



13: Jesus Is A Sympathetic High Priest

“Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Hebrews 4:14 – 16

Verse 14 brought the writer’s second warning to an end, but it’s also a transition that brings us back to his main line of reasoning and leads us into verses 15 and 16. So we’re returning to verse 14 to make it our starting point for this week’s study. It brings us back to thoughts of Jesus as “the Apostle and High Priest of our confession... who was faithful to Him who appointed Him” (Hebrews 3:1): thoughts that were uppermost in the writer’s mind when he went off on his tangent to warn us about the very real danger that any one of us could be found to have an unbelieving heart and so fail to enter God’s rest.

I think you’ll agree, that warning was pretty strong. A warning like that could leave you discouraged if not despairing over the state of your own heart. But I think you’ll also agree, the verses we’re going to think about this week are a good balance: they remind us of how sympathetic Jesus is to our plight.

Jesus Has Passed Through The Heavens

The word heavens (plural) sounds strange to our ears but it wouldn’t have posed any problem to a Jew in the days when this was written. He would have been comfortable with the idea that there are a number of heavens. The first heaven was the air: the space above us where birds fly and clouds form. The second heaven was the domain of the moon and stars. The third heaven was the dwelling place of God. Remembering that Satan is called the prince of the power of the air, what I think the writer wants us to begin with is a picture of Jesus passing through every level of creation — passing through enemy territory in triumph — having conquered sin and death.

That thought gives us yet another reason to “hold fast our confession” but it also stirs us very nicely to think about what it means that Jesus, our conquering hero, is our High Priest.

Jesus Knows Our Weaknesses

To sympathise with someone means to suffer along with him or to share his experience. The idea the writer wants us to get is that Jesus, having entered into our experience, knows our weakness and feels our heartache and pain as if it were His own.

- ◆ *What weaknesses do we have that Jesus is able to sympathise with?*

Jesus Has Been Tempted

Jesus, our High Priest, because He became like us,¹ has been exposed to every kind of temptation (testing) that we have to contend with, apart from those that are the consequence of our own sin.

He was tempted as we are but the one big difference between His temptations and ours is that He never sinned: Jesus could not have sinned. That is unthinkable but don't think it means that His temptations were unreal. Jesus' suffering when confronted with sin must have been so much more than ours for He was perfectly holy, and He resisted His temptations way beyond the point where we would have given in.

- ◆ *What kinds of temptations do you face and how is it reassuring to know that Jesus also has faced them?*

We Can Come With Confidence

"The throne of grace", is where Jesus sits at the Father's right hand: it is not a throne of judgement. We may come to that throne with confidence — without fear — because Jesus is our High Priest. Refer back to study number 7. We considered there what it means that Jesus is our High Priest and we learned from chapter 2 verse 17 that Jesus is a merciful and faithful High Priest. Here that picture is added to.

- ◆ *What does the thought, Jesus is my High Priest, mean to you?*

The words "in time of need", as well as telling us that we can approach God's throne whenever we feel the need of any help also include the idea that the help on offer to us is seasonable help: it's help that's available when it's needed, it's help that's given in good time and it's help that's appropriate to our need.

- ◆ *What kinds of needs do you think were uppermost in the writer's mind at this point?*

Come Seeking Help

So these words urge us to come to our merciful God with confidence and without fear whenever we're struggling either with weakness or with temptation. In the preceding verses the writer has warned us to hold on and stay faithful to the end. He's told us to beware lest we could be found to have an unbelieving heart. Now he's reminding us that when we struggle to keep going and when it's a battle to keep believing and living like we do God is approachable and mercifully and gracious to help, because Jesus is our High Priest who has passed through the heavens.

Often our inclination is to do the opposite of what we're told to do here. Our inclination in those times when we are most aware of weakness and need is to shy away from God. It may be pride: we want to come in strength, not in weakness: we think we can do it ourselves. More often it's that we have a totally wrong picture of God in our minds. We imagine Him on a throne of judgement, not a throne of grace and so, held back from coming to Him by shame and fear, we try to fight our battles alone.

¹ The New English Bible translates the phrase "tempted as we are" as "One who, because of His likeness to us, has been tested."