

“An Anchor for the Soul: Throne of Grace”

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • December 6, 2015

Let me begin by saying that there is so much in this amazing passage of Scripture that we will not be able to cover everything that's in it in the time we have this morning. Many of the primary doctrines of the Christian faith are touched upon in this section and so I want to encourage you to spend some time reading and studying it on your own this week. In fact, you might want to come to Brian's Sunday School class that meets in the Living Room. Each week they study the previous Sunday's sermon Scripture.

Now, let me quickly recap where we have been in this study of Hebrews. Remember that this book was written by a pastor to a group of Jewish Christians, probably a house church in Rome at a time when persecution was just beginning. The purpose was to encourage them to remain faithful to Jesus despite the temptation to either return to the Jewish faith or to completely abandon Christ. So to encourage them the writer reminds them of the superiority of Jesus. The letter begins by telling them that in the past God has spoken through prophets and angels but now He has spoken through His son. Jesus, therefore, is greater than the angels, and greater than the prophets. He goes on to say that Jesus is greater than Moses. That He is in fact the perfect imprint of God so they should pay close attention to him. Then, as we saw a few weeks ago, he warns of the consequences of falling away from Christ, not entering God's promised rest. He's talking about heaven.

Quick show of hands—how many of you want to go to heaven? For those of you who didn't raise your hand I am really curious why you're in church. Someone once said, “everyone wants to go to heaven but nobody wants to go today.” The great Presbyterian preacher D. James Kennedy developed a very successful evangelism program called Evangelism Explosion. It was a training program to help people share the good news with others. He

suggested that you start by asking someone, “Do you know for sure that you're going to be with God in Heaven. If God were to ask you, ‘why should I let you into my Heaven?’ what would you say?”

The question behind the question is “how do you get to heaven?” Many people will answer that they try to do more good things than bad things so that the scale of justice tips slightly in their favor. That's how you get into heaven. There's a problem, though. That's not how God works. God tells us in the Bible that the way to get to heaven is to perfectly keep His entire law. All the time. How are you doing with that one? Let's just take what Jesus called the “greatest commandment.” He said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul, and all your strength.” None of us has done that. I'd even be willing to say that none of us has done that here in worship. The cold hard fact is that if we're going to heaven it won't be because we deserve it. We have a problem and it's called sin. And the result is that we are separated from God. As Romans 3:23 says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Another way to put that would be all have sinned and don't meet the requirements of heaven.

The good news is that God loves you too much to leave you like that. He wants you with Him forever. God is also the only one who can solve the problem of sin. In the Old Testament we find that God set up a system in order to deal with sin. Beginning with Aaron, the brother of Moses, God ordained priests to serve as intermediaries between God and the people. He gave them specific instructions that included a system of sacrifices and offerings. Our Old Testament reading this morning comes at the end of a section where God commands a day of atonement – Yom Kippur in Hebrew – to deal with the sins of the people.

On that day, the High Priest is to bring the blood of a sacrificed bull into the Most Holy

place in the Tabernacle or Temple—the place where the Ark of the Covenant was, the place where God’s presence dwelled—and sprinkle the blood on and in front of the mercy seat on top of the Ark. This had to be the most awe-inducing event in the life of a priest, entering into the presence of God. In fact, the priest had bells sewn into his robes so that those outside could know that he was still alive.

Of course this system was not sufficient to truly deal with the problem of sin. But God ordained it to serve as a pattern for the real solution, which was Christ himself. And so the writer of Hebrews shows us that Jesus is the true priest, the “great high priest.” The role of a priest is to serve as a mediator between God and people. He needs to be able to represent the people before God, so the priest has to be one of the people and he brings performs the sacrifices and brings the offerings to God. He also needs to represent God to the people, so he had to be appointed by God. Nobody could just volunteer to become high priest.

The problem is that, as Hebrews 5:3 points out, when the priest went to atone for the sins of the people he had to begin by sacrificing to atone for his own sins. That’s where Jesus comes in. Our passage today begins, “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.” He goes on to show us why Jesus as priest replaces all other human priests. First, Jesus meets the requirement that the priest be one of the people. That’s what we celebrate at Christmas – the incarnation. God became fully human, born in the normal way. He felt pain, he got tired and hungry. Jesus is one of us. Therefore he is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. He experienced them. He was tempted in all the ways we are tempted and even more so because he is the only person to ever perfectly resist temptation. He did not sin.

But there’s one more way that Jesus is the greater high priest. The human priests had to return year after year with the blood of the sacrifices to atone for the sins of the people. Jesus, however, is not just the priest, he *is* the sacrifice. He entered into the real Holy of Holies, heaven, with the only blood that could truly atone for our sins, his own. Through his suffering and death and resurrection, Jesus “became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.” When he returned to heaven he sat down at the right hand of God the Father where he fulfills his priestly role by interceding for us. We now have direct access to God because our perfect priest is forever bringing our prayers to God.

That brings me to the final point. Hebrews 4:16 says, “Let us then with confidence (or boldness) draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” In our sinfulness God’s throne is something to be feared. But because Jesus is our great high priest it becomes the throne of grace. We can go directly to God without fear. We can ask and receive mercy whenever we need it. We do that by prayer.

Kent Hughes reminds us that when we go to God in prayer “we receive mercy for our past failures and we receive grace to meet our present and future needs.” So my question for you is this: why wouldn’t you spend as much time as possible in prayer? As the old hymn goes, “O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer!” God wants to hear from you. He’s dying to have a relationship with you. Realize what Christ has done for you and what he does for you now as your great high priest, and go to him with confidence so that you can have mercy and grace and peace and joy.

Amen