

X. Means of Grace

February 6/7/8, 2018

Hebrews 4:11-16

Aim: To reverence the Word of God, which is alive and powerful, to hold fast to our confession of faith, and to draw near to God in prayer with confidence.

A. The Word of God (Hebrews 4:12-13)

Schreiner: Verses 12-13 explain why the readers should strive to enter God's rest and why they should avoid unbelief and disobedience. Disobedience is fatal, for the word of God is powerful and effective, so that those who disobey it will not escape punishment.

Hughes: Hebrews 4:12-13 is the classic text on the power of God's Word. Interestingly, though the text has broad positive application, the text in its context is negative, a warning to those who disregard God's Word. An extended warning began twenty-five verses earlier in 3:7, where Psalm 95:7-11 is first quoted as the hearers are repeatedly exhorted with phrases from the psalm not to repeat the mistake Israel made at Kadesh-Barnea—disobeying God's word and missing God's rest (cp. 3:15; 4:3, 5, 7, all of which reference Psalm 95).

Phillips: All throughout the exhortation of chapters 3 and 4, the writer of Hebrews has grounded his arguments on citations from the Old Testament, specifically Psalm 95. This psalm was written by King David about one thousand years before the writing of Hebrews. David was also interested in exhorting his readers, and he did so by reflecting on the unbelief of the exodus generation, which had led to their destruction some four hundred years earlier. The writer of Hebrews applies the words of Psalm 95:7-11 to his own generation. In doing so he assumes—indeed, he boldly asserts—that the words written by David not only have relevance, but also have authority over those who read them in his own time.

1. The Living Word (4:12a)

¹²*For the word of God is living and active...*

Hughes: As the writer begins, he directly warns that God's Word is alive. It lives because it endures forever (Ps. 119:89). Even more, it lives because it has life in itself. God is 'living' (3:12) and the Word, as God's breath (2 Tim. 3:16), partakes of God's living character. It is alive! The character of the Word's aliveness is that it is 'active,' or as that word is sometimes rendered, 'effective.' God's Word vibrates with active, effectual power as it rushes to fulfill the purpose for which it was spoken (cp. Is. 55:11). God's Word is effectual—'living and active.' It does what it promises to do. It regards neither age nor education. This is why I take seriously every child who sits under God's Word. If you will listen to God's Word, it will change your life. This truth is both a promise and a warning to all of us, so that 'no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience [Israel's]' (4:11).

Phillips: How can this be? How can David's words, which after all are the words of a man, be living and active? The reason is seen all through this book: *because they are also the words of God.* We saw this emphasis in the very first verse of this letter, in which the writer describes the whole revelatory process with these words: 'God spoke...by the prophets. This is what makes the Bible the Word of God. The words spoken through the man David and written down on paper with some sort of writing implement are not first and foremost to be thought of as David's

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own words, the words of man, but as the Word of God. Here we need to be very careful not to deemphasize or even deny the human authorship of the Bible. The Bible was composed by some forty different human authors. They were real men; these were their real thoughts; these books deal with their actual circumstances and are colored by their own experiences and interests. To lose sight of this would be to lose much of their value. However, Peter tells us that ‘Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit’ (2 Pe. 1:21). Yes, it was men who spoke and wrote, but what they said came from God as the Holy Spirit carried them along in their work. This is why we can say that the Word of God is ‘living and active.’ While there are differences in our cultural, social, and historical settings, compared to the original readers, and our understanding of a particular passage may and should reflect those differences, nonetheless we should read the Bible as God’s Word to *us*. It is not merely relevant, but authoritative and binding on us as it was on them. It is timeless and living precisely because it is the Word of the eternal and living God.

Schreiner: The word of God, i.e., the word God speaks, is like God Himself. God is, so to speak, what God says. Hence the word of God, like God Himself, is living (cp. 3:12; 9:14; 10:31; 12:22) and active. It has an inherent power and dynamism that cannot be thwarted. In context the focus is on the effectiveness of God’s judgment, but what is said here also applies more broadly to God’s word in general. Whether the focus is on judgment or salvation, God’s word accomplishes what God intends.

Bruce: For God’s word—that word which fell on disobedient ears in the wilderness and which has been sounded out again in these days of fulfillment—is not like the word of man; it is living, effective, and self-fulfilling; it diagnoses the condition of the human heart; it brings blessing to those who receive it in faith and pronounces judgment on those who disregard it. All that our author says here about the word (*logos*) of God is in line with the Old Testament witness. With the ‘living’ word we may compare Stephen’s reference to the ‘living oracles’ received by Moses at Sinai (Acts 7:38), and Peter’s description of ‘the word of God, which lives and abides’ (1 Pe. 1:23). The word is ‘active’ in the sense that it speeds to fulfill the purpose for which it has been uttered: this self-fulfilling character which it possesses is well summed up in Is. 55:11.

2. The Penetrating Word (4:12b)

...sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow...

a) *Sword*

Schreiner: God’s word is compared to a double-edged sword. It seems the word’s role in judgment is brought to the forefront. Perhaps the author thinks of the swords of the Amalekites and Canaanites, which cut down Israel when they attempted to enter the land after the Lord told them they could not enter because of their disobedience (Num. 14:39-45). So too, the Lord’s word hews down any and all those who disobey Him.

Hughes: New Testament scholar William Lane has noted a subtle allusion to the tragedy at Kadesh-Barnea in the reference to ‘sword’ (cp. Num. 14:39-43). The Israelites disregarded God’s warning and went up without Moses and without the ark and without the blessing of God, and they did indeed fall to the swords of the Amalekites and Canaanites (Num. 13:44-45). SO we see that the mention of a sharp, doubly-edged sword in our text is a sober warning not to disregard God’s Word as Israel did in the wilderness.

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Phillips: The writer of Hebrews has more to tell us about God's Word, continuing with an explanation of how it does its work. The image of the Word as a sword is often found in Scripture (e.g., Eph. 6:17; Rev. 1:16). Furthermore, it is a double-edged sword, equally fit to save or to judge. This imagery of the sword teaches us that God's Word is sufficient for our every need in the things of faith and godliness. Not only is God's Word a sword, but when compared with other weapons, it is sharper. Philip Hughes observes, 'As the instrument of God's might acts it is more powerful and penetrating than the keenest instrument devised by man.'

Bruce: Here the divine word is not merely described as a sharp sword, but as sharper than the sharpest sword. The expression 'a two-edged sword' occurs a few times in the Old Testament, but there is no particular reference here to any one of its Old Testament occurrences. The words which follow—'as it pierces, it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow'—are to be understood as a rhetorical accumulation of terms to express the whole mental nature of man on all sides. That the word of God probes the inmost recesses of our spiritual being and brings the subconscious motives to light is what is meant (cp. 1 Cor. 4:5).

b) Impact

Phillips: The image of the sword describes the penetrating or piercing power of God's word. The point is not that a separation takes place between a man's physical and spiritual natures. As Philip Hughes explains, 'Our author is not concerned to provide here a psychological or anatomical analysis of the human constitution, but rather to describe in graphic terms the penetration of God's word to the innermost depth of man's personality.' The Word penetrates against all opposition so as to grip the whole man and not just any one aspect of his person.

Hughes: God's Word is not only living by *penetrating*, as the next line so clearly states. Some have attempted to use this text in the dichotomist/trichotomist debate—to either prove that humans are two parts or three parts. Such attempts do harm to the practical understanding of God's Word, because all we have here is a poetic statement of the power of God's Word to pierce the human personality to its very depths. God's Word can cut through anything and bring conviction. There are sections of God's Word that cut through all the pretensions and religious façade, leaving us convicted. When God wills it, His Word will pierce *anyone*.

Schreiner: When the author speaks of the word 'penetrating as far as the separation of soul and spirit, joints and marrow,' the word here continues to be compared to a sword. Strictly speaking there is no one point at which joints and marrow may be separated. It is difficult to know as well what the author could possibly mean by 'the separation of soul and spirit.' It is not apparent elsewhere from the OT or the NT that clear distinctions should be erected between the soul and spirit. In some popular and devotional literature, this verse is used to justify distinguishing between the soul and the spirit, and sometimes a whole spirituality springs up that separates the spirit, the soul, and the body. These tripartite understandings of human beings are speculative, testifying to the creativity of their authors more than they reflect the teaching of the NT. In context the author highlights the efficacy of God's word. Nothing can withstand its power.

3. The Discerning Word (4:12c)

...and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Hughes: Having established that God's Word is living and penetrating, the writer adds, 'discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.' The root word for 'discerning' is the word

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kritikos, from which we derive *critic*. So the emphasis here is on the discerning judgment of the thoughts and intentions of the heart—the radical center of human selfhood. The heart is the seat of human personality. It is hidden from all. Yet God’s Word sifts through its thoughts and attitudes with unerring discrimination. Fellow-believers, if we want to understand ourselves, we must fill our souls with God’s Word. God’s Word—read, meditated upon, and prayerfully applied—will give us brilliant discernment and profound self-knowledge. But we will also be judged by God’s Word. And herein lies the warning to those who in disobedience are falling away. His judgment will be perfectly discerning. The wise Christian invites the penetrating, discerning work of God’s Word in his life.

MacArthur: God’s Word is the perfect discerner, the perfect *kritikos* (from which we get ‘critic’). It not only analyzes all the facts perfectly, but all motives, and intentions, and beliefs as well, which even the wise of human judges or critics cannot do. The sword of His Word will make no mistakes in judgment or execution. All disguises will be ripped off and only the real person will be seen

Phillips: Furthermore, we are told what the Word does once it gets inside. How often people think they are judging the Bible when just the opposite is true! The Word of God penetrates within, and its presence makes clear our true thoughts and attitudes. Many people affect to be good and even religious, but when the Word of God comes to them, they respond with hostility and repulsion. Their attitude to the Bible shows their true attitude toward God. God’s Word comes into us and it discerns, assessing our attitude toward the one who sent it. But when accompanied by the regeneration work of the Holy Spirit, it does more: it convicts us of our rebellion against God and subdues us: it leads us as sheep to the Good Shepherd. This is how we are born again.

Schreiner: A focus on the inherent potency of God’s word is confirmed by the last phrase in the verse. God’s word ‘judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.’ God’s word penetrates to the core of the human heart, for God’s word represents God Himself. Just as God knows our thoughts and attitudes, so God’s word judges our thoughts and intentions. God knows reality so that He knows whether we are believing or disbelieving, obeying or disobeying.

Bruce: It is not surprising, accordingly that a judicial function is here attributed to the word of God. It is ‘discriminative of the heart’s thoughts and intents.’

4. The Reckoning Word (4:13)

¹³*And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*

Hughes: We have been speaking of God’s Word in its *living, penetrating, and discerning* powers. Now in verse 13 the discussion continues, but the focus switches from God’s Word to God as a *knowing and reckoning* God. This is very natural because God and His Word cannot be separated. Verse 13 gives us one of Scripture’s great descriptions of God’s knowing. God sees everything. This can be discomfiting if we have something to hide. This is sobering truth indeed. But the metaphorical language that follows makes God’s knowing absolutely terrifying for those who imagine they can avoid His gaze: ‘All are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.’ ‘All’—everything—everyone—is stark naked before Him. There is nothing to hide in or behind.

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Hughes: Almost all commentators agree that the following Greek word means ‘laid bare’ or ‘exposed.’ But there is no consensus as to what exactly the metaphor pictures, because ‘exposed’ literally means ‘twist the neck’ or ‘take by the throat.’ It can be used for bending back the neck of a sacrificial animal to administer the fatal stroke. It was sometimes used to describe a wrestler’s hold on the opponent’s throat, rendering him helpless. And sometimes it was used to describe how a man being led to execution had a knife placed beneath his chin so that he could not bow his head in shame away from the gaze of the people. Whatever the exact use of the metaphor here, its meaning is clear: all creatures are in the grip of God, totally vulnerable, helpless, and ‘exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.’

MacArthur: The work translated ‘open’ (‘naked’) had two distinct uses in ancient times. It was used of a wrestler taking his opponent by the throat. In this position the two men were unavoidably face to face. The other use was in regard to a criminal trial. A sharp dagger would be bound to the neck of the accused, with the point just below his chin, so that he could not bow his head but had to face the court. Both uses had to do with grave face-to-face situations. When an unbeliever comes under the scrutiny of God’s Word, he will be unavoidably face-to-face with the perfect truth about God and about himself.

Hughes: The language here forces us to imaging ourselves naked, held helpless, exposed, in God’s grip, close to His omniscient eyes, and so we must give account. He cannot be fooled. Duplicity and hypocrisy will not work. Happily, this means He will miss no good thing. But to the sinning, self-righteous heart, apart from the grace of God this brings nothing but unmitigated terror. Of course, the author means all of this to be sanctifying instruction for the true house-church in the welling seas of persecution. He is calling for them not to rebel against God’s Word in disobedience, but to submit to it and find rest in the storms.

Phillips: Another evidence God’s Word is sufficient for our needs is found in verse 13. God’s Word is living and active, it penetrates and probes, and furthermore *nothing can escape it*. Interestingly, the writer of Hebrews here compares God’s Word to God’s eyes. It uncovers every heart, every act, every intention, every thought and desire, and brings them before the penetrating gaze of the living God.

Schreiner: This verse features God’s infallible knowledge of human beings. The shift from the word of God to God Himself confirms the close connection between God and His word so that the latter is an expression of the former. God knows that the thoughts and attitudes of the heart, for nothing in the created order is hidden from Him. God’s judgments are always according to the truth, for He knows exhaustively everything that occurs in the world. God’s judgments never suffer from superficiality since He sees and knows all, and everything is ‘laid bare’ before Him. All human beings will give account to this God who knows all and judges their hearts infallibly. God is never duped by the stratagems and devices of human beings. Thus, no one should think he can disobey God and fall away and escape judgment.

Bruce: We may conceal our inner being from our neighbors, and we can even deceive ourselves; but nothing escapes the scrutiny of God; before Him everything lies exposed and powerless. And it is to Him, not to our fellowmen or to our own conscience, that our final account must be rendered. Stripped of all disguise and protection, we are utterly at the mercy of God, the Judge of all. Therefore, ‘let us make every effort...!’ With these words the second admonition of the epistle is concluded.

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5. The Word Summarized

Phillips: Consider what power is made available to us by the Word of God, and what an incentive this is to use it in our witness and in our own lives. It is sufficient for our every need. What better thing could we possibly do for the salvation of souls than to proclaim and explain God's Word? It alone conveys God's own power to convict and to save, to cut away the heart of stone and bring life to a new heart of flesh.

Hughes: How does this double-edged sword work? First, it is the *sword of judgment*. Because it is 'living,' it is effectually active. It accomplishes what God purposes for it to do. It is so sharp that it *penetrates*—'piercing' through everything. And then it *discerns* everything in the core of our being—leaving us 'naked' and bare before our God with whom we must reckon. All of this is a gracious cutting. We see ourselves, and we see God, and we long to fly to Him and be healed. Second, for the believer it is the *sword of sanctification*. God's two-edged sword, His Word, is alive and effectual in our lives. Again it penetrates and discerns our hearts, exposing them to us—leaving us uncovered and laid bare, so that 'naked' we flee to God for dress. Blessed be the double-edged sword of judgment and sanctification. God cuts us deeply that we might die. God cuts us again with His Word that we might live.

B. Our Great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-16)

Schreiner: In the first two sections of the book, the author argues that Jesus is superior to the angels (1:1-2:18) and that He is superior to Moses and Joshua (3:1-4:13). In the third major section of the book (4:14-10:18), he maintains that Jesus' priesthood is better than the Levitical priesthood. Hebrews 4:14-16 introduces this section even though many acknowledge that the verses are transitional.

Schreiner: In the third section of the letter, the author comes to the heart and soul of his argument, contending that the Melchizedekian priesthood of Jesus is superior to the Levitical priesthood of Aaron (5:1-10:18), though he foreshadowed and anticipated his theme in 2:17-18 and 3:1. We should note that the common thesis that informs the first three sections of the letter, for in every instance there is a contrast between the old covenant focusing on the law and the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus. The angels were the mediators of the law given to Moses and the people (1:5-2:18). Moses instituted the Sinai covenant with Israel that contained the stipulations for Israel (3:1-4:13). And the Levitical priesthood is inextricably tied to the Sinai covenant (4:14-10:18; cp. 7:11-12). We see from this that the author is making the same argument throughout the book, but that the argument is advanced from different angles or by considering various persons or institutions in the old covenant. We should also remember that the superiority of Jesus over angels, over Moses and Joshua, and the superiority of His priesthood is not a theological abstraction. In other words, the theology of the book serves the warning passages. Since Jesus is superior to the old covenant in all its dimensions, since the new covenant is better than the old, forsaking Jesus is fatal.

Hughes: At this point the writer references the ascension as a source of encouragement in a section that begins in verse 14. But he goes much farther with his encouragement by presenting the great high-priestly ministry to which Christ ascended as the reason to hold on. The writer believes that Jesus' high-priestly ministry on behalf of the believers, correctly understood and implicitly believed, would be a great anchor in the coming storms.

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Phillips: The end of Hebrews 4 concludes the long exhortation that began in chapter 3, in which the author charges his readers to press on in the faith, not hardening their hearts in the face of difficulties. To meet this requirement, so far he has articulated two key resources. First, he mentioned Christian fellowship and encouragement. This is needed, he says, so ‘that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin’ (3:13). Another key resource is the Word of God, which imparts life to us and stirs us up in the faith (4:12-13). The pastor now directs us to a third resource: prayer, through which we come before God’s very throne to receive the mercy and grace we need to press on. In Hebrews 4:14-16 the writer reminds us that we may approach God with confidence because of the redeeming ministry of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ, our great high priest. The message has three points, which we may set forth as *a requirement, a reason, and a resource.*

1. An Earthly High Priest

Hughes: To dramatize the greatness of Christ’s priestly ministry, the author contrasts it with the ministry of the Levitical high priest who once a year passed from the sight of the people into the Holy of Holies bearing the blood of atonement. In contrast, Jesus, our High Priest, passed once for all from the sight of His people at the ascension to the ultimate Holy of Holies having shed His own atoning blood. Specifically, the contrast becomes clear as we reflect on the temporal and circumscribed nature of the high priest’s work. Once a year on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) the high priest, representing all the people, entered the Holy of Holies, where he sprinkled blood on the mercy seat to symbolically atone for all the sins of the people. But even before doing this, he had to offer a sacrifice for his own sins. And then when he entered the Holy of Holies he only stayed long enough to sprinkle the atoning blood. In fact, bells were sewn to the hem of his robe so the people outside could hear him moving and thus know that God had not struck him dead.

MacArthur: The priests of ancient Israel were appointed by God to be mediators between Himself and His people. Only the high priest could offer the highest sacrifice under the Old Covenant, and that he did only once a year on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). All the sins of the people were brought symbolically to the Holy of Holies, where blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat as a sacrifice to atone for them. As no other human instrument could, he represented God before the people and the people before God. As we learn from Leviticus 16, before the high priest could even enter the Holy of Holies, much less offer a sacrifice there, he had to make an offering for himself, since he, just as all those whom he represented, was a sinner. Not only that, but his time in the Holy of Holies was limited. He was allowed to stay in the presence of the Shekinah glory of God only while he was making the sacrifice.

Hughes: His entrance into the Holy of Holies was through three portals. First, he bore the blood through the door into the *outer court*. Second, he entered another door into the *Holy Place*. And third, he entered through the veil of the *Holy of Holies*. Thus, the ancient high-priest had a three-ported entrance in coming before the thrice-holy God—and he had to do it year after year.

MacArthur: To enter the Holy of Holies, the priest had to pass through three areas in the Tabernacle or the Temple. He took blood and went through the door into the outer court, through another door into the Holy Place, and then through the veil into the Holy of Holies. He did not sit down or delay. As soon as the sacrifice was made, he left and did not return for another year. Every year, year after year, another Yom Kippur was necessary. Between these yearly sacrifices—every day, day after day—thousands of other sacrifices were made, of produce

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and of animals. The process was never ended, never completed, because the priesthood was not perfect and the sacrifices were not perfect.

2. The Heavenly High Priest (4:14)

¹⁴Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.

a) Passed Through the Havens (4:14a)

MacArthur: Throughout the book of Hebrews the high priesthood of Jesus Christ is exalted. In chapter 1 He is seen as the One who has made ‘purification for sins’ (v. 3). In chapter 2 He is ‘a merciful and faithful high priest’ (v. 17) and in chapter 3 He is ‘the Apostle and High Priest of our confession’ (v. 1). Chapters 7-9 focus almost exclusively on Jesus’ high priesthood. Here in 4:14 He is called ‘a great high priest.’

Phillips: Israel’s priests pointed forward to Jesus, the great high priest. He is great because of His divine nature. He is the Son of God and His shed blood is sufficient to satisfy God’s wrath forever. He is great because his sacrifice achieved a finished atonement, unlike the ones offered by Aaron, which had to be repeated daily. He is great because He is not a sinful man going into the holy of holies once a year, and needing to come back again the next. Instead, He has gone through the heavens into the true tabernacle, the heavenly throne room of God; and offered His shed blood once-for-all. This is the contrast implicit in verse 14. Unlike Aaron, who was denied entry into the Promised Land because of His sin, and unlike the high priests who followed Aaron who were themselves sinners and could not offer the true sacrifice, Jesus has entered the land of rest, heaven itself, and has finished our redemption.

Schreiner: The high priesthood of Jesus now takes center stage. Believers must hold on to their confession of the faith since Jesus as the great high priest and God’s Son has passed through the heavens. We have already seen the priestly theme in 1:3 where Jesus accomplished cleansing for sin and sat down at God’s right hand. The same idea is implicit here. Jesus ‘passed through the heavens.’ We have spatial and vertical language here, representing the notion that God is transcendent and separate from human beings, removed from us, so to speak, by the sky. But Jesus as the supreme and great high priest has traveled through the heavens. He has entered the presence of God by virtue of his sacrifice.

Bruce: With admonition is coupled positive encouragement. Jesus has already been presented to the readers as a ‘merciful and faithful high priest’ (2:17). ‘Jesus, the Son of God’ is not disqualified by His divine origin from sharing in His people’s troubles and sympathizing with their weaknesses. He Himself endured every trial that they are likely to undergo, but remained steadfast throughout, and has now ‘passed through the heavens’ to the very throne of God. In Him, then, His people have a powerful incentive to perseverance in faith and obedience. ‘The heavens’ through which Jesus passed are the heavenly regions in general. The plural ‘heavens,’ as regularly in the New Testament and Septuagint, reflects the Hebrew word used in the Old Testament, which is always plural. What is emphasized here is his transcendence. It is because He has been so highly exalted that He is such a ‘great’ high priest.

Hughes: On the other hand, Jesus, our great High Priest, after His once-only sacrifice for sins on the cross, passed ‘through the heavens’—going through the first heaven (atmosphere), the second heaven (outer space), and finally into the third heaven (the most holy of all places, the presence of God, cp. 2 Cor. 12:2-4). And there He sat down (something no high priest had ever done!)

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because His atoning work was finished. He remains at God's right hand, making intercession for us.

MacArthur: Jesus, our great High Priest, after He had made the one-time, perfect sacrifice on the cross, also passed through three areas. When He 'passed through the heavens,' He went through the first heaven (the atmosphere), the second heaven (outer space), and into the third heaven (God's abode; 2 Cor. 12:2-4). Jesus went to where God Himself, not simply His glory, dwells. This is the holiest of all holies. But Jesus did not have to leave. His sacrifice was made once for all time. The sacrifice was perfect and the High Priest was perfect, and He sat down for all eternity at the Father's right hand (1:3). Our great High Priest did not pass through the Tabernacle or the Temple. He 'passed through the heavens.'

Phillips: The writer of Hebrews gives us a *reason* for our perseverance, and it is a doctrinal point he gives. What is it that motivates Christian people to enter into a life of struggle and strife, holding fast to the confession? The reason behind our perseverance is the person and work of Jesus Christ, who as the Son of God and as our great high priest has secured our salvation ahead of us. Jesus and His saving work are set forth here as the antidote mainly to fear: fear of failure, fear of falling away, and even the fear of drawing near to God that paralyzes so many Christians. Two aspects of the saving work of Jesus Christ to reconcile sinners to God come in view here. He has made propitiation for us in the heavenly tabernacle, and He now ministers on high with sympathy for our weakness (v. 15).

Phillips: Because Jesus is our high priest, we are reconciled to God. This means that we can approach Him freely. We do not have to hide from Him; we do not have to flee like Adam in the garden; the veil barring us from God's presence is torn because of the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross. We may now, as the writer of Hebrews so greatly wants us to see, approach boldly into the presence of God that once was barred by our sin.

Hughes: The grand and great point of this for the author's Jewish hearers is the overarching *superiority* of Jesus their great High Priest. Their preacher-writer-friend knew that amidst the rising troubles, some of them would no doubt look back through rose-colored glasses to the Levitical system, over-imagining the comfort of having priestly mediation, and some would be in danger of being sucked back into the system. To such, this strong teaching was the antidote. There is simply no contest between the Levitical system and what is provided in Christ!

b) Hold Fast Our Confession (4:14b)

Phillips: The writer begins this passage by restating the *requirement* that this letter continually stresses, namely, the command to persevere in the Christian faith. He writes, 'Let us hold fast our confession.' This is not only a necessary requirement, but also an extremely difficult thing to do. It is 'our confession' that we must hold fast. The early church employed theological formulas to express the faithful's confession, like the Apostles' Creed. This reminds us that there is truth content to our profession of faith and that this content is vitally important. It matters what we believe; there is content we cannot let go of without letting go of salvation in Christ: things like who Jesus is and what He has done to save us from our sins.

Schreiner: Given what Jesus has accomplished as the great high priest and Son of God (these two titles tie together the two sections of the letter: (4:14-10:18 and 1:1-4:13 respectively), they should not renounce their confession. The word 'confession' (*ομολογιας, homologias*, cp. 3:1; 10:23) denotes the faith the readers have embraced and promised to uphold. They should hold fast to it and not let it slip away, for retaining their confession is not merely a matter of adhering

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to a set of doctrines about Jesus as the Son and high priest. Jesus has secured for His people access to God's presence, and the presence of God is not available by any other means. If they turn away from Jesus' priestly sacrifice and seek to find forgiveness in the sacrifices of the Levitical cult, they are sundered from God.

Hughes: Thus, we can appreciate the force of the closing command of verse 14, 'Let us hold fast our confession.' That confession was explicitly focused in 3:1 on 'Jesus, the apostle and high priest.' If you want to get through hard times, hold on to and confess Jesus 'the apostle,' the *sent one* of God, who did everything to procure your salvation for you. Along with this, proudly confess that He is your 'high priest.' Own it publicly. Make it the refrain of your soul.

MacArthur: The appeal of 4:14 is for yet uncommitted Jews [DSB: ??] to accept Jesus Christ as their true High Priest. They should demonstrate that their confession is true possession by holding fast to Him as their Savior. This emphasizes the human side of the believer's security. True believers 'hold fast,' as God holds them fast.

3. The Sympathetic High Priest (4:15)

¹⁵*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.*

a) Able to Sympathize (4:15a)

Hughes: Hold tight to your confession of Jesus, the author urges, because He is capable of unparalleled understanding and sympathy. This was an incredible revelation in its ancient setting. The Stoics believed that the primary attribute of God was *apatheia*, the inability to feel anything at all. They reasoned that if He could feel, He could be controlled by others and therefore would be less than God. The Epicureans believed that God dwelled in *intermundia*, the spaces between the worlds, in complete detachment. The Jews, of course, had a far more accurate picture of God. But before Jesus came it was incomplete, for He revealed the revolutionary Fatherhood of God—daring to address Him as 'Father and calling His followers to do the same (Mt. 6:9). But the assertion that God is not only a Father but has such sympathy that He enters the suffering of this world was, and is, absolutely staggering. It is impossible for us, with our heritage of Biblical revelation, to appreciate how revolutionary the idea of a sympathetic God was.

Phillips: The second aspect of Christ's priestly ministry is the sympathy He bears for us in heaven. This is a point the author has made before, so it must be an important one. The Lord you serve, the Savior to whom you look, is not aloof from your trials, but feels them with intimate acquaintance. He is not disinterested or cold to what you are going through; He came to this earth and took up our human nature precisely so that He might now be able to have a fellow feeling with us. Therefore, He is eminently able to represent you before the throne of His heavenly Father, pleading your cause, securing your place, and procuring the spiritual resources you need.

Schreiner: The author draws attention to the nature of Jesus' high priesthood. Even though he has entered God's presence by passing through the heavens, He can identify with human beings. Here the author picks up the emphasis on Jesus' humanity, which was rehearsed in 2:5-19, and especially in 2:17-18. Jesus is not only a majestic high priest who has entered the heavens and sits at God's right hand. He is also a tender high priest. He sympathizes 'with our weaknesses.'

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The word sympathy is not limited to compassion and empathy but also denotes Jesus' ability to help those who are afflicted (cp. 10:34).

Hughes: The method for the unparalleled sympathy of God, was, of course, the incarnation of His Son in human flesh. His incarnation was real. He became a real man—not an almost man or a Docetic man. Though He was sinless, He had a real human body, mind, and emotions—with their inherent weaknesses. He was ignorant and was taught. He walked like a baby before He walked like a man. He thought and talked like a baby before He thought and talked like a man. This is why our text asserts He *is able* 'to sympathize with our weaknesses.' Jesus, our High Priest, has an unequalled capacity for sympathy. It goes far beyond the *intellectual*, because it is truly *experiential*. Jesus does not just *imagine* how we feel—he *feels* it. The word for 'sympathize' here means 'to share the experience of another'—to sympathize through common experience. The most sensitive man who ever lived feels with us.

Bruce: His transcendence, however, makes no difference to His humanity. Our author has already stated that, in order to 'become a merciful and faithful high priest,' the Son of God had to be 'made like His brothers in all respects,' and that 'He is able to help those enduring trial,' because 'He Himself endured trial and suffering' (2:17ff.). So here he repeats that Christians have in heaven a high priest with an unequalled capacity for sympathizing with them in all the dangers and sorrows and trials which come their way in life, because He Himself, by virtue of His likeness to them, was exposed to all these experiences. Yet He endured triumphantly every form of testing that mankind could endure, without any weakening of His faith in God or any relaxation of His obedience to Him.

MacArthur: Most people seem to think of God as being far removed from human life and concerns. Jesus was the very Son of God, yet His divinity did not prevent Him from experiencing our feelings, our emotions, our temptations, our pain. God became man, He became Jesus to share triumphantly the temptation and the testing and the suffering of men, in order that He might be a sympathetic and understanding High Priest. Our great High Priest not only is perfectly merciful and faithful but also perfectly understanding. He has an unequalled capacity for sympathizing with us in every danger, in every trial, in every situation that comes our way, because He has been through it all Himself. 'Weaknesses' does not refer directly to sin, but to feebleness or infirmity. It refers to all the natural limitations of humanity, which, however, include liability to sin.

b) *Tempted Without Sin (4:15b)*

Schreiner: As a human being He knows the frailties and groaning that beset the human race. He is not a distant and aloof high priest but is Himself intimately acquainted with the human condition. Indeed He experienced the full range of temptation. He understands every temptation we face since He experienced something similar. Nevertheless He never surrendered to sin's power. He shared in our weaknesses and frailty, but He did not—not even once—give Himself over to sin. He always obeyed the will of the Father.

Bruce: The phrase 'free from sin' does not mean that our Lord experience every kind of human temptation except temptation to sin; like the Israelites in Moses' day, He too had his day of trial in the wilderness, and any compromise with the tempter's suggestions, any inclination to put God to the test, would have been as certainly sin as His refusal to countenance these suggestions or abate one iota of His confidence in His Father meant spiritual victory—victory for Himself and also for His people.

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MacArthur: Jesus knew firsthand the drive of human nature toward sin. His humanity was His battleground. It is here that Jesus faced and fought sin. He was victorious, but not without the most intense temptation, grief, and anguish. In all of this struggle, however, Jesus was ‘without sin’ (*chōris hamartia*). He was completely apart from, separated from, sin. These two Greek words express the absolute absence of sin. Though He was mercilessly tempted to sin, not the slightest taint of it ever entered His mind or was expressed in His words or actions.

MacArthur: Some may wonder how Jesus can completely identify with us if He did not actually sin as we do. It was Jesus’ facing sin with His perfect righteousness and truth, however, that qualifies Him. Merely experiencing something does not give us understanding of it. A person can have many successful operations without understanding the least bit about surgery. On the other hand, a doctor may perform thousands of complicated and successful operations without ever having had the surgery himself. It is his knowledge of the disease or disorder and his surgical skill in treating it that qualifies him, not his having had the disease. He has great experience with the disease—much greater experience with it than any of his patients—having confronted it in all of its manifestations. Jesus never sinned, but He understands sin better than any man. He has seen it more clearly and fought it more diligently than any of us could ever be able to do.

Hughes: He lived with a human body, mind, and soul—with *all* their limitations, except for sin. This does not mean He experienced every individual temptation we do. He did not experience the specific temptations peculiar to women or married people or the elderly. Neither did He experience the temptations that come from having already sinned. But He did experience the essential temptations that cover, and in His case, supersede, whatever we may experience. Even more, Jesus’ experience of temptation was greater because the stakes were so high—and because He never gave in.

Phillips: This is the reason you must not give up, because Christ is there in heaven bearing human flesh, having endured what you are going through now—and more—yet without Himself falling into sin. His righteousness represents you before God’s throne and grants you access to the Father; His prayers plead for your sustenance and intercede on behalf of your needs. ‘Here am I, and the children God has given Me,’ Jesus declared upon His arrival in heaven (2:13). He has opened the way for you, established your place where He is, and now He prays for your spiritual provision and protection to the Father who is certain to receive His every petition.

4. The Gracious High Priest (4:16)

¹⁶*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.*

Phillips: Our *requirement* is to hold firmly to the faith we profess. Our *reason* to strive on is the high-priestly ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. His ministry reconciles us to God and opens heaven’s treasure chest of grace. This makes possible the great *resource* of prayer, to which the writer now turns.

a) Draw Near with Confidence (4:16a)

Schreiner: The ‘therefore’ (*οὖν, οὖν*) hearkens back to verses 14-15. Since Jesus is both a transcendent (having gone into God’s presence in the heavens) and tender (sharing our frail and weak nature) high priest, believers are exhorted to draw near to God boldly to receive grace and mercy at a needy time. The verb ‘approach’ (*προσερχόμεθα, prosechōmetha*) is used often in

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Hebrews (7:25; 10:1, 22; 11:6; 12:18, 22). In 12:22 the recipients have already ‘come’ to Mount Zion, which is the heavenly realm where Christ reigns. Here, however, believers are exhorted to approach the throne of grace. The closest parallel to 4:16 is 10:22, where the readers are exhorted to ‘draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith.’

Phillips: What does it mean to approach the throne of grace? It means to come to God in prayer on the basis of Christ’s high-priestly ministry; that is, His propitiating sacrifice and present intercession. In a great sermon on this text, Charles Haddon Spurgeon worked out some of the implications for our own approach to God in prayer. The first is that we must come in *lowly reverence*. There is no place for pride or vanity here, and if our eyes could see what really is before us spiritually, we would tremble at its awesome majesty. Second, we should come with *great joy*. Why? Because of the favor that has been extended to us in so high a privilege. Next, our prayers should include *enlarged expectations*, as befitting the power and goodness of the King to whom we come. Combined with this must be *submission to His wisdom and will*.

Phillips: Finally, and this is the special point being made by the writer of Hebrews, we should come to God *with confidence*. We come knowing that we will be favorably received, knowing that we can speak freely, knowing that this is a throne of grace toward us. Why? Because of the High Priest who has gone ahead, securing access for us by His blood and interceding prayers. We cannot overestimate the importance of such confidence. This is the key to prayer—to praying often, to praying openly, to praying boldly and freely and with gladness of heart—to know that we come clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, invited by His own saving ministry, purchased by His precious blood, and anticipated by His sympathetic intercession. This is the secret to lively and happy prayer.

Hughes: Fittingly, the writer closes this brief section with a lyrical call to prayer in a text that is so important to the hearts of so many Christians. The term that the ESV renders ‘confidence’ here has a long documented history in classical Greek and denotes ‘free and open speech of citizens with one another.’ Significantly, it was never used for prayer in pagan classical literature. Rather, it was the Jews who first began to use it in the Greek Old Testament to describe prayer. It means ‘bold frankness’—an outpouring of the heart. There is no suggestion of disrespect here, but simply that we are to come to God without hesitation or tentativeness. What a contrast with the trepidation of the high priest when he entered the Holy of Holies!

Schreiner: The readers are encouraged to approach the throne of grace boldly (*παρρησίας, parrēsias*). The word expresses the joyful confidence with which they can approach God because of Christ. Both texts emphasize the confidence and joy with which believers approach God. The word ‘boldness’ is used in a similar context in 10:19: ‘Therefore, brothers, since we have boldness (*παρρησιαν, parrēsian*) to enter the sanctuary through the blood of Jesus.’ ‘Entering the sanctuary’ in 10:19 is equivalent to ‘the throne of grace’ in 4:16. Jesus’ priestly work in shedding His blood accounts for believers’ confidence in drawing near to God’s throne.

MacArthur: Again, the Holy Spirit appeals to those who are yet undecided about accepting Jesus as their Savior [DSB:??]. They should not only keep from going back into Judaism, but they should hold on to their confession of Christ and, finally—and necessarily—go on to ‘draw near with confidence to the throne of grace.’ Most ancient rulers were unapproachable by the common people (cp. Est. 5:1-2). Yet any penitent person, no matter how sinful and undeserving, may approach God’s throne at any time for forgiveness and salvation—confident that he will be received with ‘mercy’ and ‘grace.’

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b) *Throne of Grace (4:16b)*

Phillips: The language here is striking and clear. By telling us to come before God's throne, the author reminds us that it is the place where blood has been offered for us, the mercy seat where God calls sinners to meet with Him. But we are also reminded that it is to a king that we come; we come to the royal throne of the King of kings. Yes, it is a throne to which you come, but that throne is a throne of grace. That means that when you come, your sins are covered by the blood of Christ, and that your faults are looked upon with compassion. Your stumbling prayers are not criticized, but are received with kindness. Moreover, Jesus' priestly ministry secures the Holy Spirit's help (cp. Rom. 8:26). God's Spirit helps us to pray, and He graciously interprets our prayers in the ears of the heavenly Father. Furthermore, because it is a throne of grace to which we come, God is ready to grant our requests. He is glad to provide our needs, to give us strength to persevere through trials (cp. 2 Cor. 12:9). So we are not afraid to ask of God, we who are so needy in this life.

Bruce: Therefore, says our author, let us come with full confidence to the throne of grace. This throne of grace is the throne of God, where Jesus, as His people's high priest, sits exalted at the Father's right hand. It is the antitype, in our author's mind, to the 'mercy-seat' in the earthly sanctuary of which he speaks below in 9:5. It was at the earthly mercy-seat that the work of atonement was completed in token on the Day of Atonement and the grace of God extended to His people; the presence of the Christians' high priest on the heavenly throne of grace bespeaks a work of atonement completed not in token but in fact, and the constant availability of divine aid in all their need. Thanks to Him, the throne of God is a mercy-seat to which they have free access and from which they may receive all the grace and power required 'for timely help' in the hour of trial and crisis.

Schreiner: The throne is designated as one 'of grace.' Believers draw near to the throne boldly, for they know it is a throne of grace by virtue of Jesus' work, not a throne of wrath. Hence they confidently and gladly ask God to grant them 'mercy,' presumably for sins they have committed. At the same time they petition God for 'grace' for the strength and power to face every situation in life. God's grace is poured out as believers request help when they are overwhelmed. The term for 'help' here (*βοηθειαν, Boētheian*) echoes 2:18 where Jesus as high priest 'is able to help' (*βοηθησαι Boēthēsai*) those in temptation. The author emphasizes in 4:16 that help is granted when the need is greatest.

MacArthur: By Christ's sacrifice of Himself, God's throne of judgment is turned into 'a throne of grace' for those who trust in Him. As the Jewish high priests once a hear for centuries had sprinkled blood on the mercy seat for the people's sins, Jesus shed His blood once and for all time for the sins of everyone who believes in Him. That is His perfect provision.

Hughes: And when we come boldly, what happens? 'We...receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. We receive 'mercy' for our *past* failures and 'grace' to meet our *present* and *future* needs. We receive the full heart of God as He mercifully meets us in our sins and misery—and heals us. Then we receive the full hand of God's grace, His unmerited favor and loving regard that just keeps coming and coming. And it always comes, our verse concludes, 'in time of need.' That is, the help is always 'appropriate to the time.' It is not according to *our* clock but according to Heaven's time—the perfect time.

Hughes: But, of course, the condition for timely mercy and grace is confident and frank prayer. If we fail to pray, we rob ourselves of the great, timely resources God holds for us. Some in that

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beleaguered little house-church of the first century had allowed the mounting hardships to draw them away from God rather than closer by prayer. Their confidence was gone. What about you? Has life made you draw away from the throne of grace or draw near?

5. The High Priest Summarized

Schreiner: These verses are among the most comforting in the Bible. Believers suffer from all the temptations and agonies that characterize the human condition. Does God care? Can He do anything to help if He does? We are given the answer here. We have a high priest who is fully human. He experienced the full range of temptations. No temptation was foreign to His experience. He can relate to all of our temptations. He sympathizes with our weaknesses because He experienced those weaknesses as well. We can't say that our God doesn't know what it is like to be human. He is not a transcendent deity who is far removed from us, but He also dwells among His people. His full humanity, however, did not involve failure. No, here is one who suffered all the pains and anguish of human life without ever yielding to sin.

Schreiner: Our great high priest, Jesus the Son of God, knows and cares what our lives are like. But He is also powerful. He has passed through the heavens. He has come into the presence of God. He is tender and transcendent. He not only cares, but He also reigns at the right hand of God. He passed through the heavens and atoned for our sins with His blood, thus solving our problem with guilt and shame. He has expunged our guilt with His blood. Therefore, we do not shrink back from God's presence. We approach Him gladly and confidently, knowing that He offers mercy and grace, longing for us to know His forgiveness and His power in every circumstance of life.

Phillips: God requires us to persevere in faith through the trials of this Christian life. He gives us a great reason to press on—the saving work of our great high priest, who is able to save us to the uttermost. He has gone ahead of us to open the doors and unlock the treasures of God's mercy and grace. Prayer is the great resource God gives us, one that we must not neglect if we are to grow strong in the faith and persevere through difficulties. Prayer brings us to a throne of power and authority, but also a throne of grace to all who are in Christ. Therefore, let us draw near to God with reverence, with joy, with great expectations, and especially with the confidence that belongs to the sons and daughters of the King of heaven and earth.

Hughes: The writer has called us to hold on in life's storms through three things: our *confession* of Christ, our *understanding* of Christ, and our *prayers* to Christ. 'Let us hold fast *our confession*' that Jesus is our apostle and great high priest—that He passed through the heavens and is at God's right hand praying for us. Let us both confess it in our hearts and to others. We confess what we truly believe. Next we must take to our hearts the stupendous *understanding* that Jesus really does sympathize with our weaknesses. He took on the same weak, human instrument that we wear. There is not a note that can be struck that does not find an answering chord in Him. Believe it. Let it play in your soul. This will see you through the roughest of times. Finally, we can come confidently and openly in *prayer* to the throne of grace and so find mercy and grace that is perfectly appropriate to the time.

For next time: Read Hebrews 5:1-10.