

**Text: Heb 4.14-16**

Our text today starts off, “Therefore, since we have a great high priest...”

What is a priest?

Through the years, people who have some acquaintance with church life will refer to me as a “priest.” We don’t use that term in Baptist churches (or even most protestant churches... maybe only Anglicans would use it?).

The Oxford English Dictionary has around sixteen different definitions for the term.

“In episcopal churches: an ordained minister ranking above a deacon and below a bishop, having authority to administer the sacraments and pronounce absolution.”<sup>1</sup>

“*spec.* A person deputed to offer sacrifice; a minister of the altar.”<sup>2</sup>

The idea behind these definitions is that a priest stands between man and God, offering a sacrifice god-wards and offering a blessing man-wards. The priest is an intermediary.

The term arose in the church as the divide between clergy and people widened.

- Term not used in the apostolic age
- As Christianity came under attack as “atheistic” the communion service became known as a “sacrifice” [Irenaeus & Justin Martyr used the term]<sup>3</sup>
- As communion came to be thought of as a sacrifice, the communion table became an altar
- By about AD 200, those who officiated were called priests, and soon had the ability to grant absolution of sins<sup>4</sup>

The idea of men standing between God and people parallels ancient Judaism and the ideas of pagan religions as well.

<sup>1</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “priest, n., sense 1.1”, July 2023.

<<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1051007047>>

<sup>2</sup> OED, s.v. “priest, n., sense 1.2”, July 2023. <<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1051007047>>

<sup>3</sup> B. Le Roy Burkhart, “The Rise of the Christian Priesthood,” *The Journal of Religion* 22, no. 2 (1942): 197, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1199051>.

<sup>4</sup> Burkhart, 198.

You might recall that we teach that all believers are priests. We don't hold that the leader of the church has any more special access to God than anyone else.

Why is this important?

- We are conscious of our sinfulness, and we need access to God for cleansing
- Our sinfulness *bars access* to God which we desperately need
- Consequently, we instinctively sense we need someone to stand between us and God

Again, let's look at our passage, the whole passage now:

Read Heb 4.14-16

We do have a "great high priest" who bridges the gap between us and God. That's what we will talk about today.

Before we get into that, a couple of more things to tie us in with the passages we have just finished.

In the section where Jesus was compared to angels, we have this announcement:

Heb 2.17 Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

In chapter 3, the author then compared Jesus to Moses, again calling Jesus our high priest:

Heb 3.1 ¶ Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession;

The comparison with Moses led naturally to the warning about hardened hearts and the rest that remains for us. With this text, the author is bringing us back to the theme of priesthood. This will be the major theme of the book going forward.

**Proposition:** Believers have every reason to draw close to God as believer-priests, to get the grace they need for every trial.

What I've told you so far is in the nature of a "lecture", but it has a spiritual reason. You need access to God, and shouldn't ever shy away from him!

## I. We have a priest, let us hold fast (14)

### A. The importance of the ascension (“passed through the heavens”)

1. Session at the right hand of God (1.3)
  - a. Made a purification of sins (the offering)
  - b. Sat at the right hand of God (the acceptance)
2. His place is permanent: past action, continuing consequence (perfect tense ... “passed through”)
  - a. The OT high priest could enter the Holy of holies once a year
  - b. Our great high priest is seated *permanently* at the right hand of God

### B. The greatness of our priest

1. Greater than Angels (Heb 1-2)
2. Greater than Moses (Heb 3, and Joshua, Heb 4)
3. Greater than Aaron (chapters to come)

Lit. “mega-priest”

### C. Let us hold fast our confession

1. Have a firm grip
2. A reminder of where we’ve been
  - a. The hardened heart
  - b. The temptation to shrink back
3. Our confession: a non-private oath of allegiance

“The writer everywhere insists on the duty of the public confession of the faith. The crisis claimed not simply private conviction but a clear declaration of belief openly in the face of men.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1903), 107.

We understand the exhortation. Don't draw back, hold fast, keep up your testimony. But in the face of life's trials, how can we?

## II. We have a priest like us, who knows our needs (15)

- A. The truth of this verse is stated twice: negatively and positively
1. The negative is a double negative "not ... not" — very emphatic
  2. The positive identifies Him with us
- B. The negative proposition: we do not have a High priest who cannot sympathize
1. Sympathy is not simply "feeling bad along with someone who is suffering or struggling"

Commentaries, "always includes the element of active help..."<sup>6, 7</sup>

2. With our weaknesses: all the weakness of humanity
  - a. Physical
  - b. Moral
  - c. Spiritual

"Christians have in heaven a high priest with an unequalled capacity for sympathizing with them in all the dangers and sorrows and trials which come their way in life, because he himself, by virtue of his likeness to them, was exposed to all these experiences."<sup>8</sup>

- C. The positive proposition: he endured the test
1. From other passages, we do not believe Jesus shared our sin nature, but our human nature
    - a. All of us are born sinners, we tend towards sin (source and fruit of many of our trials)

<sup>6</sup> David Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary 35 (Nashville, Tenn: B & H Publ. Group, 2010), 304.

<sup>7</sup> William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991), 114.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce, *Hebrews*, 115–16.

b. Jesus was born sinless, so the “all things” doesn’t mean “every way” we are tempted

2. But he took on human flesh as an addition to his nature

a. He grew tired, and was hungry

b. He endured great enticement from Satan

c. He endured the physical test of the cross

I just finished listening to an account about the sinking of the USS Indianapolis, just before the end of WW2

Nine hundred survived the sinking, only about 300 survived the five-day ordeal at sea

- Sleep deprivation
- Water deprivation
- Shark attacks
- Hallucinations, madness, bodily breakdown in the water

Jesus knows what it means to suffer like this

3. Yet without sin

a. He endured every test: yet never broke

Remember, Job’s wife told him, “Curse God and die”

b. The fact that he endured meant he experienced temptation to a greater degree than we ever do

You may find yourself in the midst of trials and temptations and think you simply can’t hold out, and no one understands.

Jesus understands you.

### III. We have priestly access, let us draw near (16)

A. The language is priestly

1. “Let us draw near” — compares to the OT approach to God

Lev 21.17 “Speak to Aaron, saying, ‘No man of your offspring throughout their generations who has a defect shall approach to offer the food of his God.

Lev 22.3 “Say to them, ‘If any man among all your descendants throughout your generations approaches the holy *gifts* which the sons of Israel dedicate to the LORD, while he has an uncleanness, that person shall be cut off from before Me; I am the LORD.

But... let *us* draw near...

## 2. The throne of grace: the mercy seat

- a. In the OT, the place where the high priest offered once a year
- b. In the NT, the place where Jesus sits, interceding for us

## B. The offer meets every need

### 1. Literal rendering:

- a. “so that we might receive mercy and grace find”
- b. Allen: “a mini-chiasm”

### 2. Our need for mercy

- a. There is a price for sin
- b. The wages of sin is death
- c. In God’s mercy, he doesn’t destroy sinners

### 3. Our need for grace

- a. Grace is God’s gift, undeserved, unlooked for, but held out with open hands
- b. God’s grace empowers our testimony
  - 1) We have not the strength
  - 2) But we have the Holy Spirit

**Conclusion:**

**Proposition:** Believers have every reason to draw close to God as believer-priests, to get the grace they need for every trial.

If your temptation is to draw back, deny Christ and fade into the wood work, God has mercy and grace to help in your need.

If your temptation is to solve life's problems by indulging the flesh and seeking pleasure, God has mercy and grace to help in your need.

It matters not where you face temptation, we have a high priest who knows us and offers all we need to live for God.