

## Jesus Is Our Compassionate High Priest

### Hebrews 4:14-16 (NIV)

<sup>14</sup> Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. <sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. <sup>16</sup> Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Tonight's reading of the Passion History took us to the courtroom of Israel's high priest. As we look at the sham trials conducted by Annas and Caiaphas, we might get a wrong impression of the high priests of Israel. Pride, hypocrisy, disregard for the law, and abusive treatment of others—those are the characteristics displayed by the high priests in our reading, and judging from them alone, we might get the idea that all priests were like them and that the office of the high priest was one that was always occupied by evil men. And yet that would be an unfair assessment of that high office. The office of the high priest was established by God and was held by men like Aaron and his son Eleazar and his grandson Phinehas. There were men like Zadok, who served faithfully during the reign of King David, and Jehoiada, who rescued young King Joash from being murdered by his wicked grandmother, Athaliah. But like so many other features of life in Old Testament Israel, even these good and decent high priests pointed to someone greater than themselves. They were only shadows and pictures that served to point the people ahead to the true High Priest who would come into the world to offer the one perfect sacrifice that would atone for all sins of all time. Tonight we see that Great High Priest—the writer refers to him as Jesus the Son of God. And he tells us that **Jesus is great because Jesus is our compassionate High Priest**, and as the God-man, he is able first to sympathize with us in our weakness and he is able to energize us with his power.

#### I. Jesus is able to sympathize with us in our weakness.

Our reading begins with a reminder of the reason the word of exhortation called Hebrews was written: "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess" (10:23). Hebrews was written by an unknown author to Christians who were being persecuted for their faith. These Christians were Jewish by birth and had been raised in Judaism, with its temple rituals, sacrifices, and splendor. Called to faith in Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit through the gospel, these believers professed their faith in Christ openly. Hemmed in by pagan Romans who honored Roman emperors with the title *dominus et deus*, "lord and god," and fellow Jews who denounced Jesus as a blasphemer and a fraud, these Christians very simply confessed, "Jesus is Lord." But now they were being tempted to give up that confession, deny that faith, renounce Jesus as Lord, and return to Judaism.

They were being tempted just as Simon Peter was tempted in the courtyard of the high priest. We heard how in the face of questioning by servants of the high priest Caiaphas, Simon Peter denied his Savior—he did not hold fast to his profession, but with oaths and curses he denied that he was a follower of Christ. As we heard, Simon denied that he even knew Jesus, shamefully referring to the Savior only as "this man."

The Hebrew Christians in Rome and Simon Peter in the courtyard of the high priest weren't the last followers of Christ to be sorely tempted to quit confessing their faith in Christ. We still face that same temptation, if not with an outright spoken denial, then with a lifestyle and behavior that denies the very Savior we confess. And what our author wants us to know is that in Christ, we have a High Priest who's able to sympathize with us in our weakness. In the verses following our reading, the author talks about how the high priest in Israel was chosen from among his brothers. God chose human beings for that high office. God could have chosen an angel to carry out that important task of making atonement for the sins of the people. But he chose a human being. And there was good reason for this. We are told that God chose a human being to be high priest so that the high priest could understand people's weaknesses and not lose his temper and become easily provoked at the sins he saw in others. The writer says, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin."

When temptation comes alluring, just think:

Are you **tempted to turn away** from the calling God has given you in life, whether it's your calling to follow Christ or to be a faithful spouse, parent, or child? Jesus knows how such temptations feel. Satan emptied his entire arsenal of temptations on Jesus in the wilderness, seeking to get him to be unfaithful to his calling.

Is it when **suffering comes into your life** that you are most tempted to turn away from Christ? Your Great High Priest knows what it's like. Satan came to him and tempted him when Christ was suffering weakness after fasting 40 days in the wilderness.

Does temptation to turn away from Christ and take what seems to be the easy way **come to you from friends** who seem to have your best interests at heart? Jesus knows how it feels. Matthew, in the 16th chapter of his gospel, tells how Jesus' own disciple and friend Simon Peter was the one who tried to get him to turn away from the cross and take the easier way.

Does God's will for your life as a husband or wife, a parent or worker ever **seem like too heavy a burden to carry**? Do the obstacles ever seem too big, the cost too high, and the way just too rough? Jesus knows how it feels. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he pleaded with his Father until Jesus' sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood to let the cup of punishment pass from him.

Is it all the **stuff that looks so good** that the world will offer you if you only walk away from Christ that tests your resolve as a Christian? Then Jesus understands. He's been there. Satan offered him all the riches of the world if Jesus would only turn his back on his heavenly Father and fall down at Satan's feet.

Is it the **contempt and scorn that the world heaps** on everything that you believe and hold sacred as a Christian that tempts you to turn away from Christ? Then Jesus knows how it feels. They mocked his claim to be the Christ. They mocked his claim to be God's Son. They laughed at him and spit on him. He knows what it's like. He's been there for you.

Because Jesus is a human being—a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering, as Isaiah says—the writer says in a verse directly following our reading, “He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness” (5:2). Now it is true that our Great High Priest is different from the high priests of Israel in that though he was tempted, he never sinned. Yet having faced those temptations and having learned obedience, he is able to deal gently with those who go astray.

Notice how gently the Savior dealt with Simon Peter. He looked at him. He did not give him the cold shoulder and refuse to make eye contact. He did not look away and hide his face from Simon Peter. He didn't turn on his heel and walk away. Jesus didn't wash his hands of his cowardly friend. He looked at him. The look was a silent sermon in which the Savior said to Simon, “I know, I saw, I heard.” Jesus doesn't ignore sin or act like it doesn't matter. Jesus let Peter know that as the all-knowing Son of God he knew his disciple's sin, but that look was a look of love as well. The Savior who had said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened” (Mt 11:28), was inviting his disciple to believe that this sin of denial, as horrible as it was, had been added to the burden Jesus was carrying to the cross and would be paid for there in full. And so it is when we are ignorant and go astray, when we refuse to acknowledge our Lord with our lips, or when by our lives we deny what our lips confess: our Savior looks at us through his law and shows us our sins. Jesus doesn't ignore a single sin or act as though sins don't matter—he knows they do. So he calls us to repentance. He tells us that he heard and knows—as Moses said in Psalm 90:8: “You have set . . . our secret sins in the light of your presence.” But he does that not to rub our noses in our failures; he shows us our sins to make us long for his compassion and forgiveness, and he never drives away those who come to him. He shows us our sin so that we will join King David in Psalm 32:5: “I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.’” And so that we share the joy King David experienced as he wrote, “And you forgave the guilt of my sin.”

Yes, the temptations to turn away from Christ come from every direction in our day. But remember: We have a Great High Priest, who, having lived among us and faced our temptations, can sympathize with us in our weakness. But he's also a Great High Priest

## **II. Who is able to strengthen us in our weakness.**

In the first chapter of this letter, the writer says that after making purification for sin, Jesus sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. Here the writer tells us that Jesus has ascended into heaven and urges his readers to draw near boldly and confidently to God's throne of grace so that we might receive mercy and obtain grace to help us in our time of need. Yes, our Great High Priest is also a mighty King, exalted above the heavens, but that doesn't mean he can no longer sympathize with us in our weakness. He's been there and faced temptation; he knows the struggle and the suffering. Our Savior is like someone who once suffered a knee injury in sports. When that person is watching a game on TV and there is an injury and the announcer says you may not want to watch this, a person who suffered a knee injury doesn't have to look—or maybe just plain can't look—because he or she knows what it's like from having been there. But through more than sympathizing, this exalted High Priest can help.

Go to him, the writer says, go boldly and confidently for grace to help in time of need. This is what we need to remember when we face the temptation to turn away from Christ and deny our Savior. We need to go to our Great High Priest for help and strength. The One who has been there is able to energize us with his strength. This was the very thing Simon Peter forgot to do, isn't it? What had Jesus said to him in the garden? “Watch and pray,” that you will not enter into temptation, that you will not be overtaken and fall into sin. Watch and pray. Simon didn't do that. Instead, he fell asleep with the rest of the disciples. It was only by God's grace that he

was restored to faith and apostleship. Based on personal experience, he wrote in his first letter to watch out because “your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pe 5:8). And he also said, “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (5:7). Pray, he said. Pray as the Savior taught us: “And lead us not into temptation.” And as you pray those words, remember Luther’s matchless explanation in the Small Catechism: “God surely tempts no one to sin, but we pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us, so that the devil, the world, and our flesh may not deceive us or lead us into false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins; and though we are tempted by them, we pray that we may overcome and win the victory.”

When we are tempted to keep quiet and we’re reluctant to confess our Savior before the world, let us pray as King David did in Psalm 51:15: “Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise.” Surrounded as we are by impurity and immorality, let us pray as King David did: “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (51:10). When we feel the weakness of our flesh, let us pray as Asaph did in Psalm 50:15: “Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me.” When life’s fears and anxieties make us feel like we are flailing in the deep waters, gasping for air and fearful of drowning, let us pray as the writer of Psalm 130:1,2 did: “Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.” Surely you know what Isaiah promises to those who storm the throne of grace seeking strength. He says so beautifully, “Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint” (Isa 40:31,32).

But it is not only by the power of prayer that our Great High Priest strengthens us in our weakness. It is also with the power of his Word. “Resist the devil,” St. James urges us, “and he will flee from you” (Jas 4:7). That’s how it was when our Savior was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Each time, our Savior met the tempter with passages from Scripture. “It is written,” he said. And he has given us his Word with which to meet and defeat Satan when Satan tempts us to sin. St. Paul urges the soldiers of Christ as they dress for battle to “take . . . the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph 6:17). Draw on the power of your Great High Priest in your spiritual weakness.

Yes, the readers of Hebrews were tempted to deny their Lord and defect from the faith, like Simon Peter in the courtyard of Caiaphas’ palace, and so are we. That’s when we need to remember our Great High Priest, for he is a compassionate High Priest. Let us come boldly and confidently to the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. For Jesus Christ our Great High Priest is our compassionate High Priest—able to sympathize with us in our weakness, able to strengthen us in our weakness. Amen.