

**“Deciding Not to Be a Victim”**  
**Hebrews 4:14-5:10**  
**July 4, 2021**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Looming over much of the early chapters of Hebrews is the historical incident at Kadesh. Israel had been delivered from Egypt and was preparing to take the land God had promised them. From Kadesh, twelve spies were sent into that land and ten came back with the report that it was an impossible undertaking. The presence of giants and heavily fortified cities made the endeavor hopeless in their view. Theirs was the conclusion of a victim, of those at the mercy of forces far more powerful than their own resources could withstand. The original recipients of this letter were in a similar situation, faced with such fierce opposition from powerful opponents that they were being tempted to abandon the faith. We don't know the exact historical context of these original recipients, but it is clear that they were facing significant persecution. As was mentioned previously, one theory is that they were living in Rome and being falsely accused of starting the great fire in Rome in 64 A.D., forcing them to flee to the catacombs (underground burial tombs) of the city. The author wants to deliver them from a victim mentality by helping them to consider all they have in Jesus. The result of seeing all they have in Jesus is that they will not abandon the faith.

We too are often tempted to regard ourselves as helpless victims when we encounter opposition. To do so is to forget the Lord and his promises, just as Israel did at Kadesh. In my observation, there is a great deal of victim mentality among God's people today. I regularly receive emails describing how bad things are for the Church in America today. I frequently hear from other Christians such statements as, “Look what our world is coming to!” or “Things have deteriorated so much that I don't know if our nation will be recognizable in a few years.” It's not that such statements have no basis in fact. It may very well be the case that our nation continues to grow more toxic to Christian belief and morality. The problem with such statements is that they reveal a victim mentality rather than a faith mentality. Let me quote again from Carl F. Henry, a mid-twentieth-century theologian. “The early church didn't say, ‘Look what the world is coming to!’ They said, ‘Look what has come into the world!’” The truth is that we always have the option of deciding not to be a victim. The author urges us to make two choices that deliver us from victimhood.

**I. Hold Fast Our Confession**

The background to this command is the work of the Old Testament high priest on the Day of Atonement. The verse reads, **“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let**

**us hold fast our confession”** (4:14). On the Day of Atonement in the Old Testament, the high priest would take blood from the sacrificial animal into the Holy of Holies and sprinkle it on the mercy seat that sat atop the ark of the covenant. He would pass through the outer court of the temple into a room referred to as the “holy place.” There was a curtain at the far end of this room that no one dared pass through, because to do so would result in their immediate death. It was a curtain beyond which was located the Holy of Holies, where was located the mercy seat and the ark of the covenant. This mercy seat was the throne of God, from which God dwelt with his people and ruled on their behalf. Only the high priest could go there, and he was authorized to do so only one day of the year, on this Day of Atonement. The blood of the sacrificial animal was for the forgiveness of Israel’s sins.

Our text says that Jesus is our great high priest. He has gone into the throne room of God as our priest, which means that he acts on our behalf. According to 5:1, that’s what priests do. They **“act on behalf of men in relation to God.”** Jesus is there to secure our forgiveness and to rule on our behalf. And he did something there that no other high priest would ever do. He sat down (10:12). When we invite people to sit down in our presence, it means that we expect them to stay a while and that we welcome them to do so. Jesus sat down in the throne room of God, and he sat on the throne itself. He is there even now, and he is there as our priest, concerning himself with our interests.

Much of today’s text, as well as some of the future chapters we will consider, make the point that Jesus is the ultimate high priest. Verse 15 says that he is a priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses. Our modern idea of sympathy is too weak to convey the meaning here. It’s not Jesus saying, “O, you poor thing!” Rather, it’s what parents feel when their children are hurting. We hurt right along with them, a hurt so acute that we would wish to take it ourselves instead of see them suffer such hurt. That is the attitude of our great high priest. He also knows what it is to be tempted with sin, the second time our author makes this point (2:18). And his temptations were far more severe than ours because he never gave in. The first ten verses of the next chapter make the point that Jesus is fully qualified to be our high priest. He meets and exceeds every Old Testament qualification to be our high priest. As a result, we can have full confidence that we are secure in every way, both from the judgment of God and the judgments of man.

Someone sent to me this week a delightful clip from a sermon by Alistair Begg, in which he speaks about the heart of the gospel as trust in Jesus rather than ourselves. He makes reference to the familiar diagnostic question, “If you were to die tonight and stand before God, and he were to say to you, ‘Why should I let you into my heaven?’ what would you say?” If the answer to that question is given in the first person, we’ve gone wrong. “I’ve tried hard to live a good life” or “I’ve been a faithful wife, church member, and mother,” or “I’ve tried to keep the golden rule to do unto others as I would have them do to me.” The right answer

must be in the third person. “Because he died for me,” or, in the words of our text, “Only because Jesus is my great high priest” am I qualified to be here. The thief on the cross is a good illustration of this. He died and went to heaven. He made it. And yet his presence in heaven is surprising. He was a criminal who received a sentence of death for his crimes. He confessed that his sentence was a just one and that he was receiving the due reward of his deeds (Luke 23:41). Imagine an angel approaching him and saying, “Why are you here? Aren’t you that criminal who was crucified for your crimes? I better get my supervisor. So that angel comes and questions the thief. “Do you know the doctrine of justification by faith?” “Never heard of it,” he replies. “How about the doctrine of Scripture?” “I can’t say that I’ve spent much time in the Bible?” “Then why are you here?” the supervising angel asks. “All I know is that the man on the middle cross told me I could be here.”

That is the gospel, isn’t it? And when this verse tells us to “hold fast our confession,” it is telling us to hold on to this gospel truth. It is the most precious thing in the world. “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling; naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace; foul, I to the Fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die.” In deciding not to be a victim, decide to hold on to the cross. Let go of everything else, but never let go of the gospel. Jesus has passed through the heavens into the throne room of heaven, and everything in your life is now secure because of that stupendous truth. Let go of your reputation, your health, your job and even your life, but never let go of this truth.

## II. Draw Near in Prayer

The second choice we are urged to make as we decide not to be victims is found in the well-known sixteenth verse of our passage. **“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”** It is an invitation, and even a command, to pray. The verb translated “draw near” is a present tense verb which conveys the idea of “Let us again and again draw near.” And the occasion of our drawing near is to find help when there are needs in our lives. Our needs are God’s invitation to pray.

Sadly, prayer is not our instinctive response to need. Our first instinct is usually to resort to our own resources. We ask ourselves, “What do I need to do to address this need in my life?” And then if the need proves too big for us, we will often just give up. That’s what Israel did at Kadesh when they judged the giants and fortified cities of Canaan too powerful an enemy for them. They said, let’s just go back to Egypt. Life may have been hard there, but at least we were alive. If we have to fight those giants, we’re going to die. And then after giving up, despair sets in.

God invites a different path, the path of prayer when we encounter need in our lives. And this isn't just for big needs such as a diagnosis of cancer, a serious financial setback, or a rebellious child engaged in self-destructive behavior. Those are certainly needs that ought to take us to this throne of grace. But so should the smaller needs encountered in everyday life. Haven't you found that life is filled with daily requirements that you find unpleasant? These are needs that are God's invitation to you to pray. I find planning work to fit into this category. Some people love planning, but I don't. Yet planning is a need both at home and work for me. So I need to pray. I've mentioned before Rose Marie Miller's response to someone saying that it is too trivial to pray for a parking space. She said, "How else am I to find a parking spot in London?" What is the need that you are likely next to encounter in your life? Maybe it's something on your schedule this afternoon. Maybe you need to pay some bills this afternoon, or maybe you need to have a difficult conversation with someone. Have you prayed about this?

When we pray, we draw near to a throne of grace. We are coming into the throne room of the universe, where our Lord Jesus sits with all authority. If we had ready access to the mayor's office, able to bring any need to the attention of that office, that would be impressive. What if we had the same access to the governor's office, or even that of the President of the United States? As significant as such access would be, it is nothing compared to the access every follower of Christ has to this throne of grace. And what an encouragement it is that it is a throne of *grace*. Our access to this throne room of the universe is not based on our performance. It is based on our relationship with Jesus, a relationship that itself is based on God's grace. That is why we can come with "confidence." The word means a bold frankness. It is the kind of confidence a child has in a normal, healthy family. The children of these families are willing to bring anything, without fear of being kicked out of the family because of a request. Such a child knows that not every request will be granted, but there is no fear of bringing requests.

And then there is the promise, "**that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**" Mercy refers to our past failures. We know that as a result of our past failures we don't deserve to have God grant our requests. But we also know that it is not a matter of what we deserve, but a matter of God's mercy. And we also find grace that meets our needs.

## **CONCLUSION:**

I want to return to this point of deciding not to be a victim. The reason you can make such a decision is the reality of Jesus as your great high priest and his promise to answer prayer. Victims are fearful people, and God wants you to know that you don't need to be afraid. One of the dangers of being a fearful victim is that such a person becomes easy prey for unscrupulous manipulators. These manipulators will take advantage of your fears by fueling them further in order to

get you to do what they want you to do. Do you remember the musical, *Music Man*? Con man Harold Hill comes to River City, Iowa and decides on a con to sell musical instruments and band uniforms to the youth of the city, planning to skip town after they pay him and before he has to deliver any of the instruments or uniforms. He seeks to motivate them by pointing to the pool table that has recently been acquired in the town, saying that such a recreation is bound to lead to trouble for River City's youths. He stirs up their fears in order to manipulate them. Unfortunately, such efforts can be found among some Christian leaders who are always talking about how bad things are in the world. The result is to leave Christians falling into the trap of being fearful victims.

Is there some fear in your life that has grown large, even larger than the love of God in the gospel? You can decide right now not to be a victim of that fear. Let me suggest that you do so by asking God about one step you can take to distance yourself from that fear. It could be a very small and simple step. Maybe it's as simple as asking two people to pray for you concerning that. Maybe it's asking for advice. You have a great high priest who has secured your relationship with God. The love and forgiveness of God is the greatest treasure of all, and you cannot lose that because God is holding on to you. And you have access to that God in prayer.

Brian Fikkert tells the story of teaching biblical principles of small business management to very poor women in a crowded slum in Kampala, Uganda.

These women had fled the conflict in northern Uganda and were now living in squalor. The first lesson we taught included the message that all human beings are created in the image of God, so we have the ability to plan, which is essential to starting a business. The lesson asked the women to use the week to start planning the type of business they would like to begin. When we came back the second week, we asked the women what they had done as a result of the first lesson. One woman's hand immediately shot up, and she stated, "I went home and cleaned my house." *Oh my*, I thought. *She was supposed to start planning her business. I guess she didn't understand anything from the first lesson.* When we asked her why she cleaned her house, she replied, "In last week's lesson, I learned that I am an image bearer of God. I figured that my husband and kids must be image bearers too. And as image bearers, we shouldn't live in filth. So I went home and cleaned our house." (*Becoming Whole*, p. 239)

Jesus delivers his people from being victims. What step would he have you to take?