One requirement – hold fast to what we confess
let us hold fast our confession.

The New Testament in general, and the book of Hebrews in particular, are very concerned that we “hold fast our confession” of faith in Jesus Christ. This is the one requirement we are given: to hold fast to what we confess. Starting out well is good, but not enough. It is equally necessary to finish well, to hold tight onto the faith we once received and affirmed. We must finish the race and complete the course laid out before us. Of course, finishing well is easier said than done. To follow Christ means to seek a treasure not on earth. It requires walking by faith, not by sight. Walking by faith is not like the Greek hero Theseus following Ariadne’s thread to successfully lead the way out of the Minotaur’s maze. It is not like Hansel and Gretel, following the dropped pebbles back to home. The author of Hebrews points to the first Israelites, wandering in the wilderness, hoping for a Promised Land and facing difficulty and hardship, uncertain as to what the future holds, required to trust in God each step of the way. They sought God’s rest. The author of Hebrews has told us in previous verses we have looked at that God’s intended rest for his people is more than merely the Promised Land of Palestine, the acreage of modern-day Israel. We seek that which is hidden, what is seen by faith, an eternal rest, heaven’s rest.

In this way, the Christian faith ultimately is about belief. The English word creed comes from the Latin word credo, meaning, “I believe.” The faith is about what we believe. It has substance. We believe certain things. We do not believe other things. The theological word for the things we believe and confess is doctrine: the coherent core to the faith, the canon of belief that we affirm and confess. Another word for doctrine is dogma. Regrettably, the word dogma has taken on negative overtones in the modern world. Dogma is perceived as confining, restrictive, and old fashioned. There are many people today who want religion, spirituality, without doctrines or dogma. They seek mystical experience, or practical experience, or emotional experience, but they do not wish to talk about the content, the belief systems, the theology, doctrine or dogma of faith. In the end, such desire is impossible to satisfy. Religion without dogma is like a body without bones. If you are going to have shape, substance, and meaning, you must talk about doctrine and creed.

The author of Hebrews tells us in v. 14 the one requirement laid upon us: to hold fast to our confession of faith, to the substance of what we believe. He also tells us the reason why we are to hold fast. We hold fast to our confession because of who Jesus Christ is. We persevere because of who Christ is. The one reason that matters is that Jesus Christ is our great high priest.
One reason – Jesus Christ is our great high priest

Since then we have a great high priest

We are told that Jesus Christ is our great high priest. He is the reason why we seek to persevere in our walk of faith. In his office as high priest, he gives to us many blessings. Our knowledge of his greatness encourages us to carry on in spite of the difficulties we may face in life. The author of Hebrews suggests three facets to the greatness of Jesus Christ’s role as high priest. The first is that, as our high priest, he is qualified.

Jesus Christ, our high priest, is qualified

who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God,

The phrase used by the author in this verse, who has passed through the heavens, is very significant. It has multiple levels of meaning. On the one hand, it means just what it says, that Jesus Christ has passed through the heavens to take his seat at the right hand of God. We celebrate this event on Ascension Day, forty days after Easter, when Christ ascended into heaven. The ancient world had three meanings for the word heaven. The first heaven is the place where birds fly, what we think of as the sky. The second heaven is the place where the stars are, what we think of as space. The third heaven is the place where God’s presence dwells in a special way, what we typically mean when we use the word heaven. Therefore, at its simplest, the author means that Jesus Christ has ascended to God’s presence.

However, things do not stop there. There is another sense behind the idea of passing through – and this has to do with the order of being. In our world, we understand that there is a distinction, an increase in the nature of being, from inanimate objects, on to plant life, to animal life and finally human life. However, the order of being does not stop with the seen world. The Bible does not tell us a great deal about the unseen world, but it does speak of angels, archangels, cherubim, and seraphim. When the author of Hebrews speaks of passing through, he means that Jesus Christ has passed

Through all ranks of creatures,
To the central height,
To the throne of Godhead
To the Father’s breast

Jesus Christ has not simply ascended into heaven, but he has also ascended to the highest rank of name, power and authority in all of existence. He is transcended, seated at God’s right hand, and heaven itself cannot hold him.

1 From the hymn, At the Name of Jesus, v. 3.
In addition, there is a third level of meaning behind the phrase *passed through*. To understand this meaning, we must first consider some aspects of ancient Jewish worship. The Jewish Temple proper consisted of two parts: the Holy Place and the Holiest of Holies. Around the Temple stood various courtyards, and each courtyard was restricted as to who was permitted to enter. In this, it is similar to modern American embassies around the world. An embassy is a secure place, with many barriers and restrictions. The average foreigner can access the areas reserved for visa applications, though nowadays, usually only with a prior appointment. American citizens are easily and immediately welcomed into the citizen services office of the embassy. Behind those walls, guarded by U.S. Marines, only those who are employed by the embassy are typically permitted. All others must have special approval to enter. There are further divisions still: a section reserved for only American citizen diplomats, offices for secure communications, the ambassador’s office, and so on: the more important the person, the greater the barriers and restrictions.

In ancient Jerusalem, the average person could, of course, walk past the Temple. The outermost courtyard was set apart for the Gentiles—non-Jews who, for whatever reason, sought to enter. But they could pass no further. Next, there was a separate courtyard for Jewish women. There was another for Jewish men. Then, immediately surrounding the Temple proper, was the innermost courtyard, where the priests would perform their duty. The front of the Temple itself, known as the Holy Place, was entered twice a day by a priest assigned to the task. It was a high privilege to serve in the Holy Place and the responsibility was assigned among the many priests by a lottery system. By the time of Jesus, there were so many priests that the privilege of serving in the Holy Place might happen only once in a lifetime. Finally, the innermost enclave of the Temple, the Holiest of Holies, was entered only once per year, and only by the High Priest, and only after elaborate sacrifice and preparation. The High Priest would pass through all of the courtyards, the barriers and, for a brief time, enter into the presence of God.

When the author of Hebrews says that Jesus Christ, the great high priest, has passed through, he means that Jesus Christ has breached the barriers that separated humanity from God. By his sacrifice, Jesus Christ has breached the barriers of division that separated man from God and he has taken his seat at God’s right hand—not for a brief time, but for eternity!

Jesus Christ is a qualified high priest. Further, he is a sympathetic high priest.

**Jesus Christ, our high priest, is sympathetic**

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.
You may recall that last year around this time there was a devastating earthquake in the country of Peru. Many rightly expressed concern. Many prayed. Many nations sent relief assistance. The news of the earthquake hit the Atkinson family in a manner that was different for many here in America, for we knew the area where the quake did its destruction. We have traveled there. We had lived in Peru. We have stayed in the little village of Paracas, that no longer exists. We knew people affected by the quake. The nature of our sympathy was deepened and increased because of our experience.

The scriptures teach that God understands. He knows us. He has created us. Even more, in Jesus Christ, he has become one of us. Jesus Christ himself has endured trial and suffering. Jesus Christ was exposed to everything we experience in life. For this reason, he has capacity for sympathy.

Every now and again you may meet someone who is dismissive of Jesus’ ability to be sympathetic because Jesus was also sinless. Such a claim usually is dismissive of Jesus’ ability to understand temptation, since he himself never gave in to it. This is completely erroneous. In fact, only one who is sinless knows the full extent of temptation. We who are sinful always give in to temptation well before it reaches its apex, its full extent. We do not know the greatest temptation because we have succumbed before we encounter it. In contrast, Christ experienced temptation to its fullest, more fully than you or I could imagine, and still remained true to God.

Jesus is qualified to be the great high priest. He is sympathetic in his office as high priest. And, as a result of these two together, Jesus Christ is an approachable high priest.

**Jesus Christ, our high priest, is approachable**

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace,

Some Christians pray to Mary or to saints in part because they see them as being more approachable, more sympathetic, or more understanding. This is the premise behind the idea of patron saints; that the saint is more approachable and sympathetic to those who are his patrons. However, this is a serious misunderstanding of Christ’s person and accomplishment.

Across town, at the moment of Jesus’ death on the cross, something very significant occurred: the heavy curtain that hung between the Holy Place and the Holiest of Holies in the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The barriers that separated man from God were decisively breached in Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice on the cross. The curtain is torn. The doors stand open. The walls are breached. The divisions are overcome. The angels of God are no longer guarding the Tree of Life with flaming sword. We do not need St. Barbara, St. Jude or St. Anthony in order to approach God. Jesus Christ, the captain of our faith, has blazed the trail. He is the only one to whom we must look. He is the
only one to whom we should turn. He is our great high priest. He has deep
sympathy for us. In addition, he is approachable. He has proven it beyond doubt
through the depth of his love revealed in his sacrificial death on the cross.
Because of Christ’s victory and sympathy, we come with confidence into God’s
presence.

This leads to our final point from these verses, the one resource given to
us, the privilege of coming into God’s presence in prayer.

One resource – coming into God’s presence in prayer

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.

The image in verse 16 is of drawing near to God’s throne, the throne of
grace in our time of need. It is an image of prayer: of coming into God’s presence
to receive from him mercy and grace. Two things should be kept in mind.

The first is that we are approaching God almighty. Imagine entering the
White House, or Buckingham Palace, there is a solemnity and seriousness that
rightly accompanies entry into the presence of those possessing worldly power.
This is fitting. In prayer, we approach God’s throne and there should be a
comparable fitness in our attitude, demeanor, and deportment. God is not a
cosmic bellhop, servant or waiter and we should be wary of approaching him in a
presumptuous manner. God deserves respect. He is God. We are not.

At the same time, the author of Hebrews tells us to come boldly into God’s
presence. We can come boldly into God’s presence because we are following
the path blazed for us by our savior, Jesus Christ. We are not coming boldly into
his presence based upon our own merit. We do not come based upon our
goodness. We do not come denying our sinfulness. Nevertheless, we come
because of Christ and his work. He has born the penalty for our sin. In addition,
he has given to us the true righteousness he has earned. We can come boldly
into God the Father’s presence knowing that our debt has been paid and that we
are clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ.

The opening chapters of Genesis tell the story of life in the Garden of
Eden, the Temptation, the Fall and Adam and Eve’s eviction from the garden.
You recall that, after eating of the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve realize that they
are naked. They take fig leaves and sew aprons for themselves and later, when
God comes to visit with them in the garden, they hide. The point is that
accompanying their disobedience is the arrival of shame and the attempt to hide
from God. When there was no sin, there was no shame or embarrassment. In a
perfect world, there would be no need for clothing. However, ours is not a perfect
world. We are clothed because of sin.
After confronting Adam and Eve, and after issuing his words of judgment upon their actions, God does something very merciful. He gives to Adam and Eve clothing made of animal skins. God helps them overcome their shame. An animal loses its life to cover their disgrace. What God does for Adam and Eve he will one day do for all who belong to him. God’s people are now clothed in Jesus Christ: Christ has born their punishment upon the cross, and Christ gives to them his righteousness, permitting God’s people to stand before him in confidence.

Because of this, the author of Hebrews calls us to draw near to God without fear. Why? Because Christ has reconciled us to God. We need not feel shame for God has clothed us as he did Adam and Eve.

Say “Amen” Somebody.
Jesus the Great High Priest

14 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. 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. 16 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.

\[^2\text{The Holy Bible : English Standard Version. (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Heb 4:14-16.}\]