

“Our Great High Priest”

Introduction: If you were to look up “personal assistant” on the web, you would find job descriptions that include managing your calendar and coordinating events, scheduling and taking notes at meetings, answering phone calls and responding to emails, planning your travel, and even doing your laundry! Further, you can find a personal trainer to help get you in shape, a personal color consultant to help either paint your home or fill out your wardrobe, a personal tutor to help you learn a language, and a personal financial advisor to help make sure you can pay for all of the personal help you’ve just hired to run your life!

But nowhere, in scanning all of these services, did I find a description of the help we each truly need. Nowhere did I find someone to help bring us into a relationship with God and nurture that relationship over a lifetime, especially during those times when we may find that, due to various trials and tribulations, we are growing weary and losing heart. For that kind of assistance, to help us hold firmly to our faith, the author of Hebrews explains, we need what he identifies as a great high priest. We need Jesus. What makes Jesus so great? How is this helpful to us? [READ]

I. What makes Jesus our great high priest?

A. The priesthood has OT roots. In general, the priests were the day-to-day spiritual educators and advisors of the people, not unlike today’s pastors. They were called to help people strengthen and sustain their faith through the regular habits of worship, weekly Sabbath, and annual holy days. But the *high* priest was a unique figure. He took part in all of the above, but he alone was responsible for offering to God, on the annual Day of Atonement, the sacrifice for the sin of the people. To do so, as Lev. 16 explains, he would make use of two goats. One he would sacrifice for the sin offering, sprinkling its blood on the mercy seat – the cover of the ark, located in the Most Holy Place (the inner room of the tabernacle, where only he could go) – as well as on a few other places throughout the worship area. He would take the second goat, lay his hands upon its head, confessing Israel’s sin as he did so, and then send this goat out into the desert. It was known as the “scapegoat,” symbolizing the transfer and taking away of the sin of the people. Before he did all of this, the high priest would sacrifice a bull and sprinkle its blood in all the holy places as a sacrifice for his own sin.

B. It certainly sounds a bit odd to our ears today, but when you think about it, it is rich in its symbolism and meaning. As so much in the OT does, it was intended by God to point forward to a role Jesus would eventually take on, adding the description *great* to high priest as he did so. So, what makes Jesus great? He was great because he would be the one who would not only offer the sacrifice for our sin; he was himself that sacrifice. And, since he was sinless, he was the perfect sacrifice. His sacrifice of himself, on the cross, was fully applicable and effective and only needed to be offered once. He would do perfectly and forever what the high priest could only do in part.

C. But (not to sound like a bad infomercial) there’s more! This Jesus is also great because, having ascended to the Father’s right hand, he is interceding for us. As Paul describes it in Romans 8: 34 (NLT):

[God] is the one who has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? Will Christ Jesus? No, for he is the one who died for us and was raised to life for us and is sitting at the place of highest honor next to God, pleading for us.

Jesus, in other words, didn't ascend, following his death and resurrection, to some heavenly easy chair where he could look back on all he had accomplished, saying to himself, "wasn't that an interesting few years!" Rather, he went right to his Father's inner throne room where he continues to implement the work he began while on earth. Even better, we don't have to shout to get his attention. Instead, as we make our way into his throne room through worship and prayer, we can do so with confidence. It's as if he were saying, "Ah, we were just talking about you! Let's continue that conversation." If, as we saw last week, the living, active, and penetrating word of God is the means by which God draws near to us, our great high priest, Jesus, helps us draw near to God.

II. Mercy and Grace

A. What we see, in this interceding work that our high priest does on our behalf, is that he knows just what we need as we struggle to live our life of faith as human beings. We certainly need mercy – a setting us free from guilt and sin and the restoring of our relationship with God. But we also need grace, to strengthen and equip us to live lives of loving service and witness on a daily basis. Because he took on our humanity, our personal, great high priest knows what's it's like to live in a broken world. He experienced temptation, suffering, and unanswered prayer. He knew sorrow and hunger and disappointment. He was lied to, falsely accused, argued with, disliked, cheated, and murdered. But one of the things that makes him truly great is that, in the midst of all these challenges, he "has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin" (v. 15; cf. 2:18).

B. It means he actually finished the race and did not stop short or give in.

Illustration: I've mentioned my friend who is walking the Appalachian Trail. She sent a You Tube video out yesterday that included the pic of a tree at a place called Mountain Crossing in Georgia. Of course, there are lots of trees where she's walking but this one was filled with hiking boots and shoes hanging from its branches that, it is said, frustrated or weary hikers tossed into the tree after quitting the trail. Apparently, the climb up and down nearby Blood Mountain is challenging and leads at least some to stop walking.

How does that help us? Think about it. To whom would you go to find help in knowing how to train to run a marathon – One who never made it to the finish line or one who completed the race? To whom would you go to learn to speak Spanish – One who could speak a few sentences or one who grew up in Spain? To whom would you go to find out how to install a replacement window in your home – A neighbor who thought that a crowbar might be a helpful tool, or the carpenter who put up detailed instructions on YouTube? To whom would you go to find advice on walking the AT – One who had given up and tossed their shoes into that tree, or one who had made it all the way to Maine? Those who have been there and have completed the task are the ones who truly know what it takes to overcome, and can therefore be truly helpful.

Illustration: It's a bit like a son who stood to inherit the family business. To get him ready for that day his father could prepare him on by settling him in a corner office and instructing him to discover where to go to get his shoes shined, to get to know the local golf club, and to explore all the good

places to have lunch. Or, the father could prepare his son by having him begin in the warehouse, working the night shift, participating in the backbreaking work of loading and unloading the trucks that come and go. He could then have him work in purchasing, spending time visiting suppliers to see where the raw materials of the business come from and how difficult it can be to get them at the right price. Next the son could take a turn in the sales department, experiencing the challenge of finding new customers in a rapidly changing market. He could then complete his education by spending some time in accounting and finance, learning the daily grind of crunching numbers, monitoring cash flow and chasing down accounts receivable. Only after thoroughly understanding every aspect of the business, along with the various challenges of each, would the son be given an office of his own.

Our high priest is great because he knows. He knows, personally, what we need and he can help us overcome because he's been there *and* has overcome.

C. So returning to our text (4:14-16), it's because we have a great high priest that we can make a wonderful "salad:"

Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

Let us approach God's throne of grace with confidence.

Our author continues his discussion of Jesus as our great high priest for another half dozen chapters, bringing it to a conclusion with these additional pieces of "let us:"

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful (10:23).

Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together... (10:24)

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart (12:1-3).

As we experience the various challenges in our journey of faith, Let us hold firmly onto Jesus, our great high priest. He is the one personal assistant that we all need. He has run the race the Father set before him, and he has finished it, without failing, and so he can help us run well, and finish the race that is set before us.

With this in mind, we can sing, "what a friend we have in Jesus," because he not only bears our sins and griefs, he also knows our every weakness and can help us stand firm through the trials, temptations, and troubles of our life.