

Hebrews 4:14-16

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[0 : 00] The cosmos acknowledged His birth as a star stood over Bethlehem.

The angels celebrated His arrival with the original and unsurpassable Christmas number one, glory to God in the highest.

The shepherds and the wise men lay prostrate before the one lying in the manger. Why? Well, this was the question that we posed this morning, and the answer was found in John's prologue, very particularly in the words that we were considering.

The Word became flesh, the Word that is eternal, the Word that is distinct from and yet in relationship with God, the Word that was and is God became flesh in the privacy of Mary's womb.

And this is why the birth was acknowledged in such an extraordinary manner. Now, really the question that we dealt with this morning was with the what of the incarnation in a sense, what is it that was happening?

[1 : 19] We posed it as a why question in the sense of why all these events, but really what we were doing was answering the question, what was going on? What is it that was going on in what we term the incarnation?

And of course the answer we gave was very much a partial one, but in a measure we sought to answer that question. What is it that was going on? But there is another question, you could say an even more fundamental question or an equally fundamental question, and it's the question, why?

Why the incarnation? Now that question was famously posed by Anselm of Canterbury in the 11th century, so I guess one millennia ago.

He posed it in a theological treatise that he penned that has as its title a Latin title, Cur Deus Homo.

Literally, the question is translated, why God man? Or often it's translated to give it the meaning really that was behind the question, why did God become man?

[2 : 35] Or why the God man? Or indeed, why the incarnation? Cur Deus Homo. Now that's a big question to which Anselm gave a very helpful and cogent answer.

Why did God become man? In essence, and this is to simplify what Anselm said, but in essence he answered, in order to save sinners, Anselm recognized that God's justice, God's righteousness required that sin be dealt with, that sin receive its due and just punishment.

And as sin receives its just punishment, so the justice of God is satisfied. And this could only be achieved by the incarnation, by God himself, in the person of his Son, becoming man.

And by offering his life as an atoning death, satisfying God's justice, satisfying his own justice.

Cur Deus Homo, to save us. The incarnation was a rescue mission where, in the words of our own Professor MacLeod, behind the drama of the incarnation lies the catastrophe of the fall.

[4 : 09] The one is the divine response to the other. And that, I think, helpfully encapsulates the answer. Why?

Cur Deus Homo, to save us. But there is another reason for the incarnation, or another answer to the question. Cur Deus Homo.

The second reason, or benefit, if you wish, of the incarnation is not unrelated to the first. It can be considered as one aspect of the central saving purpose of the incarnation that answers the question, why?

And yet, it can still be, I think, legitimately considered as a distinct reason. And it is this, to understand us.

The question, Cur Deus Homo. Why did God become man? To save us, certainly. But also, to understand us. And this is a truth that is found very explicitly in Hebrews, in the passage that we've read in chapter 4.

[5 : 19] And it is to these verses that we now turn. And as we turn to these verses, as we continue to celebrate the Christmas, to celebrate the incarnation, let's consider and be encouraged by this reason for and consequently benefit of the incarnation, of the Word becoming flesh.

He understands us. I want to go through the content of the text before us in the order that we have it presented to us, in the order that it was written, rather than dissect it and distribute truths under headings and subheadings.

So simply to go through it, as I say, in the order that we find it there, verses 14 through to verse 16. But to give you a bit of a heads up as to where we're going, the following provides a bit of an outline of what we want to say.

We'll begin by identifying the need of the hour, as identified by the writer. And the need of the hour being the importance of holding firm.

Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. This was the need of the hour. The writer also gives very good reasons for holding firm.

[6 : 44] So we want to see what the need was. We want to see what reasons are given for holding firm. But then we also want to notice and highlight what I'm calling an anticipated but.

That is, the writer anticipates a but on the part of his readers. An anticipated difficulty, if you wish, that he then goes on to address.

And then we'll see the manner in which he addresses this difficulty that he anticipates his readers will have. And then finally, we'll notice that having dealt with the anticipated difficulty, he closes, at least this part of his letter, he closes with a challenge and an invitation.

Well, I hope that as we go through these aspects of the manner in which we're going to deal with these verses, all will become clear. First of all then, the need of the hour.

Now I'm sure many of you will remember when Jonathan gave us a sermon on the book of Hebrews. And it was on the whole book. Now I thought I was being quite ambitious in tackling these three verses.

[7 : 57] But that small fry compared to tackling the whole book. But those of you who do remember that sermon will remember that one of the things that we were reminded of was how important it was to understand the circumstances of those who were receiving this letter.

And very particularly, that they were believers who were being persecuted. As a result, many were discouraged and many were tempted to give up. Perhaps some already had.

And this is the readership, as it were. This is the circumstances in which they find themselves. And having that clear in our minds throws a great deal of light onto what it is that is said to them.

And here, very explicitly, this shines through in the manner in which the writer identifies what we're calling the need of the hour.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. Many were not holding firmly.

[9 : 08] Their grip was loosening. And so the writer says, no, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. The believers cry, or many of the believers, their cry was, we can't go on.

It's too difficult. We can't do it. And the apostolic retort was an Obama-like, yes, we can. Yes, we can. But were they just stirring words, devoid of content?

I'm not suggesting that the president across the pond pronounced these words devoid of content. But what about here, the writer to the Hebrews?

Well, by no means. This exhortation, this challenge to hold firmly to the faith that we profess is accompanied by what we now want to just notice, the reasons that he gives for doing so.

He gives very cogent and very powerful reasons to the readers that they would hold firm to the faith that we profess. What are those reasons?

[10 : 16] Well, they're found there in verse 14. And what he does is he points them to Jesus. Again, as we cast our minds back to what Jonathan was sharing with us, he mentioned how really the whole book is an exercise in pointing believers to Jesus, to the excellencies of Jesus, of how Jesus is greater than angels and greater than Moses and so on and so forth.

Well, here, he does just that. He points his readers to Jesus, both to who he is and to what he has done. First of all, who he is?

Well, he describes him, he identifies him as Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus, the Son of God. And in identifying him in that way, he reminds his readers that this is Jesus, a man, the Son of Mary, Jesus, his human name if you wish, but immediately reminding them that he is also the Son of God.

Jesus, the Son of God. And he also reminds them that he is our great high priest who has gone through the heavens.

I want to just think for a moment on the significance of that terminology, this statement that Jesus, the Son of God, has gone through the heavens.

[11 : 40] One thing that he does by speaking in this way is that he makes it clear that it is Jesus, the Son of God in his incarnate state, the Son of God made flesh, who has gone through the heavens.

In the language he uses, it makes it very clear that Jesus did not, as we know is the clear message of the New Testament, Jesus did not leave his humanity behind.

He didn't come and become flesh and had a time, his 33 years with us, and then he left that behind and returned from whence he came to the condition in which he was previously.

No, it is Jesus, the Son of God, who goes through the heavens. Now, that's very important in what he's about to go on to say, and so we flag it even at this point.

But also, as we think of these words that he uses, and this truth that he declares that Jesus has gone through the heavens, by saying that, he is reminding struggling believers of two fundamental realities.

[12 : 51] Firstly, he is stating, in a poetic way, if you wish, or in a very vivid way, he's stating that the work of Jesus is a completed work.

Hence, he is able to return to heaven. He is able to go through the heavens and to return to the right hand of the Father. Why? Because the mission that he had been given to do was a mission that he completed.

It's inconceivable that he would return, leaving something half done. No, he has completed his work. Hence, he is able to return. Hence, he has gone through the heavens.

Indeed, the letter begins by making very clear reference to this truth. In verse 3 of chapter 1, just notice that briefly with me. We read there in chapter 1 in verse 3, The Son is the radiance of God's glory, and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

And then very particularly what follows, After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven. Very clearly, after he had provided purification of sins, It is only then that he goes and takes his place at the right hand of the Father.

[14 : 11] Why? Because he had completed his work. He has provided purification for sins. The rescue mission that he had been sent to accomplish has been accomplished. And so, he has gone through the heavens.

And so, the believers are to remember that. That the work that Jesus has done is a completed work. It is a sufficient work for their need as sinners. Purification for sin has been provided.

And so, he has now gone through the heavens. But of course, another truth that is very to the fore in this language, or that is implicit in this language of Jesus having gone through the heavens, is that he is now reigning supreme.

He is now seated on the throne of heaven. He has, as we read in chapter 1, he has sat down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven.

And so, now, today, he reigns supreme over all. And so, these beleaguered and persecuted believers, who are being squeezed on every side by the power of Rome, and the opposition of a pagan and hostile society, are to remember, in the midst of their struggles, that their Savior Jesus, not only has he completed his work, but he has taken his place of absolute and sovereign authority in heaven, supreme over any emperor, be he Roman or otherwise.

[15 : 51] And so, these are very solid reasons that are given to these struggling believers for holding firm. We might imagine, perhaps in the comfort of this gathering here this evening, we might imagine, well, that's more than sufficient reason for holding firm.

But the writer has more to say. Why? Why is it necessary to say more? Well, because he goes on, in the next verse, in verse 15, to deal with what we suggested or described as an anticipated but.

If I can maybe explain. The scenario is more or less as follows. The believers, I am sure, are able to accept the truth of what is said concerning who Jesus is.

You know, when they read that Jesus is the Son of God, they say, yes, we believe that. They also accept and recognize the truth of what he has done. That indeed, his going through the heavens is evidence and testimony to the fact that his work of salvation is a complete work, that he has provided purification for sins.

I'm sure the believers are able to say, yes, we believe that. And they're also able to recognize that it is true that Jesus reigns supreme, enthroned in heaven.

[17 : 15] That, too, they are able to believe. No doubt, as with any group of people. Some of them able to believe it with more certainty than others. But I think as a general picture, we can say that these are truths that they are able to recognize and accept.

This is all good. And in a measure, in great measure, very encouraging. But there is a but. And we can present it, I think, in this way or with this question.

The question that the believers had. Certainly some of them. The question is this. Does this great high priest, this Savior, our Savior, who has gone through the heavens, does he really understand us?

Does he really appreciate what we are going through now? You see, he's so far away. He's gone through the heavens. He's way up there.

So distant from the cruel and grinding reality that we are enduring under the heel of Rome and pagan persecution. Yes, Jesus has gone through the heavens.

[18 : 26] We believe that. But we, they protest or they murmur, we are very much down here under the heavens. Indeed, the heavens, in a sense, separate us.

He's above the heavens. He's gone through them. And we are below the heavens. Yes, he's the Son of God. Yes, he has done a great redeeming work. Yes, he reigns supreme. But he's way up there.

And we are way down here. And the distance is so great. Can he really understand us? This seems to be the problem. This seems to be the question that the writer anticipates.

And what is the answer that he gives? Well, verse 15 provides the answer that he gives. Let's just read it and then just consider what he says.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses. But we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin.

[19 : 26] Just as a brief, not aside, but point to invite you to notice, is that even in the manner in which verse 15 is phrased, it becomes, I think, very clear that the writer is anticipating this protest or this difficulty.

And really what I'm wanting you to notice is the double negative that in some ways makes it not as clear as it might be what he wants to say. Notice there at the beginning, for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses.

Now, it seems to me, and you can take this as valid or not, you can come to your own conclusions, but it seems to me it would have been much clearer to say, we have a high priest who is able to sympathize with us in our weaknesses.

But he says we do not have one who is unable to sympathize. Now, why does he do that? Well, I think the reason he does that is because he realizes that many of his readers are precisely of that opinion. He's unable to sympathize with us.

He's a great savior. He's the son of God, but he can't really understand us. And so the writer comes and says, well, you're wrong. You're wrong in coming to that conclusion. I understand how you think that way, but you're wrong.

[20 : 41] We do not have a high priest who is unable. You think that we do. You're concerned that he might be unable, but I'm telling you, you're wrong. We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses.

But what is the response to the concern? What is the answer to this concern that is being entertained by many of those to whom he is writing?

Well, the answer really is what we were considering this morning. The Word became flesh. Essentially, this is what the believers are reminded of, very especially of the reality of his becoming flesh.

It's this aspect of the truth that the writer clings on to and develops and expounds to them that Jesus is the Word that became flesh, who made his dwelling among us.

The Son of God became a real man, a real man subject to weaknesses. Though it doesn't state explicitly that he was subject to weaknesses, it's implicit in what he says.

[21 : 58] We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses. Why? Because he himself was subject to weaknesses. To the weaknesses that are common to the human condition.

To every weakness that is common to the human condition. To physical weakness. To emotional weakness. To psychological weakness. To spiritual weakness. Whatever your weakness.

And I say that not in some theoretical way, but very practically. Whatever your weakness, he understands.

And he understands because he became weak and experienced weakness. Weakness is part and parcel of the human condition.

There isn't a moral attribute to weakness. It's just the way we are as human beings. We are weak. He became flesh. He became weak. And so, he is able to sympathize with us in our weaknesses.

[23 : 04] But of course, he says more than simply stating the Savior's capacity to sympathize with our weakness. He goes on to say, But we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are.

The word tempted that is used here is a word that can have a more general or broader meaning of being tested. But given what he goes on to say, the writer goes on to say this very important qualification, Yet was without sin.

I think the use of the word tempted is a very reasonable one. He was tempted. Tempted to sin. Tempted to sin just as we are tempted to sin.

Tempted to throw in the towel just as we are tempted to throw in the towel. Tempted to lessen his grip on the faith in the Father that he professed, just as we are tempted to loosen our grip on that faith.

He was tempted in every way just as we are. And so to these struggling Christians who wonder if their great high priest is able to understand, is able to sympathize with them, the writer says yes.

[24 : 21] Yes, he is. For he was tempted just as you are tempted. I wonder if in what he says, in the very, what shall we say, exhaustive way in which he deals with this matter of the temptations that Jesus was subject to, I wonder if there too the writer is anticipating some protest.

Or not protest, but some questions that might arise. For example, if he were to have said that Jesus was tempted and had left it there, maybe some would respond, well, yes, I believe that.

Yes, okay, that's true, but not the way I am. Not the temptation that I'm enduring. Not the trial that I'm having to confront. And if indeed he is anticipating these questions, well, the response is immediate.

It's all-encompassing and it's conclusive. We have been one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are.

I don't think language could be found to be more all-encompassing, to be more conclusive in every way, just as we are. We don't need to develop that.

[25 : 37] We don't need to give examples. The language is sufficient. Sufficient for any of us to understand in every way, just as we are.

He does understand. To these believers who wonder, does he really understand? Can he really understand my condition, my circumstances? This is the answer that is given.

The Word became flesh. He experienced the weakness that you experienced. He was tempted in the manner that you are tempted. Indeed, we know that the intensity of the temptation was far greater, for he never succumbed to it.

There is a sense in which temptation in all its intensity is alien to us because we succumb. And in succumbing, the temptation in a sense is broken because we succumb to it.

But in the case of Jesus, of course, it was not so. He endured it in all its intensity as he resisted. And so, was able to fulfill the work that he came as a sinless sacrifice.

[26 : 44] Cur Deus homo. That he might experience and understand the human condition. And that, as a man, on the throne of grace, he might sympathize with us.

And he does. There, at the right hand of the Father, he is able to sympathize with us. He does so today, and he does so with you.

One of us there in heaven. I think it was Rabbi Duncan, and I probably won't quote him accurately, who said something along these lines. The dust of the earth at the right hand of the Father.

One of us in heaven. One who is able to understand us and sympathize with us. For he became and remains flesh.

But the writer finishes with a resulting challenge and invitation. Having identified the need of the hour to hold firm to the faith we profess.

[27 : 49] Having given very powerful reasons for doing so. In pointing the believers to who Jesus is and what he has done. Having recognized that even with all these good reasons, they're struggling.

And so having gone on to remind them and to make it clear to them that the one who is in heaven does understand, can sympathize. He then finishes with this challenge or this invitation.

And what is the invitation? It's in verse 16. What is the invitation with which he ends? Well, we could paraphrase it in this way. He says to them, Let's go to heaven.

There's a sense in which that's what he's saying. Let's go to heaven. He's saying, look, you're concerned that Jesus has gone through the heavens. And that he's far away and thrown in heaven. But we can go there too.

And you say, well, does he actually say that? Well, just bear with me as I justify that. Where is the throne of grace that he makes reference to there in verse 16?

[28 : 58] Where is the throne of grace? Where is it? It's in heaven. And what are they asked to do? Let us then approach the throne of grace. He's saying, let's go to heaven.

You see, yes, Jesus is on the throne of grace. But we can go there. You see, we shouldn't think of him as so, so very far away, through the heavens, distant from us. No, let us go to heaven.

Let's go to where he is. Let's go to the throne of grace. To the one who knows us. To the one who understands us. And we can all go there. He says, let us then go.

And what we haven't even touched on here is the contrast that there are here between Jesus as our great high priest and the high priesthood in the Old Testament. How one man was able once a year on the Day of Atonement to go into the Holy of Holies.

And here we're told, no, let us all go. Let's all go. Let's all approach. Let's all go to heaven. Let's all go to the throne of grace.

[29 : 59] We're welcome there. If we think, even visually, in the measure that this is a wise thing to do, of Jesus ascending into heaven.

You know, this language of Jesus having gone through the heavens. It does take us, doesn't it, to his ascension. We think of Jesus going through the heavens. And a way is opened up, as it were, to welcome him back to heaven.

The door is open for Jesus to return. Well, let's be very clear. The door that was opened for Jesus to return remains open.

It's an open door. This is what the writer says. Let us then approach the throne of heaven. Let's go to heaven and meet with our Savior there. He's not far away.

He's not distant. He has finished his work. He's provided purification for our sins. He is our mediator, our elder brother.

[30 : 59] Heaven is our home. We are citizens of heaven. And so we can go there. How are we to go? We are to go, we're told, with a confidence.

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence. With confidence. For the way has been opened up for us.

We have every right to go. Heaven is our home. And we go there for a purpose. That is also addressed here by the writer.

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence. So that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. We go there for the help we need.

The believers that are being exhorted, being encouraged. If there was one thing they knew, it was that they needed help. Their concern was that perhaps Jesus wouldn't be able to help them or was oblivious to their need of help.

[32 : 01] But one thing they knew is that they needed help. And so they are told, well, let's go to heaven. And there we will find the help that we need. What help do we need? That we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

That we may receive mercy. That ever-present need of help in the form of God's mercy. For we too are tempted, but with sin.

And so we need mercy. We need mercy. We need of God that forgiving mercy that he is ready to give. And so the believers had encouraged, do you need mercy?

Well, you will receive mercy. Do you need grace to hold firm? To hold firmly to the faith that you're struggling to profess? Do you need grace? Do you need help in that sense?

Well, there is grace available for you. In the midst of your troubles and your struggles and the persecution and the opposition, let's go to heaven.

[33 : 06] There to receive mercy. Sinners who need mercy. There to receive grace that we would be enabled to hold firmly to the faith that we profess.

And as we approach, we do so in the confidence that the one we approach understands. Never shocked by our confessions.

Never bemused by the troubles that we are in. Never unpleasantly surprised by our circumstances that we relate to him.

Never at a loss as to what to do. Cur Deus homo. To understand us. To understand you.

Let us pray.