

Our Great High Priest

Hebrews: Jesus is Better • PART 9 • Hebrews 4:14-16

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It is so good to be together this morning! If you are visiting with us today (either here in person or online), we are glad to have you with us, and we would invite you to fill out an online visitor card by using the QR code on the front of the bulletin or by going to our website at fourlakeschurch.org/visitor.

We are here this morning to worship God and to preach the good news that Jesus gave his life for us on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. We obey that good news by believing it, by turning away from sin, by confessing our belief that Jesus is the Son of God, and by obeying his command to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. And we do have several examples this morning, starting with an update from Timothy Roland who preaches in Memphis. He says,

Rejoicing with the angels in Heaven as Brother Neil Bennett used our baptistry today at Forestview to baptize his ex-wife, Anita Bennett, into Christ for the remission of her sins. [We] witnessed Neil, taking her confession, and then baptizing her for the purpose of her salvation in Jesus. Neil will be traveling to Houston this weekend to MD Anderson for thyroid cancer treatment. Please keep both Neil and Anita in your prayers!

I have so many questions, but great to see this!

We have an update from Mike Sullivan who says,

Joe Smartt, 85 years old, lives across the street from our church building. His wife, now deceased, was a member at South Fayetteville many years ago. Joe is mostly confined to a hospital bed. His daughter, Cindy Ables, takes care of him. Joe decided he wants to be baptized. He said it's something he's known he should do for a long time, but kept putting off. So today we met him and his family at the building. They rolled Joe across the street in a wheel chair. When they got there, his daughter Cindy said she wanted to be baptized as well! When it was over, Joe said, with tears in his eyes, that his former neighbor, the late Charles Woodard, had been after him for years to be baptized. We never know the influence we may have on others. Joe had also discussed this with Ley Jean from Howell church of Christ who also offered to help. I'm reminded of what Jesus told the disciples in John 4:36 that the sower and reaper rejoice together. Praise the Lord for his grace, mercy, and patience!"

Amen to that!

We also have several others, including an update from Fate (on the left), Fate is a friend who preaches in Los Angeles – he says, “Welcome to the body, Dana!” On the right, John, Marcus, and Nicolas were all baptized in Madison, Alabama, this week. On the bottom right we have a nurse, Jenneh Vesalle, baptized under a log bridge in Liberia.

On the left up here, Spencer Ross reports that 26 were baptized on a recent trip to Pakistan. In the upper right, Alexander Rodichev reports that we have “...two new sisters in Christ in Kyiv [Ukraine], Helen and Lyudmila.” In the lower left we have Thomas baptized in Tulsa this week, and on the lower right we have two men baptized in the dark in Liberia.

There were a number of others this week, but the last one comes from a friend of mine, Paul Delgado (pictured on the left). Paul has helped us at our summer camp, and I know Paul because I baptized his mother-in-law down in Janesville many years ago. Paul preaches for the Westside Church of Christ down in Elgin, Illinois. He posted this week and says,

This afternoon we welcomed a new brother in Christ, Wade, who decided to put on Jesus in baptism and dedicate his life to serving. Wade and Westside were connected several weeks ago through a brother in Christ, Caleb Eaves, who was looking for a congregation on Facebook to discuss the gospel and continue studying with Wade in the Chicago area. Thank God for social media! After our new brother was baptized, a few of us went out after and Wade had his first fellowship meal with God’s family at Portillos!

I love the post-baptism Portillos! But we share this to help illustrate what it means to obey the gospel. And if you have not yet obeyed the gospel yourself, or if you aren’t sure whether you’ve obeyed the gospel, we invite you to get in touch. Pull me aside after worship today or reach out using the contact information on the website or on the bulletin, and we would love to study together.

Some of you might remember that back in 2016, we shared the story of Lou Olivera, a judge in Cumberland County, North Carolina, a community that includes Fort Bragg and a community that includes the largest military population anywhere in the United States. Well, Judge Olivera, a Gulf War combat veteran himself, actually set up what he refers to as a Veterans Treatment Court, a court specializing in handling veterans and some of their unique challenges, including those struggling with PTSD and various addictions. But what made the news several years ago is what happened when a retired Green Beret sergeant ended up facing the judge on a probation violation after having lied about a drug test.

That soldier was Joe Serna, 41 years old, a father of seven children. This man did four tours in Afghanistan himself and was nearly killed three times – once by a roadside bomb, then by a suicide bomber, and the third time when his vehicle ran off the road and flipped over into a canal near Kandahar. The story explains that as water filled the vehicle, one of his fellow soldiers dove down under the water, unfastened his belt, released his body armor, allowing him to escape. This man who saved his life, however, did not escape, and neither did the other two soldiers in that vehicle. Out of the four, Joe Serna was the only survivor. Well, most of us cannot even possibly come close to imagining the kind of mental anguish that man has suffered ever since then. He earned three Purple Hearts along with many other honors, but when he got home he was diagnosed with PTSD and depression, and then he turned to alcohol, eventually being charged with driving under the

influence. Through this long drawn-out process, he ended up facing the court 25 times before eventually entering Judge Olivera's special program for veterans.

Because he lied about the drug test, Judge Olivera sentenced Mr. Serna to one day in jail. However, after passing that sentence, the judge personally drove Mr. Serna to the jail in a neighboring county. When they got there, Mr. Serna was trembling, so Judge Olivera decided to spend the night with him in the county jail. And that's what they did. They checked in together and actually shared a one-man cell. Mr. Serna asked, "You are here for the entire time with me?" The judge said, "Yeah, that's what I'm doing." They sat down on the cot and talked all night long. As a combat veteran himself, the judge was concerned that being confined in the cell might trigger Mr. Serna's PTSD, so he stayed, and they stayed up talking all night long – about their service, about their kids, about family life, and so on. Looking back on it, Mr. Serna says, "I cannot even put into words who I feel about him. I look at him as a father. I've seen a lot of things, and this by far is the most compassionate thing I've ever seen anyone give to anybody. I will never let him down again." As we think about what this judge did, I want to invite you to turn with me this morning to the last three verses in Hebrews 4 – Hebrews 4:14-16.

The theme of Hebrews is, "Jesus is Better," and this morning we come to a passage where Jesus is described as being our **"great high priest."** A priest is a go-between, someone who stands between God and humanity – representing God to the people, but also bringing the concerns of the people to God. And under the Law of Moses, the high priest was above the other priests and he was the one responsible for offering that one yearly sacrifice for all the people – passing through the Holy Place in the tabernacle or in the temple, and entering into the Most Holy Place once a year on the Day of Atonement. By the time we get to Hebrews 4:16, the author is starting to make the argument that Jesus is a better high priest; and, in fact, because he is so much better, what he has done for us actually changes the way we live. In fact, he helps us. I know, many times we come away from scripture with the message that we need to stop sinning and we need to try harder. And that is certainly true; however, that is not the whole message. Part of it is: We need help!

Well, that help comes in Hebrews 4:14-16,

14 Therefore, since 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 One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. 16 Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

In terms of the structure of this passage, I hope we notice that we have two commands in this passage: At the end of verse 14, ***"let us hold fast our confession,"*** and at the beginning of verse 16, ***"let us draw near with confidence."*** This is WHAT we are to do, and this is important (we will look at both of these); however, I'd like to save these two commands for the end, and I want us to focus primarily on the rest of this passage, as Jesus is described as our **"great high priest."** This is our real need this morning. We need a go-between. Yes, we need to ***"hold fast,"*** and yes, we need to ***"draw near,"*** but we need help. We need a high priest. And let's just note as we start that Jesus is described as our **"GREAT high priest."** Most of us would recognize the word **"great"** in this passage in the English word "mega." Jesus is our **"mega high priest."** He is greater than any high priest than anyone has ever had. Jesus is better.

- I. **So let's start by noting what makes Jesus qualified to serve as our HIGH PRIEST – What is it that makes Jesus so “great”?**
 - A. **The first description comes right away as the author describes Jesus as our great high priest “who has passed through the heavens.”**

Remember how the high priest (in Leviticus) would pass through the Holy Place on his way to the Most Holy Place once a year, on the Day of Atonement? Well, it's like that, only better! Jesus has *“passed through the heavens.”* As our great high priest, Jesus has traveled, not through a physical tent or a man-made building of some kind, but Jesus has traveled *“through the heavens,”* and he is still there (continually), and we will get back to this a bit later in this book. But for now, our high priest has *“passed through the heavens.”*

- B. **Let's also notice (in verse 14), that Jesus is described as “the Son of God.”**

When you have a problem, you want to talk to somebody who's in a position to do something about it. That's Jesus! We know this. But it almost creates a problem. Our great high priest is the Son of God who has passed through the heavens, so the question is: How can a high priest in heaven relate to me? How can someone in a position like that know anything about me and what I'm going through?

- C. **So this leads us to one of the real highlights of this passage (in verse 15), and it comes in the form of a double negative, “...for we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses.”**

So yes, he's great, but part of what makes our high priest so great is that can truly sympathize with our weaknesses. He understands. He feels what we feel. He has been where we are. We think back to that judge who had also been in combat who could sympathize with what that other soldier was going through. Or maybe we think back to something else that happened a number of years ago, when former president George H. W. Bush shaved his head. Here is this decorated Navy combat veteran, ambassador, former head of the CIA, Vice President, President of the United States. Here is a man who jumped out of airplanes to celebrate his birthday every year, remember that? And one day he notices that every member of his protective detail suddenly doesn't have any hair. He asks about it, and it turns out that one of them has a 2-year old son with leukemia who had just lost his hair. Mr. Bush wanted in on it. But what I had forgotten is that George and Barbara lost a 3-year old daughter to leukemia nearly 60 years earlier. This, then, was more than just a gesture, it was a statement of solidarity: I know something of what you are going through. He could truly empathize with that family. In the same way, Jesus also knows all about our struggles; he will guide 'till the day is done. There's not an hour that he is not near us; no night so dark but his love can cheer us. There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus! No, not one! No, not one!

Do any of us here this morning think we've had a tough life? Jesus was born in poverty and was actually homeless for at least part of his life. Do any of us have some family responsibilities weighing us down? We have no mention of Jesus' earthly father, Joseph, after Jesus is 12-years old, and by the time Jesus is on the cross, as he is dying, he's arranging for the care of his mother. Do people ever put us down? Jesus' own brothers thought he was nuts and tried to take him away by force. Have we ever been let down by our friends? Judas betrayed him, Peter denied even knowing him, and everybody else ran away just when he needed them most. He laughed, and cried, and got hungry, he got frustrated with people, he was misunderstood. There's so much more we could say, but Jesus can *“sympathize our weaknesses.”*

D. And then, the other part of this is that our high priest is “*One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.*”

All priests are tempted, but the difference with Jesus is that he was tempted just like we are, but he never sinned; he never gave in. Some might wonder whether Jesus has really been tempted “*as we are,*” after all, Jesus was never tempted to shoot somebody with a gun, he was never tempted to break the speed limit in a car, he was never tempted to look at pornography on the internet, he was never tempted to max out his credit card buying stuff he didn’t need, and so on. So, in what sense has Jesus been “*tempted in all things as we are*”? I would suggest that sin is sin and that temptation is temptation. Sometimes the expression of sin is different, but the essence of sin has been and will always be the same – whether in the Garden of Eden, or in the time of Jesus, or today. Jesus was tempted, just as we are. He was tempted with greed, and lust, and hatred, and every sin we have today. But the difference is: Jesus never gave in. And for that reason, Jesus understands. He doesn’t roll his eyes or shrug his shoulders at what we’re going through, but he empathizes. And when we give in, he’s able to say, “I get it. I don’t agree, but I understand why you did that.” He feels with us.

II. Well, what does this mean for us? Jesus is our Great High Priest, but practically speaking, what does this mean for us today?

To apply this, let’s go back to the two “*let us*” statements we noted earlier...

A. ...starting with with first one (in verse 14), “*Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.*”

To “*hold fast*” is to hang on for dear life. Holding fast is what our kids do when they are little and we take them out into the deep end of the pool for the first time. Holding fast is what we as parents do 16 years later as those same kids are learning to drive. We know what it means to hold on for dear life. And spiritually, because Jesus is our great high priest, we are to “*hold fast our confession.*” His priesthood makes holding on possible. His priesthood empowers us. We hang on. We are not to turn back to a former way of life, we are not to give up or give in, but we hold on to our confession. In 2 Corinthians 9:13, Paul refers to our “*confession of the gospel of Christ.*” In Romans 10:9, he refers to confessing “*with your mouth Jesus as Lord.*” In 1 Timothy 3:16 he refers to our “*common confession*” and speaks of Jesus who was “*revealed in the flesh, ...vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.*” And in 1 John 4:15, John says that “*Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.*” We hold on to our confession.

B. The second “let us” comes in verse 16, “*Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*”

I love how God’s throne is described as a “*throne of grace*”! Certainly, God’s throne could very accurately be described as a “throne of justice,” or a “throne of glory,” or a “throne of power,” but it is described here as a “*throne of grace.*” What a contrast! Back in the time of Moses, God’s message was, “Do not touch the mountain, or you will die!” In Exodus 24:1-2, God said to Moses, “*Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and seventy of the elders of Israel, and you shall worship at a distance. Moses alone, however, shall come near to the LORD, but they shall not come near, nor shall the people come up with him.*” “*Worship at a distance!*” Or maybe we think about the tabernacle. The Levites were told to kill anyone who approached the tabernacle without permission. We might compare it to approaching a king or maybe the

president. We think of the danger faced by Esther in approaching the king, *"If I perish, I perish"* (Esther 4:16). Today, we might think of getting called to the principal's office. Some people who went to the principal's office were never seen again! Or we might think of approaching the president. What happens if we approach without permission? What happens if we jump the fence and start sprinting for the White House? We don't approach those in positions of great power without permission. And the reason is: Those in power often have the power to judge, the power to condemn. This is why we have so many "failure to appear" warrants issued by judges these days. People may commit a crime, they are released with a court date, and sometimes they never come back, and the reason is: They don't want to face the judge! Instead of facing the judge, they run. But in this passage, we *"draw near with confidence to the throne of grace."*

When we as God's children need help, his throne is truly a *"throne of grace."* And we approach his throne, looking for *"mercy."* *"Grace"* has sometimes been described as getting something we don't deserve, and *"mercy"* has sometimes been described as not getting what we do deserve. We might think of the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. The son probably deserved judgment, he probably deserved a lecture, but the Father welcomed him home, even when he didn't deserve it. That's mercy.

And what I also love about this passage is that we come to God for mercy and grace *"in time of need,"* or *"just in the nick of time,"* as some have translated this. In this context, then, we come to God not at some pre-scheduled time of prayer, but we come to him right when we need it. And he answers because he knows what we're going through. He feels with us. And so we come to him *"with confidence,"* with courage, with boldness, without reservation, with no fear. The word translated here as *"confidence"* can be translated as "freedom of speech." We don't need to be terrified when we approach his throne, but we come to him with *"confidence."* We have a back stage pass, in a sense. We have permission to approach the throne. I think back to my work with the Crystal Lake Times. The editor of that paper gave me a "Press Pass," and that pass got me into some places I would not have been welcome otherwise. As our Great High Priest, Jesus gives us access to God's throne. He gives us permission to approach the throne. What a blessing!

Conclusion:

As we close our thoughts on this passage, I would suggest that the big takeaway this morning is that we simply appreciate the privilege of being able to come to God in prayer. We have a tradition of praying "in Jesus' name." And this is it right here! We have the privilege of approaching God's throne in prayer, we have the privilege of coming to God for help in our time of need, and we come with confidence, with freedom of speech, but only because of Jesus. He is truly our great high priest. And if I could make a suggestion: Instead of just tacking on "in Jesus' name" at the end of our prayers, let's acknowledge Jesus as our great high priest throughout the prayer, from beginning to end. The only way we can approach God's throne in prayer is through Jesus. What a blessing that is!

Caleb has done a great job choosing songs about Jesus being our great high priest, and we'll be singing one of those in just a moment to prepare us for partaking of the Lord's Supper, but before we do, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

We come to you this morning in the name of Jesus, our great and merciful high priest. You are perfect and holy in every way, but we are not, and so we need your Son. Thank you, Father, for making our salvation possible.

We come to you through Jesus, our Savior and King. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com