

Jesus Christ, our High Priest Hebrews 4:14-16

“High priest” is a term that only the book of Hebrews applies to Jesus Christ. In fact, the thought of his high priesthood forms the central theme of this book.

The priesthood was basic to Judaism. Every Jew was familiar with the concept of the priests who officiated at the Jerusalem temple and of the high priest, who led them in their service. Did that Old Testament priesthood appeal to any of the readers? Was part of the argumentation for their backsliding from Christianity to Judaism the excuse that Christianity had no high priest? Then let them listen and learn. “*We have a great high priest,*” the author writes (Heb. 4:14). Never was it said of any Old Testament high priest that he was “great,” not even of Aaron, the first one. But of God’s High Priest it is said.

Moreover, this Great High Priest “*has gone through the heavens.*” Did his invisibility bother them? Did they prefer that visible priest from Aaron’s line on that annual Day of Atonement with the blood of the sacrifice going across the temple courtyard into the Holy Place and then going where they could not see, beyond the veil into the Holy of Holies?

If so, let them remember that God’s High Priest has done more than pass through temple chambers like those earthly priests, who are seen today and dead tomorrow. He has gone through the heavens to the throne of God, there to live and reign forever. His invisibility is His advantage; His absence indicates His greatness. The sacrifice He offered, the blood He carried to the mercy seat of God, was His own. He is “Himself the victim and Himself the priest,” and His sacrifice was perfect. Only once did He have to bring it, not yearly like those high priests with the animal blood, as His ascension into heaven’s glory well indicated.

Who is this “great high priest”? Jesus the Son of God. ‘Jesus’ reminds us of His humanity, ‘Son of God’ assures us of His divinity. Here is a high priest who is far superior to any earthly one because of His person and His work.

He is also our High Priest! “*We have a great high priest,*” the author reminded the Hebrews. God had given him to them. By God’s grace they had professed Jesus and all that He offered as the substance of their faith. Now was no time to waver in that confession. Regardless of what forces were pulling and pressing upon them, there was no room for cowardice. A great High Priest who made life worth living and death worth dying dared not be lightly dismissed or thoughtlessly traded for something inferior. Instead, it was time to keep holding firmly to Him and His blessings.

What about weaknesses? It’s easy to say, “Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess,” but what about those weaknesses that can lead to doubt and disobedience toward God, lovelessness toward our fellow man, and preoccupation with ourselves? The High Priest knows about such things too. That’s part of what makes Him so great. In Jesus’ life on earth, when He took on our human nature and became true man, He also was “*tempted in every way, just as we are.*” From the beginning to the end of that earthly stay, Jesus faced temptations more severe than we will ever know. He felt the full pressure and pull as all the troops in hell’s barracks with all the weapons from hell’s arsenals stormed against Him. He felt those temptations even more than we do, because while we so often fall under temptation’s first round, He remained standing to receive every assault.

Yet in all this he “*was without sin.*” This thought can be taken two ways, both of which make good sense. It can mean that though tempted, He never yielded but remained holy. Scripture rightly guards Christ’s sinlessness zealously, reminding us in passages like 2 Corinthians 5:21 that He “had no sin” and 1 Peter 2:22 that “He committed no sin.” A sinful Jesus could be no Saviour and no Great High Priest.

Or the mention of His sinlessness can point to His perfect human nature. Unlike us, He had no old Adam, no inherited sinful nature out of which temptations could arise. All the attacks came not from within but from without, from Satan and the wicked world, so that Jesus could tell His disciples in John 14:30, “The prince of this world is coming. He has no hold on Me.” The point is that Jesus knows. Though repeated and very real temptation left His sinlessness unshaken, He knows what it’s all about. From experience he knows what we face, and his heart can well sympathise with us.

Give up such a high priest? Go back to Judaism where sinners dared not approach a holy God except through the mediation of a human high priest once a year? No, rather, “*Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence.*” It is God’s throne we can approach, the seat of His infinite majesty and holy justice. Before this throne of splendour, sinners shrink back in terror and stand mute in guilt. But with Christ our Great High Priest standing there, it becomes a “throne of grace” where believers “*receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*”

In the nick of time, right when we need it, when our temptations come, we’ll find what we need from Him who knows just how to give it. We’ll receive “mercy” there, God’s love that looks at and offers help to believers overwhelmed by their own weaknesses. “Grace” will also be there, God’s love, wholly undeserved, which pardons the guilty. To such a throne of grace, we come boldly confessing sin and receiving forgiveness, pouring out sorrow and being comforted, laying down weaknesses and being strengthened, asking questions and being answered. But only because of the “*great High Priest*” who has made full atonement for our sins.