

## OUR HIGH PRIEST IN HEAVEN

Readings: Lev 16:1-10, 15-17; Heb 2:5-18

Belgic Confession Art 26

Text: Heb 4:14-16

Theme and purpose: To urge you to approach God with confidence for mercy and grace through Jesus our great mediator.

Sometimes you find yourself in a difficult situation in the church, or at school or at work. For one reason or other the relationship between you and another person has broken down. You have tried to repair it and set it right but that has not been successful. Your relationship with that person is strained and you don't feel you can approach him or her.

Eventually you decide to ask a mutual friend for help. This friend knows both you and the other person very well. She also understands your situation. You approach her and ask her to come with you to see that person; "Would you act as a mediator between us? We want to get this sorted and be able to be friends again. We want to be able to work happily together once more."

Your friend agrees to act as a mediator. A mediator is a go-between, a helper, one who facilitates, who represents you to another person.

You and I need mediator to represent us to God. There is a great distance between us on earth and God in heaven. He is holy and we are sinful, he is infinitely great and we are very small, he is righteous and we are guilty.

The Bible teaches us that we cannot approach God on our own; we are not worthy to come to him without an invitation; we cannot draw near to him without the help of a mediator, someone to speak on our behalf.

Because of that, God, in the Old Testament, appointed priests to act as mediators between himself and the people. First there was Moses and his brother Aaron, the first High Priest, and then all the priests who followed him.

In the New Testament God has appointed the Lord Jesus as our only mediator. "For there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5)

This is the subject of Article 26 of the Belgic Confession. It is the longest article in the confession because it addressed a major problem in the Roman Catholic Church. Many of the people at that time looked to their priests, and to Mary, and to the saints to mediate between them and God. Guido de Bres, the writer of the Confession, warned against looking to the saints or any other human mediator to fulfill this role because Christ alone is our only High Priest and Mediator. This was one of the slogans of the Reformation – Christ Alone!

You can approach God directly through Christ who is our great mediator. This is what the writer of this letter emphasized in this passage. He urges us to approach God with confidence through Jesus our High Priest for the mercy and grace we need.

First of all he tells us that Jesus is **in heaven**, and secondly he reminds us that Jesus has also been **on earth**, and for each of these truths he develops an application.

**1. JESUS IS IN HEAVEN.** Jesus the Son of God "has gone through the heavens" (v 14).

### a. Explanation

From the time of Moses on, once a year, the High Priest would go from the court of the temple, through the Holy Place, and into the Most Holy Place. He only went into that Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. He went there offer the blood of a sacrifice on behalf of the people. On his ephod and on his breast-piece he bore stones with the names of the 12 tribes of Israel (Ex 28). He represented them before the Lord. No one else was allowed into that room. They watched him go in and they had to wait until he came out.

Jesus fulfilled the ministry of those Old Testament priests. He offered himself as the full and final sacrifice for the sin of his people. He represented us. He bore our sin.

After he had done all this, God then raised him from the dead and he went from earth, through the heavens, and into the presence of God.

He is there in heaven now – the Son of God with God the Father. We can't see him but we know he is there; we believe that by faith.

We know that we have a High Priest in heaven who is representing us to God. He can do that well because he is God, so he understands what God wants and requires of us. He is in heaven as God, interceding for us.

b. The writer of Hebrews drew **an application** of this for us: “Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess” (v 14b).

The Christians receiving this letter needed this encouragement. They were facing persecution and trial. The writer was concerned that they might drift away from what they had believed.

In chapter 2:1 he urged them to pay more careful attention to what they had heard. In 3:12 he warns them against a sinful and unbelieving heart. In 4:1 he urges them not to fall short of entering God's rest. And here in 4:14 he urges us to hold firmly to our faith and not let it go.

Literally the phrase reads, “Let us hold on to our confession”. Our confession is what we believe about Jesus, our faith in Jesus, which is the faith we have professed.

It is one thing to *make* a profession but it is another thing to *continue in it*. All of us need this encouragement to hold firmly to the faith we have professed.

Sometimes trials and troubles come our way and unsettle our faith – These could be sickness, or the death of a loved one or financial troubles.

Sometimes we are very aware of the sin in our hearts and lives and this can disturb our faith because we don't seem to make much progress in dealing with it.

At times like this we need to hold on to our confession, to keep a firm grip of our faith, to keep a tight hold on Jesus.

We need to remember that God is in heaven and that he is almighty and powerful, and that he is our Father.

And we need to remember that Jesus is also in heaven as our great High Priest and he is interceding for us, representing us to God as the Son of God. We have a High Priest in heaven so no matter what happens let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

## 2. Secondly we know that **JESUS HAS BEEN ON EARTH.**

a. **The writer explains** two important truths about the earthly ministry of Jesus.

i. In verse 15 we read, “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses.”

This is put as a double negative for emphasis.

We can put it positively by saying; we have a high priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses.

He can do that because he was a man, he was human like us. He lived on earth and went through what we are going through.

When you are going through a difficulty or trial the people who are the most help to you are those who have been through a similar experience - someone else who has lost their spouse, another person who has struggled with chronic pain, other parents who have had a baby die, another woman who has miscarried. These people can truly sympathize with you in your situation because they have been there themselves.

Jesus has not experienced everything that we experience – he was not married, he did not have children, he did not lose his job, he did not have a car accident, his home was not burgled. But he was human like us – born just as we were, and he grew up as we did, and he lived on this earth for 33 years in a busy life of ministering to others, talking to and conversing with and helping those around him. He was busy and pressured, lonely and rejected, disappointed and discouraged. He really can sympathize with you in your struggles and trials and weakness. So look to him, pray to him, and seek his help.

ii. The second truth the writer made about the earthly ministry of Jesus is this; “We have one who was tempted in every way just as we are – yet was without sin” (v 15b).

He was not tempted with every *particular* temptation we experience – he was not tempted to get angry with his wife or impatient with his children or to lose his temper with his boss. But he did experience every *type* of temptation we experience - to doubt, to despair, to selfishness, to pride, to be independent of God, to disobey God’s commands, to lust, to impatience, to envy. He went through all that we go through, tempted in every way just as we are, yet without sin.

b. From all this the writer again draws out an **application** for us.

i. In verse 16 we read, “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence...”

When we think of a throne we usually associate it with kingship and justice and judgement. But this is a throne of *grace*, of favour, of God's free kindness. It is described like this to encourage us to approach this throne.

We approach this throne of grace when we go to God in prayer. Yet we are often slow to do this, even in times of trouble. We tend to muddle along on our own, to struggle with our trials by ourselves, to be independent and self-reliant.

Someone has said that prayerlessness is the root of all sin. We may believe in God but if we do not pray then in practice we are atheists. We claim to trust in him but in reality we often live without him.

We need this encouragement approach the throne of grace.

A hymn reminds us of this:

*What a friend we have in Jesus,  
All our sins and griefs to bear,  
What a privilege to carry,  
Everything to God in prayer.*

*O what peace we often forfeit,  
O what needless pain we bear,  
All because we do not carry,  
Everything to God in prayer.*

The word translated “approach” in verse 16 is in the present tense. You can *always* draw near to God. You can do this *all* the time and at *any* time. He is constantly available.

You can approach the throne of grace “with confidence”. Other translations use the word “boldness”. You can go to God with courage and assurance because Jesus is representing us.

We can do this despite the vast difference between God and us; even though he is in heaven and we are on earth; even though he is holy and we are sinful, because we are going to him through the Lord Jesus our mediator, our high priest.

You don't need any other mediator. In this New Testament age you don't need a priest to represent you to God, nor do you need one of the elders to speak to God on your behalf, nor should you look to any of the saints or to Mary, as the Roman Catholics do.

Christ alone is our Mediator and he is all-sufficient and can meet our every need!

ii. So we are invited to approach the throne of grace with confidence "so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (v 16b).

All of us have times of need: we need comfort, encouragement, reassurance, help, guidance, consolation, and friendship. But our greatest needs are to receive mercy and to find grace.

*Mercy* speaks of God's forgiveness; in his mercy he has offered to forgive our sins on the basis of the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. When you know your sin and are aware of your failures you can go to him and find mercy.

And God also offers his *grace*: he has promised to give us all we need to resist temptation, to overcome sin, to endure trial, to persevere in suffering.

This is God's encouragement and his promise to us; you can and will receive mercy and find grace to help you in your time of need.

You and I can have confidence in Jesus because he is in heaven at the right hand of God, interceding for us, as God's Son.

We can also have confidence in him because he has been here, on this earth, with us, among us. He can sympathise with us in our weakness because he has been tempted in every way just as we are.

"Therefore, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess ...let us ... approach the throne of grace with confidence that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

Amen