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THE THRONE OF GRACE

Hebrews 4:14-16

By

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Hebrews Lesson 14

The Throne of Grace Hebrews 4:14-16

All Christians struggle with two crucial areas that will make or break us in the Christian life: perseverance in times of trial; and, prayer. As you know, they are connected. A vital prayer life is essential to endure trials.

Failure to endure trials is the mark of the seed sown on rocky soil. Jesus explained that this seed represents those who, "when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy; and they have no firm root in themselves, but are only temporary; then, when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately they fall away" (Mark 4:17). Endurance is one mark of genuine saving faith (Heb. 3:6).

Prayer is our supply line to God in the battle. His abundant, sustaining grace flows to us through prayer. Because prayer is so vital, the enemy tries to sever that supply line. When we suffer, the enemy often whispers, "God doesn't care about you and He isn't answering. Why waste your time with these worthless prayers?" It's easy to get discouraged and quit praying, which cuts us off from the very help that we need!

Our text is one of the most encouraging passages in the Bible when it comes to perseverance and prayer. The first readers of this epistle were tempted to abandon their Christian faith and return to Judaism because of persecution. The author has just given an extended exhortation, using the bad example of Israel in the wilderness. They failed to enter God's rest (a picture of salvation) because of unbelief and disobedience. Therefore, we must be diligent to enter that rest. If we will respond in faith and obedience to God's Word, it will expose our sin and show us His ways. It is foolish to think that we can hide our sin from God, because everything is naked and laid bare in His sight (4:12-13).

Martin Luther commented on our text, "After terrifying us, the Apostle now comforts us; after pouring wine into our wound, he now pours in oil" (in Philip Hughes, *Commentary on the Epistle to*

the Hebrews [Eerdmans], p. 169). Rather than trying to hide because of our sin, the author shows how we should draw near to Jesus, our sympathetic high priest, who gives us access to God's throne. For those who are in Christ, that throne is not a place of fear but, rather, a throne of grace!

Since Jesus is our great yet sympathetic high priest, we must persevere and we must pray.

There are two commands here: Hold fast our confession (persevere; 4:14); and, Draw near with confidence (pray; 4:16). They are both based on the truth about who Jesus is: Since Jesus is our great high priest, the Son of God, who has passed through the heavens, we must hold fast our confession. And, since Jesus is a high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses, we should draw near to the throne of grace for help in our times of need. Thus His transcendence to the right hand of God's throne and His humanity are both essential elements of His unique effectiveness as our high priest. If we want to persevere through trials and receive His help through prayer, we must understand who He is.

1. Since Jesus is our great high priest who has passed through the heavens, we must persevere (4:14).

The author tells us who Jesus is and how we should respond.

- A. Jesus is our great high priest who has passed through the heavens.

We see Jesus' greatness in two ways here:

- 1) Jesus is great in His office as high priest at the right hand of God.

We have difficulty relating to the concept of a high priest, but to the Jews, it was an important office. Moses' brother Aaron was the first high priest. He was the mediator between the people and God. He and his fellow priests offered the sacrifices on behalf of the people. They had to follow a detailed procedure spelled out by God. Any variance or innovation meant instant death, as Aaron's two sons, Nadab and Abihu discovered when they offered "strange fire" on the altar (Lev. 10:1-3).

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest alone would go into the Holy of Holies to make atonement for all the

sins of the nation. If he entered there improperly or at any other time, he would die (Leviticus 16). He would sprinkle the blood on the mercy seat in the very presence of God. When he came out alive, the people heaved a sigh of relief, because it meant that God had accepted the sacrifice for their sins for another year.

Jesus is not just another high priest in the line of Aaron. Rather, He is our great high priest according to the order of Melchizedek (5:6). Rather than entering the Holy of Holies in the temple, He has passed through the heavens (in His ascension) into the very presence of God. The Jews thought of the sky as the first heaven. The stars are the second heaven. The presence of God is the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2). Whether the author has this in mind, or is just using "heavens" in the plural because the Hebrew word is always plural, we cannot say for certain.

But his point is that Jesus, our great high priest, is unlike any merely human high priest. He has entered the very presence of God. The Father has said to Him, "Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for your feet" (Ps. 110:1). No earthly priest would dare to *sit* in the Holy of Holies! They always stood. But Jesus *sits* at the right hand of God's throne because once for all He made atonement for our sins (Heb. 10:12). So Jesus is a great high priest, in a class by Himself, because of His office as a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek (which the author will explain more in the following chapters).

2) Jesus is great in His Person as God in human flesh.

"Jesus" is His human name, calling attention to the full humanity of the Savior (see 2:17). If He had not been fully human, He could not have atoned for our sins. But He is also "the Son of God," which refers to His deity (John 5:18). As Bishop Moule said, "A Savior not quite God is a bridge broken at the farther end." Our author has shown in chapter 1 that Jesus is fully God. Thus Jesus is uniquely great in His office as high priest and He is uniquely great in His person as God in human flesh. Therefore...

B. We must persevere.

The words, "hold fast our confession," imply danger and effort on our part (B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 106). Picture someone hanging on for dear life as their

raft goes down the raging rapids in the Grand Canyon. "Hold fast!" "Confession" implies not only our private belief in the essential doctrines of the faith (especially with regard to Jesus' deity and humanity), but also our public declaration of this truth in the face of persecution. We make such a public profession of faith in baptism, but that profession is put to the test when persecution arises. Are we only fair-weather believers who deny the Lord when it becomes costly to believe, or will we stand firm even to death because we know whom we have believed?

J. C. Ryle reports, "When John Rogers, the first martyr in Queen Mary's time, was being led to Smithfield to be burned, the French Ambassador reported that he looked as bright and cheerful as if he were going to his wedding" (*Home Truths* [Triangle Press], 1:64). While God must give special grace at such a time, we would not do well in persecution if we grumble and walk away from God when we face lesser trials. Paul says that we're not only to persevere in trials, but to do so with great joy (Rom. 5:3)! So hold fast your confession of faith in Christ when He takes you through difficult trials. He is none other than your great high priest, God in human flesh, who now sits "at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. 1:3).

2. Since Jesus is our sympathetic and sinless high priest, we must pray in times of need (4:15-16).

A. Jesus is our sympathetic high priest.

The author uses a double negative, "We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses...." Probably he was anticipating an objection: "You've just said that Jesus is a great high priest who has passed through the heavens. How can someone beyond the heavens relate to me and my problems?" The author responds, "No, Jesus is not unsympathetic. He understands your deepest feelings."

We all need someone to sympathize with our problems and weaknesses without condemning us. Sometimes that is enough to get us through, just to know that someone else understands what we're going through. I read about a boy who noticed a sign, "Puppies for sale." He asked, "How much do you want for the pups, mister?"

"Twenty-five dollars, son." The boy's face dropped. "Well, sir, could I see them anyway?"

The man whistled and the mother dog came around the corner, followed by four cute puppies, wagging their tails and yipping happily. Then lagging behind, another puppy came around the corner, dragging one hind leg.

"What's the matter with that one, sir?" the boy asked.

"Well, son, that puppy is crippled. The vet took an X-ray and found that it doesn't have a hip socket. It will never be right."

The man was surprised when the boy said, "That's the one I want. Could I pay you a little each week?"

The owner replied, "But, son, you don't seem to understand. That pup will never be able to run or even walk right. He's going to be a cripple forever. Why would you want a pup like that?"

The boy reached down and pulled up his pant leg, revealing a brace. "I don't walk too good, either." Looking down at the puppy, the boy continued, "That puppy is going to need a lot of love and understanding. It's not easy being crippled!" The man said, "You can have the puppy for free. I know you'll take good care of him."

That is a limited illustration of our Savior's sympathy for our condition. Since He became a man and suffered all that we experience, He sympathizes with our weaknesses. He demonstrated His compassion many times during His earthly ministry. But His humanity was not diminished in any way when He ascended into heaven. We have a completely sympathetic high priest at the right hand of God!

B. Jesus is our sinless high priest.

He was "tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin." At first, we may wrongly think that being sinless would make Jesus unsympathetic and distant from us, since we all have sinned many times. Perhaps a fellow sinner could relate more to my failures. But that is not so. Charles Spurgeon pointed out ("The Tenderness of Jesus" [Ages Software], sermon 2148, p. 407, italics his),

[D]o not imagine that if the Lord Jesus had sinned he would have been any more tender toward you; for *sin is always of a*

hardening nature. If the Christ of God could have sinned, he would have lost the perfection of his sympathetic nature. It needs perfectness of heart to lay self all aside, and to be touched with a feeling of the infirmities of others.

Others object that if Jesus never sinned, He must not have been tempted to the degree that we are tempted. But as many have pointed out, that is not so. The one who resists to the very end knows the power of temptation in a greater way than the one who yields to sin sooner.

When it says that Jesus was tempted in all things as we are, it doesn't mean every conceivable temptation, which would be impossible. Nor was Jesus ever tempted by indwelling sin, as we are. In this, He was like Adam and Eve before the fall. Temptation had to come to Jesus from without, not from within.

But Jesus knew every type of temptation. He knew what it is like to be hungry, thirsty, and tired. He knew the horrible agony of physical torture, which He endured in His trial and crucifixion. He knew what it is like to be mocked, distrusted, maligned, and betrayed by friends. From the start of Jesus' ministry to the very end, Satan leveled all of his evil power and strategies to try to get Jesus to sin. But he never succeeded. Jesus always obeyed the Father.

Verse 15 raises the question, "Was it *possible* for Jesus to have sinned?" We need to answer this carefully (I am following Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* [Zondervan], pp. 537-539). Scripture clearly affirms that Jesus never committed sin (Heb. 7:26; 1 Pet. 1:19; 2:22). It also affirms that His temptations were real, not just playacting. The Bible also affirms, "God cannot be tempted by evil" (James 1:13). Since Jesus was fully God, how then could He *really* be tempted, much less commit a sin? Here we plunge into the mystery of how one man can be both fully God and fully human, as Scripture plainly affirms of Jesus.

Since Jesus is one *person* with two natures, and since sin involves the whole person, in this sense, Jesus *could not* have sinned or He would have ceased to be God. But the question remains, "How then could Jesus' temptations be real?" The answer seems to be that Jesus met every temptation to sin, not by His divine power, but by His human nature relying on the power of the Father and

Holy Spirit. As Wayne Grudem explains, "The moral strength of his divine nature was there as a sort of 'backstop' that would have prevented him from sinning..., but he did not rely on the strength of his divine nature to make it easier for him to face temptations..." (p. 539).

As you know, Scripture sometimes affirms something of Jesus that could only be true of one of His natures, but not both (Matt. 24:36). Jesus' divine nature could not be tempted or sin, but His human nature could. Don't stumble over the fact that you cannot fully comprehend this. Rather, accept the testimony of Scripture: Jesus truly was tempted and He never sinned. These facts mean that He understands what we are going through and He is able to come to our aid when we are tempted (2:18).

Because Jesus is a sympathetic and sinless high priest...

C. We should draw near in prayer.

"Draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." "Throne of grace" is an oxymoron. To the ancient world, a throne was a forbidding place of sovereign authority and judgment. If you approached a throne and the king did not hold out his scepter, you were history! You definitely would not draw near to the throne for sympathy, especially with a trivial problem. But the author calls it the throne *of grace*. He makes it clear that we are *welcome* at this throne. He answers four questions: (1) *Why* draw near? (2) *When* should we draw near? (3) *How* should we draw near? And, (4) *What* can we expect when we draw near?

- 1) *Why* draw near? We should draw near to the throne of grace because we are weak and we have there a sympathetic high priest.

We don't come because we've got it pretty much together and we just need a little advice. We come because we are weak (4:15). Jesus didn't say, "Without Me, you can get along pretty well most of the time. Call Me if you need Me." He said, "Without Me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5). And when we come to the throne of grace, He doesn't ridicule us or belittle us for our weaknesses. He welcomes us as a father welcomes his children to his side to protect them from some danger.

- 2) *When* should we draw near? We should draw near to the throne of grace whenever we need help.

We should come in a “time of need,” which is at *all* times! A main reason we do not pray is that we don’t realize how needy we are. We think we can handle things on our own. Just call in the Lord when things get really intense. But the fact is, we depend on Him for every breath we take and for every meal we eat, even if we’ve got a month’s supply of food in the freezer. Praying without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17) is necessary because we are constantly in over our heads. Prayer is the acknowledgement that our need is not partial; it is *total!*

- 3) *How* should we draw near? We should draw near to the throne of grace directly, with confidence in our high priest.

The author does not say, “Draw near through your local priest.” He says, “Let *us* draw near.” *Us* means every believer. Dr. Dwight Pentecost, one of my professors in seminary, told how he was in Mexico City during a feast for the Immaculate Conception of Mary. There was a long line of thousands waiting for confession, but only one confession booth. As the noon bells rang, an old, stooped over priest came out of the booth, walking with two canes. A woman with several small children fell on her knees before him and grabbed him by the knees. She cried out to him, begging him to relieve her burdens. But he struck her on the side of the head with one of his canes and went off through the crowd. He was an unsympathetic, weak human priest.

Thankfully, we do not have to go through any human priest to draw near to the very throne of God. We could not dare come in our own merit or righteousness. But we can come *with confidence* because the blood of Jesus, our high priest, has gained us access (Eph. 3:12). Our confidence is not in how good we’ve been or in how well we can pray. Spurgeon pointed out that God will overlook our shortcomings and poor prayers just as a loving parent will overlook the mistakes in the sentences of his toddler. Even when we have sinned badly, if we draw near to confess our sins, He will cleanse our wounds and begin the healing process, just as a parent would carefully clean and bandage the wounds of his child. Finally,

- 4) *What* can we expect when we draw near? We will receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need.

What a wonderful promise! We won't be scolded for having a need. We won't be told that our need is too trivial for such an important high priest to be troubled with. We will receive mercy and find grace to help. "Help" is a technical nautical term that is used elsewhere only in Acts 27:17 to describe the cables that the sailors wrapped around the hull of Paul's ship during the storm so that it would not break apart. We encountered the verb in Hebrews 2:18, where it has the nuance of running to the aid of someone crying for help. When your life seems to be coming apart at the seams because of the storm, cry out to our sympathetic high priest at the throne of grace. You will receive mercy and find grace to help.

What is the difference between *mercy* and *grace*? They somewhat overlap, but *mercy* has special reference to God's tenderness toward us because of the misery caused by our sins, whereas *grace* refers to His undeserved favor in freely forgiving our sins, which actually deserve His judgment (see R. C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* [Eerdmans], pp. 169-170). Together, both words reflect the good news that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor. 5:18). All that trust in Christ and His shed blood as the payment for their sins have free access at the throne of grace to God's boundless mercy and undeserved favor!

Conclusion

I like John Piper's analogy that prayer is our walkie-talkie to get the supplies we need in the spiritual war that we are engaged in. It's not an intercom to call the maid to bring extra beverages to the den. In other words, prayer isn't to make us comfortable and cozy, oblivious to the advancement of God's kingdom purposes. Prayer is our walkie-talkie to bring in the needed supplies as we seek first His kingdom and righteousness. If you're under fire in the battle, persevere—hold fast your confession, because Jesus is our great high priest. If you have needs, pray—draw near to the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help in the battle.

Discussion Questions

1. How does our understanding of the person and work of Christ relate to persevering in trials?
2. Does Jesus' sympathy for our weaknesses mean that He tolerates our sins? Explain.
3. Some Christians argue that if Jesus could not have sinned, His temptations were not real. Is this so? Why/why not?
4. The term "throne of grace" reflects a fine balance between the reverent fear of God and being accepted by Him. Discuss the implications of this balance.

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