**JESUS IS OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST**

February 7, 2016

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

Key Verse 4:14 “Therefore, since we have a great high priestwho has ascended into heaven,Jesus the Son of God,let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.”

There are no high priests around today. It is a foreign concept to us. But God planned centuries of history with Israel, recorded in the Old Testament, so that we would have a context for understanding this concept of high priest. That means he thinks it is really important. We would really miss the important truth if we say, “Well, that is too old-fashioned and irrelevant for today. Nobody knows what a high priest is; so let’s just translate Jesus into one of our familiar concepts, say, defense lawyer.” Instead what we need to do before we jump to contemporary analogies is to go back to God’s context, God’s history and God’s book, and learn some deep and wonderful things that we might otherwise miss—because high priest does not equal defense lawyer or any other analogy in our society. We need God’s history. Our culture and our history are way too limited to grasp who Jesus is and what he came to do. The Bible is all about Jesus. God was guiding the history of Israel as a backdrop to help make sense out of the coming of Jesus. The Old Testament is a crucial background for understanding the work of Jesus.

Hebrews 5:1–3 gives us a little glimpse of who high priests were in the Old Testament religious life. Verse 1 says that high priests came from among men and were appointed on behalf of the people to offer gifts and sacrifices to God for sins. A whole world of meaning is opened up to us here. There is a God. There is sin. This sin has created a barrier between God and the people. But God has made a provision for being reconciled to the people. He has ordained that there be human priests who would be a go-between; and that these priests would offer sacrifices. There would be the shedding of blood—a kind of animal substitute for the sinner. God would look upon this and turn his anger away from the people’s sins.

But built into this priestly system were some inadequacies. The one we see here in verse 3 is that the high priest was himself a sinner and had to offer sacrifices for his own sins as well as the sins of the people. This meant not only that his sympathy would be imperfect and his presence in the holy place with God limited; it also meant that he would die and have to be replaced. He could never guarantee an ongoing presence with God to intervene for the people. All the inadequacies of the old priesthood will be clear as we go forward in the book of Hebrews. But that is the point of the whole history of Israel—it is imperfect, inadequate, and incomplete. It all points forward to something greater, to someone perfect and complete. It points to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our ultimate and perfect High Priest. In fact, even the sacrifices that the high priest offers (5:3) point to Jesus, because Jesus is such a perfect and complete fulfillment of the priesthood that he is not only the High Priest, but he is also the sacrifice that the High Priest gives (Hebrews 9:12, 25–26; 13:12).

So let’s look at what Hebrews 4:14 tells us about our perfect, final High Priest and what difference he makes in our 21st-century lives. Look at verse 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.” Verse 14 tells us three crucial things: Jesus is alive; he is with God above the heavens; and he is the Son of God.

**First**, Jesus is alive. Unlike all the other high priests that ever lived and died, Jesus lived and died and rose from the dead never to die again. This is why the whole Old Testament system of the priesthood is over. Jesus is the final priest between God and man because he will never die. He has his priesthood by an indestructible life (Hebrews 7:16). We have a priest who is alive.

**Second**, he is with God above the heavens. He ascended into heaven into the presence of God himself. Before Christ, the holiest place of the tabernacle or temple was entered once a year by the high priest. But that was just a shadow of the true Holy Place in heaven where God dwells. This is where our High Priest lives today. He has immediate access to God in heaven day and night. Hebrews 7:25 says, “He always lives to intercede for them.”

**Third**, he is the Son of God. He was not merely a human exalted to this priestly place. He is the divine Son of God who created the heavens and the earth (1:8–10). This gives his sacrifice its infinite worth. Jesus does not take the blood of bulls and goats into the heavenly temple. Nor does he even take the blood of a mere human. He takes his own precious blood, the blood of the Son of God (Hebrews 9:12). And when God the Father sees this sacrifice for my sin, he says, “That is enough. The debt has been paid. My righteousness is vindicated.” And he overlooks my punished transgression and counts me as his beloved and innocent child.

So our High Priest is alive forevermore; he is with God above the heavens in the holiest place in the universe; and he is the very Son of God pleading my case by his own blood.

Look at verse 15. “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.” In verse 15 we learn that, in spite of how lofty our High Priest is (alive forever, in the presence of God, as the Son of God), nevertheless three other truths about him still stand: he was tempted in all the kinds of ways we are; he never gave in and sinned; and he is therefore sympathetic with us in our weaknesses. C.S. Lewis imagined someone objecting here: “If Jesus never sinned, then he doesn’t know what temptation is like. He lived a sheltered life and is out of touch with how strong temptation can be.” Here is what Lewis wrote in response to that objection: “A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is . . . A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in . . . Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means—the only complete realist.”

Jesus can sympathize with us in our pain and our dying, because he experienced excruciating pain and entered all the way into death. And he can sympathize with us in our temptation to sin, because he was tempted— to lie (to save his life); and to steal (to help his poor mother when his father died); and to covet (all the nice things that Zacchaeus owned); and to dishonor his parents (when they were more strict than others); and to take revenge (when he was wrongly accused); and to lust (when Mary wiped his feet with her hair); and to despair with self-pity (when his disciples fell asleep in his last hour of trial); and to murmur at God (when John the Baptist died at the whim of a dancing girl); and to gloat over his accusers (when they couldn’t answer his questions). Jesus knows the battle. He fought it all the way to the end. And he defeated the monster every time. So he was tested like we are and the Bible says he is a sympathetic High Priest. He does not roll his eyes at your pain or cluck his tongue at your struggle with sin.

Even though he was God’s Son, he was called to suffer and he learned the full meaning of obedience all the way to death in the things in which he suffered. And thus God made him a perfect high priest. You learn what you learn by experience. You can say fire burns. But until you have felt it burn, you really can’t be sympathetic to someone who is burned. Sympathy comes from experience and Jesus learned obedience in his incarnation through suffering. Look at verse 8. “Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered.” This does not mean he moved from being disobedient to being obedient. It means he moved from being untested, to being tested and proven. He moved from obeying without any suffering, to obeying through unspeakable suffering. It means that the gold of his natural purity was put in the furnace and melted down with white-hot pain, so that he could learn from experience what suffering is and prove that his purity would persevere.

Did this come automatically? No. Verse 7 says that it was prayed for and begged for and cried out for and wept for with tears. It was not easy even for Jesus. Some take verse 7 to refer only to the battle in Gethsemane when he sweat drops of blood and pleaded with God. I don’t think so. Notice the word “days” in verse 7—“During the days of Jesus’ life on earth.” Not just a night or a day, but during all the “days of his humanity” he was wrestling and praying and begging and crying out and weeping. It was not brief. It was a lifetime of warfare against sin. And when verse 7b says that he was praying and crying “to the one who could save him from death,” does that mean that he was mainly praying for deliverance from physical death? Was that the main aim of his praying in the days of his life? I don’t think so, because verse 7 says “he was heard.” I think that means God gave him what he asked for, and verse 8 describes the effect of that answered prayer: he learned obedience. Jesus was praying for obedience—for persevering purity. In other words, Jesus knew that there was a death worse than death. Much worse. Physical death is bad enough and he desired that there be another way to do the Father’s will than to die on the cross. But far more horrible than dying on the cross was the impurity of unbelief and disobedience. That was the great and horrible threat. So he prayed all his life against that, and he was heard by his Father and, instead of caving in to sin, he learned obedience from what he suffered.

What does all this mean to us today? Because he is alive, and in the presence of God with the sacrifice of the blood of the Son of God, and full of sympathy for his people, we are encouraged to do two things: First, “Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess”; second, “Let us approach God’s throne of grace with confidence.”

**First**, “Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess”. The confession is simply our unshakable hope (10:23) that God is for us and will work to bring us into his final rest and joy. Hold fast to that because you have a great High Priest. That is the first conclusion. For several weeks we have been seeing the call to hold fast and to be diligent and to fix our thoughts on Jesus. Here we see it again. Only here the writer is spreading out powerful reasons not only for why you should hold fast to your confession, but also why you can! God is for you. You have a great High Priest. He is alive. He is in the presence of God. He is the Son of God. He is sympathetic. So hold fast to your hope. But what practically do you do with your hope? That is the second point.

**Second**, “Let us approach God’s throne of grace with confidence.” Look at 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.” 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. Jesus himself suffered. Because he revealed his weaknesses, we can relate to him. Have you ever imagined living with someone who never showed weaknesses. It is very hard to get close to him/her. Because Jesus showed his weakness and suffered, we can approach him freely for help because he understands.

Every one of us needs help. We are not God. We have needs. We have weaknesses. We have confusion. We have limitations of all kinds. We need help. But every one of us has something else: We have sins. And therefore at the bottom of our hearts we know that we do not deserve the help we need. And so we feel trapped. I need help with my children, my loneliness, my job, my health, my finances. I need help. But I don’t deserve the help I need. So what can I do? I can try to deny it all and be a superman who doesn’t need any help. Or I can try to drown it all and throw my life into a pool of sensual pleasures. Or I can simply give way to the paralysis of despair. But God declares over this hopeless conclusion: Jesus Christ became a High Priest to shatter that despair with hope, and to rescue that drowning wretch. Yes, we all need help. Yes, none of us deserves the help we need. But no to despair and pride. Look at what God says. Because we have a great High Priest, the throne of God is a throne of grace. And the help we get at that throne is mercy and grace to help in time of need. Grace to help! Not deserved help — gracious help. This is the whole point of the Old and New Testaments. God planned for a High Priest, a Savior, a Redeemer, a gracious Helper. Here “in our time of need” is also translated as “in the nick of time.” At the moment of desperation, when we look to Jesus, he is right there to help us. He does not say, “Not yet. Maybe later.” He helps us in the nick of time. You are not trapped. Say no to that lie. We need help. We don’t deserve it. But we can have it. You can have it right now and forever. If you will receive and trust in your High Priest, Jesus the Son of God, and draw near to God through him.

Look at verse 9. “…and once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” Not everyone has eternal salvation. Only those who are obeying Christ have the eternal salvation that he obtained for us. Are you obeying Christ? Or are you living in obedience to his will? Jesus is the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him. So hold fast to your confession and draw near to Christ for help.