bullinger).”^{xi}

Let's not forget that this verse is usually understood as referring to our prayers, and we must recognize that God delights (KJV) to answer our prayers (cf. Prov. 15:8). We pray because we trust Him to answer our prayers and to strengthen our faith when His answers do not line up with our aspirations.

Hughes makes sense, when he says;

“The genuineness of the faith they have professed must be demonstrated by a confident approach to God at all times in Christ; to draw back is the act of an 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 he is 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.”^{xii}

Among all religions on earth, only Christianity can provide sinful worshippers the boldness, invitation and promise of help to present themselves before God’s throne...and survive.

Pink again, to close this lesson:

“The purpose of God has now been accomplished. The corn of wheat, having fallen into the ground and died, now bringeth forth much fruit (JN 12:24). The blood has been shed, the sacrifice has been offered, the Veil has been rent; and Christ, as the forerunner of His people, has passed into the Holiest. We then may draw near. Because Christ received the wages of sin which were due us, we share the reward which was due Him. We may boldly enter in. By faith, we have access into the heavenly sanctuary. Every barrier having been removed, the believing worshipper may, with perfect liberty, draw near to the Throne of grace. Then, “let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience (Heb. 10:22).”^{xiii}

ⁱ Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 151

ⁱⁱ Docetic means, an early heresy started by Cerinthus in the 1st century AD, that claimed that Jesus only appeared to be a man.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hughes, Hebrews, p. 170-171

^{iv} Robert A. Pyne, Humanity & Sin; Word, 1999, p. 264

^v IBID, p. 271

^{vi} Stephen J. Wellum, God the Son Incarnate, Crossway, 2016, pp. 433-434

^{vii} Hughes, p. 171-172

^{viii} Schreiner, p. 153

^{ix} John MacArthur, Hebrews, p. 113

^x Wellum, p. 388

^{xi} A.W. Pink, Gleanings in Exodus, Moody, 1981, p. 235

^{xii} Hughes, p. 174

^{xiii} Pink, p. 236