"A Sympathetic High Priest (Part 2)" – Hebrews 4:12-16

Brandon Holiski Southern Oaks Baptist Church July 29, 2018

[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Take your Bible and meet me in Hebrews 4...

The verses we are about to read are the same ones we considered last week, but we came nowhere close to exhausting their significance. We won't today either. But we will at least push a bit further in on the matters that they raise. In so doing we will discover that these are among the most encouraging in this epistle. So let's do the most important thing and read the text. We will pick up again in verse 14 of chapter 4. Follow along as I read. This is God's Word...

"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. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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 4:14-16)

Last week I mentioned that there are three major ideas in this text that I would like for us to see. There is a *requirement* that is laid upon our lives, a *reason* that this requirement is possible to fulfill, and a *resource* that is offered to us. A requirement, a reason, and a resource. We only got through one and a half of these items though. Let's review.

The Requirement: The Confession We Hold

In verse 14 we read, "let us hold fast our confession." We considered how this confession is two-fold, relating to our confession of the historical Jesus and our confession of the Christian faith. Calling us to hold fast to our confession is the writer's way of calling us to persevere in the faith, not falling away into unbelief. But since he recognizes that a Christian's perseverance in the faith is owing to the work of Christ, the object of our faith, he goes on to ground the call to "hold fast our confession" in the truth of who Christ is and what He has done. That led us to the second item we considered last week...

The Reason: The Great High Priest

Look again at verse 14, this time paying close attention to the first half—"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." Why then do we persevere in maintaining our Gospel confession despite all struggle and strife? Because we have a Great High Priest who faithfully fulfills His priestly work on our behalf.

We considered last week that the high priests of old played a role in making atonement and making intercession for the people of God. Yet because the priests themselves were sinners (among other reasons) the whole system of their priestly work was inadequate. It never was sufficient. But God used it to create categories in our minds to prepare us for the day when He would send His Son to fulfill the role of high priest perfectly. The writer of Hebrews is going to develop these ideas in the pages ahead. He's going to

show us what Jesus *did* by way of offering up a perfect sacrifice for our sins and what He currently *does* for us by way of making intercession for us.

Here, however, the focus is less on the particulars of what He did and does and more on the manner in which He has undertaken those activities. Two things stand out. He fulfills His priestly ministry sinlessly and sympathetically. Listen again to verse 15. "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." Now there are two sides to this verse—the temptation side (which explains Jesus' sympathy with us) and the sinlessness side (which explains why we can be saved). There is the side that shows Jesus to be like us (tempted) and the side that shows Him to be utterly different than us (sinless). Tender and transcendent. Relatable and yet in a category all His own.

Last Sunday we really focused on His sinlessness and how that was necessary for our salvation. If Jesus had even sinned once, His sacrifice on the cross would not have been perfect and therefore it would not have been sufficient to atone for our sins. We didn't just need a substitute to die in our place; we needed one who was perfect. So every temptation that Jesus resisted has implications for our salvation. That's worth remembering every time you face temptation in your life. Jesus experienced the same kind of temptation, but He didn't give into it. Though He shared your weaknesses as a man, for your sake He never gave into temptation, He never once sinned. That's what we considered last week.

Let's push that idea a bit further with our time today. This text says that Jesus was "in every respect...tempted as we are", but can that really be true? We saw that it cannot mean every possible temptation because we might imagine some temptations that are unique to certain life situations that Jesus never experienced while on earth. He was never tempted to go to the theater and see and inappropriate movie, for example, because there was no Cinemark Theater in Nazareth. He was never tempted to cheat on His wife because He was never married. Perhaps there are temptations unique to old age that Jesus never would have encountered because He died so young. But that's not what this text is claiming. The author isn't saying that Jesus experienced every single temptation, but every kind of temptation. The kinds of temptations in play with each of those situations I just mentioned are not unique to those situations. Jesus knew them all. And He never gave in and sinned.

He was tempted to lie in order to save his life. He was tempted to steal to help his poor mother. He was tempted to covet the nice things that Zacchaeus owned. He was tempted to dishonor His parents because they were stricter than other parents. He was tempted to get revenge on those who wrongly accused him. He was tempted to lust when a woman washed His feet with her hair. He was tempted to engage in self-pity when his closest friends couldn't even stay away with Him when He needed them most. He was tempted to murmur in His heart against God when John the Baptist was senselessly beheaded at the whim of a dancing girl. He was tempted to gloat over His accusers when He outsmarted their attempts to embarrass Him and they couldn't answer His questions. He understands our temptations. He knows the struggle. He shared the weaknesses of our humanity. "He is not a distant and aloof high priest but is himself intimately acquainted with the human condition." He truly gets it.

I'm not sure how many of you have read Homer's *Odyssey* (or seen *O Brother Where Art Thou*), but you may recall the famous scene involving the Sirens. The Sirens were these monsters that disguised themselves as beautiful women singing intoxicating songs that lure passing sailors to their island. They assure all commuters that they just want to entertain them for a while when in fact their intent was always to destroy them. Circe warns Odysseus that no man who hears the voice of the Sirens can resist their invitation.

Not wanting to die on the voyage, Odysseus has his men stop up their ears with wax so they cannot hear the Sirens' song. He opts to leave his own hearing in tact, however, because he desires to be the first to hear their song and survive. So he commands his men to tie him with ropes to the mast of the ship. He instructs them to not untie him even if he struggles intensely and begs them to cut his cords. In fact, if he attempts any such request of his crew they had orders to tie the ropes even tighter.

Sure enough they pass by Sirens and Odysseus becomes enchanted by their song. A longing surges through his body like he had never felt before. He tries with all his might to break free of his bonds, but he cannot. The ropes begin cut him deeply. In his agony, he wants nothing more than to succumb to the Sirens, yet his deaf sailors keep tightening the ropes. To him the Sirens seem as beautiful as Helen of Troy, but to his men, who are not bewitched by their song, they look like vicious and hungry monsters. In the end, Odysseus experiences to the full the agony of their song and yet was unable to give in to its call on the basis of his prior decision to take steps to ensure his survival. I once heard Art Azurdia reflect on this story as follows:

"You can imagine him tied there. His arms stretched out to either side, lashed to the crossbeam of that mast, with this overwhelming longing to yield kept in check by his own predetermination not to respond. A predetermination effected in his orders to his men.

The point? Jesus Christ had *no men* to whom He could give such an order. And yet throughout the entirety of His life that sweet song of Satan sought to lure Him away from His Father's plan. He came at Him in the wilderness. 'If you fall down and worship me, I will give you the kingdoms of the world.' It came at Him again, surprisingly, through the mouth of his own beloved disciple, Peter— 'Lord, you can't go to the cross.' It came at Him again powerfully in the garden of Gethsemane as He cried out in agony to His Father, 'Must I drink from this cup?'

But the Siren's song was never more alluring than when hanging on the cross He heard from the onlookers, 'If you are the Son of God come down.' It was the last great temptation of the Siren, to abandon at the last minute the vocation to which He had been obedient all of His life. For years the voice of the Siren sang its song in His ears. He heard it over and over to the full and yet not once did He give Himself over to it because He had lashed Himself to crossbeam of obedience. The temptations were real. Powerful. The intensity of its wickedness was infinitely greater than any other temptation either before or after."⁵

Indeed, I would argue that He knew temptation to a greater degree than you and I ever will. You have to believe that Satan knew the stakes when the Son of God came to earth and that he would have thrown every trick in the book at Jesus to trip Him up. Satan only had to win one temptation battle with Jesus to win the war of our salvation. So I'm quite sure he would have pulled out all the stops and not pulled a single punch.

Some push back and argue that Jesus' temptations would not have been as intense because there are certain temptations that we experience precisely because we are sinners. For example, we do something wrong and because of that we are tempted to lie about it. The second temptation comes to us precisely because we failed to resist the first temptation. So doesn't that mean that we experience a greater and more intense battle with temptation? No. Actually the opposite is true. The sinlessness of Jesus means that His temptations were by necessity harder to resist than our own.

Think about it. You and I experience some temptation to sin and we may resist it for a while but if we give in and sin it is because we have convinced ourselves that the temptation was too much to bear. The sin relieves the weight of the temptation (and leaves in its place the weight of guilt and shame, but that's another matter). The longer we resist a temptation the more difficult that temptation becomes. Jesus was tempted in every way as we are yet He never sinned so that must mean that He knew the full strength of

each and every temptation in a way that we never could. Why? Because we always give in before the power of a temptation is exhausted. Here's how C. S. Lewis explained it in his classic, *Mere Christianity*:

"A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of the German army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it: and Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means—the only complete realist."

I so hope this deepens your worship. Your salvation *required* the sinlessness of Christ. You know how challenging it is to resist temptation to sin in your own life. But Jesus' battle with temptation was infinitely greater. Praise Him then, for He waged that war perfectly for your sake. He fought every temptation through blood, sweat, and tears so that people like us who given in with regularity could be spared God's judgment. What a Savior! "The agony of His obedience was squeezed out to the last drop and that is why we have a sympathetic resident in heaven." In the words of Hebrews 2:18, "*because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*" He has suffered. He is sympathetic to our suffering. He can help. The sympathetic nature of Jesus, our Savior, is one of the most sustaining truths the Bible offers for the Christian journey.

In preparation for this sermon I came across a phenomena that the *Oxford Companion to Music* calls, "sympathetic resonance."

"If two tuning–forks of the same pitch be placed in position for sounding and one of them be set in vibration, the other will take up the vibrations sympathetically; the first fork is then a generator of sound and the second a resonator."

Here's another scenario. Suppose we rolled in a second piano on the opposite side of the stage, I close off the room, and make my way to the first piano where I strike a random note. It's middle C. Do you know what would happen to that second piano? The same note on the opposite piano would gently respond as that string begins to vibrate even though no key on that second instrument was disturbed. This is called "sympathetic resonance."

So what's the point? Christ was made like us in every respect. He was fully human. You might say, He had the same instrument as us and, when He passed through the heavens at His ascension, He took that same instrument with Him. And now every time a note is struck in the weakness of your human instrument, it resonates in heaven in His. "There is no note of human experience that does not play on Christ's exalted human instrument." That's the point of verse 15—"we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses..." He is capable of unparalleled understanding and sympathy.

"Whatever we may be going through, there is not a note we can play, not a melody or a dirge, no minor key, no discordant note, that does not evoke a 'sympathetic resonance' in Jesus. He mastered the instrument while he was here on earth, and he wears it in Heaven. Do you want sympathy? Do not go anywhere else. Dare not go to anyone but him!" 11

What is more, it is precisely this that Jesus invites us to do—turn to Him for the help we need in this life. He wants to help us. As Richard Phillips remarks,

"The Lord you serve, the Savior to whom you look, is not aloof from your trials, but feels them with intimate acquaintance. He is not disinterested or cold to what you are going through; he came to this earth and took up our human nature precisely so that he might now be able to have a fellow feeling with us. Therefore, he is eminently able to represent you before the throne of his heavenly Father, pleading your cause, securing your place, and procuring the spiritual resources you need." ¹²

And this leads us to the third and final major idea in this text...

The Resource: The Throne of Grace

Check out the invitation in verse 16—"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 commenting on this verse, John Piper gets right at the heart of the Gospel…

"Every one of us needs help. We are not God. We have needs. We have weaknesses. We have confusion. We have limitations of all kinds. We need help.

But every one of us has something else: sin. And therefore at the bottom of our hearts we know that we do not deserve the help we need. And so we feel trapped. I need help to live my life and to handle death and to cope with eternity — help with my family, my spouse, my children, my loneliness, my job, my health, my finances. I need help. But I don't deserve the help I need.

So what can I do? I can try to deny it all and be a superman who doesn't need any help. Or I can try to drown it all and throw my life into a pool of sensual pleasures. Or I can simply give way to the paralysis of despair. But God declares over this hopeless conclusion: Jesus Christ became a High Priest to shatter that despair with hope and to humble that superman or superwoman and to rescue that drowning wretch.

Yes, we all need help. Yes, none of us deserves the help we need. But *no* to despair and pride and lechery. Look at what God says. Because we have a great High Priest, the throne of God is a throne of *grace*. And the help we get at that throne is mercy and grace to help in time of need. Grace to help! Not *deserved* help — gracious help. This is the whole point of the Old and New Testaments. God planned for a High Priest, a Savior, a Redeemer, a gracious Helper.

You are not trapped. Say no to that lie. We need help. We don't deserve it. But we can have it. You can have it right now and forever. If you will receive and trust in your High Priest, Jesus the Son of God, and draw near to God through him." ¹⁴

Amen. The invitation of verse 16 is a game-changer. We don't have to keep our distance anymore. We don't have to hide. We are welcomed at the throne of God. I'm reminded of the invitation the reader receives later in the epistle,

"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." (Hebrews 10:19-22)

It is our faith that assures us that we can approach God. Our faith that Christ has opened the way for us to come before God. Our faith that we don't need to fear that we will find a throne of condemnation because Christ has atoned for our sins. It has become for us "the throne of grace" because of the work of Christ. 16

What's most remarkable here, however, is not *just* that we are invited to come before God, but that we are invited to come *boldly*. We are told to come "with confidence." Even in our weakness and frailty, "naked and exposed" before God (4:13), we are still invited to come confidently because we know that our Great High Priest, Jesus, has fully and finally put away our sins. ¹⁷ But this is true only for the believer. For those who have not trusted in the work of Christ, the throne remains a throne of judgment and wrath. But for those whose faith rest in Christ alone, "Righteous judgment has been replaced by radical mercy." What a difference a Great High Priest makes, amen? Richard Phillips writes,

"We cannot overestimate the importance of such confidence. Many Christians struggle with prayer. We tremble as with stage fright, as if the light from God's throne exposed us in naked shame, when in fact it reveals the radiant robes that have been draped around us, the righteousness of Christ given to all who trust in him. This is the key to prayer—to praying often, to praying openly, to praying boldly and freely and with gladness of heart—to know that we come clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, invited by his own saving ministry, purchased by his precious blood, and anticipated by his sympathetic intercession. This is the secret to lively and happy prayer."

And what happens when we come boldly before this throne of grace? Verse 16 says we find mercy and grace to help in our time of need. We find all the mercy we could ever need to cover all our sins. And we find all the grace we need for every situation we face in this life. Mercy for past sins and failures. Grace for today's trouble and work. Every resource we could possibly need in this life is kept for us to receive at the throne of God's grace. "But, of course, the condition for timely mercy and grace is confident and frank prayer. If we fail to pray, we rob ourselves of the great, timely resources God holds for us." So we are invited to come. Don't try to make it through this life in your own resourcefulness. That will always fail you. Come to God with the confidence that He has what you truly require and He is eager to give it in your time of need.

And if this is true than may we not shrink back in neglect and fear. Let us draw near in prayer. We need not fear wearing God out. This is an invitation to come before God in prayer.

"We dare not be prayerless....prayerlessness is the root of all sin. When we do not give time each day to earnest and believing prayer, we are saying that we can cope with life without divine aid. It is human arrogance at its worst....To be prayerless is to be guilty of the worst form of practical atheism. We are saying that we believe in God but we can do without him. It makes us careless about our former sins and heedless of our immediate needs. This letter urges us to come into the presence of a God who welcomes us and a Christ who understands us. To neglect the place of prayer is to rob ourselves of immense and timely resources. For the Christian the throne of grace is the place of help."²¹

So here's an idea. Let's get together and pray tonight!

[Commercial: Prayer Service and Fellowship and 24 Hours of Prayer Launch]

I'll close with the lyrics of a beautiful hymn by Joseph Hart, called "A Man There Is, A Real Man."

A Man there is, a real Man, With wounds still gaping wide, From which rich streams of blood once ran, In hands, and feet, and side. 'Tis no wild fancy of our brains, No metaphor we speak; The same dear Man in heaven now reigns, That suffered for our sake.

This wondrous Man of whom we tell, Is true Almighty God; He bought our souls from death and hell; The price, His own heart's blood.

That human heart He still retains, Though throned in highest bliss; And feels each tempted member's pains; For our affliction's His.

Come, then, repenting sinner, come; Approach with humble faith; Owe what thou wilt, the total sum Is canceled by His death!

His blood can cleanse the blackest soul, And wash our guilt away; He will present us sound and whole In that tremendous day.

Let's Pray...

¹ "The typical understanding of *temptation* is the enticement to wrongdoing that confronts us every day. We typically think about it in its most graphic forms: the temptation to sin sexually, the temptation to elevate ourselves over others, the temptation to steak and cheat, or the temptation to lash out in anger. Yet when we examine Jesus's temptations in Matthew 4, we see just how basic temptation can be. That narrative demonstrates that even eating can be a temptation if satisfying physical hunger results in disobedience to God. Thus, Scripture shows us that temptation can take the most graphic of forms. Nevertheless, Scripture instructs us to go to Christ when we are tempted because he is the only one who was tempted in every way common to humanity and yet did not sin." R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Exalting Christ in Hebrews* (CCE; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 66.

² This catalog of examples is based off of a similar list found in "Draw Near to the Throne of Grace with Confidence," a sermon preached by John Piper on September 15, 1996, and accessed at the following web address: https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/draw-near-to-the-throne-of-grace-with-confidence.

³ T. H. Robinson writes, "His whole life was one of temptation, and the very fact that he had powers and abilities which we do not possess only added to the stress. He was the fullest and most vivid personality that this world has ever known, and the very richness of His human nature exposed Him all the more fully to the assaults of temptation." Quoted by Raymond Brown, *The Message of Hebrews* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1982), 96.

⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, Commentary on Hebrews (BTCP; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 153.

⁵ "The Greatest of Our High Priest," by Art Azurdia, accessed online at the following address: http://www.spiritempoweredpreaching.com/downloads/297 49.mp3.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 124, 125.

⁷ Azurdia, "The Greatest of Our High Priest."

- ⁸ As Raymond Brown remarks, "He can be of far greater help to us than any [mere] human priest because, whilst it is true that they sympathized, they also sinned." Brown, 97.
 - ⁹ Percy A. Scholes, *The Oxford Companion to Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 14.
 - ¹⁰ R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (PW; Wheaton: Crossway, 1993), 130.

¹¹ Ibid., 131.

¹² Richard D. Phillips, *Hebrews* (REC; Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006), 149-150.

¹³ "The end of Hebrews 4 concludes the long exhortation that began in chapter 3, in which the author charges his readers to press on in the faith, not hardening their hearts in the face of difficulties. To meet this requirement, so far he has articulated two key resources. First, he mentioned Christian fellowship and encouragement. This is needed, he says, so "that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:13). Another key resource is the Word of God, which imparts life to us and stirs us up in the faith (Heb. 4:12–13). The pastor now directs us to a third resource: prayer, through which we come before God's very throne to receive the mercy and grace we need to press on." Ibid, 145.

Piper, "Draw Near to the Throne of Grace with Confidence."

15 Charles Spurgeon once told his congregation: "I could not say to you, 'Pray,' not even to you saints, unless it were a throne of grace, much less could I talk of prayer to you sinners; but now I will say this to every sinner here, though he should think himself to be the worst sinner that ever lived, cry unto the Lord and seek him while he may be found. A throne of grace is a place fitted for you: go to your knees, by simple faith go to your Savior, for he, he it is who is the throne of grace." Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "The Throne of Grace," in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 63 vols. (Pasadena, Tex.: Pilgrim Publications, 1975), 17:860.

16 John Calvin was in awe of the statement "throne of grace." He wrote, "The basis of this confidence is that the throne of God is not marked by a naked majesty which overpowers us, but is adorned with a new name, that of *grace*. This is the name that we ought always to keep in mind when we avoid the sight of God.... The glory of God cannot but fill us with despair, such is the awfulness of his throne. Therefore in order to help our lack of confidence, and to free our minds of all fears, the apostle clothes it with grace and gives it a name which will encourage us by its sweetness. It is as if he were saying, Since God has fixed on His throne... a banner of grace and of fatherly love towards us, there is no reason why His majesty should ward us off from approaching Him." William B. Johnston,

trans., Calvin's Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of

17 "Many Christians struggle in their relationship with God, especially when it comes to prayer. The reason for this is felt by the writer of Hebrews, and it is expressed in what he has said in the preceding verse: "No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Heb. 4:13). Anyone with any spiritual awareness is made very uneasy by the thought of God's searching gaze. Remember the scene in the garden after Adam and Eve had first sinned. In their original state, before they fell into sin, they were 'naked and were not ashamed'" (Gen. 2:25). With no sin to condemn them, they delighted in the gaze of their loving Creator. But after the fall, they hid their shame even from one another, pathetically sewing on fig leaves for garments. Even more, they dreaded the presence of God, fleeing and hiding from him as he approached. This is how many Christians feel in their relationship with God. The thought of his gaze chills their bones. They are willing to do anything but deal with God himself, skulking around the edges of his light rather than drawing near to him. They struggle to pray and seldom do unless forced by circumstances. It is this paralyzing fear that the writer of Hebrews now addresses. As Philip Hughes explains: 'Sinners are no longer commanded to keep their distance in fear and trembling, but on the contrary are now invited to draw near, and to do so with confidence.' The reason for this change is the saving work of Jesus Christ to reconcile sinners to God. In particular, two aspects of that work come into view here: He has made propitiation for us in the heavenly tabernacle, and he now ministers on high with sympathy for our weakness. When God discovered Adam and Eve's sin, he punished them by barring them from the garden and cursing them. But God then took the initiative in restoring them to fellowship with himself. Genesis 3:21 tells us, "The LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them." God sacrificed an animal in their place and clothed them with the garment of the innocent substitute he had provided. That is a wonderful picture of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away our sin and whose perfect righteousness is imputed to us." Phillips, 147-148.

¹⁸ Mohler, 68.

St. Peter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963). 57.

¹⁹ Phillips, 151-152.

²⁰ Hughes, 132.

²¹ Brown, 96-97.