**CHRISTMAS SERIES**

**2019**

**THE ONLY PRIEST WE NEED**

**Hebrews 4:14-16**

**INTRODUCTION**

“Who is God?” Ask your average Canadian this simple question, and most would say, “I’m not sure.” They may believe in some sort of higher power, but they don’t know who or what that higher power is. They may have questions. They may even engage in some spiritual searching. But for them, life is too overwhelming to spend much time on such questions. And so, they work, play, and sleep on repeat, and before they know it, they hit their midlife crisis, or they’re on their deathbed wondering “Where did my life go?” Their lives have passed like a flash before their eyes, and yet they’re still not any closer to answering this simple question. “Who is God?”

Perhaps that’s you today. Perhaps you’ve been on a journey trying to answer this question, but it feels less like a journey and more like wandering. A journey has purpose and direction. You know where you’re going. But wandering is random. You’re just hoping that the right circumstances or people will come across your path to tell you about who God is, but there are no guarantees. You feel less like a person with their eyes wide open and more like someone who’s blind. You’re stumbling around in the dark, and you don’t even know what you’re looking for.

Christianity tells us that we don’t have to stumble around in the dark, because God has reached into our darkness and revealed himself to us. God isn’t in the shadows. He’s in the light, and he’s revealed himself in such a way that anyone can find him if they seek him. How do we do that? By seeking him in the Bible.

That’s why the Bible is so important. It’s not just an ancient book. It’s the timeless revelation of God himself. It’s God’s self-communication of who he is, and what he has done, and how we are meant to fit within the world that he’s created. That’s why there’s nothing more important to us at Sovereign Grace than reading the Bible, by ourselves in our homes, and together when we gather as a church.

That’s what we do Sunday after Sunday. We open the Bible and we read to understand something more about God. When I step onto this stage and get behind this pulpit, people aren’t leaning in to hear about what I have to say. They’re leaning in to hear about what God has to say through his Word. My role isn’t to inspire you, or be your life coach. My role is to point you to the Bible, so that you would have an encounter with God himself. Every Sunday, we are looking into God’s Word so that we would learn more about who God is, who we are, and what God has done to bring us back into a right relationship with him.

We’re all on a journey towards knowing God. Some of us are headed in the right direction. Others are going the wrong way. My role is to point you in the right direction by showing you what the Bible says. I’m like a guide on a hike through a beautiful forest. If the focus is on me, you’ve missed the whole point. But if you focus on what I’m pointing you to, to the truths about God that are revealed in God’s Word, then we can know him, and enjoy him together.

Today we’re going to study three verses in Hebrews 4 that teach us some amazing things about God. And as we’ll see, these verses do so by using the language of “priesthood”. Some of you may come from a religious background, perhaps a Catholic background, where priests are understood to be a mediator between us and God. You believe that the only way you can approach God is by going through a priest, because they’re the gate keepers to the spiritual realm.

That’s actually one reason why many people have been turned off from religion. They read about the latest reports and allegations about priestly abuse that seem to hit the news every few months and they think, “All these religious people are hypocrites. I could never trust people like that.”

But if we look at the Bible, we find something wonderfully surprising about the priesthood. Yes, we need to approach God through a priest, but this priest isn’t what many of us might expect. In fact, he’s not even living on earth! He’s not found in confessional booths, or temples, or churches, but in heaven. The only priest we’ll ever need is Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

This is the heart of the Christmas message. Christmas is about the story about how Jesus came into the world to live as a man, to die as a man, and to rise again as a man, so that he could become our great high priest, the only priest we’ll ever need.

The title of this sermon is **The Only Priest We Need.** My aim today is to show you that **Jesus Alone Gives us Access to God.**

We’re going to break up this message into two points:

1. What we are to do
2. How we are to do it

(1) **WHAT WE ARE TO DO**

The first thing I want you to notice is that these three verses call us to do two things. Everything else these verses say is meant to motivate us to do these two things, because Christianity is never just about knowledge. It’s about knowledge that leads to action. It’s about how truth changes the way that we live.

The first is found at the end of verse 14: “let us hold fast our confession”. In a religious context, confession sometimes means telling someone, usually a priest, about your sins. That’s not what it means here. Confession here means the verbal expression of what you believe about God. It’s what people do when they recite the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord.” The point of doing that isn’t just to recite a mantra or to go through a religious exercise. It’s to express your confession of faith. It’s the act of saying, “This is what I believe. These are the truths that I’m committed to live by.”

We live in a time when very few people have a confession of faith, because our culture is defined by skepticism. It’s an age when people don’t know what they believe, and they prefer to keep it that way. When they encounter people with strong convictions about what they believe, they view them as being close-minded because they’re not open to other belief systems. They think that the best way to live is to just keep an open-mind. They say that true knowledge is gathering information without ever planting yourself anywhere. It’s inquiring but never coming to a conclusion. It’s seeking but never finding.

If that’s you, then listen to what the great British thinker C.S. Lewis said when he wrote,

“You cannot go on ‘seeing through’ things for ever. The whole point of seeing through something is to see something through it… If you see through everything, then everything is transparent. But a wholly transparent world is an invisible world. To ‘see through’ all things is the same as not to see.” – The Abolition of Man

Is that you today? Are you “seeing through” all things to the point that you’re not seeing anything at all? That’s not knowledge. It’s just perpetual doubt. Do you realize that being in a state of perpetual doubt is itself a confession? You’ve come to believe that you can never arrive at a belief. When you call people of faith “close-minded”, do you realize that you’re being “close-minded” to the “close-minded” people? There are many things that people can confess. Skepticism is one of them. It’s a belief system.

“Believers” aren’t the only ones doing the believing. “Unbelievers” are believing as well. The only difference between them is what they believe. Christians believe that they can come to conclusions about who God is through the Bible. Skeptics don’t, because what they believe instead is that no conclusions can be made about God. We’re both believing something. The only difference is that my belief leads to the Christian faith. Your belief only leads to doubt.

But verse 14 says it doesn’t have to be that way. “Let us hold fast our confession” of the Christian faith. The verse is saying that, if you believe, then don’t give up. Hold fast to your beliefs with greater resolve and commitment. But if you don’t believe, it doesn’t have to stay that way. You can exchange your confession of skepticism for the confession of Christ, if you would stop trying to see through him and start seeing him as he really is instead.

The second thing we are called to do is found in verse 16. “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace”. We are to hold fast our confession, and we are to draw near to the throne of grace.

The throne here is a symbol for God. God rules over the heavens and the earth like a king over his kingdom. He is the monarch of the universe, the Almighty King, who reigns over all with absolute sovereignty. He commands legions of angels, he laughs at his enemies, and silences his rivals with a simple word from his mouth. He preserves all things, ordains all things, and governs all things for the purposes of his will.

How could we approach a king like that? How could we, whose days are like the flowers of the field, here today and gone tomorrow, approach the everlasting King of all? It’s hard enough to book an appointment with the Queen of England. How could we book an appointment with the King of the universe?

Verse 16 says that we don’t have to, because we’ve been invited to draw near to his throne with confidence. God has given us a royal invitation, not just to his house, but to his very throne room, where he himself sits in judgment over all.

That’s what a throne symbolizes. It symbolizes a king’s authority to execute judgment over his kingdom. But the amazing thing about this invitation is that it beckons us to approach not the throne of judgment, but the throne of grace. Grace is what we receive when we need strength when we’re weak. Grace is what we receive when we need courage when we’re afraid. Grace is what we need when we need forgiveness when we’ve sinned. Grace is what we need to become the kinds of people who stop hurting other people and start healing them instead. Grace is what we need to find hope when we’re tempted to despair. And the best thing about grace is that it’s free. It’s the unmerited, undeserved favour of God, given to undeserving sinners like us.

The God of the universe has called us to “draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” What do you need today? All of us have needs, and all of us need help with those needs. Verse 16 tells us that God is willing to provide that help. *Divine* help is available to those who draw near to his throne of grace. Human help is good. *Divine* help is better, because life’s hard. It doesn’t matter if you’re a Christian or not. Life’s going to be hard for everyone. Loved ones will die. Friends will betray you. Bodies will decay and weaken. But the all-mighty, all-powerful God himself has promised to help you in your times of need, whatever those needs may be.

That’s the Christian life in a nutshell: personal conviction about what you believe, and personal relationship with the one you believe in. It’s an equal commitment to truth and love. It’s knowing the one you love, and loving the one you know. That’s God’s invitation to all of us. It’s an invitation to draw near to his throne of grace, not as cowering servants, but as beloved children. And so, let us hold fast to our confession, and let us draw near to the throne of grace.

(2) **HOW WE ARE TO DO IT**

But how do we do that? How do we receive this gracious invitation into the throne room of God’s grace? None of us can approach God’s throne room by ourselves. We need to be brought in. This is where we must lift our eyes away from ourselves and towards our great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God. He’s the only one who can usher us into the presence of the King and into a personal relationship with God himself.

Our text today gives us two reasons why we can hold fast to our confession and draw near to the throne of grace. The first is in verse 14. The logic of the verse is simple. “Since we have this, let us do that.” What do we have that lets us hold fast our confession? Verse 14 says “we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God.”

We have a priest named Jesus who makes it possible for us to draw near to God in faith and relationship. Notice what he’s called. He’s called a “great high priest”. Before Jesus came, God’s people could only come to him through God’s priests. The priests were mediators between the divine and the human, and they did that primarily by offering sacrifices on behalf of the people.

The high priest was no different, except he had one task that no other priest could fulfill. Once a year, he would enter into the holiest place in the Temple, the “Holy of Holies”, a place where no one else was allowed to enter. If they did, they would be punished with death. Only the high priest was permitted to enter, because that was where God’s presence dwelt.

And so, once a year, what the high priest would do is he would enter the Holy of Holies and offer special sacrifices. The purpose of these sacrifices was to atone for sins. It was to pay the price for the sins of God’s people by offering up an animal instead. This day of the year was called the “Day of Atonement”, when God’s people acknowledged that what they deserved for their sins was the punishment of death, but instead of receiving that punishment, it was put on the sacrificed animal instead.

But there was a problem with this system. One was that the high priest was a sinner himself. If he messed up the procedure, or if he approached God in an unworthy manner, the whole Day of Atonement would be futile. Another problem was that the high priest was just a man who would die, which meant that a new high priest had to be appointed every generation. That may sound simple enough, but it wasn’t, because the priesthood went through seasons of corruption. A faithful high priest didn’t guarantee that the next one would be faithful as well. In fact, God’s people went through several generations when the Day of Atonement was never observed. It was a fallible ceremony led by fallible men.

But verse 14 says that we don’t have to be afraid of that happening again. We don’t have to be afraid that our sins will fail to be atoned for, because we don’t just have a high priest. We have a *great* high priest who has passed through the heavens. As sacred as the Holy of Holies was, it was just an earthly placeholder for God’s presence, and the high priests of old would stand there once a year to make atonement for our sins. But this high priest, this *great* high priest stands in the actual presence of God forever.

And what did he bring? He didn’t bring a lamb, or a goat, or a bull. The only thing he brought into God’s presence was himself. This high priest offered *himself* as the true Lamb of God, the only sacrifice that could truly take away the sins of the world. We will never miss another day of atonement, because this high priest has offered the final sacrifice, once for all: the sacrifice of *himself*. And now he stands as a priest forever, never to die, never to be replaced, never to cease in his priestly mediation, because he always lives to make intercession for us.

That’s why Jesus came into the world. That’s why we celebrate Christmas. We celebrate Christmas because Jesus came into the world to die like a lamb on the cross as God himself made atonement for our sins.

And so, whether you’ve been a Christian for decades or whether you’re coming to believe in him for the first time, this is why we can hold fast to our confession. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has made atonement for our sins as our sacrifice and as our great high priest, and now he has passed through the heavens as our resurrected Saviour, the eternal mediator between God and man.

We can believe, knowing that our belief won’t be in vain. We can draw near, knowing that his throne of judgment has been turned into a throne of grace, because Jesus our great high priest has passed through the heavens.

The second reason why we can hold fast and draw near is found in verse 15: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” Our high priest may have passed through the heavens, but that doesn’t mean he’s distant and removed from us. He doesn’t relate to us with cold detachment. Instead, he comes close to us with the warmth of his sympathy, because he knows what we’re going through.

He knows the weakness of our frail bodies. He knows the limits of our finite minds. He knows every struggle against the temptations of sin, because he has tasted it all himself, not in the holiness of his deity, but in the weakness of his humanity.

There’s a difference between the knowledge of omniscience and the knowledge of experience. As the Son of God, Jesus has always known about the nature of our weaknesses and temptations, because he knows everything. He’s omniscient. But when he became the Son of Man, he came to a knowledge about our weaknesses and temptations to the highest degree. As Donald Macleod once wrote,

“He experiences life in a human body and in a human soul. He experiences human pain and human temptations. He suffers poverty and loneliness and humiliation. He tastes death…. Before and apart from the incarnation, God knew such things by observations. But observations, even when it is that of omniscience, falls short of personal experience. That is what the incarnation made possible for God: real, personal experience of being human.”

Jesus doesn’t only know everything about you. He has felt it along with you. He has tasted every moment of weakness and temptation past, present, and future and knows exactly what you’re going through. In fact, he knows a degree of temptation that none of us have ever experienced, because unlike us, he’s not just fully man. He’s fully God, and as one who is fully God, he was tempted to do things that went far beyond human capability.

Who among us has been tempted to turn a stone into bread? Who among us has been tempted to call down fire from heaven upon those have rejected us? Who among us has been tempted to summon twelve legions of angels to protect us when the very people we wanted to help were committed to killing us? None of us, because none of us would have been able to do any of these things. But Jesus was able. He was tempted in all these ways but didn’t give in, so that he could perfectly obey the will of his Father.

Jesus was tempted in every respect that we are and more, yet he did not sin, not even once. Some people say, “If he never sinned, he couldn’t have known what temptation was like!” But if you have any experience fighting and resisting temptation, you know that the longer you resist, the harder it becomes. Every moment of temptation becomes harder and harder to resist until you finally decide to give in because the pull of sin is just too great. Resisting temptation doesn’t end it. It only gives the temptation more fuel! If you give in to temptation routinely and quickly, you don’t really know what temptation is like. You’ve never fully tasted its power. But Jesus has, because he didn’t just resist for a few hours, or for a few days. He resisted for an entire lifetime.

Jesus knows what you’re going through, and his response to you isn’t one of pride or arrogance. “I did it, why can’t you?” His response is one of sympathy and compassion. “I know what it’s like. I know how hard it is. Let me help you.”

Everyone’s looking for someone who can fully understand what they’re going through, but you’re never going to find that person until you know Jesus. Jesus knows. He has felt every single one of your pains, and he is waiting with arms stretched out to help you.

**CONCLUSION**

Will you let him help you? Will you turn to him as the only priest you’ll ever need? All of us need help to walk faithfully with God. That’s why our church exists. That’s why pastors like me exist. We’re here to help each other and anyone else who wants to draw near to God and receive help in their time of need.

But before any of that can happen, you need to put your faith in Jesus. He’s the only priest you’ll ever need, because he’s the only one who can mediate between you and God. You’re not going to find the priest you need behind any pulpit. You’re definitely not going to find him behind this one. But you will find him in the pages of Scripture. And if you reach out to him, you’ll find that he was never very far from you at all. Will you do that? Will you give up your skepticism and embrace faith in Christ? Nothing’s more powerful than faith in Christ. Not faith in government. Not faith in family. Not faith in ourselves. Only faith in Christ will give you the joy that you’ve been looking for so long to find. As 1 John 5:4 says,

“For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.”

So, who is God? He’s the Almighty King of the universe who wants you to draw near to him, and he has made a way for you to draw near to him by giving you Jesus. The sacrifice of Jesus has paid for the sins of all who would trust in him, so that people like you and me can begin this glorious adventure of knowing and enjoying God forever.

That’s what Christmas is all about. It’s about how the light of the world pierced into our darkness. That’s why we decorate our houses with Christmas lights. They remind us that, as hard as life may be, the light of Christ has dawned in our world. We don’t need to wander around aimlessly searching for God without hope, for he has come to us. As the Scriptures say,

“The people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light has dawned.”

This Christmas, may Christ free you from the shadow of death with the light of his glory. May he open your eyes to see his beauty. And may he give you mercy and grace to help you in the time of your need.