

The Throne of Grace
Hebrews 4:14–16
November 19, 2023

In May of 2021, a contractor with the Arkansas Department of Transportation discovered a significant crack in the Hernando DeSoto Bridge. He called 911 almost immediately. Within hours, traffic was shut down. Since that bridge's construction in 1973, being able to cross the mighty Mississippi wasn't something anyone around here fretted over, but for three months in 2021 the 41,000 cars that cross that bridge every day had that assumed commute altered.¹

We can take access for granted. Or maybe we give little thought to that which facilitates access. Those that crossed into Arkansas on a daily basis might not have ever considered that beam's welding in 73. As another example, a few Saturday nights ago I was driving west down I-40 and noticed the cars in front of me shifting out of the right lane. As I approached what seemed to be causing this shift, I noticed multiple pickups ambling along with their driver's side door opened. They were stopping and starting and stopping and starting. Eventually, when I pulled alongside them, I saw why. You know those reflectors that help us see the divisions between the lanes in the dark? As these trucks reached *each* one, someone would jump out with a tool, pull out that reflector, do something quickly to it, put it back, and then hop back in their truck to drive slowly to the next reflector. Over and over again they did this in the right lane. All the while the left lane is whizzing by them.²

Access can be taken for granted. So can that which facilitates access. And that's not just on the roads. A number of years back our family hiked a trail in southwest Missouri. On this trail hikers had access to a cave that men hid in during the Civil War, access to climb around a small waterfall, and at the end a nice view of Lake Taneycomo. This trail wasn't a long trail. It was doable even for our young children, all of it easily accessible. Why? Because almost 100 years ago Dr. Lyle Owen and his family marked out a trail on their land; and, then, by hand they laid 338 stone steps leading to each landmark. How do we know that? On one of the final steps they laid, the Owen family etched their names in stone alongside these words: Began August 5, 1937. Finished August 10, 1938.³

Their labors facilitated access. We could come up with a hundred other examples of instances where we might take that for granted or where we might give little thought to that which facilitates access.

Today's passage is a hinge passage. While in some sense it concludes what the author's said thus far,⁴ it also *introduces* the next section. This is important to point out because the next section—beginning here and going all the way to chapter 10—is *the* central theological argument in the book of Hebrews.⁵ It concerns who Christ is—in particular His priesthood—and what He's done to give us access to God Himself. We know this, in part, because this particular section ends with these words: **Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near** (Heb. 10:19–22).

¹ <https://www.ualpublicradio.org/local-regional-news/2022-02-21/how-authorities-missed-the-flaw-that-nearly-brought-down-the-i-40-bridge>

² So, if you don't like your job, consider that one.

³ <https://www.bransonmo.gov/DocumentCenter/View/9698/LakesideForestBrochure2021?bidId=>

⁴ Harold Attridge, *Hebrews*, 138.

⁵ Peter O'Brien, *God Has Spoken In His Son*, 46, says 5:1–10:18 is this section.

As you can tell from that conclusion, the case to come is not mere theological speculation. It's foundation for an exhortation, that is, by considering the "what" and the "Who" that made access possible, God's people might be emboldened to draw near.⁶

And, as we'll see, it's not *only* the conclusion that makes that point, this introduction does as well. Like any introduction, it's not exhaustive. It introduces, giving the broad strokes of what's ahead. And by doing so, it anticipates.

1. Since He's Exalted, Hold Fast (v. 14)

Verse 14: **Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens.** In a mere cursory reading of that phrase, we hear the language of exaltation. That's also how the letter began with, describing the Son as sitting **at the right hand of the Majesty on high** (Heb. 1:3). So, while these verses are *primarily* introduction to the following section, they're not introduction exclusively. The "therefore" indicates that. Chapter 1 of Hebrews used this language of exaltation, describing the Son as the fulfillment of Old Testament passages like, **let all the angels of God worship Him** (1:5) and **Your throne, O God, is forever and ever** (1:8) and **Sit at My right hand, until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet** (1:13). But thus far the book hasn't necessarily told us *how* He arrived at that exalted place, at the right hand of God. Verse 14 tells us that He passed through the heavens.

We'll come back to that momentarily, but note first that the author intends to remind us who this exalted One is. Verse 14: **Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God.** Again, we're not to discard the argument thus far. The whole book builds on itself. In chapter 2 the author indicated that Psalm 8 pointed forward to One that had **all things in subjection under his feet and was made for a little while lower than the angels** (2:8–9). It's in *that* context this exalted One's name is mentioned for the *first* time. 2:9: **But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus.**

The first verse of chapter 3 uses His name for the *second* time: **Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus** (3:1). Then, as that chapter instructs us *how* we might consider Him, it describes Jesus with these words: **faithful as a Son** (3:6). So, to quickly and simply overview how the book has developed, chapter 1 begins by portraying the Son in whom God speaks. Chapter 2 tells us that this Son's name is Jesus. Chapter 3 tells us how faithful Jesus was *as* a Son. And then chapter 4 brings all that together in this phrase, **Jesus the Son of God.** *He's* the exalted One that passed through the heavens.

But thus far we've skipped three words that are *key* to interpreting what the author means by **passed through the heavens.** Verse 14: **since we have a great high priest.** Keep in mind that those reading this letter were Jewish Christians, those steeped in the traditions of their fathers. And in *that* context, unfettered access to a holy God was *far* from assumed. In fact, Leviticus 16:2 instructed the high priest, and those that would follow him: **he shall not enter at any time into the holy place inside the veil, before the mercy seat which is on the ark, or he will die.** They couldn't enter **at any time**, nor could they do so however they wanted. A holy God was not *safe* for an unholy people.

So, God gave them instructions concerning how and when they might draw near. On one day of the year—the Day of Atonement—one man could enter as a representative for the people of God—the high priest. He alone would enter through the veil into the Holy to Holies to make an offering for the people. These Jewish Christians would've known the rituals, the care with which the

⁶ Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 223.

Day of Atonement was approached, backward and forward. Israel's hope hinged on the high priest getting this right.

In Hebrews 4 the author picks up on this familiarity, but he goes beyond it. Even the term in our verse **great high priest** gives an indication that this is something superior. It's almost as if he writes, "great great priest," or "high high priest."⁷ With that language he's emphasizing something unique.⁸ This **great high priest** represents the people of God, yet He belongs to an entirely different order of priesthood.⁹

How else might we know that this High Priest is far superior to Aaron, of an entirely different order of priesthood? In part, because this great high priest, v. 14, **passed through the heavens**. What's the significance of that? Hebrews 9:24: **Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us**. Leon Morris writes, "The high priest went into a tiny, dark room which was a symbol of the presence of God. The access with which Christ was concerned was access into the very presence of God in heaven."¹⁰

So, who represents us, mediating for us as priest? It's not the best of our fellow man, but Jesus, the *Son of God*, whom He's loved for all of eternity. What did He do? He didn't enter a tent; He passed through the heavens where He now sits at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Verse 14 says clearly that what He's done is ours. We're so bound up with what *He's* done that we, present tense, *have Him*. And it's in that light that the author admonishes us. Since we have, . . . let us. Hear verse 14 in that light: **Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.**

Chapter 3:1 mentioned something of this confession, **consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession**. It's not hard to make the case that the early church had particular truths they confessed together. Both 3:1 and 4:14 indicate that Christ's priesthood was an aspect of the content that made up this confession. But it also calls this confession *our confession*. So, that confession they were to hold fast to seems to refer *both* to the content of the faith *and* to the public profession of that faith with others.¹¹

That's actually an aspect of what we'll do at the close of the service today at the Lord's table. Maybe I've mentioned this prior, but when describing the ordinances John Hammett says that baptism is like a wedding ceremony and the Supper akin to the anniversary. The Supper is the ongoing remembering, reaffirming, and rejoicing in what occurred. We don't believe the cracker nor the juice *by itself* affects us. Rather, that as we eat and drink in faith—*continuing* to confess what we continue to believe—God nourishes us.

We're to consider the High Priest of our confession (3:1). We have a High Priest who has passed through the heavens. He's exalted. We're to hold fast.

2. Since He's Sympathetic, Draw Near (vv. 15–16a)

So, if He's exalted, does that mean He's so *other* that He can't identify with us? In a similar way to the exalted Son of Hebrews 1 being followed by the **lower than the angels** humiliation of Hebrews 2,¹² 4:14 is followed by 4:15: **For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our**

⁷ Cockerill, 224.

⁸ Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 109

⁹ Attridge, 139.

¹⁰ Leon Morris, *The Atonement*, 84.

¹¹ Cockerill, 225.

¹² Attridge, 139

weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. He's exalted, yes. But that doesn't mean He's distant.

To understand this phrase rightly, we need to define "sympathize" carefully. In our day, we often use sympathy as a feeling alone. It *may* lead to action; it may not. However, from an etymological perspective, the biblical term is literally, "suffer with."¹³ It's not merely watching someone else's suffering from afar, it speaks to identification with. That's what the word means. However, because we don't always define words by their etymology, we also have to know how the word "sympathize" was used at the time. In that era, unlike our own, this word *always* included the element of active help.¹⁴ It's a "suffering with" that also leads to active assistance.¹⁵

Verse 14 said there's something we have; **we have a great high priest**. Verse 15 says there's something we *do not* have, that is, a high priest that *cannot* sympathize. And then verse 15 returns to that which we *do* have: **We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin**. If we define "sympathy" rightly, it means He not *only* felt compassion for us in our weakness, He entered into our suffering *so that* He might help. He's the High Priest we have. The exalted Son was made low.

Maybe we bristle when someone that has *never* experienced what we have attempts to give us advice. Or maybe we wince when a pastor stands up and speaks as if he knows what we're going through. The truth is that he doesn't, at least not fully. He can never enter in and know the true weight of whatever you're carrying.

However, Lord willing, he preaches about the One that can and does. He didn't merely *feel*, with compassion He entered in, becoming Man. I found so helpful Chris's question from a few weeks back, "How else would it be possible for Christ to style Himself our brother unless He enters the human predicament?"¹⁶ He didn't become "sort of" human, shifting between God and man depending on what the circumstance demanded. No, He walked on sore feet, looked with tired eyes, and loved with a heart that had been hurt. People He invested in walked away. People He loved didn't reciprocate. He sympathizes. He understands. Because He entered in.

And as man—*truly* so—He faced temptation as well. That's what verse 15 makes plain. Of course, there are a number of ditches in this conversation. I'm sure you dealt with many of them when discussing Matthew 4 this morning. For example, we *can't* say that He had evil sinful desires that arose from within the essence of His person. James 1 makes that option untenable. However, another significant misstep in this conversation occurs when our speculation leads us to assert that He was not *truly* tempted. If that's our conclusion, then we're wrong.¹⁷

Verse 15 is clear. He was tempted. And He was tempted in all things as we are. That doesn't mean He faced the *exact* same temptation you might, whatever that external temptation might be. But He faced every kind of external temptation,¹⁸ in a similar manner.¹⁹ He was **tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin**.

He put on flesh, made His dwelling among us, suffering *with* us, facing temptation *like* us, and conquering that temptation *for* us. Why? So that He might help us.

¹³ Συμπαθεῶ (sympatheō)

¹⁴ William Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, WBC, 114.

¹⁵ Cockerill, 225.

¹⁶ https://cdn.subsplash.com/documents/JF89ZG/_source/e78e5a6e-7e3b-431b-aad4-56f216c7e73b/document.pdf

¹⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 538. In Matthew 4, for example, His temptation came from *without*, from outside Himself. See our recent study in James for more on this.

¹⁸ Cockerill, 225.

¹⁹ Harris, 111.

Verse 14 had an exposition that led to an exhortation. Since He, our exalted High Priest, has passed through the heavens on our behalf, hold fast our confession. Verse 15 follows the same pattern of exposition that leads to—or grounds—an exhortation. Since we have a High Priest that knows, that sympathizes, then, we read verse 16: **Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace.**

3. Hold Fast, Draw Near, and Find Grace (vv. 14–16)

Again, how did the High Priest draw near in the Old Testament? In the days preceding the Day of Atonement, the High Priest went through dress rehearsal after dress rehearsal to ensure he nailed every jot of Leviticus 16. He practiced his lines; he pretended to clean the altar; he burned the incense. Why? Because he knew he hadn't earned that access. A holy God is not safe for an unholy people. God's throne was the place of judgment; he approached with fear.²⁰

And yet, *here* we're instructed not only to draw near, but to draw near in a particular way. Verse 16: **Therefore let us draw near with confidence.** Is God less holy than He was in the Old Testament? Didn't we just read in verse 13 that **there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare.** How can we—revealed by His all-seeing eye—draw near with confidence?

Because of what Hebrews has declared thus far, and what it just reiterated. Verse 14 makes plain that our High Priest **passed through the heavens.** That verb “passed through” is a perfect tense verb. Though that might not mean anything to you, know that this tense was used to describe something that happened in the past but has continuing results. One man explained the significance, “His entrance has been achieved and the results are immutable.”²¹ At the right hand of the Father, He remains. So long as He remains, we can approach.

And that's why the author of Hebrews calls what we draw near to a **throne of grace.** We've never lived in a monarchy. But Israel knew well that a throne was not something you drew near to haphazardly. The throne could dismiss you. The throne could end you. Yet, on the other hand, they also knew that the one on the throne—more than anyone else—could help you.²²

The throne we draw near to is a throne marked by grace. Our High Priest made it so. And we draw near for the purpose verse 16 gives, **Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.** Now, tomorrow, and next week will be a time of need. Yet, no one can help more than the One at the throne. He sympathizes and acts on our behalf. So, we draw near. And when we do, we receive mercy and find grace.

Conclusion

Which is what we aim to do at the Lord's Table. We're able to approach because Christ passed through the heavens on our behalf. He's granted access; we draw near. And we *keep* drawing near because He keeps giving us access.

And that's an access we shouldn't take for granted. I mentioned earlier the 338 stone steps on that trail in Missouri. And that, on one of the final steps, the Owen family etched their names and some dates in stone. But under that, they etched another sentence, reminding everyone why we

²⁰ Cockerill, 227.

²¹ Quoted in Cockerill, 224.

²² George Guthrie, *Hebrews*, NIVAC, 180.

were able to stand where we did: **Let those who tread here not think that these steps were made of stone and mortar alone but of sweat and blood and agony.**

As we partake of this meal together, let us be reminded, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near (Heb. 10:19–22).

