

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

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[0 : 00] Hebrews chapter 4, if you could turn it up again, page 1003, picking things up at verse 14. And there's all this talk about priests.

And priests, and talking about priests seems a bit strange to our modern ears. It was the case in past generations that the local priest was an important part of the community.

He was there from cradle to grave. And he helped you navigate the things of life, particularly to ensure that when your time did come, your soul was ready to meet your maker.

But we don't need priests anymore. Not just because of all the scandals that have come out in recent years. It's not just that reason that people have discarded the idea.

Of the priest. But modern society has found other solutions to the struggles of life. We have constructed our own salvations from the perceived hells that we face.

[1 : 12] Priests, along with the religion that they peddle, have been consigned to the past. We don't really need priests anymore. Or have they really been consigned to the past?

In his Religion for Atheists, Alan de Botton makes a case for adopting some of what we might describe as the trappings or the habits of religion if we want to live a fulfilling life.

He's saying that there are some benefits to the things that are part of religious practice that actually could help us navigate life pretty well if we were to adopt them.

In fact, we need someone, he says, who would fulfill the priestly role in life. But he suggests the solution is the person that does that nowadays, well, it's the psychotherapist.

There, the new priests, de Botton argues. He says this, quote, End quote.

[2 : 28] Fear of death is inescapable. Death is inescapable.

And we know that that fear is there because deep down in all of us, we know that the existence of death in the world tells us something about ourselves that makes us uncomfortable.

Death speaks to us of a disconnect between us and the one who made us. The one who stands at the center of reality. In truth, if we're honest, death is a persistent and unavoidable reminder about the human condition before God.

The Bible tells us that, but we know it deep down in our experience that the existence of death is something that speaks to us of a brokenness in our world.

And particularly a brokenness as it relates to that relationship at the center of reality. How are we to deal with it? Anxiety about mortality.

[3 : 32] How are we to deal with it? Well, I have the answer. And it is the only answer that there is. We need a priest. Not a mere man.

However wise or kindly or spiritual he might be, we need someone who will go to God on our behalf and do whatever is needed to reconcile our relationship with Him.

And the book of Hebrews, in particular a passage this evening, tells us that this is what we have in Jesus Christ. Look at 4 verse 14.

We have a great high priest. In fact, this evening we come to an extended meditation on the high priesthood of Christ and the significance of that high priesthood for His people.

And I want us to see this evening. I hope I don't get in the way of it as we go through here because this is very good news. One of the big points the author wants to clarify in this section is that Jesus is fully qualified to fulfill this priestly role according to the Old Testament commands for a priest.

[4 : 46] Because according to Torah, and explained here in chapter 5 verses 1 to 5, the three criteria for a priest, the three that had to be met, they were first of all that they made atonement for sins.

Secondly, that they sympathized with the people they represented because they too were beset by weakness. And thirdly, they didn't simply choose to be priests of their own accord.

You see, they didn't take this honor for themselves. Because verse 4, they were called to this office by God. And verses 5 to 10, then lay out how Jesus perfectly meets those qualifications.

Look at verse 5, chapter 5, verse 5. Christ did not exalt Himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by Him who said to Him, You are my Son, today I have begotten you. As He says also in another place, You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

He was called by God. Remember, I said a few weeks ago that this quote from Psalm 2 speaks of Him being begotten from the dead in His resurrection. That's what He's speaking about. Today I have begotten you.

[5 : 55] I have called you out of death in His resurrection. And He is raised to sit at the Father's right hand. That is why He is an ever-living priest. That is why He enters into the priesthood of Melchizedek, verse 6, the one who is without beginning or end of days.

And then, verses 7 and 8, He sympathizes with us through His grief and suffering. Suffering that led to His death as an atoning sacrifice for the salvation.

Verse 9, do you see, of those He represents. Being made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. Now again, remember, this is important for the first hearers of this book. They were tempted to go back, go back to the old covenant forms, go back to old covenant priests and sacrifices and so on. But this is making clear, the author here is telling these people that want to do that, that are tempted in that direction, that Christ is a fitting priest because He is qualified according to the Old Testament criteria.

[7 : 00] He is the one the Old Testament criteria look forward to. And His priesthood is great. He is a great high priest because of what He does in this process. What does He do in this process?

Three things were told this evening about our priest. First is this. He takes our nature. Sorry, He shares our nature. He shares our nature. Since then, verse 14, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God.

Now, we've already heard, chapter 2, verse 17, how Christ had to be made like His brothers, like us, like you and like me, in every respect in order to be the priest that we needed Him to be.

And we're told in the introduction that once He had gone to the cross to make purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. Here, the focus is on the humanity of the One who is seated in heaven.

The author uses His human name, do you see? Jesus. The name given to the eternal Son made flesh. The name that was given to Mary's boy.

[8 : 09] The one who took on flesh in order to share our human nature. He is the one who has passed through the heavens. It's Jesus. When the Bible speaks about heaven or the heavens, it does so in three ways.

The heavens can simply be referring to the sky. The psalmist talks about the birds of the heavens in this sense. It can also refer to the cosmos. Psalm 8 refers to the stars being in the heavens.

That's the second way that it speaks. But beyond the heavens, on the upper story of the building, if you like, is heaven. The heaven of heavens. And this is where God is said to dwell.

And it is there, in the presence of God, that our author locates Jesus. He shares our nature in order to bring flesh and blood, humanity, your humanity and mine, into the presence of God and to represent us as one of us.

Jesus not only sits at the Father's right hand to rule, but he physically stands in the Father's presence to advocate for us, to plead our innocence, to intercede for us, to take our prayers and to perfect them to the Father.

[9 : 32] And his priestly ministry has no deficiencies. In sharing our nature, he brings our humanity into heaven.

But also, secondly, he knows our weakness. He shares our nature. Secondly, he knows our weakness. 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.

The Lord Jesus has gone ahead of us, not just from earth to heaven, but from a condition of temptation and trial, just like us in every respect, to a condition of glory, free from every trace of sin. The only point of difference is that he has never sinned. When you think about temptation and sin, when we are tempted, there is an external aspect to that.

There is something out there, as it were, that Satan holds before us, seeking to draw us away from obedience to God. Jesus experienced that in every way that we do.

[10:42] The full onslaught of the devil in his face. You think about the temptations in Luke chapter 4. Temptations to go the way of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Face to face with Satan, he experienced all of that temptation.

Satan is pushing him to exalt himself rather than to obey the will of God. Jesus faced external temptation in every respect. But for us, there is also a second element, isn't there?

There is an internal aspect as well. Our sinful nature agrees with and enjoys that external temptation that comes our way. And it colludes, as it were, in the plot to destroy us.

There is an external temptation and there is an internal draw that comes from our sinful nature. That is why John Newton could say, In London, I am in a crowd of temptations, but in the country, there is a crowd of temptations in me.

Take me away from the external temptations, the internal desire for sin still remains. That's not true of Jesus. He has never experienced the temptations that come to us because we have a sinful nature.

[11:52] He has never experienced temptation to sexual sin or to gluttony or to shout at the children. But the fact that that is true of Jesus is not a hindrance to his ability to be sympathetic to us in our weakness when we are tempted.

And by the way, the idea intended by the word sympathize here isn't the rather benign facial expression. You know, when somebody says they're being sympathetic, you know, that kind of thing, it's not that.

It has the sense of knowing our experience. He knows what it's like for us. He knows what it's like to be you in this sense. But I think we could hear this and we could say, well, yeah, all right, fair enough.

It says that, but he didn't have a sinful nature. You've just said that, so it can't have been as bad for him as it is for me. But the fact that Jesus never sinned means that he actually understands sin better than we do.

And he has experienced, experienced, if you like, the full force of temptation. Look at verse 7. In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplication with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death and he was heard because of his reverence.

[13:11] All the days of his flesh. I once heard it put this way. If a group of 10 men were walking along in 70 mile an hour winds and nine of them blew over straight away and the 10th walked all the way home, which one of those knows the most about wind?

Which one knows the most about enduring the struggle? Which one knows the most about how it is that they need to endure? Which one is therefore best qualified to help others in the same struggle? The Lord Jesus knows far more about temptation and sin than we do because we blow over in temptation after only a few steps. And then we lie on the ground and we talk about how hard it is to walk against the wind.

We have a priest who stands in the presence of God in our humanity fully aware of what it is like to struggle against sin.

Your experience is known to God. Your struggle is known to God.

[14:20] He is not ignorant of what it takes to persevere against temptation and what that feels like. The pressure that you feel to deny God and to choose an easier path.

Jesus endured it himself all the way to glory. He knows our weakness. And then thirdly, He secures our salvation.

He shares our nature. He knows our weakness. Thirdly, He secures our salvation. The Old Testament Aaronic priests offered sacrifices. 5 verse 1. First for themselves and secondly for the people.

Christ did not need to offer sacrifice for His own sin. He had none. But verse 8. Although He was a son, He learned obedience through what He suffered.

And being made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

[15:24] He learned obedience. He chose minute by minute to obey His Father. And through this suffering and death, He was made perfect.

Christ entered into His perfection not from a state of previous imperfection, of course, but from a state of untested perfection. And through this being perfected, He secures salvation for all who obey Him.

Jesus, our great high priest, has done everything required to save us for all eternity. eternity. And as we saw before, eternal here doesn't just mean everlasting, doesn't just mean a very long time. Eternal life is a participation in the life that is God's. Salvation is, therefore, in a very real sense, heavenly in the way that 4 verse 14 here talks about it.

And Christ's suffering and death secure this salvation for all who cling to Him. And His triumph over sin and death in light of verse 14 is a triumph for each one of us as well.

[16 : 34] So that is why we gather here this evening and we can say that Christ is our great high priest.

And when we grasp what it means for Him to be our great high priest, that should lead us to respond in a particular way. Since then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens.

Jesus, the Son of God, what does it say? We do something. What do we do? Let us hold fast our confession. Because of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done, we should hold fast our confession. What does that mean? Well, our author explains, verse 16, Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in a time of need. Holding fast is not something we do by looking at our fingers, checking our grip, as it were.

We hold fast by coming to the throne of grace in order to receive forgiveness for our sins and strength for our trials. Holding fast always requires us to look away from ourselves and look to Christ.

[17 : 49] Like last time, I said we do examine ourselves to root out unbelief. We do, we do, as it were, look at those things in our peripheral vision, but straight ahead, our focus is on Christ, our faithful and great high priest.

Maybe it is that we examine ourselves for a time, but we do that only to lift our eyes again and fix them again on Christ.

Notice the attitude. Do you see that as well? The attitude we're to have, we approach with confidence. We do it with boldness. This means actually, we are obligated to do this. We are obliged to go to Christ with boldness.

We don't stand at a distance from the throne of grace. Come boldly, come quickly and do so because we have a great high priest. It's possible to get this wrong in a couple of directions. Some Christians, I think, get it wrong in the sense that they crawl and grovel before God because they think of themselves as such miserable sinners. I think some of us, we believe God has saved us, but he doesn't really like us.

[19 : 00] He doesn't really want us in his presence. Now, we'd never say it like that, but functionally, that is how we operate. It's like God holds his nose at the thought of us. That is a straight-up denial of the finished work of Christ and his ongoing priestly work on our account.

The failure in the other direction is when people stroll up to the throne of grace super casually. Well, grace is grace. There's always more grace for me. Well, God, he forgives.

That's his job. That kind of chat. That is a straight-up denial of how dark our hearts are in the light of a holy God. We've got to get the biblical balance. The biblical balance is found by the Christian who understands, on one hand, the gravity of their sin, but at the same time, through the grace of God, they see the greatness and the glory of their Savior.

And the challenge is to hold those together with equal concern. We're to approach God boldly because we have a great high priest who delights in us.

Our sin is great. Our high priest is greater. We sing, don't we, our sins, they are many, and they are, but his mercy is more. In fact, that is precisely what we receive.

[20 : 10] Look at 4.16. That's what we receive when we come. Mercy for our sins. As you mature as a Christian, your awareness of sin doesn't get less.

It grows in actual fact. It will only get less if you harden your heart and start to lie to yourself about what you're really like. Rather like the Apostle Paul. Do you remember the Apostle Paul early on talks about himself as the least of the apostles?

And then a bit later, it's the least of all men. And then at the end, it's the chief of sinners. That's the trajectory, as it were, of healthy self-understanding when it comes to sin.

As we grow, we should have a deeper appreciation of the subtlety and the deceitfulness of our sin. But as this awareness of sin grows, so does your appreciation of the mercy of God. And not only that, but along with mercy, we receive grace. Grace to enable us to persevere in our trials. As you struggle through the winds of temptation in life, grace to endure comes to you all the way from the throne of heaven.

[21 : 23] And it helps you take the next step and then the next step and then the next and so on. It's our experience of both mercy and grace that will keep us going as we seek to obey Christ as we're called to do.

5 verse 9. Being made perfect, He became a source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him. So when you see the depths of your sin, you appreciate the magnitude of what it takes to love you. And this in turn leads to a deeper love for and a more fervent worship of Him. When you know the sustaining grace of Christ, when you experience answered prayers for strength to stand for Him in the workplace, not to give in to particular besetting sins or to hold fast in the face of temptation to walk away, you appreciate His work in your life more profoundly.

You love and delight in Him more deeply. Do you see how it works? And then it is as you delight in God that you want to obey Him. You choose obedience gladly because you delight to be in a relationship with a God who has been just so merciful and just so gracious to you.

How do we hold fast our confession in the face of trials and temptations that beset our path?

Whatever the trial, whatever the temptation that is most kind of insidious in your life, the thing that has the hardest grip, the strongest grip on your heart, how do you hold fast?

[22 : 53] Remember that we have a great high priest. We have one who shares our nature, who knows our weaknesses and who has secured our salvation and in light of all of that we approach His throne of grace.

Don't stand at a distance. Run to Him and receive from His hand an abundance of mercy and grace upon grace upon grace.

Don't stand at a distance. If there is a besetting sin in your life that has ensnared you and you feel like it has a grip that can't be broken, it can.

You have a great high priest. Go to Him. Don't keep Him at a distance. When we sin, when we struggle, so often the last place we want to go is to God because we feel so terrible.

That is the very place we need to go. So go to the throne of grace. That's the only place where you'll get mercy. That is the only place where forgiveness for that sin, where the power of that sin can be broken.

[23 : 56] So go and don't hold back. There is mercy and there is grace because He shares our nature, He knows our weaknesses and He has secured our salvation.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Thank you.