



Sunday School Lesson 4 for June 27, 2004.
Released on: June 22, 2004.

Devotional Reading: Hebrews 7:21-28.
Background Scripture: Hebrews 4:14-5:10; 7

Study: Hebrews 4:14—5:10. Jesus: Our High Priest
Questions and answers are found below.

TIME: About A.D. 67
PLACE: unknown

Hebrews 4:14-16

14 Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.
15 For we have not a high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.
16 Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 5:1-10

1 For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins:
2 Who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way; for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity.
3 And by reason hereof he ought, as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins.
4 And no man taketh this honor unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron.
5 So also Christ glorified not himself to be made a high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, today have I begotten thee.
6 As he saith also in another place, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.
7 Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared;
8 Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered;
9 And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him;
10 Called of God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

LESSON AIMS

The aims of today's lesson are:

- Describe the work of Jesus on our behalf as our great high priest.
- Tell some of the ways that we are blessed by having Jesus as our high priest.
- Acknowledge an area of temptation and seek Jesus' help in overcoming it.

INTRODUCTION

"The Old Rugged Cross." I saw them put nails in His hands, I saw the blood on His face from the thorns in His crown, and I saw them raise the cross and drop it in a hole they had dug in the ground.

If that wasn't enough, to see the blood from His crown, they pierced his side and blood gushed out on the ground. I saw Jesus hanging between earth and the sky. And all I could do was just watch Him die.

It started to get dark and lightning, thunder clapped and the earth shook where they trod, I heard some one from the crowd speak out "Surely this was the Son of God."

I saw them take Him down and take Him to a tomb, rolled the stone in front and there they placed a guard. On that early Sunday morning the angels rolled away the stone and I saw the guard lay where he once stood.

I looked in the tomb Jesus wasn't there. Because He arose the way He said He would.

Jesus is alive and doing well. He has conquered death, grave, and hell. He is still around to save the lost. And that is why I still cherish the Old Rugged Cross.

-----by George Breezeale

The "eternal lifeline" Christ passes to us comes at the price of His own life sacrificed on the cross (Hebrews 7:27). The world places a premium on "having friends in high places: in order to get things done.

But such "friends" usually expect something in return for their favors.

This often tawdry or cheap and underhanded game is described by various euphemisms or inoffensive expressions as "one hand washes the other," "dancing with the one who brought you," "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours," and "it's not what you know but who you know."

How sad to be involved in such game playing and yet overlook the fact that Jesus is in the highest possible position; and he calls us friends.

He is our great high priest, able to do far more for us than anyone in a position of influence on earth ever can. And there is nothing he expects us to do to earn his favor.

In fact, it is he who has done all the work necessary to repair the broken relationship between people and God. Today's lesson will bring these facts back to mind, and challenge us to live up to our own priesthood as well (I Peter 2:9).

LESSON BACKGROUND

The priesthood was an important part of the covenant that God revealed to Moses. Priests were "go-betweens"—representing people to God and God to the people. The law required that members of the priesthood be drawn from the descendants of Aaron (Numbers 3:10), who was from the tribe of Levi (Exodus 4:14).

The concept of one man's being the "high" priest begins to be seen in Leviticus 16:32 and 21:10. The high priests were sometimes looked to as leaders or advisors to the political leaders.

In the tabernacle and later in the temple, the high priest normally presided over the offering of sacrifices. The high priest came before God not only as the chief mediator between God and those whom the priest represented, but also as a sinner himself.

Some sacrifices were so sacred that they could be offered only by the high priest (Leviticus 16; Hebrews 9:7). What a responsibility!

The high priests unfortunately became overly involved in the political processes in the period between the Old and New Testaments. In about 174 B.C., ungodly rulers began to select at their whim the men to fill that office. As a result, high priests were sometimes implicated in corrupt activities.

The high priest in Jesus' day is a good example (Mark 14:1; 63, 64; Luke 22:1-6). Clearly, something better was needed.

The old covenant, designed to be temporary, needed to be replaced.

As we have noted in previous weeks, the believing Jews of New Testament times were tempted to turn away from faith in Christ and back to the traditions of Judaism. They needed to realize that Christ was the great High Priest that the Old Testament priesthood memorably but imperfectly foreshadowed.

If they turned from Him, they would be left without any hope.

Believers today must also resist the temptation of unbelief. As we study the sublime or inspirational compassion of Our High Priest found in today's lesson, may we be inspired to steadfastness and a spirit of gratitude.

EXPOSITION AND QUESTIONS JESUS: THE GREAT HIGH PRIEST

Originally it was the responsibility of the head of the family to perform the priestly duties on behalf of his family (Gen. 8:20; 12:8; Job 1:5). This was God's established pattern until such time as He, through the Prophet Moses, anointed Aaron and Aaron's sons to fulfill the offices of priest and high priest (Exodus 28:1).

Recognizing the importance of the office of high priest to those who had converted from Judaism to Christianity, the writer of Hebrews stressed the role of Jesus Christ as the great High Priest, who fulfills all that had been prefigured in that Aaronic high priestly office.

Once each year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest entered within the veil, the most holy place, and there offered blood "for himself, and for the errors of the people" (Heb. 9:7). The holy of holies, which was separated from the holy place by a veil, was a room of tremendous beauty.

Our Saviour, the Son of man, being from the tribe of Judah, would not have been allowed to enter the earthly holy of holies. But He entered into one that was infinitely superior.

He has entered heaven itself bearing an infinitely better sacrifice—His own precious blood. He is now "even at the right hand of God": and "maketh intercession for us" (Rom. 8:34).

HEAVENLY HIGH PRIEST (Hebrews 4:14-16)
Immortal (v. 14)

1. Why is Christ called a "great" High Priest?

This description sets Jesus in contrast to Aaron and those who followed him as priests. Those priests were all fallible human beings. Since they all died, their services as priests were limited to their own brief life spans.

Our great high priest, by contrast, can no longer die. He is able to serve as our high priest in Heaven for eternity. The phrase gone through the heavens speaks to the majesty and glory of Jesus Christ in this regard. Some suggest that this idea refers to Christ's ascension (Acts 1:9) during which he passed through the "immediate" heaven and on into the "ultimate" Heaven (Corinthians 12:2).

Sympathetic (v. 15)

On many occasions we may have sympathized with others caught in painful situations. We can extend to them our encouragement, but unless we've "been there and done that," then it's difficult to know the depth of their pain. Because Christ has come in the flesh, he indeed has "been there and done that."

To be tempted in every way, just as we are does not suggest that Christ faced every single temptation that we will ever face. But he has indeed experienced temptations that come through the flesh and those that come through pride (Matthew 4:1-11). Jesus was besieged by Satan himself, but resisted all temptations successfully.

So even though Jesus was unscarred by sin, he can empathize, understand or have compassion with us and strengthen us when we are tempted.

2. What were two important prerequisites for the priesthood?

A foundational requirement for the high priest was that he be a man, for he represented man before God concerning all the duties man has before his Creator and Lord. Furthermore, he was appointed ("ordained") to the position; he did not grab it for himself.

Approachable (v. 16)

Under the Mosaic covenant only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies to offer the yearly sacrifice of blood (Leviticus 16:29-33). All others were forbidden to enter the Holy of Holies on pain of death. But Christ's sacrifice on the cross changed all of that.

At the time of his death the heavy curtain that separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place was torn from top to bottom, symbolically opening it for all believers to enter in (Mark 15:38).

We enter when we approach the throne of grace with confidence. One normally might approach the throne of a king with an overwhelming sense of fear, not knowing how the king will react. But when we come before him, we can do so with confidence because he extends grace to us. When we come in our time of need, we have every reason to believe that he will hear us and respond.

ISRAEL'S HIGH PRIEST (Hebrews 5:1-4) Human (v. 1)

Under the Mosaic covenant the high priest was chosen from among the descendants of Aaron to oversee the priestly mission before God. God did not send an angel or some other heavenly being to carry out this mission. It was most appropriate for the high priest to be one of the people whom he would represent.

For this reason it was necessary for Christ to come in the flesh that he might represent the entire human race before God.

3. What does the term "compassion" mean in Hebrews 5:2?

The term "compassion" here refers to an ability to deal with people with gentleness and moderation. The high priest was not to be one who quickly lost patience with others because of their shortcomings. He was to be able to regulate his actions and temper to best help the people he dealt with.

The high priest was to display this patience toward both the ignorant person—the spiritually immature or untutored—and those who through weakness had wandered away from the path of righteousness. These two categories correspond to types of sin that were mentioned in the Mosaic law and were to be dealt with by the priests (Lev. 4:1-3; 6:1-7).

In truth, the grammatical structure of Hebrews 5:2 suggests that spiritual ignorance and waywardness are closely related. The high priest needed to remember how prone to foolish wanderings we are.

A high priest ideally had to become "all things to all people" if he were to fulfill his ministry. Any priest had to meet very exacting standards for the specialized priestly ministry (Leviticus 21:1-22:16). However, the priests' concentration on holiness tended to isolate them from those who were ignorant or were going astray, meaning the wayward and worldly.

So how could the high priest—or any priest—maintain the high standard of holiness that God demanded, yet still be able to deal gently with ordinary people?

(v. 3)

The earthly high priest was best able to do this because he himself was subject to weakness. Although always searching for greater holiness, the most godly high priests were still able to "connect with" those under his spiritual care because he shared their weaknesses and knew the power of temptation.

The arrogant religious leaders of Jesus' day, however, wanted nothing to do with "sinners." We see their attitude come out as they react to Jesus' association with the outcasts and the misfits of society (Matthew 9:11). Those leaders accused him of being glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners" (Matthew 11:19).

Jesus' compassion stands in stark contrast with their arrogance and corruption; Jesus promised that they would be punished severely (Mark 12:38-40).

Under the Mosaic covenant, the high priest offered sacrifices not only for the sins of the people but also for his own sins (Leviticus 9:7; 16:6). However, we are told that "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). Eventually a perfect sacrifice would be required. Only Christ could provide that, by sacrificing himself.

Here is where we see a sharp difference between the old covenant priesthood and the priesthood of Christ.

Called (v. 4)

The high priesthood in ancient Israel was most honored and respected office, second only to that of the king. Yet even kings were not allowed to perform the tasks of priests (2 Chronicles 26:16-21). Under God's plan, one did not come to the position of high priest as the result of a popular election, a military coup, or political conniving.

A person who occupies this office was called by God.

History does not give us much specific information about how high priests were chosen, but in some ways God's hand was involved in the process. Of course we know from history that the hand of God was sometimes circumvented, and on occasion rascals and scoundrels occupied the office.

This was certainly true during Jesus' ministry when Annas and Caiaphas were high priests (Luke 3:2).

4. What evidence did the author of Hebrews cite to show that Christ had been appointed a priest?

To prove that the Father had made Christ High Priest, the writer of Hebrews cited two passages from Psalms. The writer of Hebrews first referred to Psalm 2:7. The biblical writer also referred to Psalm 110:4.

PERFECT HIGH PRIEST (Hebrews 5:5-10)
Son of God (v. 5)

Christ did not come to earth to glorify himself. Instead, "being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:8). It was God who glorified him (2:9-11).

On at least two occasions, God publicly declared Jesus to be his Son (Matthew 17:5; Luke 3:22). The latter part of the verse before us is from Psalm 2:7, which prophetically looked forward to the glorification of God's Son when he came as a man.

Order of Melchizedek (v. 6)

5. How does Psalm 110 show that Christ is both King and Priest?

The opening verses of this psalm clearly refer to Christ's kingly rule, but in verse 4 Christ is called a priest.

6. What do we learn about Christ by studying Melchizedek?

The previous verses have been comparing and contrasting the high priesthood of Christ with the high priesthood of the old covenant. Now the writer introduces a new element: Melchizedek. This man is a mysterious figure, living in the time of Abraham.

Melchizedek preceded Aaron and Moses by several hundred years.

Not only was Melchizedek a priest of some kind, he was also "king of Salem" (Genesis 14:18).

When Abraham returned from a successful campaign, he was greeted by this Melchizedek, who pronounced God's blessings upon Abraham. Abraham, in turn, paid tithes to Melchizedek (Genesis 14:19,20).

The Aaronic priesthood originated in the tribe of Levi. Since Christ was of the tribe of Judah, he could not be a priest of the Aaronic order in the biological sense. But this restriction was set aside because Christ was a priest in the order of Melchizedek.

This does not mean that Christ was a descendant of Melchizedek. Rather, it means that Christ was a priest of similar kind. (Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 6:20; 7:17).

Giver of Submission (vv. 7, 8)

Christ's intercessory work of a priest began while he was still on earth as he offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears. This refers to Christ's prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane.

While the Gospel accounts do not mention loud crying and tears, they do make it clear that his prayers in the garden were deeply emotional (Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46).

7. How does Hebrews 5:7 emphasize Christ's suffering?

As great as He was, Jesus still had to endure great pain and hardship. The words of verse 7 refer in particular to Christ's suffering in Gethsemane, where He pleaded to be rescued from the cruel death that awaited Him (Matt. 26:36-42).

He set the example for us in times of trouble by pouring out His heart to the Father (Ps. 62:8).

The Father did not grant His request for deliverance, but because of Christ's spirit of submission (His godly fear), He did answer the Son's prayer by giving Him the strength to accept what He needed to do.

8. In what sense did Christ learn obedience (vs. 8)?

This verse poses something of a problem. If Christ was perfect (and he was) and if He was always obedient (and He was), then why did He have to learn obedience by suffering?

We begin to arrive at an answer by remembering when Jesus came into the world as a baby, He, somehow, was able to set aside temporarily some of his divine knowledge and characteristics.

Thus it could be said that he "grew in wisdom and stature" (Luke 2:52).

Jesus "learned obedience by actually obeying." Jesus came not only ready to act, he did act. In so doing, he obeyed the will of the Father. That obedience purchased our salvation!

Author of Salvation (vv. 9, 10)

Once made perfect doesn't mean that Jesus was ever "imperfect." There is a perfection that results from having actually suffered; it is different from the perfection that is ready to suffer. As a result of suffering, Jesus became the source of eternal salvation.

What a breathtaking promise: salvation that stretches into the far reaches of eternity!

CONCLUSION

"Something Beautiful!" The story is told of a king who owned a valuable diamond, one of the rarest and most perfect in the world. One day the diamond fell and a deep scratch marred its face.

The king summoned the best diamond experts in the land to correct the blemish, but they all agreed they could not remove the scratch without cutting away a good part of the surface, thus reducing the weight and value of the diamond.

Finally one expert appeared and assured him that he could fix the diamond without reducing its value. His confidence was convincing and the king gave the diamond to the man.

In a few days, the artisan returned the diamond to the king, who was amazed to find that the ugly scratch was gone, and in its place a beautiful rose was etched.

The former scratch had become the stem of an exquisite flower!

God can turn the "scratches" on our souls into something beautiful.

-----from: "God's Little Lessons on Life for Mom," Honor Books of Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1999. p. 67

Mankind does not like to confess its desperate and helpless condition. According to Scripture, the natural man is "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). His sinfulness has placed a barrier between him and a holy God who will not compromise His righteous standards.

How can a person ever find a way out of spiritual darkness?

Man's only hope, of course, rests in God's grace. Man would never find his way to God, but God in His mercy sent His Son to identify with man and offer up the sacrifice necessary to satisfy God's justice.

We have a great High Priest who gives us access to the throne of God. Let us make it a habit to come boldly before that throne in prayer.

PRAYER

Our Father, we come before you as believers. Yet we must pray that you will help our unbelief. Strengthen our faith and our zeal so that we can trust more fully in Him who is our mediator before you. As a result, grant us to become better witnesses and better soul winners for Christ. In the name of our great high priest we pray, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

"You are . . . a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9).

At times in our struggle against sin we feel almost overwhelmed by the power of the devil. But we have good reason to take courage because we have a Savior who has not only paid sin's price; He has also experienced our struggles against temptation. And, we know that we are able to enter eternity through His grace.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week we will explore what it means to move on toward maturity as Christians and to grow in our faith. (Hebrews 5:11-14—6:1-12).

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