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## The Enabling Help of Drawing Near

### Hebrews 4:14-16

**Introduction** Have you ever asked yourself the question, “Why did God wait so long to send Jesus into the world? Why didn’t Jesus come after the flood, or in Abraham’s day? Why is there this long (and somewhat tedious) history with Israel?”

One answer is **not** to say that history runs on its own power at God had to wait for that to unfold. No, God **rules** history. He has ordained and is directing along the map of His plans to the destinations of His purposes. No also, because God planned before history ever started that Jesus would be born and live and die and be resurrected for the sins of His people. God has composed a magnificent symphony in which Jesus is the melodic theme and which even the discords of Satan and sin and self are woven until the growing theme of the cross ends in the triumphant anthem of the crown.

So why this long wait? Why the Old Testament?

One answer is that we needed categories in which to think of Jesus so that we could make sense of the amazing work that He has and is doing. There needs to be context that interprets why He is here and what He is doing. Imagine going into a village where no one has ever heard of God, creation, the fall, Israel, the tabernacle and try to tell them the gospel. You try to tell them about priests and sacrifices and prophets and kings and law and grace. How would they ever make sense of it all? Well, New Tribes Missions has come to understand not only the problem but God’s solution and has written an “evangelistic strategy” called *Firm Foundations*.

If you ignore the Old Testament and interpret Jesus culturally within in your own context you may make Him a coach or a therapist, or a guru or a good example or a mentor or a trail-blazer. There may even be some truth in each of these. But when you skip the Biblical-historical context and categories, you are not thinking of Jesus in the true and deep and authoritative and helpful way the Bible wants us to.

“Therefore, we have a high priest, one who is great and who has passed through the heavens.” So what does that mean? We don’t have high priests today so why don’t we think about Jesus as a defense attorney? We don’t’ because when we jump immediately to contemporary analogies we lose the deep and wonderful and vital truths that shape our thinking about Jesus. Our history and our culture is simply too shallow and provincial to give us the categories to really grasp who Jesus is and what He has done.

Jesus being a priest means what it does in the light of the Old Testament Biblical-historical framework. We understand the priesthood of Jesus in the thought and words and actions of Old Testament Priests. So we will, over the next months (for this is the meat of Hebrews) sit in the school of the book of Hebrews and we will move from classroom to classroom learning how we are to think about Jesus. This will be done so that in magnifying Jesus we will be maturing as saints.

What has the Author been arguing up to this point? He has been showing how Jesus is superior to prophets, and angels and Moses and Aaron. He is showing us what that supe-

riority means in the greatness of our salvation and the importance of the Word. We have faced the enormity of entering God's rest—that is, that we believe God in an obeying way. We understand that we have hard and unbelieving hearts thickly callused with years of rubbing up against the deceitful pleasures of sin. And we know that we have the living and penetrating power of the Word which exposes us to ourselves and drives home with real pain that we are utterly visible and vulnerable to God.

So what we desperately need is some way to approach God whose laser holy eyes shred all our self-deceiving masks of sin and receive help to believe in an obeying way. This is why this paragraph brings Jesus forward as our High Priest.

## **The Great Realities of Our High Priest**

**(v.14-15)**

The role of the Old Testament priest was to serve God and His people by bringing the sacrifices for sin. They were the visible mediators when unbelief led to sin and sin required sacrifice. They were there Sabbath after Sabbath to meet God's people bringing sacrifice for sin. Once a year, one of them, the High Priest, entered into the inner room of the tabernacle or temple and if the sacrifice was accepted he came out otherwise he died.

## **The Superiority of Jesus as Our Priest**

**(v.14)**

So Jesus is superior in three crucial ways.

### **He is Superior in His Position.**

He is *great*. The word here is *megan*. In modern vernacular, He is a mega-high priest. He is not just a priest; He is not just one of many high priests. He is the great high priest. He is unique in His excellencies.

### **He is Superior in His Place.**

He has passed through the heavens. The image here is that of the priest passing through the veil to enter the holy of holies. His was a horizontal event. His was one that expected an immediate return.

These few words bring before us the great reality of Jesus' resurrection and ascension. Jesus, unlike any priest before or since, has lived died and is now alive having passed through the heavens. The language is meant to convey that heavenward procession of Jesus as He went to the Father having triumphed over Satan and sin. He is leading His Old Testament saints in triumphal procession out of Paradise into Heaven. He has made a grand vertical ascent showing the fullness and finality of the sacrifice His priesthood brings.

The verb *passed through* is one which shows a completed past action with a permanent present result. He has passed through the heavens in redemptive triumph and unlike every priest before, He is still there. We are not waiting for Him pass back through the veil to see if the sacrifice has been accepted. That fact that God raised Him as set the Father's seal of approval on His Son's sacrifice.

### **He is Superior in His Person**

What makes Jesus' priesthood so amazing is that in Christ we have God and man brought together. Not that God has been reduced to humanity or that man has

been elevated to deity, but that in Jesus Christ there is a hypostatic union of the divine and human in true union yet without mixture. This is the great doctrine of the incarnation. This is the point on which many have failed and fallen. Jesus is God, the very Son of God, the second person of the Godhead. This gives His sacrificial work and infinite worth and eternal value to save sin-laden souls.

So Jesus our High Priest is superior because He is great, because He is risen and ascended—He is alive, and because He is God.

But if this were all there were, Jesus would then seem to be inaccessible and unsympathetic. If He is great, ascended and God, how can He possibly know what I am going through? How can He possibly know what it means to face the temptations of unbelief that lead to sin?

## **The Sympathy of Jesus as Our Priest (v.15)**

Because we have a sympathetic High Priest, He is sympathetic in three crucial ways.

### **He is Sympathetic to Our Weaknesses**

He has lived in the frailty and weakness of a human body. He knew what it was like to be hungry, to thirst, to have no permanent home, to be subject to all the cares and woes and diseases of a cursed earth. He knew what it was like to be surrounded by sinners and religious hypocrites and unfaithful disciples and even a traitor. He knew what it was like to wrestle his body out of bed in the morning to pray. He wearied under the constant onslaught of Satan and his minions. He knew what it was like to be rejected, misunderstood, slandered, vilified, misrepresented. He knew how all the weaknesses of the human condition in a cursed environment and being surrounded by sinners threatens trust and shakes believing obedience.

### **He is Sympathetic because of His Temptations**

He is sympathetic in the experience of temptation. He was surrounded as a man with all the temptations that allure us, all the external incitements to not believe God in an obeying way. As one writer has observed, He was tempted:

- to lie (to save His life)
- to steal (to help His poor mother when His father died)
- to covet (all the nice things Zaccheus owned)
- to dishonor His parents (when they did not understand Him)
- to take revenge (when He was wronged)
- to lust (when Mary wiped His feet with her hair)
- to pout in self-pity (when His disciples fell asleep at prayer)
- to murmur at God (when John the Baptist died at the whim of a dancing girl)
- to gloat over His accusers (when they could not answer His questions) (Piper)

All the powerful magnetism of sin's draw, from the world and the flesh around Him and Satan's attacks on Him, bombarded the powerful purity of His divinity.

### **He is Sympathetic in His Sinlessness**

He also knows what it is like to stand unflinchingly true in the face of the howling gales of temptation. In fact, Jesus knows what it means to be tempted in a way that none of us do: He never gave in. So how can He be sympathetic if He never sinned? He has led a sheltered life. He doesn't really know what temptation is like and is out of touch with how strong temptation can be."

C.S. Lewis responded to that objection in these words:

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... 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 [temptation]. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in... 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.

If you think your temptations are great now, what would they be like if you *never* gave in to them? Jesus knows. He knows the battle. He fought all the way to the end. And at that end, having never ever succumbed to sin Himself, He bowed low to shoulder our sins and carried them to the cross.

So Jesus is sympathetic as our high priest. He does not roll His eyes at your pain nor cluck His tongue at your weakness nor turn away from your struggle against sin.

### **The Great Responsibilities to Our High Priest (v.16)**

This leads us to this great, practical, relevant contemporary conclusion. Because Jesus is our high priest: a great, living, divine, one who is in the presence of God and full of sympathy for His people, *therefore* two things:

#### **Hold Fast to Your Hope (v.14b)**

The way we are threatened to let go is different from their situation to ours. They were being threatened with death if they did not deny Christ. It was a tangible threat that came at points of conscious decision. This is not generally so for us.

We must hold fast to our confession against the tide of indifference, apathy and a lack of spiritual fervor. We simply drift into not gripping tightly and passionately to our agreement with God. So, because we do not think about the supremacy of Christ in any area, we drift from the Word, we neglect the greatness of our salvation and the nearness of God's rest. Our outward religious practice has very little inward reality. So what we are doing is not believing obedience.

But how do I do that? How do I fight against the numbness in spiritual things that hardens into unbelief and disobedience and not entering into a trust that looks like rest?

#### **Draw Near to Your Help (v.16)**

I once heard this paragraph preached by a man who, just an hour earlier, had received word from his home across the country that his wife suffered a massive stroke. In all

the devastation of his life, the awful tearing of his emotions, the utter darkness of what lay ahead, the horrendous temptation to doubt God and His goodness, he believed God in the obeying way of drawing near and find help. Because he held fast to what He knew to be true, he had confidence to come to God.

And so can we. Our need is great. We have hard, callused, unbelieving hearts. We do not trust in a way that looks like rest. We feel the awful self-disclosing exposure of the penetrating power of God's Word. We shudder at the thought of our utter visibility and vulnerability to God. **BUT**, we have a superior and sympathetic High Priest who is alive and is in heaven and is there knowing how we feel. So we draw near to the Throne of Grace. We pray.

### **The Precept of Drawing Near**

This command comes to us when we are tempted to doubt God, disobey God and not enter rest. I know that we tend to think of this text in the circumstances of my illustration. Yes, we know we must draw near when seizures come, and wives and mothers die, and businesses fail, and spouses abandon. But we also must draw near when lust burns, and materialism chokes, and apathy deadens. We must draw near when jealousy and anger and envy and coveting all boil up out of the ferment of our old natures under the heat of temptation.

### **The Privilege of Drawing Near**

In trial or temptation, we come to a throne of grace with confidence.

- It is a **throne**. So expect that our King-Priest is going to tell us what to do. When we draw near, we do so on God's terms. This is what Israel failed to understand and did not enter the land. This is what we fail to understand and we divorce obedience from belief. It is useless to believe there is a throne of grace if you never draw near. And never drawing near shows that you do not believe there is a throne of grace.
- It is a throne of **grace**. It is a rule by our High Priest who is superior and sympathetic. It is grace in that God from this throne leans down with empathetic interest to the approach of believing saints.
- It is with **confidence**. The exposure of the Word and my visibility and vulnerability keeps me from coming with arrogance. The superiority and sympathy of my intercessor motivates me to come with confidence.

So in the dark strains of God's providence when trials tear and temptations test then let us draw near to God on His throne where He will magnify His worth by giving us the right and power to delight in God through believing obedience that is an entering into rest.

### **The Purpose of Drawing Near**

From God on His throne of grace flows mercy and enabling grace. Listen to me loved ones. I see a subtle shift in Christianity today that is affecting us as well. We are thinking that what we receive from God somehow is how it ought to be—somehow we deserve it. We usually say it or think it this way, "Why would God allow this to happen?" May I say that the question from sinners and saints ought

to be, “Why not?” Again, this is why the Word must penetrate our hearts and expose us to ourselves so that we will see how desperate we are for the *mercy* of God. We deserve nothing. All of the treasure of God’s goodness to us in Christ *was, is and will ever be a measure of the mercy of God.*

When I draw near to the throne of grace and receive mercy, then enabling grace flows into my inner person so that I am helped. Grace is the power of God to change me, not necessarily my circumstances. In my time of need, when I stand in each “today” with all of God’s promises before me, I will draw near to God and from His mercy flows grace to enable my believing obedience. Approach the throne, not in the hope to see circumstances change, but in the confidence that God will help you and change you and enable believing obedience.

Loved ones, there are many of you this morning who need this Word. You are frustrated, hurt, fearful. You are not sure of the road ahead. The “today” of your life is filled with giants and obstacles and overwhelming problems. You need to know that Jesus is your superior mediator and sympathetic priest-king. You need to hold fast to your agreement with truth. You need to draw near to God. You need do so in order that God will lean over in mercy and with grace change **you**.

Let us hear this Word this morning with believing obedience. May we be stirred up to hold fast to our hope and draw near to our help. May we do so in trials. May we do so in temptations. May we do so with a trust that looks like entering God’s rest. **Conclusion**