



THE SURE-FOOTED CHRISTIAN

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Hebrews 4:14-16

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. 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. 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.

Has anyone here ever ridden a mule on a trail to the bottom of the Grand Canyon? I never have. But it fascinates me that in spite of those treacherous, cliff-hanger trails, mules have scored a near-perfect safety record over the past hundred years. Those who sell the rides down the steep Grand Canyon trails choose mules instead of horses. Why? Because you can count on mules to stay on their feet over trails that would trip up horses. The sure-footed reputation of mules led the Army to call a new four-legged machine a “robotic pack mule.” It keeps its balance while walking over sharp rocks—even after being kicked from either side.

God calls us Christians to be like mules. Not stubborn or moody. But steady. Sure-footed. Christians who can go through temptation, persecution, suffering, disappointment or whatever and come through standing firm in their faith in Jesus. Too often, though, we act less like mules and more like roller coasters. Here’s part of a poem I found the other day:

*Roller coaster Christians,
That’s what we seem to be.
Up one day and down the next
That’s what others see.
“Praise the Lord! How great He is!”
We share with those around,
And later when they see us
Our chins are on the ground.
Circumstantial Christians
That’s really what we are.
If everything is going well
Then Christ is up to par.
But when the going is difficult*

*And problems rise in view,
We mumble, moan and mutter
And Jesus can't shine through.*

Are you on that roller coaster? If so, how can you get off and live as a steady, stable Christian? Hebrews 4:14-16 reveals the secret of Christian sure-footedness. Let's take a close look at that secret and how it makes you able to keep your balance

I. The Secret of Sure-Footedness: Your High Priest.

What secret lets mules stay standing where horses stumble? Mule hooves are shorter and more straight up and down than horses' backward-slanted hooves. So a mule can place its feet more precisely. The outer layer of a mule hoof is also thicker and tougher than that in a horse hoof. As a result, mules can pick their way even through brutally sharp rocks.

Verse 14 gives away the secret to Christian sure-footedness:

...we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God.

You, as a believer, can stand firm because you have Jesus as your great high priest. But this term may baffle those who've grown up with computers, iPods and cell phones. Say high priest to first-century Jews, and you'd fill their minds with clear images and meaning. But say high priest to us Americans and we see only a blur. Yet the secret of our sure-footedness lies right here. So let's pause to get the term into sharp focus.

After bringing the Israelites out of Egypt, God told them to build an elaborate tent (tabernacle). There, God said, he would live among them in the innermost room. Even so, the Israelites could not get close to the holy God. A heavy curtain blocked the way. God set up a system of priests, men responsible for doing the chores in the tent. Only one of these priests, the high priest, could go behind the curtain into that inner room where God lived. Yet even he could enter this room only once a year. What was the main role of this high priest? Hebrews 5:1 sums it up: "Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins." So to an Israelite, the term "high priest" spoke of the one who could go into the presence of the Holy God for them. The high priest represented them before God. He offered God sacrifices for the forgiveness of their sins. To them, the "high priest" was their uplink with God.

We have no high priest on earth today. Why? Because now that Jesus has come among us, done his work and returned to heaven, God has made him high priest. As it says in Heb. 5:10, Jesus "was designated by God to be high priest." As our high priest, Jesus infinitely outshines all those in the Old Testament. They all sinned. He never did. They all died. He rose and lives forever. They offered animal blood—time after time. Jesus offered his own blood—once for all, with no need to repeat the sacrifice. They worked in a temporary, earthly sanctuary. He works in the eternal, heavenly sanctuary. Jesus, our high priest, makes all those others look like pikers!

Are you beginning to see why your sure-footedness as a Christian lies in knowing Jesus as your high priest? Jesus has “gone through the heavens” (v. 14). By his blood on the cross, Jesus has opened for you “a new and living way . . . through the curtain” (Heb. 10:20). So through Jesus, you now have direct access to God. Your pathway to God is no longer blocked by that heavy curtain. Your representative before God works not in an earthly copy of the heavenly sanctuary, but right there inside heaven itself. Jesus, your high priest, speaks to God on your behalf (Heb. 6:20). You’ve heard the old saying, “It’s not what you know but who you know.” You can be sure-footed in your Christian life, because you have connections in heaven. In Jesus, you are on a first-name basis with an insider there.

II. A Sign of Sure-Footedness: Commitment.

Knowing Jesus as your high priest makes you able to do something you could not do otherwise. Notice how the writer of Hebrews puts it:

Therefore since we have a great high priest . . . Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

This is one of those since-then statements. Since [because] Jesus is your high priest, then you can hold firmly to your faith. Knowing Jesus is your high priest will steady your commitment to follow him. Your Christian experience does not have to rise and fall like a roller coaster.

The poem I read earlier spoke of “circumstantial Christians.” Are you seeing how knowing Jesus as your high priest will deliver you from depending on circumstances? Picture holding firmly to your faith in Jesus, your high priest, as holding onto a rope swing. No matter what circumstances lie below you—temptation, failure, opposition from others, illness, change—you can ride safely across them because you are counting on support from above, not from below. You are not trying to find your footing on the things below on earth, but you are depending on the lift supplied by your high priest who has “gone through the heavens.”

Think of the “rope” in this illustration as anchored in heaven. Here’s how the writer of Hebrews puts it in another place:

Hebrews 6:19-20

We have this hope as an anchor for our lives. It is safe and sure, and goes through the curtain of the heavenly temple into the inner sanctuary. On our behalf Jesus has gone in there before us and has become a high priest forever . . .

Last Sunday, Jeff compared our Christian hope to an anchor. This verse shows us where your anchor is embedded. Unlike a ship’s anchor which reaches down, your anchor reaches up. Your anchor is sunk firmly into Jesus, your high priest who represents you in heaven.

For us Christians, one of our greatest temptations is to fasten our eyes on our temporary situations—and so let go of the rope of our faith. Don't worry. Your high priest knows all about that temptation, as we see in Heb. 4:15:

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.

Are you tempted to worry? So was Jesus. Are you tempted to withdraw? So was Jesus. Are you tempted to lose your cool, to lust, to lie, to envy? So was Jesus. When you are struggling with any of those—or with any other temptation—don't think you need to keep your distance from Jesus. Your high priest has been tempted in "every way" that you are tempted. He understands the squeeze the world puts on you. "Yes," you say. "But he never sinned. I do. And when I do, I lose my footing and down I go."

No! Your high priest shed his own blood for your sins. If you sin—and we all do—simply go to him and tell him right out what you thought or said or did. As your high priest, he is there to restore your relationship with God, even after you've failed to measure up. Here's how John, one of Jesus' closest companions, put it:

I John 2:1

. . . if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense — Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.

As your high priest in the presence of your Father God, Jesus speaks up to defend you. He does not excuse your sin or pretend you never sinned. Instead, he bases his defense on the sacrifice for sin he made on the cross. John continues,

I John 2:2

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Are you getting the picture of how Jesus, your high priest, is the secret to sure-footedness? Hold firmly to the rope of faith in him. Hold it when you're being tempted. Hold it when you've sinned. Hold it when others sin against you. Hold it when it seems all earthly circumstances are against you. Commit yourself wholeheartedly to Jesus. Commit yourself to trust him no matter what happens. And as you do, you'll find that you've stepped off that roller coaster. Your circumstances may be the same, but they won't take you down into those dark valleys any more.

III. A Sign of Sure-Footedness: Confidence.

A second sign of sure-footedness shows up in v. 16.

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.

Because your great high priest is right there beside God on his throne, you can "approach the throne of grace with confidence." How do you—from your place on earth—approach

this invisible throne located in heaven? Through prayer. By talking with God as you would talk with your closest friend. The Greek verb tense for approach means to constantly approach. That once-a-year limit imposed on the ancient human high priest no longer applies. Your high priest, Jesus, is constantly in the presence of God the Father. So you can come through him to God anytime, anywhere and for any reason.

Like high priest, throne is another word we Americans seldom use. We have a president who sits behind a desk in the oval office—not on a throne. But we've seen movies about kings and queens seated on their thrones. A throne speaks of power and authority—the right and ability to command that this or that happens. So a throne can frighten us. The power of the one on the throne reminds us of our weakness and vulnerability. But don't let the throne in v. 16 intimidate you. You can come with confidence. Literally, that means to pray with bold frankness. You can tell God exactly how things are in ordinary, non-church words. You can come with confidence because it is a throne of grace, a throne at which people receive good gifts and favor. This is God's throne. Yes, he has unlimited power and authority. But he uses it for your good. He proved that by sending Jesus to die in your place so that he could be right in forgiving your sins. And now, Jesus himself—your great high priest who has “gone through the heavens”—sits at the right hand of the One on the throne.

As you pour out your real-life worries, guilt, anger or whatever at the throne of grace, what can you expect? You will “receive mercy.” That means God will look with compassion on whatever weaknesses you have or trouble you are in. You will also “find grace.” You will be treated with favor, acceptance, kindness and support. And all of this mercy and grace comes to “help” you in your “time of need.” I don't know about you, but my “time of need” is just about all the time.

Why can you and I—so weak, so sinful, so undeserving—come so often to the throne of the all-powerful, holy God? For just one reason. We come only because we have a great, God-appointed high priest who is there pulling for us. Jesus serves as high priest for anyone who is trusting him, holding firmly to faith in him. If you have never anchored your faith in Jesus, the One God sent to die for your sins, I urge you to do so right now. Go with confidence to God's throne of grace. Ask him to give you the faith that will allow you to hold firmly to Jesus as your high priest.

Maybe you're already a believer in Jesus, but your walk with him is not sure-footed. You've been depending on your own strength or feelings to get you through what life has been throwing at you. As a result, your life is a series of highs and lows, ups and downs. Your life is controlled by mood-swings. Some days you feel close to God, other days he seems nowhere near. What should you do? I can't say it any better than the writer of Hebrews put it in 3:1:

Hebrews 3:1

Fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.

By faith, take hold of that “rope” that’s anchored in him. Depend on his support. Stop trying to find your support in your circumstances. Instead, go with confidence—bold frankness—to the throne of grace. Pray, knowing that Jesus, your great high priest is there at God’s side praying for you, pulling for you. Then face your circumstances again—this time sure-footedly.

Paul said it in seven words:

II Corinthians 1:24

It is by faith you stand firm.