

# Jesus: Our Great High Priest

**HEBREWS 4:14-16**

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About a month ago, some of you might remember that I shared a story online concerning a rather inspiring judge in Cumberland County, North Carolina. Judge Lou Olivera, 45 years old, is a Gulf War combat veteran who has started what he refers to as a Veterans Treatment Court, a court specializing in handling veterans and some of their unique challenges, including those struggling with PTSD and various addictions. But what made the news a month or so ago is what happened when a retired special forces Green Beret sergeant ended up facing the judge on a probation violation after having lied about a drug test. The soldier was Joe Serna, 41 years old, a father of seven children. This man did four tours in Afghanistan himself and was nearly killed three times – once by a roadside bomb, then by a suicide bomber, and the third time when his Humvee ran off the road and flipped over into a canal near Kandahar. The story explains that as water filled the vehicle, one of his fellow soldiers dove down under the water, unfastened his belt, released his body armor, allowing him to escape. This man who saved his life, however, did not escape, and neither did the other two soldiers in that vehicle. Out of the four, Joe Serna was the only survivor. Most of us cannot possibly imagine the kind of mental anguish that this man has suffered ever since then. He earned three Purple Hearts along with many other military honors, but when he got home he was diagnosed with PTSD and depression, and he then turned to alcohol, eventually being charged with driving under the influence. Through this long drawn-out process, he ended up facing the court 25 times before eventually entering Judge Olivera's special program for veterans.

Because he lied about the drug test, Judge Olivera sentenced Mr. Serna to one day in jail. But here is what happened: After passing that sentence, the judge personally drove Mr. Serna to the jail in a neighboring county. When they got there, Mr. Serna was trembling, and so Judge Olivera decided to spend the night with him in the county jail. Outside the jail, Mr. Serna said to the judge, "Where are we going, judge?" And the judge said, "We are going to turn ourselves in." And that is what they did. They checked in together and actually shared a one-man cell. Later, Mr. Serna explained, "This was a one-man cell, so we sat on the bunk and I said, 'You are here for the entire time with me?'" The judge said, "Yeah, that's what I'm doing." They sat down on the cot and talked all night long. As a combat veteran himself, the judge was concerned that leaving Mr. Serna in the cell alone all night might trigger his PTSD. So he stayed, and they talked all night long about their military service, family life, and so on. Serna said later that it was more of a father-son conversation (even though the age difference was only 45 to 41); it was personal. Looking back on it, Mr. Serna says, "I cannot even put into words how I feel about him. I look at him as a father. I've seen a lot of things, and this by far is the most compassionate thing I've ever seen anyone give to anybody. I will never let him down again."

As we think about what this judge did, I would invite you to turn with me this morning to the last three verses in Hebrews 4 – Hebrews 4:14-16 (p. 1873). This morning, our men have been leading some of their favorite songs and reading some of their favorite passages. This passage is one of my favorites.

The book of Hebrews, of course, is a book that probably started out as a sermon. We don't know the author, but we do know the main point. The book is addressed to Jewish Christians who were starting to face persecution, and so they were thinking about going back to Judaism. They wanted to go back to what was safe. The author of Hebrews, though, makes the point in this book that Jesus is better.

That is the theme of this book: Jesus is better! In Chapters 1-2 he is better than the angels. In Chapter 3 he is better than Moses. And then by the time we get to Chapter 4, the author is starting to make the point that Jesus is a much better High Priest than any of the high priests under the Law of Moses. A priest, of course, is a go-between, someone who stands between God and humanity. Years ago, one of my favorite books on preaching was by John R.W. Stott, and the title of his book was, *Between Two Worlds*, and for preachers, the idea is that we (in a sense) have one foot in heaven and one foot on earth, we are trying to communicate God's message in a way that can be understood. And that is similar to the concept of a priest. The job of a priest involved representing God to the people and bringing the concerns of the people to God. And the high priest was the one responsible for offering that one yearly sacrifice – passing through the Holy Place in the temple and entering into the Most Holy Place only one time every year on the Day of Atonement. By the time we get to Hebrews 4:14-16, the author is starting to make the argument that Jesus is a better high priest. And in fact, because he is better, what he has done for us changes the way we live.

Notice, please, Hebrews 4:14-16,

***<sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> For 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. <sup>16</sup> 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.***

**I. As we look at this passage, we notice how Jesus is described as our GREAT HIGH PRIEST.**

And the fact that Jesus is our high priest is repeated twice here, so it must be important. But the question is: What makes him great? Why is he such a great High Priest? What makes him great, first of all, is that he has ***“passed through the heavens”*** (verse 14). Just as the high priests under Moses would pass through the temple, Jesus has ***“passed through the heavens”*** – not through some kind of man-made building, but he has passed through the heavens to take our concerns to God directly, face-to-face.

What also makes Jesus so much better is that he is the ***“Son of God”*** (verse 14). In other words, he is in a position of great power. When we come to him in prayer, Jesus is in a position to do something. Jesus has that position of power. He has passed through the heavens, and he is the Son of God.

But we also find here that as our great High Priest, Jesus has the ability to sympathize with our weaknesses. Yes, he has passed through the heavens, yes, he is the Son of God, so our obvious concern at this point is: Then surely he cannot relate to me! But that is not the case! Yes, he is great, but what makes him even greater is that he can sympathize with our weaknesses. And here, we think of that judge who sentenced a man to jail and then went to spend the night with him in that jail – a judge who could truly empathize with what that man

was going through. He had been through it himself, so he could understand. That is what Jesus did for us. He left heaven to come here so that he could live as a human being. He became human so that he could feel exactly what we feel. He knows what it means to be cold and tired and hungry. He knows what it means to be betrayed by a friend. He knows what it means to lose a friend to death. He knows what it feels like to be angry, and sad, and happy. He can relate to us. He can relate, because he has been where we are.

I think back to something that happened a few years ago when former president George Bush shaved his head. Here is this decorated Navy combat veteran, ambassador, former head of the CIA, vice president, president of the United States, this man who jumps out of airplanes to celebrate his birthday every year, and one day he notices that every member of his protective detail suddenly doesn't have any hair. He asks about it, and it turns out one of them has a 2-year old son with leukemia who had just lost his hair. Mr. Bush wanted in on it! What I didn't realize is that George and Barbara lost a 3-year old daughter to leukemia nearly 60 years earlier. This, then, was so much more than just a gesture, it was a statement of solidarity – I know something of what you are going through. He could truly empathize with that family. In the same way, Jesus knows all about our struggles; he will guide till the day is done. There's not an hour that he is not near us; no night so dark but his love can cheer us. There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus! No, not one! No, not one!

So yes, our great High Priest has passed through the heavens, he is the Son of God, he can sympathize with our weaknesses, but we also find here that he has been tempted in all things as we are, yet he is without sin. Jesus put up a fight against temptation, and unlike us, he won! Jesus came out on top! Maybe you've heard somebody say, "Well, you're not a sinner, so you don't get it." Maybe somebody could say that about Jesus, "He never sinned, so he really does not understand!" This is what C.S. Lewis said about that,

No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good. A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of the German army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness — they have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. 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.

I love what he said there! Jesus is the only one who truly knows the power of temptation, because he is the only one who has resisted it all the way through to the end and has come out on top! He is our great High Priest, because he has been tempted just as we are, yet without sin.

## II. **So, what does this mean for us? Jesus is our great High Priest. So what? What does this mean to all of us here this morning?**

I would go back to the text here and just briefly point out two very practical applications. First of all, the author of Hebrews tells us that since Jesus is our great High Priest, we are to ***"hold fast our confession."*** This is one of those "salad" passages in Hebrews. Twice, the author refers to "lettuce." ***"Let us hold fast our confession,"*** he says. To ***"hold fast"*** is to hang on tight! To ***"hold fast"*** is to hang on without letting go, no matter what. ***"Holding fast"*** is what our children do when they are little and we launch out into the deep end of the pool for the very first time. ***"Holding fast"*** is what we as parents do 16 years later as they are learning

to drive! We hang on without letting go! So in terms of our faith, knowing that Jesus is our great High Priest, we hang on. We do not turn back to our former way of life (as these people were being tempted to do), but we hang on, we dig in, we stand firm, we do not give up on the Christian faith, we do not give in to sin, we do not give up on our Christian family. But instead, we do whatever it takes to hang in there!

And then secondly, there is something else we do, and that is: Knowing that Jesus is our great high priest, we are to ***“draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”*** I love that God’s throne here is referred to as a ***“throne of grace.”*** There are so many other words that could have been used to describe the throne. It could have been a “throne of justice,” or a “throne of glory,” or a “throne of power,” but the writer describes it as a ***“throne of grace.”*** And the reason is, when we as God’s children need help, his throne is truly a ***“throne of grace.”*** And we approach this throne of grace in search of ***“mercy.”*** While ***“grace”*** has been defined as getting something we do not deserve, ***“mercy”*** has been described as not getting what we do deserve. As people who get in trouble from time to time, we need both! We need mercy and grace. And then, what I also love about this passage is that we come to God for mercy and grace ***“in time of need.”*** Some of the language experts have pointed out that this phrase could also be translated as ***“in the nick of time.”*** We come to God for help, just in the nick of time, we come to him a moment of need, and he answers. We don’t just come to him at some pre-scheduled time of prayer, but we come to him right now, right when we need it. And he answers because he knows our struggles. We come to him with confidence, because we know that he has been where we are now. As our great High Priest, he has struggled with temptation and has come out on top. We come to him in prayer, then, with boldness, with courage, without reservation, without fear. We come to him in a moment of weakness, we admit what we are struggling with, and we have every right to expect him to respond favorably, because he knows what we are going through.

### **Conclusion:**

As we close our thoughts on this passage, we want everybody here to know that Jesus is willing to serve as your high priest. But we do need to accept his offer of salvation on his terms. In fact, in the next chapter, the author will go on to say (in Hebrews 5:9-10), ***“And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation, being designated by God as a high priest....”*** God, then, has made the offer, and it is available ***“to all those who obey him.”*** We obey him by turning away from our sin, by having a change of heart about sin. We then state our belief that Jesus is the Son of God, and then we allow ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism, for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, let us know, talk to one of us on your way out this morning. But if you cannot wait and know you need to be baptized right now, you can let me know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

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