

Our Weaknesses

Hebrews 4:14-16

I want to begin this morning by having you think about your weaknesses. Your strengths are those things about which you feel confident and competent. Your weaknesses are those things about which you feel inadequate and vulnerable.

Your weaknesses may involve your ***past***. There may be some things in your past that are never far from your mind. Your past could involve sins you've committed or sins that have been committed against you. But there is a resulting weakness in your life. It may be that because of your past relationships in general are a weakness for you.

Your weakness may have to do with your ***body***. Perhaps you have some type of physical condition that limits you in significant ways. Whereas others go through life relatively carefree, you have this weakness that affects what you can do.

Your weakness may have to do with your ***flesh*** - not your body but that immaterial part of you that craves sin. Because of the weakness of your flesh you have to be very careful where you go and what you do; if you give your flesh an inch it will take a mile.

What are the weaknesses in your life? When you think about it, there are specific temptations associated with our weaknesses. A person with a painful/traumatic past might be tempted to become bitter and cynical about life and relationships and the church. A person with bodily weakness might be tempted to question the goodness of God. A person with fleshly weakness might be tempted to sins of indulgence - whether they involve alcohol or drugs or sex or food or entertainment.

Generally speaking, we wish our weaknesses would go away; we want to be strong, not weak. And we tend to think that our weaknesses keep us from walking closely with God (or from serving God more effectively). We think, "If I didn't have such intense fleshly desires . . . or if I didn't have such a traumatic past. . . or if I weren't so limited by my physical (or mental) condition. . . then I'd really be able to walk with God." We tend to think that our weaknesses define us and determine the type of life we can live.

Today as we continue our series from the book of Hebrews we are going to consider Hebrews 4:14-16. This passage prompts us to think about our weaknesses in a new light. This passage prompts us to see our weaknesses in light of Jesus, our great high priest who understands our weaknesses and gladly gives us the grace needed to avoid the temptations associated with those weaknesses. This passage tells us that God helps us in our weakness as we do two things.

First, ***God helps us in our weakness as we hold fast our confession. (Hebrews 4:14)*** Before we can think clearly about our own weaknesses we need to think clearly about who Jesus is.

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 how the author describes Jesus' identity in relation to us as believers. He 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.

Jesus is "a great high priest who has passed through the heavens." Chapters 5 through 10 will explain just how great a high priest He is. The author will explain that Jesus' greatness as our high priest involves 1) being of "the order of Melchizedek" (which is superior to the order of Levi; chapter 7), 2) holding His priesthood permanently (7:23-25), 3) serving in the true, heavenly tabernacle (8:1-6), 4) offering a better sacrifice (Himself! see 9:11-14), etc. There is nothing mediocre about Jesus as our high priest; we have a great high priest.

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 holy of holies, Jesus has passed through the heavens into the **heavenly** holy of holies. In 6:19-20 the author will mention that Jesus has entered within the veil "as a forerunner for us"; the idea is that in Him we now have access to God Himself. Having passed through the heavens Jesus has secured for us a full and unfettered relationship with God.

Jesus is also identified as **the Son of God**. Jesus as the Son of God was quite prominent in the first couple chapters of Hebrews. Chapter 1 begins by point out that whereas God had spoken long ago in many portions and in many ways, in these last days He has spoken to us **in His Son**. The Son is 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. In other words, 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." The fact that the author mentions "the confession" (or "our" confession) three times in the book of Hebrews (4:14, 3:1, 10:23) suggests that he has in mind a specific set of teachings or doctrines about Jesus. We can't say with certainty what this confession was, but it probably involved the teaching that Jesus is the Son of God and that Jesus is our great high priest.

His challenge is to "hold fast our confession" about Jesus as high priest and Son of God. 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.

What is involved in holding fast to our confession? The author of Hebrews isn't merely talking about having correct doctrine about Jesus - although good, orthodox doctrine is certainly better than faulty, unorthodox beliefs about Christ. He's ultimately talking about living our lives in a way that's compatible with this confession about Christ. Instead of walking through this life thinking that we're on our own and that God could care less, if we hold fast our confession, we live as if we have a great high priest who has brought a perfect sacrifice into the presence of God to pay for our sin once for all and that this great high priest - who, by the way, is Jesus the Son of God - is ready and willing to come to our rescue. And so we need to pay careful attention to what we really believe. (Btw, you can tell what a person really believes by his/her thoughts, words, and actions.)

I like Paul Tripp's comment that, "No one is more important in your life than you because no one talks to you more." That's so true. Day in and day out we have these internal conversations in which we're talking to ourselves. We are telling ourselves things that are either true or false; we are telling ourselves things that encourage trust in God or that encourage self-sufficiency. Psalm 42 provides a great example of the conversation the psalmist was having with himself. He felt like he was dying - like a deer panting for the water brooks (v. 1); He felt like God had abandoned him to his enemies (v. 9). And so he said this to himself:

11 Why are you in despair, O my soul?
And why have you become disturbed within me?
Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him,
The help of my countenance and my God.

By talking to himself in this way he was holding fast his confession that God is his protection and help - even when his circumstances were disheartening.

In a similar way, we can hold fast our confession about Jesus the Son of God. We need to tell ourselves the things that are true because we have a great high priest. Another way to say it is that "we need to preach the gospel to ourselves day after day." Before we preach the gospel to others, we need to preach the gospel to ourselves so that we're experiencing what we're advocating for others.

In this way we resist the temptation of thinking, "I go to church on Sundays and then I go back to the 'real world' on Mondays" - as if the things we are talking about from Scripture are unreal and irrelevant to everyday life. Hebrews is urging us to realize that having a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, is a reality that affects **everything**. Specifically, verses 15 and 16 spell out how this changes the way we think about our weaknesses.

God helps us in our weakness as we draw near with confidence to the throne of grace. (Hebrews 4:15-16) 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: we do **not** have a high priest who **cannot** sympathize with our weaknesses. I think he states it this way to negate a common misperception about Jesus, namely, “He 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.” Our author negates that line of thinking by saying, “Actually we do **not** have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses.”

In His divinity Jesus **is** in a different category than us; but in His humanity Jesus is in exactly the same category as us. Here he specifically mentions that Jesus can “sympathize with our weaknesses.” The author seems to have in mind especially those weaknesses that can lead to temptation and sin (see P.T. O’Brien, p. 183). Jesus isn’t at the right hand of God thinking, “I wonder what it’s like to experience weakness of body and mind and spirit. I wonder why it seems to be so hard for people 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.

Specifically, He “has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.” In the next chapter the author mentions that an earthly high priest can also sympathize with sinful people, but with a significant difference:

2 he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness; 3 and because of it he is obligated to offer *sacrifices* for sins, as for the people, so also for himself.

The high priest in the old covenant could also sympathize with the weaknesses of the people. But he was also obligated to offer sacrifices for the sins of the people **and** for himself (because he sinned also). By contrast, Jesus experienced the same temptations we experience - yet without sin. Some argue (rightly, I think) that Jesus experienced the full brunt of temptation because He never gave in. One 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). But that’s the easy way out.

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.

And that’s exactly the type of high priest that we have in Jesus. Since He is at the right hand of the throne of God, the author urges us to approach God with confidence:

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.

In light of the fact that Jesus fully sympathizes with our weaknesses (He really “gets it”) we should “draw near with confidence to the throne of grace.” Instead of keeping our distance and “doing the best we can with what we’ve got,” we draw near with confidence. This is the opposite of approaching God timidly thinking that He is stingy and grumpy and pretty unlikely to give you anything.

We are 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! We live in an age in which 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 again 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.

About fifteen years ago I met a guy at Trinity Seminary who was pastoring a church in southern California. He didn't tell me exactly what had happened, but he had come very close to some type of immorality that almost cost him everything he valued - marriage, ministry, friendships, etc. By the grace of God he came to his senses and began seeking God like never before. I met him years after all of this had happened. But what struck me was that he was still living with a healthy fear of the weakness of his flesh and of the deceitfulness of sin. He was desperate for God's grace every single day. He hadn't become complacent, thinking that now he was strong or that he didn't really need much grace anymore. His weakness kept him hungry for God and His grace. That's exactly where you and I need to live - daily desperate for God's grace. That's certainly where Paul lived. Listen to what he wrote in 2 Corinthians 12. After praying three times for God to remove his "thorn in the flesh" Jesus answered in this way:

9 And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.