

STUDY OF THE ANALYSIS BY DR. THOMAS ROGERS  
TEPLY OF HEBREWS 4:14-16

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## Introduction

Dr. Thomas Rogers Teply wrote Christ is Best, a book of almost 500 pages that is a careful study of the entire New Testament book of Hebrews. Dr. Teply's PhD is in Religious Education. His engineering background has taught him to be keenly detail-oriented. On the back cover of the book, he recalls a training directive from his days at the U. S. Naval Academy: "It is never sufficient to send a message that can be understood; it is imperative to send a message so completely that it cannot possibly be misunderstood." Since various translations of the Bible can imply different meanings, Dr. Teply wisely studied the Bible in the original Hebrew and Greek whenever possible to get the most original meanings. He broke down the entire book of Hebrews into passages, then into verses, then still again into phrases and/or clauses. Each of these was studied deeply in great detail, and was discussed broadly from a perspective with inclusion of supporting Biblical passages. By such a fastidious endeavor, he extracted all reasonable possibilities and proffered meaningful interpretations.

The original handwritten letter that made up the book of Hebrews was written after the recipients had already likely suffered as a result of their belief in Jesus. Some believers had already been killed, and others were still in prison (Knowles 663). It was a compassionate letter written to those who had been persecuted for their faith. The letter reminded readers then (and now) that Jesus also suffered and understood their difficulties. It is not known who wrote the letter. Some Biblical scholars believe that Paul wrote the letter, but evidence is circumstantial at best.

Hebrews 4:14-16<sup>1</sup>

*14: 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. 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. 16: Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need.*

Although only three verses in length, Dr. Tepy's study of the brief passage comprises well over ten pages. His chapter title for discussion of this passage is, "Our Sinless Jesus." Being sinless identified Jesus as divine, and through our relationship with what Jesus symbolizes, we have an ideal toward which to direct our consciousness and improve our lives. This passage of three verses acknowledges who Jesus actually was—both divine and human. He was higher than the highest mortal priest in terms of God-consciousness. He went through pain and suffering just like any mortal might. But because of his divinity, the verse instructs us to keep our faith strong and be humble when we need help through his strength.

Each verse of Hebrews 4:14-16 was broken down into manageable phrases or clauses by Dr. Tepy during his analysis, and will be precisely segmented here as well.

**Heb. 4:14. *Therefore, since we have a great high priest...***

The position of the high priest was common in the era of the Old Testament as the bridge between humanity and God. There were many rabbis and religious teachers in Jewish society, but there was only one high priest. That high priest operated out of the Temple in Jerusalem, and was a liaison for those who would acknowledge God, but because of tradition, knew they could not relate to God directly. "In the days of the tabernacle and temple, the Jews had a high priest ... Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest offered a sacrifice for his own sins. He was then allowed through the curtain into the Most Holy Place to offer sacrifices on behalf of

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<sup>1</sup> From The Holy Bible: New International Version. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996.

everyone else” (Knowles 665). The temple and the altar were destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. Prior to Roman occupation, there had previously been a system of nepotism in place for the selection of successive high priests. But while the Romans were in control of the area, they appointed high priests who were willing to acquiesce to Roman authority.

Dr. Teply noted that since Paul died around 67 or 68 A.D., he could not have known about the destruction of the temple, and is therefore unlikely to have been the author of the book of Hebrews. Once the Temple was destroyed, the Jews no longer had a central temple as focal point for their religious leader, nor have they had one since. But those who followed the teachings of Jesus realized that they no longer needed a high priest in a physical building, since *their* high priest (Jesus) gave each individual an inner link to God. No longer would the high priest of the Jewish temple have to be the liaison between God and man.

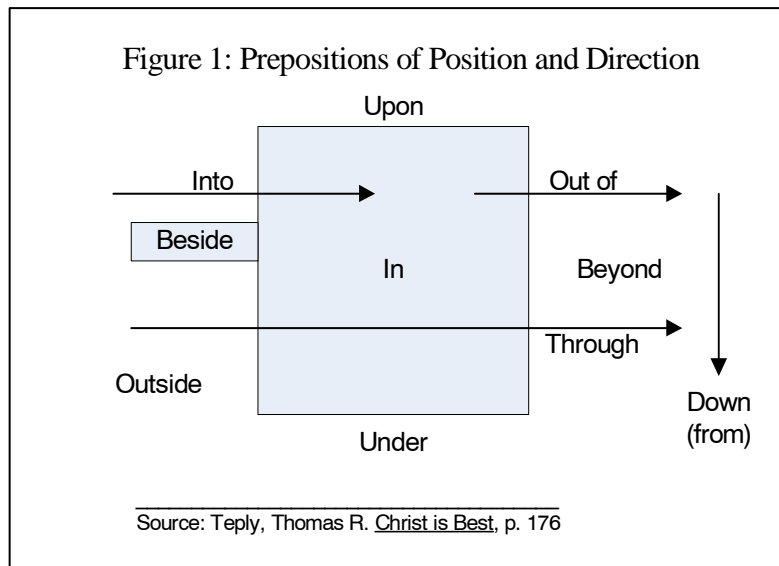
Old Testament sins were atoned by making blood sacrifices at the altar. But those atonements didn't really work since they were done only to appease the apparently angry God, rather than to purify the heart of the sinner; the sinner continued to live and believe the same way as before the sacrifice. If God “wanted a sacrifice, it surely was not a blood sacrifice, but rather a spiritual sacrifice” (Knowles 666). So, Christ's death on the cross superseded the prior blood sacrifices that satisfied only the actions of people, not their thoughts that preceded those actions. Jesus had no sins for which he had to atone with sacrifice. But what he did instead was allow his body to be sacrificed in the quintessential gesture of showing good will. That sacrifice was made for the sins of all people forever.

*...who has gone through the heavens...*

In this clause, Dr. Tepy discussed the difficulties of prepositions, and since it is hard enough to use the proper prepositions in our own language to capture the essential meanings of sentences, we should take extra caution to gain accurate meanings from the Bible. Dr. Tepy provided a representational two-dimensional diagram (Fig. 1) to compare the different

prepositions of position and direction and to understand the meaning of the word “through” in comparison with the other relevant prepositions shown.

What was conveyed in this clause was that Jesus did not just go into heaven, he went



through it completely. The implication is that he went “beyond” what we mortals can even imagine. The limitations of the model are understandable—something in the domain of infinity cannot accurately be represented in two dimensions. But as it captures the essence and meaning of our language, it is useful as a representation.

According to the footnotes in the New Jerusalem Bible for Hebrews 4:14, this is the “first mention of heaven where, according to the letter, Christ exercises his priestly function. Seated at the right hand of God, he belongs no less than God to the eternal realities; his sacrifice, accomplished once and for all, takes on a perfect and eternal value. The God of Christian hope is the fulfillment of this salvation in the heavenly city” (1977). After the crucifixion, Jesus became the link between man and God.

*...Jesus the Son of God...*

Dr. Tepy discussed three ways to consider the word “son.” The first way is with Jesus being equal to God by being his son. The second way is by Jesus becoming divine in his lifetime, but being less than God since he is a son and not actually God the father. The third way to consider the meaning of the word son is that all people are sons by virtue of the fact that God created every one of us. Dr. Tepy clarified any ambiguity of the meaning of the phrase by cross-referencing John 1:1-17 which teaches that Jesus is God who became flesh, not merely a man who later became divine, nor one who was just a son (creation) of God like all people are.

*...let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.*

There are two implications to this clause. The first “is from the theme of Hebrews, that this faith which we profess is eminently worth clinging to without cessation” (Tepy 177). It is worth clinging to because it is a faith valued above all others. There is no faith superior to that in Jesus the Christ.

The second implication of this phrase that Dr. Tepy discussed is that of the despair that we may experience if we *don't* cling to our faith. God's work and love never rests, nor should our faith rest.

The word “profess” here does not mean to merely possess. Dr. Tepy mentioned that the original Greek word was ὁμολογία, and it was used in the original Greek as “our confession.” We shouldn't just passively possess a strong faith. It must instead be an *active* faith, one that we proclaim, announce, and share.

**Heb. 4:15.** *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses.*

The Jewish priests were human, and therefore prone to the temptations of weaknesses (sins). They could not therefore sympathize with us; they could only commiserate or empathize. But because Jesus was sinless by being God in flesh, he could truly sympathize with us. The

meaning of this statement is that Jesus, as the new high priest, is the one all people can look to for sympathetic understanding.

*...but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are...*

What is referred to here is that Jesus was tempted as are all humans, and in all ways. He was tempted with materialism, pride, power over others, and all other conceivable temptations. To clarify where it was mentioned in the New Testament that Jesus met with various temptations, Dr. Tepy referred to the Biblical selections of I John 2:16, Luke 4:1-13, Matthew 4:1-11, and Mark 1: 12-13.

*...yet was without sin.*

Dr. Tepy posed an interesting question to ponder regarding this phrase: “Was Jesus not able to sin, or was Jesus able not to sin?” (179). He didn’t attempt to answer the question directly in his study, knowing that arguments could be made for both sides of the issue. The question does, however, provide for an interesting discussion, and it seems that, since Jesus was human and possessed all human attributes, he was *able* to sin, but simply did *not* do so. The thoughts in his mind leading to actions manifested as sinless in every instance, by his choice. As a man, he had free will. But being divine meant that he consciously exercised that free will flawlessly. Dr. Tepy believed that the most important point was simply that he didn’t sin, and, as evidence, he provided additional passages that declare that Jesus was without sin. The Greek word ἄμωμος, from the original Hebrews 9:14 and I Peter 1:19, means “without blemish, faultless, unblamable” (Tepy 182).

**Heb. 4:16. *Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence...***

We don’t need to approach God with meekness, nor because of fear do we need to approach with temerity. We may confidently approach, knowing that grace is available for

anyone with sincere supplications. Dr. Teply understood the meaning in the clause to be that we should begin to act upon what we know of Jesus. The meaning of the passage leads believers in the way to proceed: “This is the truth. You must accept the truth. You must act on the truth” (Teply 182). There is no better place to go for spiritual comfort than to the throne of grace, accessible through prayer and faith. Some people seek comfort through artificial means (e.g., drugs), some seek it through social interactions with others, and others seek comfort through psychoanalytical therapy. But for spiritual comfort, there really is no better direction to turn than inward, toward the welcoming of God’s love. Once we realize who Christ is, our path is clearly laid out for us.

For the meaning of grace in this clause, Dr. Teply provides a suitable analogy. If we were invited to an exquisite dinner party and were treated in such a magnanimous manner that we humbly realized we could never repay, we’d certainly acknowledge our host to be most gracious indeed. We might not have deserved such treatment, but we were given it without asking for anything in return, and without consideration for whether or not we were even deserving of it. Similarly, and as it relates to the passage, we might not even be deserving of the grace of God, but it is given freely and willingly to those open to it.

*...so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need*

In this clause we see the phrases “receive mercy” and “find grace” together. And together they form the point being made that while we might not *deserve* God’s mercy for our sins, we are able to find grace if we are receptive to it.

Just as we need food and water regularly yet don’t notice them when satiated, so too do we need God’s sustenance. We might not recognize it every hour of every day, but it is an underlying need to complete our duality as both human bodies and spiritual beings.



### Summary

The overall theme of the entire book of Hebrews is captured in Hebrews 4:14-16, and that is to show how trust in Christ is the greatest blessing we can hope for. There is no better system of belief through which to be the fullest we can be as humans except through the example Jesus set for us. His way can be our way. And his way is “best.” Thus, the title of Dr. Teply’s book, Christ is Best, sums up the main theme in the three verses studied, and of the entire book of Hebrews on a broader scale.

Dr. Teply did an exemplary job of analyzing the passage studied. The study of just these three verses of Hebrews 4: 14-16 has helped broaden the understanding not only of that passage, but also of the book of Hebrews and of the entire Bible in general. Such studious commitment to every single verse in the entire Bible would surely be more than one could accomplish in a lifetime. Dr. Teply clearly portrayed that not only was Jesus the perfect high priest as depicted in Hebrews 4:14, but he was also the perfect human and the perfect sacrifice. As the *perfect priest*, he is God, teacher, and a polestar of leadership. As the *perfect human*, Jesus acted as God’s son and set the best possible example of how not only to live among our fellow humans, but also how we should show reverence toward God. As the *perfect sacrifice*, Jesus set into motion the final attribute of the trinity—that of the Holy Spirit—so that the essence of God can be received by all people at any time.

Was there bias in Dr. Teply’s analysis? *Bias* can have a negative connotation. Bias implies that one *won’t* get to the truth because preconceived beliefs about the issue at hand override the value of truth. I saw no bias from Dr. Teply in this regard. He went out of his way to diligently examine each and every manageable clause or phrase of the passage that was studied. If bias can be used at all it might be that Dr. Teply was “biased” from many years of formal

academic study and decades of active involvement of preaching to and studying with many thousands of people through professional ministry. But rather than terming it bias, it should be more accurately called “experience as a Christian minister and scholar.”

It could be argued that Dr. Teply’s religious belief system itself is a form of bias. But if so, it certainly is not any close-minded form of bias. More objective to describe his belief system would be the term “viewpoint.” Dr. Teply is an excellent example of one who seems himself as a fundamentalist, believing in the Bible as the word of God, but who also highly values the diligent study of the Bible to understand its meanings. There are many degrees between the most extreme fundamentalists and those on the far left of liberal Christian beliefs. Some who see themselves as fundamentalists (e.g., Dr. Teply) are a little more scientifically-minded when it comes to issues where science may shed some light on truth. Dr. Teply observed that “Some (fundamentalists) are so rigid in both their understanding of scripture and their expression of what they believe that they think their ‘interpretation’ is utterly true while everyone who disagrees with them is utterly wrong and probably even lost forever. That is a far cry from where I stand. The main reason I differ from such people is because my acceptance of the word of God as utterly true is not identical with what I believe the word of God means by what it says.” So, what the Bible actually *means* is the important thing to consider when studying it. And it is through digging deeply and analyzing meaning that rigorous study can be rewarding.

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