

Our Great High Priest
 Hebrews 4:14-16
 Tampa Covenant Church
 17 May 2026

Proposition: Jesus is our Great High Priest; the one who has passed through the heavens and who understands our weaknesses; therefore, we hold fast to him and draw near to him with confidence to receive mercy and grace in our time of need.

FCF: Our failure to recognize that we have a High Priest who truly understands us.

RHF: Through his death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus Christ now serves as our Great High Priest, representing us before God and granting us confident access to his throne.

(#1) Introduction:

Today is Ascension Sunday, which is the 1st Sunday following Ascension Day (*which was last Thursday*). When we think of Christian Holy Days, we naturally gravitate toward Christ's miraculous birth, his sacrificial death and his glorious resurrection, but the ascension is oft overlooked because it's not as prominent as the other doctrines in the pages of Scripture. But that should in no way diminish its significance because the Ascension serves as the linchpin to Christ's ongoing work of intercession in our lives.

There's a real comfort that comes to us when we know someone has our back. Because the truth is, we all have blind spots. That's part of the beauty of how God has wired us; we're not meant to live in isolation. We need people. But as good as others may be in advising and standing beside us; they're not equipped to deal with our deepest problem; the reality of sin in our lives. But they can point us to the one who can; Jesus Christ our Lord. And this is where the good news comes into focus. Because he's the one who's secured our right standing before a holy God; doing perfectly for us what no would else could do. We'll see in our text today that Jesus is our Great High Priest; who passed through the heavens, and who understands our weaknesses; therefore, we hold fast to him and draw near with confidence to receive mercy and grace to help in our time of need.

Hold Fast to our Great High Priest: (v.14)

We open the book of Hebrews and we're met with some of the loftiest language in all of Scripture concerning Christ. And there's a reason for this. The audience consisted of Jewish Christians, who were facing hardship and opposition for the faith. And with that came the temptation to drift back to the old system of worship (*temple, sacrifices and priesthood*). So the writer seeks to encourage them by doing what we're called to do in these situations; he points them to Christ. And shows them how Christ is far superior to anything they're tempted to retreat to: In chap, 1, Jesus is the radiance of God's glory; the exact imprint of his nature. In chap 2, that same eternal Son takes on flesh and becomes a merciful and faithful High Priest in service to God. In chap 3, they are told to consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of their confession; he's the one who provides the ultimate rest that Joshua couldn't give.

When we arrive at our text, **(#2) he says in v.14**, "*Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God,*" The author identifies this great high priest as Jesus (fully human), and he's the Son of God (fully divine). Which means he's no ordinary High Priest; he's uniquely

qualified to stand in the presence of the Father on our behalf. In the OT, the High Priest served as the representative between God and his people. He offered sacrifices, pronounced blessings, and entered the Most Holy Place once a year to make atonement for the sins of the people.¹ No doubt those images would've come to mind for this audience but here they are ready to shrink back. But the author is saying don't do it. Why? Because your High Priest is greater than Moses, greater than Aaron and greater than every Levitical priest out there.

He didn't pass through the veil of an earthly tabernacle; rather, he "*passed through the heavens*." This is the language of the Ascension. (#3) Recall in Acts 1, after the resurrection, Jesus told the disciples they'd receive the power of the Holy Spirit to serve as his witnesses. And "*as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight*." Luke is taking us back to the OT and pointing us to the glory cloud; the visible sign of the LORD's presence that covered and filled the tabernacle to the point that Moses couldn't enter.² (#4 Blank) Christ's exaltation began with his resurrection from the dead but it didn't stop there; it was perfected in his ascension.³ In passing through the heavens, Christ entered into the very presence of God. Under the old covenant, the priest stood day after day, offering the same sacrifices again and again because his work was never complete. But when Christ in his body made a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Father. Where he now reigns and waits until his enemies are made a footstool under His feet. And he's mindful of us. (#5) It's what we sang together, "Jesus My Great High Priest" his powerful *blood did once atone and now it pleads before the throne*." The lyrics remind us that when Jesus cried out from the cross, "*It is finished*", it marked the end of his active suffering. Now as our Great High Priest, enthroned in glory, his mediatorial work continues in our lives.

Therefore, we take (#6) the exhortation seriously to "*hold fast (grab/seize) our confession*." This isn't a new command; it's a repeated call! In 3:6, he says, "*we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope*." And he says it again in 10:23, "*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful*." Every time I read the words "*hold fast*," I can't help but think of a (#7 Blank) time years ago when Aida and I were visiting my cousin and his wife. He's like an older brother and a bit of an adrenaline junkie. One morning we're all heading out for breakfast, and he said, "*Let the ladies take the car; we'll take the motorcycle*." I knew exactly where this was going. As soon as we hit I-4, he pulled back the throttle and I held fast for dear life. I mean, I was holding on so tight it looked like there was one person on that bike with two heads!

And that's the posture Hebrews writer is calling us to but in this life we tend to loosen our grip for a myriad of reasons. But hear the good news: our Salvation and growth in grace do not ultimately rest on the strength of our grip on him, but on his faithful grip on us. Thus, the gospel can't be a private belief we keep to ourselves; it's the truth we publicly confess. And at the center of our confession is a person. Jesus Christ, the God man who came in the flesh; lived perfectly, died on a cross, was raised to new life, and is now seated at the right hand of the father where he prays for us and has promised to return one day in making all things new. And when we confess him, we're not just stating the facts about him; we're staking our lives on him.⁴ And because he's holding on to us; we're able to cling to him in faith because we know the truth about our High Priest.

He Sympathizes with our Weaknesses: (v.15)

(#8) He writes, *"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, I'm sure in a room this size we've been told by someone or may have said ourselves, 'I don't need your sympathy/pity.' Some of that is fueled by pride, 'I've got this; I don't need your help.' But oftentimes it's pushback against being misunderstood, 'Hey, You have no idea what I'm going through so back off.' In other words, we want someone who truly understands our situation; especially in those darkest moments. That's true because as well-meaning as sympathy may be, it can sometimes come off a bit smug; 'Oh that must be awful; I'm sorry that happened to you', it may feel but it feels from a distance; it doesn't share pain.⁵ And how can it? because the truth is none of us can fully sympathize with experiences we haven't endured. However, that's not the case with Christ in sympathizing with our weaknesses. He fully sympathizes with us because he humbled himself by taking on our nature. And he didn't come to earth with a silver spoon in his mouth; rather, he was laid in a feeding trough. In setting aside his rights and privileges as God, he lived in obscurity, suffered rejection, weariness, sorrow, and even the weight of being forsaken. Therefore, he can sympathize with the vulnerability (#9) of our humanity because he was 'tempted in every respect as we are, yet without sin.'*

It doesn't mean he experienced every single specific temptation we've faced in our lives. Rather, he experienced the full range of temptation on every dimension of human nature; body, mind, heart and will.⁶ As C.S. Lewis once pointed out, only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. And someone who gives into temptation after five minutes simply doesn't know what it would've been like an hour later. That's why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They've lived a sheltered life by always (#10) giving in. Then he says, *"We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it: and Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means-the only complete realist."*⁷ Which means he's not naïve about temptation... he's not distant from it nor is he idealistic about it. So when we say, Jesus knows what you're going through; we're saying he's the only one who truly understands our deepest struggles; which means he's the only one qualified to represent all of humanity before God.

(#11 Blank) And this is important because when we think about our deepest struggles, we're not just talking about what happens out there. But also what happens in here (our hearts). The things we quietly carry and the parts of our lives we tend to partition off as we suffer in silence: disordered desires, misplaced affections, and deep longings that seek to pull us out of step with the Lord's will for our lives. Church, even there he sympathizes with us and in no way does he cast us aside. Because there's no private struggle that we endure that's foreign to him; he knows the weight of temptation and he bore them in his body so that even in the midst of that struggle, can still find real hope. Because the ultimate expression of Jesus' humility and obedience is seen in him, walking that rugged road of obedience to the cross, where he endured its shame in offering himself as the once-for-all sacrifice for our sins. As Paul writes, he who knew no sin became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in him. So what does that mean for us? It means we don't run from him in our weakness; rather we run to him.

Drawing Near with Confidence: (v.16)

(#12) The author writes, *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.* This really sheds light on how we approach our Lord in prayer; we “draw near with confidence,” We don’t come presumptuously as if we’ve earned a hearing with God. But neither do we come full of doubt as if we’re thorns in his side. Both of these approaches are flawed because they focus on self (our goodness or our badness) rather than focusing on our Great High Priest. But when we come with a clear understanding of who he is then everything changes. Because we rest confidently in the fact that he’s Jesus, the Son of God, who passed through the heavens, understands our weaknesses, truly tempted and yet without sin. And with all of that; he willingly gave up his life so that we might be made whole.

And through his sacrifice; the wrath of God has been satisfied; therefore, our approach to God has completely changed. We no longer come fearing condemnation and strict justice; we now come confidently before the **(#13) throne of grace.** And it’s there we receive mercy and find grace. One writer said, “*it’s there we receive mercy to cover the sins of yesterday, and it’s also there that we find grace to meet the needs of today.*”⁸ Those two blessings belong together; so we must come seeking both. We come pleading for mercy because we’re far more guilty than we often care to admit. And it’s the mercy of God in Christ that has completely covered our sin, guilt and shame. And this grace we discover serves to help in our time of need. Not help in the sense that we do our part and Christ does his as though grace simply fills in the gaps where we fall short. No, this is a timely grace that sustains us in our weakness because it’s nothing less than God himself drawing near to us; strengthening us, preserving us, comforting us, and assuring us that we’re never abandoned in the struggle.⁹ Because there will never be a stage or season of life where we’ll outgrow our need for the mercy and grace of God.

(#14 Blank) And if we try to live our lives apart from Christ; we’ll surely fail. Because we need a mediator someone who truly has our back who can truly look at us in our darkest moments and say; “I’ve been there” and through the gospel; we know it’s true. Therefore, we draw near not just at the beginning of our new life in him. We come again and again, day after day, month after month, year after year. In our failures, in our doubts, in our pain and suffering and even in our joy and gladness. We continue drawing near because our sin debt has been paid in full. Christ’s sacrifice is sufficient and his atoning work is finished. Therefore, we come boldly to the throne of grace, receiving the limitless supply of God’s mercy and grace purchased for us by Christ. Because right now, our Great High Priest stands in the presence of the Father continually presenting his finished work as the all-sufficient basis for our right standing before God.¹⁰ And because of his great love for us, we have hope; a hope that will not disappoint and neither will it put us to shame because we belong to Christ.

Conclusion:

So may we continue to hold fast to him. Draw near to the throne of grace. And take comfort that even when our grip feels weak; his never fails. And because he lives; because he reigns and because he intercedes for us; may we experience the newness of his mercy every morning and the timeliness of his grace working in our lives for our good and for his glory, now and forevermore. And everyone would say. Amen.

¹ Mary B. MacFarlane, "High Priest," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

² <https://bibleproject.com/articles/the-ascension-of-jesus/> (accessed 10 May 2024).

³ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans publishing co., 1938), 350.

⁴ Moisés Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 509–510.

⁵ Brené Brown, *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience* (New York: Random House, 2021), 124.

⁶ Theodore H. Robinson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. James Moffatt, *The Moffatt New Testament Commentary* (New York; London: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1933), 50–51.

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 64.

⁸ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Hebrews: Christ above All*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 96.

⁹ Mark Olivero, "God's Grace," in *Lexham Survey of Theology*, ed. Mark Ward et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).

¹⁰ Berkhof, 353.