

Main Idea: Today we’ll explore one of the great grace-texts in the Bible and learn about the throne of grace. According to Hebrews 4:14-16 there is a high priest on that throne and we can trust Him fully. In fact, our text gives us three reasons why we can and must approach the throne of grace with confidence.

- I. We can approach the throne of grace with confidence because of who our High Priest is (14).
 - A. He is great.
 - B. He went through the heavens.
 1. He went where sinners cannot go.
 2. He went where God is.
 - C. He is both God and man.
 - D. He deserves our absolute allegiance.
 1. To be saved you must make a public profession.
 2. If you are saved, you will hold on to that profession.
 3. You will hold it because He is holding you.
- II. We can approach the throne of grace with confidence because of what our High Priest experienced (15).
 - A. He identified with our weakness.
 - B. He was tempted just like we are.
 - C. He never sinned.
 - D. He understands what we feel.
- III. We can approach the throne of grace with confidence because of what our High Priest offers (16).
 - A. He gives us access to the throne.
 - B. He gives us confidence.
 - C. He gives us mercy and grace.
 - D. He gives us what we need at the right time.

Make It Personal: Since we have access to the throne of grace...

1. We can experience rest no matter what is happening around us.
2. We must see our needs as opportunities.
3. We should be a people who pray a lot.

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 4

Thrones. We don’t think much about thrones in our country. I’ve never seen one, not that I recall, and certainly never approached someone sitting on one.

I did a little research and was surprised to learn that there are 26 monarchies in the world today, with kings, queens, sultans, emperors and emirs. Some rule with power and authority. Some merely reign in a more symbolic way.

Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy, which makes Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz the king and prime minister. Sabah Ahmed al-Sabah has ruled Kuwait since 2006. He is the head of the royal family which has been in some form of power since the early 1700s.

Others will ruling monarchies include United Arab Emirates. Swaziland. Qatar. Brunei. Oman. Jordan. Morocco. Thailand. Liechtenstein has Prince Hans Adam II. Tonga has King George Tupou V.

Then there are countries with ceremonial or figurehead monarchs, such as Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Spain, Greenland, Cambodia, Malaysia, and of course England. Japan's Yamato dynasty traces its origins back to 660, making it the oldest continuous hereditary monarchy in the world.²

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this text, see the Hebrews series message on 3/2/08.

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/07/22/meet-the-worlds-other-25-royal-families/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.ac454f52f9cc

I've entitled this message "The Throne of Grace." The title comes right out of the text we'll be considering, Hebrews 4:14-16. Thankfully, you don't have to experience an earthly monarchy to appreciate the wonder of this biblical reality.

A throne represents authority. The person sitting on a throne possesses authority. We get that. What's shocking about this throne is the modifying phrase. It is a throne *of grace*. What does that mean? It means so much as we'll see today.

Today we'll be exploring another of the great grace-texts in the Bible, the final three verses of Hebrews 4. The first readers of this epistle were Jewish Christians who, because of persecution, were contemplating going back to their former beliefs and practices. One criticism they heard from their Jewish brethren, no doubt, was, "You've abandoned the temple rituals God gave us centuries ago, and that means you no longer have a high priest to represent you before God! Don't be a fool! Come back!"³

But we *do* have a high priest, says the writer of Hebrews. In fact, the priesthood of Christ will be a key theme throughout the rest of the book of Hebrews. And right here, in verses 14-16, the writer gives three reasons why we can trust our High Priest, indeed, three reasons why we can approach the throne of grace with confidence.

I. We can approach the throne of grace with confidence because of who our High Priest is (14).

Verse 14, "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess."

We may not appreciate this fully because, as with thrones, we don't understand what a priest is. But the first readers did. A priest is a God-authorized individual who has legitimate access to God's presence and who enters God's presence in order to do something in behalf of those who could not otherwise enter God's presence. Simply put, a priest is a go-between, a person who represents others before God. Under the Mosaic law people brought their sacrifices to a priest so that the priest might offer those sacrifices in their behalf to God.

If for fourteen centuries your people had been approaching God *through a priest*, you would have great difficulty abandoning that understanding. If you had learned that God is holy, as the Jews had rightly learned, and that sinners can't meander into His presence, you would be inclined to find a priest to represent you before God. That's what makes verse 14 so significant. *We have* a high priest, says the writer. And three things are true of Him.

A. He is great. The Greek word is *mega*. We have a *mega*-priest.

B. He went through the heavens. Notice the text doesn't say He merely went "to heaven," but that our high priest has gone "through the heavens." That raises two questions. One, why is the word plural, 'heavens'? And two, what does it mean to go "*through* the heavens?" Let's tackle these questions one at a time.

First of all, it's not uncommon in the Old Testament for the word 'heaven' to be plural.⁴ So that could be why it's plural here. But my sense is the writer has a more specific intent. It's helpful to note that the Bible mentions three heavens. There's the atmospheric heaven that surrounds the earth (Deut. 11:11), the first heaven. Then there is the realm of the sun, moon, and stars (Gen. 1:14), the second heaven. And then there is

³ For instance, see Acts 21:28.

⁴ Donald Guthrie, p. 120.

the third heaven, referred to as ‘paradise,’ the realm where God dwells (Isa. 63:15; 2 Cor 12:2-4). This verse says that our high priest has gone through *the heavens*, that is, right into the very presence of God.

And what about that word “*through*”? Why does it say our high priest went *through* the heavens? It’s worth noting that in the tabernacle and temple, there likewise were three areas: the outer court, the Holy Place, and the Holy of Holies. No one could enter the Holy of Holies except the Jewish high priest, and he could enter it only once a year on the Day of Atonement. On that day the high priest would go in to the Holy of Holies, sprinkle blood on the mercy seat, and then come back out. See the pattern? In and out, in and out, year after year, over and over, in and out, in and out. The high priest couldn’t stay because he was sinner. And the high priest kept coming back year after year because God’s people were sinners.⁵

But we have a different kind of high priest, a mega high priest, who can do far more for His people than any other priest can do. Here’s why, for two reasons.

1. *He went where sinners cannot go.* Right through the heavens, and...

2. *He went where God is.* And to top that, He stayed there! Ephesians 4:10 says, “He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.”

Do you remember what happened to Nadab and Abihu? These two sons of Aaron were ordained as priests in Leviticus 8. They began their ministry in Leviticus 9. Then at the beginning of Leviticus 10 they took their censers and put fire in them to burn incense, but they used *unauthorized* fire. Consequently, fire came out from the LORD’s presence in the tabernacle and consumed them! Israel received a valuable reminder that day. You do not approach the Living God on *your* terms, but on *His* terms.

What makes our high priest different from all other priests? This is the heart of it.

C. He is both God and man. Verse 14 identifies Him as “Jesus the Son of God.” In the book of Hebrews our high priest is called “Jesus” about a dozen times and “Christ” about a dozen times. The writer wants us to know that our Savior is both God and man. Here he calls him “Jesus” (emphasizing His humanity) and “the Son of God” (emphasizing His deity). Because of this...

D. He deserves our absolute allegiance. Notice the since/then connection in verse 14, “*Since* we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, [*then*] let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.” *Since* we have a great high priest, *then* we ought to “hold firmly” [the verb *kratomen* means ‘to grab, to seize, to keep; it’s used also in 10:23, ‘Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess’]. Hold firmly to what? The NIV says, “to the faith we profess.” In the Greek it simply says, “Hold fast the profession.”

We learn some vital truths about salvation here. I’ll mention three.

1. *To be saved you must make a public profession.* To become a Christian you must do something with your mouth. Romans 10:9 says, “That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Hebrews 3:1 refers to Jesus as “the high priest whom we confess.” Hebrews 4:14 says we are to hold on to “the profession” (*homologias* means ‘to say the same thing’; translated ‘confess’ in 1 John 1:9). In order to become a Christian you must say the same thing about Jesus that countless others have said and that God Himself says,

⁵ Observation by Robert Gromacki, p. 82.

that He is the Savior and Lord, that He died for sinners like you, conquered the grave on the third day, returned to heaven, and now offers forgiveness and eternal life to all who will trust fully in Him.

And if you really believe in Him, you won't hide it. According to God's Word, you'll make your faith known by making a public profession. That profession begins at baptism—that's what baptism is in the New Testament, God's intended means for making a public profession of one's belief in and submission to the person of His Son, Jesus Christ.

I said that our public profession *begins* at baptism. It certainly doesn't end there.

2. *If you are saved, you will hold on to that profession.* "Let us *hold firmly to the faith we profess*," says the writer. Hebrews was written to people who had already professed faith in Jesus, but now they are urged to hold to that profession. And those who truly know Christ *will* hold to that profession. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me (John 10:27)."

What shall we conclude about the person who does *not* hold fast to their profession? Hebrews will have much to say about such a one, particularly in chapter six. Does such a person lose his salvation? No, salvation is of the Lord (Jonah 2:9), is a work that God accomplishes by grace (Eph. 2:8), and is work that God perseveres to accomplish (John 10:28-29). No, no truly saved person will ever lose their salvation. But not all who *profess* Christ truly *possess* Christ.

Let's make this personal. If you are saved you will not only make a public profession but you will also hold on to that profession. That means that Jesus won't merely be a fire insurance policy in your hip pocket. What you proclaimed publicly at your baptism will continue to be your profession throughout your life. *I believe in Jesus! He is my Savior and the Master of my life. He is my hope in death and my treasure in life. That is my profession!*

You say, "But how can I hold on to that profession? I'm so weak!"

True. We are all too weak to keep ourselves. But the answer is...

3. *You will hold it because He is holding you.* I love the word picture Jesus uses in John 10:28-29. Here's what He says about His sheep, "I give them eternal life [note that eternal life is His gift to us], and they shall never perish [note His promise of eternal security]; no one can snatch them out of my hand [note there is no possibility that He will lose one of His sheep, not one]. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all ; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand [note the double protection for God's people; both the Father and the Son are holding them in their hands]."

I'll say it again. You become a Christian simply by believing in Christ. But if you have truly believed in Christ you will want to make that faith public, through baptism and then throughout your life. You will give evidence that you are a Christian by holding to your profession, and you will hold it because He is holding you. If you ever stop holding your profession, it reveals He wasn't holding you, and He wasn't holding you because you weren't one of His sheep to begin with.

Why can we approach the throne of grace with confidence? First, because of who our High Priest is. Do you believe that Jesus is who the Bible says He is?

II. We can approach the throne of grace with confidence because of what our High Priest experienced (15).

Verse 15, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.”

Here we learn something amazing about our high priest. Yes, He is *great* and He has *gone through the heavens*, but He’s not distant and far removed. Indeed, He who is the greatest being in the universe has actually experienced what we experience. We’re told four things about His experience in verse 15.

A. He identified with our weakness. “For we do *not* have a high priest who is *unable* to sympathize with our weakness.” That’s putting it negatively. It’s telling us what we do *not* have. We do *not* have a distant, unsympathetic high priest. What *do* we have? We have a high priest who has the ability to *sympathize*. The word “sympathize” is the Greek *synpatheo* and literally means “to suffer along with.”

To Greek thinking people in the first century, this was unthinkable. The Stoics, for instance, said that the primary attribute of God was *apatheia*, which meant he had the inability to feel anything at all. Barclay explains, “They argued that if a person could feel sorrow or joy it means that some other person was able to influence him. If so, that other person must, at least for that moment, be greater than he. No one, therefore, must be able in any sense to affect God for that would be to make him greater than God; and so God had to be completely beyond all feeling.”⁶

Now answer this. What does our high priest have the ability to sympathize with? Our *weaknesses*. Do you ever feel weak and vulnerable? Then this is especially for you. We have a high priest who identified with our weakness.

That’s because God actually became a man. It’s called the doctrine of incarnation. God took upon Himself human flesh. He felt hunger. He got tired. He made Himself vulnerable to the attacks of abusive men. And because of this, because He identified with our weakness, He is able to sympathize with us. Hebrews 5:2 takes it a step further, stating, “He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.”

But there was more to His experience.

B. He was tempted just like we are. “We have one who has been tempted in every way just as we are.”

Does this mean that Jesus experienced every single temptation possible? For instance, think of the spouse who loses her mate. Months pass, and she grows weary. This lonely widow feels the intense temptation to grow bitter at God for taking her mate. Did Jesus experience that particular temptation? He was never married, nor did He ever lose a spouse, did He?

Think about the teenager who struggles with internet pornography. Did Jesus face that specific temptation? They didn’t have smartphones in the first century.

So what is this verse saying? Literally the text says that He was tempted “according to all” (*kata panta*) and “in like manner” (*kath homoiotes*). 1 John 2:16 helps us understand. There we are given three basic categories for temptation [KJV]: “For all that *is* in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.”

⁶ Barclay, p. 42.

Note the categories: the “lust of the flesh,” “the lust of the eyes,” and “the pride of life.” Those categories transcend cultures and time periods. There’s *the lust of the flesh*—that covers everything from premarital sex to the lure of internet porn, to the temptation to overeat. Then there’s *the lust of the eyes*—that covers coveting your neighbor’s house or car or job because you’re not satisfied with what God has given you. Then there’s *the pride of life*—the lure to look good in the eyes of man, wanting your name to be recognized, wanting your own way.

Jesus experienced each of those. Remember His wilderness temptation? Matthew 4 says that after fasting forty days, Jesus was approached by the devil who threw three temptations at Him: the first, *turn these stones into bread* (the lust of the flesh), the second, *throw yourself down off of the temple peak* and see if God’s angels rescue you (the lust of the eyes, living for the here and now), and the third, *bow down and worship me and I’ll give you the kingdoms of the world* (the pride of life).

Remember this, beloved, when you face temptation this week. When you feel tempted to lust, or despair, or covet what is your neighbors. You have a high priest who was tempted in the very same way. And then remember this.

C. He never sinned. “Just as we are—yet was without sin.” This is mind-stretching to ponder. He was *like us* yet He was *not like us*. Listen to how various translations render this statement...

NLT: “for he faced all of the same temptations we do, yet he did not sin”

NRSB: “but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.”

Young’s Literal: “but *one* tempted in all things in like manner—apart from sin.”

ESV: “but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

We have a high priest who was without sin. Indeed, He had to be sinless in order to accomplish what He accomplished. Hebrews 7:26 declares, “Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.” 2 Corinthians 5:21 states, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us...”

“But Christ is God,” you say. “So He’s all powerful, and that means that temptation didn’t affect Him like it does mortals like us.”

That’s a valid point to consider. Since Christ is God and since He was ‘free from the bias of sin’ (as Guthrie puts it; p. 123), can He really identify with us? Was His temptation *real*?

We actually wrestled with that concern in a previous study in Hebrews, and I shared the following illustration. I asked you to think of two men trying to lift a heavy object. Who better understands how heavy the object is, the man who tries to lift but can’t budge the object, or the man who heaves it over his head, holds it there for the count, and then returns it to the ground? If a man can’t lift two hundred pounds he’ll never appreciate fully the weight of *four hundred pounds* hoisted over his head, will he?

When a person says, “Well, the fact that Jesus never sinned means He doesn’t understand how bad temptation can become,” it’s simply not true. It’s the other way around. *We* are the ones who don’t know how bad temptation can become because we give in before it reaches its greatest intensity, which He didn’t.

Barclay offers this explanation: “The fact that Jesus was without sin means that he knew depths and tensions and assaults of temptation which we never can know. So far from his battle being easier it was immeasurably harder. Why? For this reason—we fall

to temptation long before the tempter has put out the whole of his power. We never know temptation at its fiercest because we fall long before that stage is reached. But Jesus was tempted far beyond we are; for in his case the tempter put everything he possessed into the assault. Think of this in terms of pain. There is a degree of pain which the human frame can stand—and when that degree is passed a person loses consciousness so that there are agonies of pain he can not know. It is so with temptation. We collapse in face of temptation; but Jesus went to our limit of temptation and far beyond it and still did not collapse. It is true to say that he was tempted in all things as we are; but it is also true to say that no one was tempted as he.”⁷

So remember that as well this week when the tempter comes. Remember that the One on the throne of grace faced that, and *far more*.

All that would indicate fourthly...

D. He understands what we feel. This is so comforting to know. Our high priest has experienced the powerful lure of temptation, so consequently He who knows all things by virtue of His *omniscience* also knows what we feel by *experience*.

Think about what He encountered during His life. At the age of twelve He was misunderstood by His mother and step-father, and He who was indeed a perfect child must have felt tempted to say, “I don’t need you to raise me.” But He didn’t. He submitted Himself to those parents in obedience to the fifth commandment, “Honor your father and mother.”

Later as an adult He went into the wilderness and experienced intense hunger. There He was tempted to satisfy legitimate needs in ways His Father didn’t authorize. He spent sleepless nights and when bone-tired felt the lure to substitute His Father’s plan for some “time for me.”

On multiple occasions He who always loved other people perfectly was gossiped against, wrongfully slandered by self-seeking critics, and felt the lure to make those critics pay.

In Gethsemane He experienced intense emotional agony, and felt the temptation to run from God’s plan for His life.

At His court trial He experienced blatant injustice and the violation of His rights, and felt the temptation to retaliate. He was hit on the head by soldiers and felt the temptation to hit back. On the cross He experienced the pain of being forsaken and utterly alone, and felt the temptation to call upon thousands of angels to come to His aid.

I was there when our daughters were born. I watched the miracle happen twice and both times felt a great sense of appreciation for what my wife endured. I remember seeing the monitor in Blodgett Hospital in Grand Rapids, Michigan as it was indicating when the next contraction would hit. Yes, I was right there. I saw my wife carry and bring into the world our two children.

But I’ve never experienced what I saw. I never felt what Sherry felt. As hard as I tried I did not know what she was going through. I could not sympathize fully with her weakness.

But our high priest can and does! O beloved, listen to what He experienced so that He might become our sympathetic high priest...

Isaiah 53:3-6 “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we

⁷ William Barclay, p. 42.

esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

Think again of the first readers of Hebrews. Some were considering leaving the church, abandoning their profession in Christ, and going with the flow in life. Did Christ ever face that temptation? Indeed! Hear the mockers at His cross, “If you are the Son of God come down from your cross (Matt 27:40ff)!” He had a choice to make: leave the cross and in so doing leave His suffering, *or* remain on the cross and in so doing remain faithful to His Father’s will.

Christ’s whole life was full of such decisions. And His response every time was “I must do the will of Him who sent me.”

Brothers and sisters, we can approach the throne of grace with confidence, first, because of *who He is* who is one that throne—He is great. He went through the heavens. He is both God and man. He deserves our absolute allegiance. Second, because of *what He experienced*—He identified with our weakness. He was tempted just like we are. He never sinned. And therefore, He understands what we feel. But there’s more.

III. We can approach the throne of grace with confidence because of what our High Priest offers (16).

Verse 16, “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

Here is His threefold offer.

A. He gives us access to the throne. He who has gone through the heavens and right into the presence of God offers to us access to that highest place. To *the throne*, says the text. Again, a throne is where a king sits. A throne in heaven represents where the highest king of the universe sits. *Let us approach that throne*, is the invitation.

Have you ever been in a store, arrived at the checkout, proceeded to pay, only to discover you didn’t have enough money? How’d you feel? Like crawling under the carpet and slithering out of the store?

That’s exactly how we *could* feel when we approach God with a request. There we are before the Owner of the universe and we have absolutely *nothing* we can give Him, for two reasons. One, He already owns everything, and two, as sinners we are bankrupt before Him. On what basis then can we approach Him?

On this basis. He calls His throne *the throne of grace*. Grace is God’s unmerited favor and help. God saves us by His grace (Eph 2:8). He predestined us to sonship by His grace (Eph 1:3-6). He gave us grace before the beginning of time, says 2 Timothy 1:9. He poured out His grace upon us abundantly, says 1 Timothy 1:14, along with faith and love. And now, in and through Christ, He gives us access to His royal throne, which He calls *the throne of grace*.

That’s what God’s throne is, my friend. It’s the place where people who have nothing to offer God find help. And the reason He offers us help is because of the high priest who is there representing us.

But it’s not just *access*. He gives us more, something even better.

B. He gives us confidence. Let us approach the throne *with confidence*, says our text. Do you realize how revolutionary this reality is? For fourteen centuries only one person per year could enter God's Holy of Holies. Just one. But when Christ died, something happened, something so significant that God actually tore in two from top to bottom the barrier that barred entrance into the Holy of Holies. By means of His death, Christ removed the barrier that kept sinners out of heaven, cut off from God's throne. This means that now all who have put their trust in Christ can approach God directly and do so boldly!

But for what reason? Why does the Lord invite us to approach His throne? He wants to give us something.

C. He gives us mercy and grace. "So that we may receive mercy and find grace to help." Whether we realize it or not, those are our two biggest needs in life, for God's *mercy* and *grace*. "God, please don't treat me as I deserve!" That's a request for mercy. And, "God, please give me what I need yet don't deserve!" That's a request for grace.

And why would God extend to us such a marvelous offer? Has He gone soft on sin? No. It's all because of the One who is there on that throne. When a sinner approaches the throne of God trusting fully in the High Priest, Jesus the Christ, God offers that sinner unmerited pardon and help for Jesus' sake.

I don't think we realize what we have. I know I don't. We have available to us the mercy and grace of God 24/7. But here's the key. He wants us to ask. He delights in hearing His kids say, "I don't deserve it, but I'm asking for Your help again."

And one more thing about this offer...

D. He gives us what we need at the right time. "In our time of need," the text concludes. God's help is so timely and that's because God's timing is perfect.

Remember the subject at hand. The writer of Hebrews has been talking about the offer of God's rest to those who were considering walking away from it all. "It's too hard," they were saying. "We can't do it," they were thinking.

And they were right, to a point. They couldn't do it, not in their own strength. They needed help. And what's what they had, access to a throne where weak sinners find exactly what they lack in their time of need.

The throne of grace.

Make It Personal: Since we have access to the throne of grace...three things are true.

1. *We can experience rest no matter what is happening around us.* Problems? We all have them. The Lord doesn't offer us a problem free life, but rather *rest* in the midst of them. Are you in turmoil this morning? He offers you rest. Approach His throne and ask for us.

2. *We must see our needs as opportunities.* Needs? Again, we all have them. Health challenges. Relationship challenges. Challenges of all sorts. But the throne of grace changes our perspective on these challenges. Our needs become opportunities. We bring our needs to Him, ask for His mercy and grace, and then He answers in ways we could never imagine, all to His glory.

3. *We should be a people who pray a lot.* Personally. In our families. With our friends. And certainly with our forever family. Let's be a people who live at the throne of grace.