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Sermon Study on Hebrews 4:14-16

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Thus did the Roman system of government meet the traveler and missionary of the first century A. D. Everywhere that great governmental power is evident. The Book of Acts, therefore, gives us a cross-section of certain phases of Roman political institutions and shows this power in daily operation. One other factor impresses itself upon one who studies these political contacts; it is the un-failing accuracy with which Luke designates the various political officials. His nomenclature of these offices is perfect — a fact which confirms the inspired character of his book.

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Seward, Nebr.

H. O. A. KEINATH.

Sermon Study for the First Sunday in Lent.

HEB. 4, 14—16.

(Eisenach Epistolary Lessons.)

V. 14: "Seeing, then, that we have a great High Priest that is passed into the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession." The author speaks of a great High Priest. The office of priest and high priest was instituted by God Himself in the Old Testament. Ex. 28, 1—3; Heb. 5, 4. Priests were to be mediators between God and men, Heb. 2, 17; 5, 1; cf. Ex. 18, 19; to maintain and, if necessary, to reestablish the covenant relations between God and His people. For this purpose they were to offer up sacrifices, Heb. 5, 1, in order to "make atonement," Lev. 1, 4, 5; 5, 6, 10, etc.; 16, 6.

10, etc.; to cleanse the people that they might be clean from all their sins before the Lord and thus to regain for them the good will and favor of God, Lev. 16, 30; to apply this grace to the people by blessing them, Lev. 9, 22, 23; Num. 6, 23—27; to plead and intercede with God for the people, Num. 16, 44—50. This Old Testament priesthood was typical, symbolical, pointing forward to the true High Priest, of whom the author of this epistle speaks, who actually accomplished that atonement, that reuniting of God and man, which was prefigured by the sacrifices of the Old Testament.

This great High Priest is He who "passed into the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God," that unique person, the God-man. Our High Priest is true man. Jesus is the name given to a truly human child, conceived in the womb of a human mother, Luke 2, 21, born under the rule of Caesar Augustus as one of the millions of subjects of the Roman Empire, growing up like other children, in all things being made like unto His brethren, Heb. 1, 17. Yet in one respect there was an essential difference. Jesus is *the Son of God*, far exalted above all creatures, the eternal, omnipotent Creator and Ruler of the universe, as the author had so convincingly and in language of choicest beauty set forth in the first chapter of his letter. See also chap. 3, 5, 6; 5, 5, 8; 7, 3, 24, 26; 10, 12, 29; 13, 8. The Son of God became man to become our High Priest. Only as a truly human being could He perform this office, Heb. 2, 14—18; especially v. 17: "It behooved Him." As God-man He fulfilled the Law, establishing a perfect righteousness for those whose Substitute He had become, Heb. 5, 8, 9; Rom. 5, 19, cleansing them from their sins and freeing them from the penalty of their sins, chap. 2, 14—17; 9, 11—15, 26; 10, 11—14. Having finished His work on earth, having by Himself purged our sins, the God-man sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high, Heb. 1, 3, or, as our lesson puts it, passed into the heavens, literally, *through* the heavens. The word heaven or heavens frequently denotes the created firmament of heaven, the starry heavens, Heb. 11, 12; 12, 26 (sing.); 2 Pet. 3, 7 (pl.), in other passages, the abode of God above all created heavens, Heb. 9, 24 (sing.); 8, 1 (pl.). In our passage it is used in the first sense, of the created heavens. Jesus, our High Priest, has passed through the heavens, ascending far above all heavens, Eph. 4, 10, into that uncreated, unbounded, illimitable spacelessness which is God's abode, humanly speaking, 1 Kings 8, 27; Is. 66, 1. (NOTE.— Jesus, the son of Mary, passed through all heavens. The human nature of the Son of God is not in a certain, locally circumscribed place; no, it is far removed from all limitations of time and space, partaking in full of that glory which was the glory of the Son of God ere He was made flesh, when by Him were all things created, as in Him all things consist. Col. 1, 16, 17.)

Jesus, our High Priest, ascended on high in His official capacity,

as our Proxy. His work on earth is completed, the Father satisfied, our Representative admitted into heaven, our redemption perfected. Yet even in heaven He continues His office. Having passed through the heavens, He is still our High Priest. True, no more is there any need of sacrificing, suffering, dying, Heb. 7, 27; 10, 11. 12. Now He pleads, intercedes, for us as our Advocate, Heb. 9, 24; 12, 24; applies through Word and Sacrament the fruit of His atonement to sinners, 10, 22; 12, 24. 25; works faith in us and keeps us in faith and sanctification, Heb. 12, 2; and finally leads us to glory, into which He has gone before, chap. 6, 18 ff.; 9, 15. 28; 12, 22. 23. Truly, a great High Priest, greater than Moses, chap. 3, 2 ff.; than Joshua, 4, 8; than Aaron and the Levitical priests, chaps. 5. 7 ff.; greater even than the angels, chap. 1, 4—2, 5. He is indeed the Captain of our salvation, 2, 10; the Author and Finisher of our faith, 12, 2; able to save to the uttermost, 7, 25; Jesus, the Son of God, who has passed through the heavens, our Great High Priest.

This High Priest we "have," says the author. Not only does there exist so great a High Priest, but we *have* Him, He is our own; through faith we have laid hold of Him; He is ours to have, possess, use, enjoy; for we **HAVE** a great High Priest. Before teaching his readers, however, how they can make use of Him, the writer admonishes them to hold fast that which they have, lest they lose their precious possession.

"Let us hold fast our profession"; rather, *the* profession or confession. Very significantly the author does not say, Let us hold fast our High Priest, but, our confession. We cannot hold fast our High Priest unless we confess Him. And there is but one confession of Him that is worthy to be called a confession. *The* confession which we must hold fast in order to have our High Priest is that well-known confession which the author himself had just made: We have a great High Priest, Jesus, the Son of God. This confession dare not be changed or slighted, lest we lose our High Priest. Unless we confess Him as the God-man, we deny Him; and denying our High Priest, we have no longer a high priest to plead for us. If we deny Him, He will deny us. Matt. 10, 33; Luke 9, 26. (These latter words were spoken by Jesus in close connection with Peter's remarkable confession and Jesus' prophecy of His death.) Only so long can we have our High Priest as we hold fast *the* confession. This lesson, important at all times, is especially necessary in our day of anticonfessionalism, unionism, Modernism. See also Heb. 2, 1—4; chap. 3; 4, 11; 6, 4—6; 10, 26—31; 12, 25 on the danger and dire consequences of losing Christ by not adopting, or not holding fast, the confession.

In order to induce his readers to hold fast their profession, the writer brings out in greater detail the true nature of this great High Priest, v. 15, and pleads with them to make full use of the High Priest whom they have, v. 16.

V. 15: "For we have not an High Priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." Though Jesus, our High Priest, has passed through the heavens and now sits at the right hand of God the Father, He has not lost touch with mankind. He has not laid aside the ability to be touched with the feeling of our infirmities. He is Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, to-day, and forever, Heb. 13, 8, our ever-sympathizing High Priest. We need such a High Priest. The author speaks of "our infirmities." Again he has in mind not so much the natural depravity of man as the sins, the shortcomings, of believers. He calls them infirmities. That exactly expresses the idea conveyed by the original *ἀσθένεια*, lack of strength. There is in this very expression a rebuke. There is really no excuse for our infirmities. We have in Jesus a perfect Savior, who of God is made unto us Righteousness and Sanctification. 1 Cor. 1, 30. In Him we have an inexhaustible reservoir of strength. Is. 54, 24; 40, 31; Phil. 4, 13. Still, how often do infirmities mar the life of a Christian! How often are his efforts not those of a man strong in the power of his Savior, but like the feeble attempts of a weak child! Half-hearted resistance, weak-kneed compromises, even cowardly surrender, while on the contrary, he should attack and in the strength of Christ successfully overcome, and victoriously tread under foot, the enemies of our salvation; reluctant cross-bearing, even bitter lamentations instead of songs of thanks for being counted worthy to suffer with Christ,—how often does not that exactly describe the attitude of the Christian! These infirmities remain sinful, and every sin remains displeasing to God, meriting eternal punishment. Surely we need a High Priest who is not provoked to swift and well-deserved punishment by the failings of His Christians, inexcusable as they are, but who can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities. This sympathy is an essential attitude of a true high priest, without which he could not properly perform His office. In order to have a sympathizing high priest, God in the Old Testament did not choose an angel for this office, but took a human being from among men, one who could have compassion on the ignorant, Heb. 5, 1, 2; and in the New Testament He sent His own Son and made Him like unto men, Heb. 2, 17. For this reason, Jesus, the Son of God, was in all points tempted like as we are, though without sin. What a condescension for the Son of God to permit Himself to be tempted by Satan, to allow Satan to approach Him with the purpose of seducing to sin Him who is the Sinless One! How truly great the love of Jesus! This love indeed clearly marks Him the great High Priest.

Jesus did not select only certain kinds of temptations, while others were excluded from the list of temptations with which Satan was permitted to approach Him. We read, "but was in all points

tempted." There was not a sin in the catalog of transgressions to which Satan did not tempt Jesus. There was not a disregard of God's holy Law into which the prince of Darkness did not seek to seduce Him who is the Light of the world. There was not an arrow in the quiver of the strong man well armed which he did not aim at the armor of the Holy One in Israel. There was not a trick, time-worn or newly hatched by his ever fertile brain, which the old wily foe did not employ to ensnare the Christ of God. He made use of surprise attacks, sudden, fierce onslaughts, and of long-sustained sieges, as in the wilderness. There were attacks by his enemies, who threatened, mocked, persecuted, ostracized, crucified Him. There were attacks by the people, who, misunderstanding the nature of His mission, tempted Him with the lure of temporal honor and glory. John 6, 15. There were attacks coming from His own disciples: Peter, Matt. 16, 22, 23; 26, 69 ff.; Judas, Matt. 26, 47 ff.; from other disciples, caused by their ignorance, petty jealousies, etc. There was the special hour of the enemies and the power of darkness, Luke 22, 53, that agony in Gethsemane, those truly horrible hours when, forsaken of God, He was surrendered to Satan and his hosts, who did with Him as they pleased. Satan surely made full use of his opportunity to tempt Jesus in all points.

Jesus was tempted in like manner as we are. He felt the temptations of Satan, felt them keenly, intensely. He was a true man with truly human feelings and emotions. How abhorrent must have been the very attack of sin and Satan to Him to whom sin is an abomination! Man's nature is accustomed to sin; he is conceived and born with a sinful nature; the thought of sin is not horrible, rather quite welcome, to man. But how keenly must Jesus have felt the attempts of something altogether foreign to His nature to take possession of Him! Therefore the very thought of those hours when Satan would be permitted to spend his fury on Him caused Him to shudder and exclaim: Luke 12, 50; John 12, 27; 13, 21. Compare also Mark 14, 33, 34; Luke 22, 44; Matt. 27, 46. Jesus, the Son of God, our great High Priest, was indeed tempted in all points like as we are.

Yet there is a great, essential, important difference between the temptations of Christ and our temptations. The author calls attention to this difference by adding the words "without sin," separate from sin. For four thousand years not one member of the human race had been able successfully to resist all attacks of Satan. Adam, created after the image of God, succumbed. Noah, a just man and perfect, Gen. 6, 9; Abraham, the friend of God, Jas. 2, 23; David, the man after God's own heart, 1 Sam. 13, 16, all succumbed to Satan's wiles, all are examples of the power of Satan to seduce even the best of men. The Man of Nazareth was an exception to the rule. Though tempted in all points, though feeling as keenly as other men, yea, more

keenly, these temptations, yet He passed through all these fierce trials without sin. Not once did He succumb, not once did Satan succeed in causing His feet to stray from the path of God's holy Law or His thoughts to deviate from the norm of God's will. For Jesus is not only the son of Mary, He is also the Son of God, like God sinless, impeccable, Jas. 1, 13, untempted and untemptable by sin. He could not be Jehovah, the great I AM THAT I AM, the immutable, unchangeable Holy One, if there were in Him the slightest possibility of sinning.

Here, then, is the great High Priest, the Conqueror of sin, Jesus, the Son of God, that is passed into the heavens. But though He is now seated at the right hand of God, far removed from all temptations, He still is very close to His Christians, sympathizing with them in their trials and temptations. His is still that body which suffered, was crucified, and buried, His still that human nature which so keenly felt the temptations of Satan. At His ascension He did not strip off that body nor its human affections and sensations; no, that is eternally His own body, and even on the throne of God the body in which He wept and suffered and was tempted, is to Him, as Gerhardt puts it, *ein' unverrueckt' Erinnerung unsrer Plagen* (*Gesangbuch*, No. 39, 13), an unceasing memorial of our sorrows, those sorrows, which He experienced in the days of His flesh and which are now the lot of His brethren in the flesh. Knowing our frame, remembering that we are dust, having experienced like temptations, like sorrows, like emotions, His heart is touched with pity and compassion. He is still the same sympathizing High Priest that He was in the days of His flesh. Ought we not to hold fast our profession of so great a High Priest? And ought we not to make use of this High Priest? That is the next thought brought out by our epistle.

V. 16: "Let us therefore come boldly unto the Throne of Grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need." In the Old Testament only the high priest was permitted to enter into the Holy of Holies, where God Himself dwelt between the cherubim. He was permitted to enter it on one day only, and only with blood. Heb. 9, 7. If he dared to enter it any other time and in any other manner than that prescribed by God, his was to be the fate which overtook Nadab and Abihu. Lev. 16, 1. 2. If any other person dared to approach the seat of God, he was sure to die. Num. 18, 7. 22. Well can we imagine that the Holy of Holies was an object of awe for every Israelite, so that even the high priest entered it only with fear and trembling lest he be consumed by the holiness of the Lord. If it was presumptuous for Israel to approach this visible throne of God, it might seem a reckless, yea, a blasphemous undertaking for us to approach the throne of God on high. However, the author of Hebrews bids us lay aside all fear and come boldly to the throne of God. That

throne, the throne of justice, holiness, and righteousness, that throne before which no sinner can stand, Ps. 5, 4, is now the throne of grace. For on this throne of God sits Jesus, the Son of God, our High Priest, who, after having satisfied each and every demand of the justice of God and having wrought a perfect redemption, now passed through the heavens to make this throne His own. We note that the apostle uses the article before *throne* and *grace*. There is but one grace, that grace which came by Jesus Christ, John 1, 17; Acts 4, 12, and there is but one throne of grace, that throne occupied by the King of Grace, Jesus, the Son of God. Neither are there two thrones of God, one of grace and another of justice, as though God were a fickle, changeable God, according to a mere momentary whim occupying once the throne of stern justice and then the throne of grace. There is but one throne of God, and that is, and ever shall be, a throne of holiness and justice, Heb. 1, 8, 9; but this throne of the just Judge has become the throne of grace because of the perfect work of our great High Priest. Heb. 1, 3. Thus indeed the throne of God has become even for sinners loaded down with many infirmities the throne of grace. They can approach this throne boldly, literally "telling all." To that sympathizing High Priest they can unburden their hearts. They need not fear that any sorrow be too great or any worry too insignificant, that any sin be too shameful or any infirmity too inexcusable, to be confessed to Him. For on the throne of God sits He who like them has gone through the sorrows and trials and temptations of this life, who knows by personal, though sinless, experience the weakness of the human flesh, the throb of fever, the agony of pain, the power of sin. He therefore does not lose patience with His brethren in the flesh when they come to His throne confessing their frailties, appealing to Him for forgiveness and pardon, or help and aid, or comfort and consolation. From the very outset they can be sure that they will not ask in vain. Their prayer will be heard. They will obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. "Mercy always involves a more especial reference to wretchedness, which touches the heart; whether consisting in outward misfortune, suffering, punishment, or inward corruption, guilt, and sin, while grace looks rather to a mere self-determined and kindly inclination toward those who have neither right nor claim to it." (Lange-Schaff, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 99.) This is not merely grace and mercy in the abstract, not an idle, meaningless assurance of grace, not a vain promise of mercy; rather, it tends to a well-defined purpose, that of help in time of need, literally "well-timed, opportune help." No matter how wretched we are, our merciful High Priest can and will provide help, and no matter how little we deserved His pity, He, of whose fulness we can take grace for grace, will not deny His help and aid to us. His help is well-timed help. It does not always come at the special time that we have