



The Great High Priest and the Throne of Grace

Series: *Hebrews – An Anchor for the Soul*

Hebrews 4:1-16 (14-16)

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This morning we come to one of the most encouraging and hopeful texts in the Scriptures. This encouragement to come to the throne of grace is the climax of this extended warning section in this sermon to the Hebrew Christians in Rome that began way back in chapter 3 and verse 7. You remember the circumstances. Following Christ and remaining faithful to Him was becoming very costly. They were losing family and friends, jobs and possessions, losing their place in society, losing their freedoms, and soon, some of them would lose their lives for their faithfulness in Christ. And they were faced with the question: Was following Christ really worth it? Was Christ worth their devotion? Was God worthy of their trust?

The temptations swirling around them were real and constant – to depart from the gospel and from following Christ and return to their old lives; to fall away from Jesus to Judaism; to fall away from Christ and seek an easier way. We face those same temptations – to return to our old manner of living, to compromise our faith and make it more socially acceptable (which means to not live by faith in Christ and in surrender to Him at all); to trade real devotion to Christ for devotion to other things – earthbound things – and baptize them with religious rationalizations to make ourselves feel better. Really, what the Hebrew Christians were facing and what we are facing is just like what Jesus described in the parable of the sower. He described in the parable two kinds of responses to the gospel that proved to be false, two kinds of ground (hearts) that seemed to respond positively at first but ultimately proved to be false. He speaks of the Word as a seed that is sown on rocky ground and among thorns and He says this: **“And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.”** (Mark 4:16–19, **ESV**) This was the danger that the writer of Hebrews was seeking to head off in the lives of the Hebrew Christians and in us as well.

For that reason, the writer of Hebrews gives this extended exhortation, this extended warning, using the bad example of the Exodus generation, of the very generation that had been delivered by God in a miraculous way from bondage in the nation of Egypt. They failed to enter in the Promised Land, a picture of salvation and eternal life, because of unbelief and disobedience that was rooted in hardness of heart toward the words and the promises of God. He didn't want that for the Hebrews or for us and so he gave us this strongly worded warning: ***“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”*** (Hebrews 3:15, ESV)

Today, if you are hearing what God is saying to you, if you are hearing His voice, respond in faith, respond in surrender, respond in obedience – respond!! He calls us to rigorous self-examination in the light of God's word – not our feelings – but God's Word the describes true faith and its evidence -- resting completely in the finished work of Jesus Christ for salvation, a lifestyle of obedience, an evident devotion to Jesus Christ, faithful and true-hearted worship, the presence of the fruit of the Spirit in a believer's life, a life of selflessness and Spirit-driven service, a life of persevering trust. He tells us to be on guard against gradual hardening, creeping coldness, what he calls an evil, unbelieving heart. He calls us to exhort one another daily, to have a proper fear of any of us failing to reach the rest of God and falling away from Jesus. This is a matter of spiritual life and death. Like we said last week, there are no exceptions to the Word of God. There are no small or inconsequential sins or patterns of sin or inconsequential disobedience. There is no such thing as acceptable, understandable, or excusable rebellion. There is no such thing as an acceptable season of cooling affection and devotion. There is no such thing as convenient Christianity. All of these things, left unchecked, all those things minus sincere repentance, lead to apostasy and spiritual death.

We must hear and respond to the Word of God because as the writer says, ***“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”*** (Hebrews 4:12, ESV) The only reliable measure of our the condition of our hearts, the only reliable measure of the reality of faith, the only reliable measure of truth is the Word of God – not our feelings, not appearances, not our reasoning, not any of the outward human measure – the only reliable examiner of our hearts is the Word of God. The Word of God pierces our souls to the real us. It exposes our motivations, desires, the hidden thoughts, and the motivating passions of our souls. It cuts through our professions, pretensions, excuses, and motives, lays bare self-delusions, revealing the truth condition of our hearts. It

judges our motives and will, confronts our unbelief, our spiritual immaturity, our disinterest in Christ, our disinterest in Scripture, exposing where our hope and trust truly lie. It goes to the heart, to our life in all of its aspects.

Then he brings this warning to climax by telling us: **“And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” (Hebrews 4:13, ESV)** Our hearts, all of us, are naked and exposed – literally in the Greek, naked and pinned by the throat. Remember this was a word used of bending back the neck of a sacrificial animal to administer the fatal stroke or of a wrestler’s hold on the throat, rendering him helpless. All of us are in the grip of God helpless and exposed to the One to whom we must give an account. There is a day of account coming. He knows our genuineness and he knows our pretense. He knows our faith and he knows our unbelief. He knows our struggles to live faithfully and he knows our excuses for disobedience. He cannot be fooled.

And we said that this is a terrifying verse. It’s meant to be; that’s how serious the stakes are, right? What are we going to do?!? But I love what Martin Luther says about this passage. He says, “First, the apostle terrifies us and then he comforts us.” After he warns us of the terrifying thought that our faith could prove to be false, after he terrifies us, he comforts us. And boy does he ever. He gives to us two exhortations, bound up in beautiful promises, that will give strength and encouragement, hope and vitality, great joy and immense thankfulness, to all who have ears to hear and a heart to believe and obey. These are the words, all throughout this warning, that our hearts have been longing to hear. The first exhortation is this: Let us hold fast to our confession.

The First Exhortation – Hold Fast to Our Confession (14) He says in 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.” (Hebrews 4:14, ESV)** Now what does that mean? What does it mean to “hold fast to our confession?” What is our confession? Every faithful and true Christian’s confession, in its most basic terms, is “Jesus is Lord,” right? Jesus is Lord and what we mean by that is Jesus is worthy of our faith, of our surrender, of our obedience, of our devotion, of our love because He is the very Son of God who has saved us. He is the one who took on flesh and lived a life of utter perfection and complete obedience before the face of His father – something we could not and would not ever do. He is the one who took our place, who died on the cross, who poured out His blood, who was broken by God the

Father for our sins, who suffered in our place the excruciating and full fury of God's wrath that we deserve, who took our punishment so that we could be forgiven of our sins and be made at peace with God. He is the one ***“who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.”*** (Psalm 103:3–5, ESV) He is the one who saves wretched sinners like us by faith, because He loves us and He desires to make us His blood-bought, faithful, surrendered, worshipping people.

Jesus is Lord and the writer of Hebrews, including himself, says to us and to the Hebrew Christians: ***let us hold fast our confession.*** This confession is a treasure beyond price. It cannot be lightly dismissed, thoughtlessly abandoned, or carelessly professed. It is life and when we are urged and commanded to hold fast to such a confession, it is not merely an appeal for endurance but an exhortation to fearless witness. Don't be robbed of your faith! Hold it fast and hold it forth by a faithful life. Own Christ in all of your life, public and private. Do not be ashamed. Do not fall away. BF Westcott, writing about this passage says, “The writer everywhere insists on the duty of the public confession of the faith. This crisis (the Hebrew Christians were facing, that we face in the climate of our own culture and even in our own homes and families) claimed not simply private conviction but a clear declaration of belief openly in the face of men.” So it's not just our private faith that he's talking about but also our public confession in face of persecution.

And here's why – we have nothing of which to be ashamed. We have Jesus and we must hold fast to Him and follow Him. But, won't his open confession of Jesus make it harder for us? Yes, but if we are looking for a path of ease, we will not find it in Christ. Jesus said, ***““Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”*** (Matthew 7:13–14, ESV)

Holding fast to Jesus will not be the way of ease but it is the way of life. To follow Jesus is not to seek our ultimate treasures here in this earth, not here in this earthly life, but treasures in heaven. That is not to say that we do not enjoy any earthly blessings – we do, of course. But they are not our ultimate treasure. We are a people who have set our hearts on the heavenly rest of God and realize that this is the day of battle, of striving for faith, of striving against enemies like the devil, still indwelling sin, and a world system under the sway of Satan. This is the time of our labor, the time of sacrifice and of willing self-denial, of

obedience to His Word, of putting our sin to death, of glad service for His Kingdom, of pursuing Christ's Lordship in every are of our lives, for the sake of our surrender to Jesus as Lord. The great reward is yet to come.

What motivates a life of glad confession in heart, word and deed? A vision of Jesus as He truly is, a surpassing vision of Jesus in all His glory. The writer of Hebrews says: ***“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 surpassing vision of which the writer speaks is that of Jesus as our great high priest. Now, this is deliberate on his part. This exhortation is specifically tailored to the Hebrew Christians to whom He is writing. Remember that they are Hebrews. They formerly followed the Jewish religion, right? The high priest figured prominently in OT worship, in the Jewish worship to which they were tempted to return. But the writer of Hebrews wants to show them that Jesus is so much greater. Now because we are not Jewish, we could miss this vision of Jesus, but I don't want us to. It's going to take a little work, but it will be well worth it. Think about this with me.

We have a hard time in our modern days on this side of the cross relating to the concept of a high priest, but to the Jews in the OT, it was a vital ministry. Moses' brother, Aaron, was the first high priest in the nation of Israel. He was the mediator, the go-between for the people and God. The priests were the men responsible for the sacrifices and the worship in the tabernacle and then later in the Temple. Because of their sinfulness, the average Israelite could not directly worship God in the tabernacle or the temple by offering sacrifices. He could not approach God at all. Instead, Aaron and his sons, offered the sacrifices on the behalf of the people by means of a very detailed procedure given to them by God in the Law. So, the high priest was ordained to act as a minister for the people and to minister unto God. He had primarily four functions.

The first function was to make atonement. Once a year, the high priest, on the Day of Atonement, would offer to God a specific sacrifice for all the sins of all of the Israelites throughout the year. He would make this sacrifice – a bull for himself and a goat for the people -- and take the blood of the sacrifice into the Holy of Holies, into the innermost part of the tabernacle or temple, where the presence of God was and he would sprinkle it on the Ark of the Covenant which represented the throne of God on the earth, ok? When he sacrificed the animal and presented it to God, he was not only doing it on his own behalf, but also he was doing it on the behalf of the people. When he went into the Holy of Holies and

came out again, the people would breathe a sigh of relief because it meant that God had accepted the sacrifice for their sins for another year. So the first thing the priest did was to make atonement, but he had to keep doing it year after year.

But another aspect of the high priest's ministry was intercession, or praying, on behalf of the people. As I said, once the sacrifice was made on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would then take the blood and would enter into the Holy of Holies, to the Ark of the Covenant. On top of the Ark of the Covenant was the lid of the Ark which was called the mercy seat. Inside the Ark was the broken tablets of the Law, the Law that man had broken. He would take the blood and sprinkle it upon that mercy seat, interposing or covering the broken Law with the blood of an innocent sacrifice, praying to the Lord asking for mercy and forgiveness of his and the people's sin.

Third, it was also the job of the High Priest to keep the people and to lead the people to be morally and ceremonially pure before the Lord. It was his job to lead the people to be faithful to the Lord, and to love and serve Him, to be obedient to Him, to be holy. Of course, he couldn't actually cause them to be holy, but he was to lead them in that direction.

The last aspect of the high priest's ministry has to do with his death. Numbers 35 talks about this. I'll just give you the highlights. God established in the civil laws of Israel that if someone accidentally killed somebody -- not premeditated murder but manslaughter -- the next of kin could avenge their family member's death. But God also made a provision for the one who killed someone unintentionally called a city of refuge. There were six of them. If the accidental killer could get to a city of refuge before the nearest of kin found them they would be safe. The next of kin couldn't come inside the city of refuge, but he could wait outside the city, and wait for the person who had killed his relative. So if you accidentally killed someone you were in exile in a city of refuge. If the person came out of the city's gate, then the relative could avenge his deceased relative's death. But here is the thing -- the law also had a provision that at the death of the high priest, the persons who had fled to the appointed cities for refuge were allowed to return to their homeland without fear of harm. So what does all of this add up to?

Jesus is the Great High Priest who blows all the other priests away. Why is Jesus our great high priest? Here we go, ready? Jesus is the Greatest High Priest because He has made a

lasting and eternal atonement for us, one that does not ever need to be repeated. Jesus not only offered a sacrifice as a high priest, but He was the sacrifice. Upon Calvary's altar, He lifted Himself up as the sacrifice for our sins, and His shed blood was offered as the atonement to satisfy the justice of God against our sins. Then, he passed through the heavens into the very throne room of God and presented Himself, presented His blood, as the means of securing our peace with God and now, because He is God's Son, is seated in Heaven always to make intercession for His people. He is the one who not only offers the atonement, who intercedes for us, but is the One who by His grace and by the indwelling work of His Spirit and through His Word who actually makes us holy and to grow in holiness – what we call sanctification. And then this, when Jesus died as our High Priest on Calvary's cross, we who trust in Him were set free from the fear of death for our sins—free, without fear of condemnation, without fear of God's righteous retaliation with His fierce anger for our sins. We are free.

Jesus Christ is the far greater high priest, our Savior, our Lord, our King, whom we can receive only by faith. We have a Great High Priest who has borne our sin upon Himself on the cross, who has held nothing back but who Himself was slaughtered though He was fully innocent, had his blood spilt as our eternal sacrifice, and who has purchased for us forgiveness, opened up the way of eternal life to all who will believe. We have a Great High Priest who can and has changed our hearts and made us new. We have the Great High Priest that we do not deserve but that we desperately need. This is the vision of Christ that we must have and that motivates us to hold fast to our confession. We have nothing of which to be ashamed. When you see Jesus like this, you will want to be faithful to Him, to hold fast your confession. It's not easy. It requires real striving, discipline, self-control, and a will to fight the temptation to fall away, not all at once – but degree after degree. It demands that you live in manner that is distinctly different from the world. It's not easy, not at all, but that is where the next exhortation comes into play. In order to remain faithful, to persevere in the faith and enter eternal rest, the writer of Hebrews, including himself, says, "Let us draw near to the throne of grace."

The Second Exhortation – Let Us Draw Near to the Throne of Grace (15-16) He tells us in verses 15-16, ***“For we do not have 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 sin. 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.”*** (Hebrews 4:15–16, ESV) He's just told us about the greatness of Jesus as our Great High Priest, but he wants to tell us more. He wants to tell us why we

should draw near to the Throne of Grace with confidence. Look what he says: ***For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses.*** We face temptations to fall away of all sorts – our godless society, our families, the cost of following Christ, the allure of the world, the false promises of sin, the desire for ease, the selfishness and self-absorption, the temptation to unbelief and coldness of heart toward God – real and hard and difficult temptations and, in ourselves, we are weak. But the writer of Hebrews wants us to know that we are not in this alone. He wants us to know that we have a Great High Priest who is for us because he has been one of us. He is not aloof or uncaring. He is not disinterested or cold to the temptations and pressures that you are feeling in your life. He does not roll his eyes at your weakness, your failure, or your struggle to remain faithful. He knows how hard it is. He sympathizes with our weaknesses because He knows what your life is like.

He sympathizes with us, not in an abstract or distant way, for instance when we see the reports of a devastating earthquake, or a tsunami, or the images of starving children that move us to tears and even to give financially to try to alleviate the misery. No, it is far deeper than that. He sympathizes with our weakness experientially. Jesus knew what it was to be immersed in a godless society, to feel the weight of His family's disapproval, knew all too well the cost of following God the Father, to feel the pull of the world and of ease, the pull to look out for Himself first. In fact, the writer of Hebrews says, He is the one ***who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.***

What does that mean? The point is not that Jesus has faced every single possible temptation that we could face. He was not tempted to become engrossed and obsessed with social media. He did not face the temptation to look at pornography. He did not experience all of temptations that are unique to the elderly or the married, but He did experience every ***kind***, every ***type***, of temptation. He was tempted to lie in order to save His life; to steal to care for His mother after His earthly father died; to covet all that Mary and Martha owned; to hold a grudge against Peter; to serve Himself in the temptation to make bread in the wilderness; to disobey the Father and avoid the cross in His agony in Gethsemane; to have all the things of the world when Satan offered Him the earth; to take revenge when he was fiercely opposed and falsely accused; to lust when the former prostitute kissed His feet and wiped them with her hair. Jesus knows the fight. He endured temptation all the way to the end and defeated it every single time and proved to be the perfect and sinless Son of God. But He knows the fight and He knows we are weak and He

welcomes us to come to Him for strength. He is ready and willing to give us the grace and strength to persevere and that is why the writer of Hebrews tells us...

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. Let us draw near to the Father and let us draw near to the Son. Let us draw near to the throne. How can I do that? How can I approach the throne of the One who knows everything about me, who knows my sin, who knows my failures, who knows my doubts, who knows my inconsistencies, who knows the conflicts of my heart? I can, you can, because of the kind of throne that it is – a throne of grace. Now that phrase, “throne of grace” especially to the Hebrew Christians was an oxymoron – a contradictory phrase like “jumbo shrimp,” or “awfully good,” or “deafening silence.” In their time, a throne was a place of sovereign power and judgment. If you came before a throne in those days, your very life was at risk. The throne was a place of judgment – but not for true Christians, not for true believers. No, the throne of God is a throne of grace. If you are a true Christian, God welcomes you to His throne, because of Christ’s shed blood for you, and He gladly gives you mercy for your past sins, mercy for your past failures, mercy for your inconsistencies, and grace – grace for your doubts and fears, grace for your desperate need, grace for weaknesses.

You do not have to fear rejection, do not have to fear condemnation, do not have to fear that God will reject or refuse you, do not have to fear that God will cast you away because of your guilt. That guilt, if you are a true Christian, has been forever borne by Christ in your place. You are free now to draw near because of what He has done for you as your high priest. This is the exact flow of thought in the Charles Wesley hymn that we sing, “Arise, My Soul, Arise.” You know the words: “Arise, my soul, arise; shake off thy guilty fears; The bleeding sacrifice in my behalf appears: Before the throne my surety stands, Before the throne my surety stands, My name is written on His hands. He ever lives above, for me to intercede; His all redeeming love, His precious blood, to plead: His blood atoned for every race, His blood atoned for every race, And sprinkles now the throne of grace.”

You do not have to fear rejection but you do have to know your need and you have to draw near to the throne of grace. The greatest barriers and obstacles to drawing near to God, beyond the feelings of guilt, are pride, blindness to our needs, and self-justifying and excuse making.

God has given us in Christ, access to His very throne, a throne that promises grace and mercy and must simply come. Just come. How do we draw near to this throne of grace and receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need? We must come admitting our need, desperately recognizing our weakness, in total and complete dependence upon God. We must come with an honest appraisal of ourselves, of our spiritual condition and of our need. Look, beloved, here's the deal. Every one of us is weak; we all need God's grace and mercy. We all have needs; we all have temptations that threaten to overwhelm us; we have limitations and of all kinds. And we all have sins. We all know that we do not deserve God's grace. We don't deserve His mercy or grace – but that's just the point. Grace and mercy are never deserved.

We all face a choice – to deny my needs and try to preserve some kind of reputation with others and keep intact our pride, to fall away in our hearts and blindly give ourselves to finding ultimate satisfaction in the empty promises of sin. Or we can humble ourselves before the Lord and draw near to God in abject humility, and find grace and mercy, more than we ever could have imagined. God knows all there is to know about us and He is still for us. Beloved, listen to me,

Don't Listen to Those Liars, Satan and Sin, But Draw Near Satan and sin would keep you away, telling you that you don't really need grace or mercy – you are okay, better than some, at least as good as most. They would tell you that this is all so overblown; much ado about nothing; you don't need this – this all just some kind of scare tactic. Or they will try another approach, telling you that you have blown it so badly that God will not receive you, that Christ will not be sympathetic to you, that you are wasting your time, that there is no hope for you at the throne of grace and they are damnable, detestable liars. You do need grace and you do need mercy. Listen to me, you who know Christ in truth and in faith, you have the right to approach the throne of grace with confidence, with bold frankness, to freely speak with God – not to plead your case, but to find mercy and grace – because of the sacrifice of Christ in your place. Because the blood of Christ covers your sin, you can be open and honest with God – you can be, what is all the rage these days – you can “be real.”

You can come and confess your sins, your weakness, the truth about yourself. You can come confessing to the Lord the truth: “Lord I am not loving you as I should; I am trading my joy

in you for temporal pleasures that can't satisfy; I am not moved by your truth as I once was; I am being drawn away by the deceitful promises of sin and the world; I am failing as a parent, as a spouse, and I just want to give up; I am a proud and unloving person; I am angry; I am discontent; I'm struggling with substance abuse and no one knows; I am in the grip of pornography; I am abusive in my speech; I am jealous of other people; I am losing my hope as I get older and weaker, as sickness and illness progresses; I have acted in shameful ways; I have compromised my witness in so many ways, I am tempted to fall away..." You can be honest about it all and know that you have a Great High Priest who will not condemn you, a Great High Priest who can and does sympathize with you in your weaknesses, who knows the weight of temptation, and who because He conquered it at every turn, promises that He will give you mercy and grace to help in time of need. But you have to come in faith. You have to come knowing that you are needy. You have to come knowing that you must have His grace and mercy to make it. And it will be yours. The only one who can keep you from the throne of grace is you.

You can be faithful. You can persevere. You can make it to the end. God has given you everything in Jesus Christ that you need. Therefore, let us draw near to the throne of grace with humility, in reverence, in confidence and honesty, with joy that He will receive us and give us mercy and grace to help in time of need – right now.

Today is the day to be real.

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