

Jesus' Present Ministry
Implications for Our Praying

Today we are continuing our Lenten sermon series on Jesus' Present Ministry. Last week we sought to answer the question, "Where is Jesus now?" The most precise answer to that question is: **Jesus is seated at the right hand of God**. After His death and resurrection Jesus was elevated to the place of power and authority; He reigns with God the Father, providing everything that is associated with God's right hand in the OT - blessing, protection, rescue, pleasure, etc. This means that Jesus is not sitting idle until the day that He returns; He is active and powerful in this world. Today we are going to examine the implications of this for our praying.

In his book on prayer, Paul Miller points out that "many people struggle to learn how to pray because they are focusing on praying, not on God" (*A Praying Life*, p. 20). Focusing on praying is like trying to drive while looking **at** the windshield instead of looking **through** it. I think Miller is absolutely right; we learn how to pray by focusing on God. We don't focus on praying, we don't focus on our sinfulness and weakness, and we don't focus on our own worthiness (or lack thereof). If we want to learn how to pray we must focus on God. Today's passage will urge us to do just that: focus on God's unique Son, Jesus. Listen as I read Hebrews 4:14-16.

14 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. 15 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. 16 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.

This passage urges us take our eyes off of ourselves and to fix our eyes on Jesus so that we will understand who He is, where He is, and what He offers those who come to God through Him. In other words, this passage explains how Jesus' present ministry should influence the way we pray. Of course, prayer is a vast, complex, and sometimes confusing topic.

- Prayer includes thanksgiving (telling God "thank you" for what He's done)
- Prayer includes praise (expressing to God your appreciation for who He is)
- Prayer includes confession (telling God "I'm sorry" for the ways we've wronged Him)
- Prayer includes listening (paying attention to things He might say and ways He might lead us)
- Prayer also includes petition (asking God to do things for us)

Today's passage addresses this last aspect of prayer, petition - asking God for the things we need. There are ways that you and I need grace and mercy from God; we need Him to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. If we don't understand and believe what this passage says about Jesus, our asking will go wrong in a number of different ways.

Spiritual Reality: Jesus is our great high priest at the right hand of God in heaven.
(Hebrews 4:14) This reality is the basis for confident praying.

14 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.

Speaking to the believing community, the author says that ***we have*** a great high priest (see also 4:15, 8:1, 10:21). It's not merely the case that there exists a great high priest; no, ***we have*** a great high priest. It's the difference between "there is a hundred dollar bill" and "***I have*** a hundred dollar bill." If we have a great high priest, we'd be foolish to ignore who He is and what He does.

Not growing up under the old covenant, we don't understand intuitively our need for a high priest. But the original readers of Hebrews would have. They understood that you don't simply walk into the presence of God; they knew that sinful people would be consumed in God's presence by His white-hot holiness. In the old covenant, God allowed the high priest to enter into His presence as a mediator for the people, but even then it was only once a year and he had to bring a sacrifice for his own sins and the sins of the people. It was customary, so I've read, that they would tie a rope around the high priest's ankle so that if he died in God's presence they could pull his body out without entering themselves.

What the author of Hebrews is saying here should have filled them (and us) with awe: ". . .we have a ***great*** high priest. . ." Chapters 5 through 10 will explain just how great a high priest Jesus is. Jesus is a great high priest ***who has passed through the heavens***. Whereas the high priest in the old covenant passed through the veil into the earthly holy of holies, Jesus has passed through the heavens into the ***heavenly*** holy of holies. In 8:1 the author gets even more specific:

1 Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens,

Our great high priest sits enthroned at the right hand of God. The earthly temple in the old covenant was only a copy; Jesus entered into the heavenly temple (8:1-6) - into the very presence of God Himself. Equally amazing is the statement in 6:19-20 that Jesus has entered within the veil "***as a forerunner for us***"; the idea there is that we too can follow Him through the torn veil into the presence of God. In Christ we have ***full and unfettered fellowship with God***. Colossians 3:1 says that we have been "raised up and seated with Christ"!

14 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.

Notice back in 4:14 that Jesus is also identified as ***the Son of God***. Chapter 1 identifies Jesus as the One who created all things, who inherits all things, who radiates God's

glory, who is the exact representation of God's nature, who sustains the universe, who made purification of sins, who is enthroned at the right hand of God. **That** Son of God is our great high priest. The One who represents us before God is incomparable in every way.

Because of Jesus' identity (as our great high priest and as the Son of God), the author urges us to "**hold fast our confession**" (which is mentioned three times in the book of Hebrews - in 4:14, 3:1, and 10:23). This confession involves, among other things, the teaching that Jesus is the Son of God and that Jesus is our great high priest. When you hold fast to something, you seize it and possess it firmly. When it comes to "our confession" about Christ, the last thing we should do is hold it loosely or open-handedly. We should cling to these truths about Jesus providing full, unfettered access to God the Father and that Jesus is the very Son of God who is for us. The whole book of Hebrews argues against drifting away from and abandoning this confession.

Think about how this reality informs our praying. The tendency is to view Jesus as our high priest at the right hand of God as good information but something secondary when it comes to prayer. What really matters - what is primary - is how I feel about myself: if I feel good about myself and my walk with God right now, I'll pray; if I don't feel good about myself I'll probably stay away from God. Noticing the condition of our souls and paying attention to our obedience is obviously important. But this passage screams, "Take your eyes off of yourself. Fix your eyes on Jesus. He is our great high priest seated at the right hand of God. Because He is there, you are free to go there also!" This is a rich spiritual reality that we should understand and believe!

It gets even better when we consider the next spiritual reality described in verse 15: **Spiritual Reality: Jesus' past earthly experience uniquely enables Him to understand our weaknesses and temptations.** (Hebrews 4:15) In verse 15 the author tells how Jesus' earthly experience uniquely qualifies Him to help us in our weakness.

15 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.

He could have said, "we do have a high priest who **can** sympathize with our weaknesses." But he uses a double negative instead (I think) to clear up a common misconception: we do **not** have a high priest who **cannot** sympathize with our weaknesses. The common misconception is that "Jesus can't possibly understand what I'm going through. . . He was so sinless and so single-minded and so godly that He's in a different category than me. Even if He could understand what I face, He wouldn't be sympathetic to me; He would ridicule and scoff at me." Our author negates that line of thinking by saying that actually "we do **not** have a high priest who **cannot** sympathize with our weaknesses."

By becoming one of us, Jesus is now and forever able to "sympathize with our weaknesses" - especially those weaknesses that can lead to temptation and sin (see P.T. O'Brien, p. 183). Jesus is not at the right hand of God thinking, "I have no idea why

it's so hard for humans to believe that God is good and strong and 'for' them." No, Jesus doesn't have to wonder about those things because He experienced the full range of weaknesses associated with having a flesh and blood body in this world.

The author writes that Jesus "has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin." Some argue (rightly, I think) that Jesus experienced the full brunt of temptation because He never gave in. The easiest way to get rid of temptation is simply to give in to it - go ahead and sin and the temptation goes away (for a while).

Jesus never did that. He was tempted in the things He suffered (2:18), but He never sinned (see also 2 Corinthians 5:21, John 7:18, 1 John 3:5, 1 Peter 2:22, etc.). When you think about it, we don't need a high priest who has sinned just like us; we don't need a high priest who has experienced anger, vengeance, greed, lust, and pride. That type of person could certainly sympathize with us, but he wouldn't be much help. No, we need a high priest who has negotiated all the temptations of this life successfully without sinning. That's a high priest who can help us in the midst of temptations. That's exactly the type of high priest we have in Jesus. In Hebrews 2:18 we are told:

18 For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.

Jesus is able to rescue us when we're tempted if we let Him. . . if we come to God through Him. . . if we pay attention to His Spirit who dwells within us.

We are also told twice in the NT that one of the ways that Jesus helps His people is through prayer, "interceding" for us. We read this in Hebrews 7:25.

25 Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

In a similar context, Romans 8:34 tells us that . . .

34 . . . Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.

The emphasis seems to be on Jesus praying for our perseverance. F.F. Bruce points out that this interceding shows continuity between Jesus' prayer life on earth and in heaven. We read in Luke 22:32 that Jesus told Peter, "I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail. . ." On earth Jesus "came to the aid" of Peter when he was weak and tempted. After denying Jesus three times, surely Peter was strengthened by this knowledge that Jesus had prayed for his perseverance. It seems to me that the same can and should be true for us: the reality that Jesus' present ministry includes praying for our perseverance should strengthen us and give us courage to pray.

Many times our weaknesses and temptations are the thing that keep us *from* praying. We think, "I'm tired, so I'm not going to pray," or "I'm anxious and can't sit still long enough to pray," or "I'm too consumed by temptation to pray." But this passage says that our weaknesses and temptations should *drive us to* prayer! Why? Because we have a

great high priest at the right hand of God who genuinely understands what we're facing and who genuinely wants to give us the help we need.

Therefore, we can draw near with confidence, asking for mercy and grace.

(Hebrews 4:16) If we don't understand and believe verses 14 and 15, we won't be able to do verse 16. In light of the fact that we have a great high priest seated at the right hand of God who can fully sympathize with our weaknesses. . .

16 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.

We are to be so confident in Jesus' identity as our great high priest and in His unique ability to understand us and help us that we are told to draw near to ***the throne*** of grace. As you know, the throne is where the King sits. In the old covenant, God was not only enthroned in heaven but also "above the cherubim" (Psalm 80:1, 99:1) - in the holy of holies above the ark of the covenant. Only the high priest could draw near to God in the holy of holies once a year. But in Christ we can continually draw near with confidence to the throne of grace! As believers in Jesus we have unfettered access to God.

Of course, the only thing being dispensed at the throne of grace. . . is grace - unmerited, undeserved gifts from God. God isn't selling anything; He isn't making deals. At the throne of grace He gives gifts to people like you and me who haven't earned or merited a thing. We're told here that when we draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, we will "receive mercy and find grace to help ***in time of need.***" Our needs will be met at just the right time.

The story is told of a man who checked into a monastery for a few days of spiritual retreat. The monk said to him, "I hope your stay is a blessed one. If you need anything, let us know and we'll teach you how to live without it." (cited in *Prayer* by Philip Yancey, p. 54). The point is that we often mistake wants and needs. We have freedom to ask for whatever we ***want***, but God is primarily committed to giving us what we ***need*** - especially our needs associated with our weaknesses.

God helps us in our weakness as we draw near with confidence to the throne of grace through Jesus Christ our great high priest. Think about your weaknesses and the associated temptations. You might have weaknesses associated with your past, your body, your flesh, your circumstances. Your temptations might involve anger, anxiety, cynicism, grumbling, sensuality or some other type of indulgence. The fact of the matter is that this week you and I are going to need grace in relation to our weaknesses; we will need God to give us what we don't have. This passage assures us that when we approach the throne of grace we will be given what we need because Jesus fully understands what we're experiencing.

The question is whether you and I are going to draw near and ask for the grace we need or whether we're going to pretend that we can live our lives with our own wisdom and in our own strength. Have you made peace with the fact that you are weak and that

you need the grace of God every day of your life? Have you considered the possibility that your weakness isn't a curse but that it's a blessing in disguise? It may just be that your weakness is the thing that keeps you tethered to God; your weakness keeps you humble and keeps you running back to the throne of grace.

Draw near with confidence to the throne of grace this week. Don't let your weaknesses or anything else keep you away. Don't merely pray for the things you think will happen anyway; pray for the things that only God can do.

One of the core ways that we learn to pray is by praying with others. We've established a monthly "prayer night" on the third Sunday of each month - which is tonight. Tonight's prayer night will begin at 6 p.m. Our prayer time will flow from the things we've been discussing this morning. If you come you will be able to pray with others and for others. And others will pray for you.