

Let Us Approach the Throne of Grace! Hebrews 4:14-16

Introduction

When I was on leave over the past few months, I read a book about how to avoid burnout that was written by a missionary who had experienced burnout himself. It was called *Resilience: How Japanese Pastors Can Thrive in Every Season*. Apparently, one of the problems of burnout is that we can lose ourselves.

These days, in the midst of the busyness of ministry, it's easy to lose perspective on both our identity, that we are accepted by God, and our proper position, close intimacy with God. What are the warning signs we have lost this perspective? Lacking a plan for the future, few or no close friendships, our devotions are done out of a sense of obligation, no habit of self-reflection, no self care routine, difficulty feeling a sense of accomplishment, feeling busy and fatigued. The kinds of experiences indicate a situation where joy is being lost and burnout is occurring. (John Houlette, pg. 30, 2021)

How about you? Do you have a vision and plans for the future? Do you have close friendships? Meaningful devotion times with the Lord? How about time to self-reflect or daily self-care?

Today, we're going to focus on what it means when it's said that Jesus is our high priest. Knowing Jesus is how we come to know ourselves. A close relationship with Jesus is what keeps us from losing ourselves, no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in. A relationship with Jesus, our high priest, is the secret to walking by faith without growing weary.

Hebrews 4:14-16

- ¹⁴ Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.
- ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.
- ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

From this passage let's, first, focus our attention on who Jesus is as our high priest. How much would our hearts be encouraged if we were thrilled by Jesus everyday? Second, let's consider Jesus' ability to empathize with us, as the passage says he is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. According to Scripture, sorrow is healed through sorrow, and suffering is healed through suffering. Lastly, let's look at how Jesus' grace and mercy are a timely help to us.

1. Jesus, our great high priest, 2. with his extraordinary empathy for our weakness, 3. offers us help through his mercy and grace. Let's draw near to the throne of grace!

1. A Great High Priest

The author of Hebrews introduces Jesus as a 'merciful and faithful high priest' in chapter 2 verse 17. But he doesn't mention Jesus' role as high priest from chapters 3-4, instead directing his reader's attention to the history of Israel. He recalls Israel's faithlessness, and encourages us to know the power of God's Word and enter into God's Sabbath rest. 4:12-13

4:12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

13 And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

These words bring us to our senses, don't they? What is the difference between us and the faithless Israelites who wandered in the wilderness for 40 years and were unable to enter God's rest?! We also fail to trust God. Our selfish hearts are wicked, and we are tormented by jealousy and deceit. We wander aimlessly, unable to find a path forward, because of our weakness and sin. When we appear before the judgment of the holy God, every single one of us will be found guilty.

This is why, in the Old Testament, the priests would lead the people in worship, particularly through offering animal sacrifices, atoning for the sins of the people and appeasing God's holy wrath. By doing this, they interceded for the forgiveness of those who believed. And only once a year, the high priest would enter the most holy part of the tabernacle. He would intercede on behalf of the sins of the people by slaughtering an animal and sprinkling its blood. This is how God's grace was mediated to the people.

Modern people are incredibly insensitive to the holiness of God. We have lost a sense of fear of God, so we don't feel the need for a high priest or an intercessor. How about you? Imagine making a mistake on your most important job, doing a lot of damage to the company and its customers, a situation so desperate that you are sure to be fired. Standing before the CEO, your body would be stiff with nervousness, your legs trembling, your mouth dry while your armpits and back are soaked in sweat. You would be in despair.

We, who deserve judgment, have been provided a great high priest by our loving God. The author emphasizes the perfection and effectiveness of Jesus' forgiveness. He reminds us that Jesus, our "great high priest who has passed through the heavens," is a high priest without equal.

Here, the author is using the term for 'high priest' used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. So when he says 'great high priest,' he's basically calling Jesus the 'super high priest.' Furthermore, by saying that Jesus, the Son of God, has passed through the heavens, he is saying that Jesus doesn't merely have a close relationship with God, but he is in heaven, directly interceding with God on our behalf.

Ordinarily, the high priest would pass through a curtain in the temple (or tabernacle) that separated the most holy place, where God's presence resided, from the rest of the temple. In the most holy place, there was the ark of the covenant with the mercy seat, and it was from there that God spoke and gave his judgments. You could say that the tabernacle and the temple were replicas of heaven on earth. But Jesus has passed into heaven itself and he addresses God directly!

The author of Hebrews offers a comparison of Jesus, the Son of God, with the human priests. Jesus has accomplished a perfect salvation that no regular high priest could ever have accomplished, passing into heaven and sitting at the right hand of God himself.

Aaron, the first high priest in Israel's history, was Moses' older brother, and he experienced God's miraculous salvation from Egypt. However, when Moses was up on Mount Sinai, the people of Israel came to Aaron and complained that Moses was gone and they didn't know what would happen. Incredibly, Aaron committed a terrible sin by making them a golden calf idol to worship. This was the human priesthood.

This is why God sent his Son, Jesus, to be our high priest. To intercede for our sins, Jesus offered himself as a perfect atoning sacrifice, rose from the dead, and ascended to heaven. He is still at the right hand of God, interceding for you, for your smallest weakness to your greatest sin. You are being protected by the loving intercession of our extraordinary great high priest, Jesus.

2. Jesus is Able to Empathize

Now here, the author emphasizes an aspect of the high priest's duties. That is, Jesus' ability to identify and empathize with us, since, although he is God, he 'incarnated' as a human being. Jesus experienced and overcame every temptation that we encounter, and this is precisely why he is able to empower us when we are in the midst of weakness, temptation, testing, suffering, and pain.

According to the gospels, Jesus, as a human, experienced limitations (hunger, tiredness, limited knowledge) and pain (sorrow at Lazarus' tomb, fear at Gethsemane, suffering on the cross). Jesus was also tempted by Satan. He was tempted to disobey God by satisfying his own fleshly cravings, desire to be in the limelight, and thirst for power. And then the temptation to give up on his mission to go to the cross. If Jesus hadn't experienced the hardships of being human, weakness, temptation, and pain, he would not be able to give the help we need when we experience these things.

It's important to note that, because Jesus was human, he could not have experienced and overcome temptation without going through pain and suffering. We really can't imagine the depths of agony Jesus experienced in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he was crucified. But because he never fell to sin and he conquered his tests and temptations, we receive blessing and happiness.

The author makes special mention of the fact that Jesus was 'without sin.' Jesus can empathize with our weakness because he was tested just as we are, however, he remained without sin. What is the author trying to say here? He's not using Jesus' sinlessness to condemn you for your sins. Many people who are meticulously upright tend to be critical of the people around them who make mistakes, but Jesus is not like that. But neither is this merely about showing us what truth and righteousness is.

It is through Jesus' endurance, passing his final test, the cross, without sin, that we can be forgiven and receive the love of God. Our faithless hearts were changed, we were made into new people, and we began living together with God. Therefore, when it says that our sinless savior sympathizes and empathizes with our weakness, it means above and beyond tender-heartedly drawing near and accepting us.

As we saw earlier with Aaron, the human high priests were corrupted, defeated by their own weakness. They could deal kindly with the sinful people, but they could only suppress and put up with the people's sin to an extent. So if Jesus hadn't been without sin, even if he did experience all our tests and temptations, it really wouldn't have meant much at all.

However, when Jesus was tested and tempted as we are, he did not respond like we do. He never once succumbed. This is the reason he can give us victory. The incarnate Jesus was perfectly obedient, and lived a sinless human life. Through his obedience, he became our Savior, he was raised from the dead lives. He gives us hope in the midst of

trials, causes us to persevere, brings about a new humanity, helping us overcome our own trials and temptations. This is the power of our empathetic high priest!

3. Help Through Mercy and Grace

So then, how should we respond? Since we have a great high priest who is sympathetic to our weaknesses, the author offers two proper responses. Holding fast to our confession of faith, and drawing near to the throne of grace.

What a beautiful thing it is to, with tenacious perseverance, confess our faith in Christ in the midst of trials. Of course, I'm not just talking about saying 'I'm a Christian' outloud, there are three aspects of this confession. A sincere trust in Christ, a public profession of faith in your own words, and living in accordance with what you believe and have confessed to be true.

"True faith acknowledges Christ as what he truly is, our God-appointed king as well as our God-given priest, and true trust in him as Savior will express itself in submission to him as Lord also." (J. I. Packer, Concise Theology)

When we have the triple threat of thoughts, words, and actions, our faith is made strong and our identity is stable. If we believe in our hearts, but do not express it in our words and deeds, it is an empty faith. If we believe in our hearts and express our faith in our actions, but don't talk about Christ and testify to what he has done, then God's beauty will not be made known. If we don't have faith in our hearts, our impressive confessions and good works are just hypocrisy, and it will end in weariness, inconsistent character, and ruin.

Therefore, we must never cease to draw near to Christ's throne of grace, to come back to our true selves and restore our intimacy with God. To overcome trials and temptations, let's gain peace in our hearts, and receive God's power in our words and actions.

In verse 16, the author clarifies the purpose of approaching the throne of grace. He says, "...that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." 'Mercy' reminds us of God's covenant love and unshakable faithfulness to his people, which he demonstrated in the history of Israel and fully realized in Jesus. In other words, mercy calls to mind God's unchanging, faithful love that is based on God's promises, despite unbelief and rebellion against God. Abraham, Moses, and David all lacked faith in God at points in their stories.

And 'grace' is more than just God's favor in accepting us. Grace is the new reality of redemption, richly experienced by the power of the Spirit by those who believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus. According to the book of Hebrews, God's grace empowers us in our weaknesses to overcome temptation and live faithfully in every aspect of our lives.

So the hardships, persecutions, trials, and temptations that we suffer are actually milestones in our lives, preparing us for good things we have yet to see. God is able to help us 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, so let us approach the throne of grace with confidence.

In the Old Testament, before Jesus came, no one except the high priest could 'approach' the throne of God, the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies - and that was only one day a year. And since the throne of God was also the place of judgment for sin, this access to the throne was accompanied by great fear.

However, now, we are urged to actually approach God's throne, his presence, boldly and with confidence, anytime and anywhere. This is because our great high priest, Jesus, the Son of God, has caused grace and mercy to abound, making it possible for people to approach God through him.

Hebrews 9:14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

For those of us who believe, Christ's sacrifice removes our sins. He has purified our conscience from dead works, so we can come before a holy God, not with fear, but with joy. Let's call on the name of Jesus with a repentant heart. Let's pray, trusting in the power of our great high priest's death and resurrection. Let's confess our sins, praise him, and testify about his greatness.

Also, since you have experienced the power of Jesus' empathy for you, let's approach the throne of grace together with the people around us. There may be times when you want to help and encourage others who are going through the same trials that you have been through. You may want to offer thoughtful advice or helpful wisdom.

However, in order for your friend's life to be truly changed and to overcome their trials, they must encounter God. So the best support you can give to your friends is to help them draw near to Jesus. In other words, approach the throne of grace together, because the person who can save them is not you, it's Jesus!

Romans 8:34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.