

WE HAVE A GREAT HIGH PRIEST JESUS!

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

Key Verse: 4:14

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.”

We can divide the book of Hebrews into three major sections. In the first section, 1:1-4:13, the author describes Christ’s person; he is the Son of God and Son of Man—superior to angels and Moses. In the second section, 4:14-10:18, he tells us of Christ’s works as a great high priest. In the third section, 10:19-13:25, he exhorts us to persevere in running the race of faith—fixing our eyes on Jesus. The second section, which we are beginning today, can be further divided into three parts. 4:14-16 contain the key idea of the entire book: Jesus is our great high priest. Chapters 5-7 explain Christ’s qualification and, chapters 8-10, Christ’s ministry as high priest.

In today’s passage the author declares that we have a great high priest Jesus, who sympathizes with our weaknesses yet is able to help us (4:14-16). He also tells us how Jesus became our great high priest (5:1-10).

Recently, a mother in Baltimore pulled her son out of a gang of rioters. She began to slap him and rebuke him in order to save him from committing crimes. She became tough because of her mother’s heart for her son. While her act was controversial, many called her the mom of the year. In this world of survival of the fittest, we need to be tough, or at least pretend to be strong. If we expose our weaknesses, we will be exploited. That is why people hide their weaknesses. Of course, sometimes, we do need to be tough in dealing with the hard realities of the world. However, this mentality may affect the way we relate to Jesus. Instead of coming to Jesus in our weaknesses, we may try to hide and pretend there is no problem. We may think that if we reveal our weaknesses to Jesus, we will be rebuked and punished. But Jesus is not like that. Let’s see how Jesus is different.

First, Jesus is a great high priest who empathizes with our weaknesses (4:14-16). Verse 14 is the key verse of the entire book of Hebrews. It says, **“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.”**

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In Greek, this sentence begins with the word “**Echontes**” which is an active, present participle of “**have.**” The author strongly emphasizes that we now have, acting on our behalf, regardless of situation or circumstance, a high priest Jesus. Because we have this great high priest, we can always live victoriously in this tough world. The author calls him “great” because he is superior to the high priests in the Old Testament. His priestly work is beyond comparison to theirs in its scope, nature, and efficacy. This great high priest ascended into heaven. What does this mean? After finishing salvation work on earth, he transcended time and space and entered into heaven, where he is eternally glorified. Because he transcended time and space, he is not bound by any human barriers and is able to help anyone and everyone. His work of salvation on earth was completely finished and accepted by God. Now he sits at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). He did not go to some corner of heaven where he could rest and relax. He went into his Father’s inner courtroom in order that he, by interceding for us with the Father, may continue the work he had accomplished on earth. Paul says in Romans 8:34, “**Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.**” Charles Wesley sang a hymn: “He ever lives above for me to intercede, His all redeeming love, His precious blood to plead” (“*Arise, My Soul Arise*” #432). When the Father hears Jesus’ plea, he justifies those for whom Jesus intercedes. Since God justifies us, no one can bring any charge against us (Ro 8:33). This exalted Jesus is the Son of God. Since he is fully human and fully God he can be a perfect mediator between God and mankind (1Ti 2:5).

After reminding us that we have a great high priest Jesus, the author exhorts us, “**...let us hold firmly to the faith we profess**” (14b). Holding firmly can be compared to gripping a lifeline in the midst of angry waves at sea. Only the lifeline keeps us from drowning. Without it, we perish. In the same way, holding firmly to our faith in Jesus is the only way to be saved from sin, death and the devil. The early Christians professed their faith by drawing the symbol of a fish containing the words, “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.” They confessed their faith at the risk of their lives. Jesus gives eternal salvation to those who make this confession. So this confession is the most important commitment of one’s life. Jesus said, “**What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?**” (Mk 8:36) Last Saturday night Manny Pacquiao, national hero of the Philippines, lost what

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was called “the fight of the century.” So many people felt sorry for him. The next day he attended Sunday worship service and said, “Losing the fight is not a big deal. Jesus is everything to me. Let’s share Jesus with the world.”

Though we have a great high priest Jesus, who ascended into heaven, it seems he is too great and distant to relate to us. We may wonder how he could possibly understand our weaknesses and help us. Verse 15 tells us how. It says, **“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.”** Here we should understand what our weaknesses are. We human beings are weak physically, mentally, spiritually and emotionally. It is because we are made of the dust, and since the Fall, have been subject to the power of sin. When we are young, we may think we are pretty strong. But when we contract the flu, not to mention a serious disease such as cancer, we realize that we are very weak. We desire to become righteous and do many good things. But in reality we are paralyzed by our sins and do evil instead. We want to bless others; but when they are successful, we easily become jealous. What we do is not the good we want to do, but the evil we do not want to do. So we cry out like Paul, **“What a wretched man I am!”** (Ro 7:19-24) We are emotionally weak and easily wounded by misunderstanding or harsh words. If we feel lonely, it is easy to become sorrowful and helpless. We cannot expect people living in the hard world to understand or bear our weaknesses. Rather, they exploit the weakness of others for their own benefit. But Jesus is different, as the author emphasizes with a double negative: **“...we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses....”** Only Jesus fully empathizes with our weaknesses. He is utterly superior to any other high priest.

The concept of priesthood can be found in just about every religion. They depend on a power hierarchy which exploits the weak for their benefit. They are often hypocritical, corrupt and cruel. For example, in one case the Aztecs and Toltecs of ancient Mexico, to dedicate a temple, offered 20,000 people as sacrifices. The people were stretched out on stone slabs alive, had their hearts cut out, and then were offered to the deaf and dumb god they worshiped.¹ What a contrast Jesus is! Jesus understands us and feels our pain

¹ Tozer, A.W., *Experiencing the Presence of God: Teaching from the Book of Hebrews*, (South Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2014), p. 56.

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as though it is his own. Not only does he understand us, he is able to help us because he was tempted in every way just as we are, yet he did not sin. The words **“in every way”** mean that he experienced all of life’s trials as we do: poverty, hunger, oppression, injustice, misunderstanding, rejection, and so on. He was tempted by the devil in the desert for forty days in regards to the bread problem, fame, power, taking the easy way, pride, and more. He was betrayed by a beloved disciple; his top disciple denied knowing him, and he experienced unjust arrest, trial, and condemnation. Finally he suffered and died on the cross. Jesus was familiar with suffering and pain from birth to death. But actually, he took up our pain and bore our suffering (Isa 53:3-4). Jesus was tempted fiercely in all aspects of human life, but never sinned; he won the victory without fail. So he is able to help us to overcome all the trials and temptations of life, and all of our sins and weaknesses. He never condemns or punishes us when we come to him. Instead, he understands and provides the help we need.

So what should we do in our time of need? Let’s read verse 16. **“Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”** Here we need to understand the words **“God’s throne of grace.”** “Throne” represents authority and power. Usually we associate this with judgment of the holy God. So we are very fearful before God’s throne, as Isaiah was when he met the holy God (Isa 6:3-5). In the Old Testament, the high priest could meet the holy God only once a year, and only when he approached exactly as God told him to; otherwise, he would be killed. But here God’s throne is the throne of grace from which his love and forgiveness, mercy and compassion overflow upon those who come to him. We can come to God’s throne of grace with confidence. This means boldly and freely without fear. When Queen Esther approached King Xerxes, she needed permission. Anyone who approached without permission would be killed. In order to save her nation, she fasted for three days and then risked her life to approach the king’s throne, saying, “If I perish, I perish” (Est 4:15-5:2). But we can approach God’s throne through our great high priest Jesus anytime, boldly and freely without fear. Whenever we come to God, we can receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. When we need comfort, God gives us true comfort. When we have a guilty conscience, God forgives all of our sins and gives us true peace and joy. When we are being tempted, God gives us the strength and self-control to overcome. When we are confused and stuck, God gives us wisdom and

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guidance. When we feel weak, helpless and fearful, God gives us courage and the Spirit of power. Whenever we come to God for help, he gives us immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine (Eph 3:20). What a great blessing! What a great privilege! In our time of need, we should not go to Google, go shopping, begin binge eating or drinking, or try to sleep longer. Let's come to God's throne of grace through our great high priest Jesus.

Second, Jesus became our high priest by learning obedience from what he suffered (5:1-10). In this section, the author explains how Jesus is qualified to be our great high priest. He explains the qualifications for high priest in the Old Testament (1-4), how Jesus met those qualifications and what he did (5-8), and the result (9-10). One of the qualifications for high priest is to be selected from among the people to represent them in matters related to God (5:1a). Angels are not qualified, only humans. Humans understand the weakness of other humans, and are able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray (2). The ignorant may be those who do not know God's way and unintentionally commit sin. Those who go astray know God's way but intentionally go their own way. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, they turn from God's way and follow their own way. Sometimes we think of sin in strictly moral terms. But here we see that sin is not following God's way, but going one's own way. Isaiah described this well: **"We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to their own way"** (Isa 53:6a). Going one's way seems to be normal and fun. So a favorite saying of such people is, "It's my way or the highway." Such people may seem bold, independent and courageous. But they end up in terrible trouble they cannot get out of by themselves. They need a gentle, understanding high priest who can guide them back to God's way. High priests in the Old Testament were also sinners who need God's mercy. So they could deal gently with other sinners. They offered sacrifices for their own sins, as well as for the sins of others (3).

Another qualification for high priest is to be called by God (4). The priesthood is not an office that can be taken by human means. It is a privilege and glory which is bestowed by God. In our society, usually, when there is some kind of opportunity, people apply for it based on their achievements and qualifications. If they are selected, it is based on their merit. But God's calling is quite different. It is based on his divine wisdom and sovereign grace. Jesus did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest, but God called

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him (5a). To explain how Jesus was qualified to be our high priest, the author quoted two Psalms. In Psalm 2, God spoke directly to Jesus, saying, **“You are my Son; today I have become your Father”** (5b; Ps 2:7). This Psalm was originally composed for the Davidic kings in light of the Lord’s covenant with David. This Davidic king is ultimately fulfilled in Christ. Jesus is the Son of God whom he appointed a Messianic king. At another time, God said to Jesus in Psalm 110:4, **“You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek”** (6). God established Jesus as the everlasting priest in his identity with people. So Jesus was acclaimed as both God’s Son—the Messianic king—and an everlasting high priest in the order of Melchizedek. Jesus is both king and priest in one person, appointed by God directly, and fully and perfectly qualified.

In verses 7-8, the author tells us what Jesus did to become high priest. Usually people who are appointed to such a high position of privilege avoid the suffering of ordinary people and try to exercise their authority based on their position. But Jesus is quite different. How is Jesus different? Verse 7 says, **“During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.”** Jesus, in his full humanity, prayed to God. Sometimes we wonder why we need to pray. We can learn from Jesus. From the beginning to the end of his ministry, Jesus depended on God in prayer. When Jesus was baptized, tempted, needed wisdom to appoint disciples, raised Lazarus from the dead, and at many other times, he prayed. After the Upper Room discourse, he offered high priestly prayer to God. Jesus’ prayer was not habitual, but fervent, with cries and tears. The climax of his prayer life came at Gethsemane. The point of Jesus’ prayer was not to save his life on earth, but submission to God’s will even through death on the cross. Because of his reverent submission, his prayer was heard, and God raised him from the dead. Verse 8 says, **“Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered....”** **“Son though he was,”** implies that Jesus is in very nature God, but he did not use his privilege to avoid the common law that learning comes from suffering. Jesus voluntarily obeyed God’s will from his incarnation to his death on the cross. Jesus gave up his honor, glory and privilege in heaven and entered this world as a human being and went through the same sufferings that we go through. But Jesus was never rebellious. He was always willing to suffer and learned

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obedience. In this way he succeeded where Adam failed and became the perfect sacrifice for us.

Verses 9-10 tell us the result of Jesus' obedience: **"...and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek."** When Jesus obeyed God fully and perfectly, he became the source of eternal salvation and God made him our great high priest. Now he is able to save completely and eternally those who obey him. Here we need to pay attention to the word **"obey."** When we hear the word **"obedience,"** we have an allergic reaction. It is because Adam's disobedience and Cain's rebellion are circulating in our blood. So we need to learn obedience. Obedience was not natural even for sinless Jesus. Jesus learned obedience. How? From what he suffered. We, too, should we learn obedience through suffering. Suffering has great meaning. God disciplines us through suffering. In other words, God purifies us from rebellion and disobedience and molds us into people of obedience who can please him and be a blessing to others.

Let's read our key verse, 4:14: **"Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess."** We have a great high priest who is able to empathize with our weaknesses. Let's come to God's throne of grace with confidence to receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.