

Sam Storms

Bridgeway Church

Hebrews #14

## **Celebrating Christ as the Source of Salvation**

### **Hebrews 4:14-5:10**

If you were to ask the average Christian to quote one verse in the Bible that best summarizes what we call the gospel, most would instinctively turn to **John 3:16**. And that's ok. It is stunning to think that because God loved this world of fallen sinners he sent his only Son, Jesus, so that if we believe in him we have everlasting life. So, you can't make a mistake or go wrong by pointing to John 3:16 as an excellent summation of the gospel.

But may I suggest that there is an even more explicit and expressive declaration of the gospel than John 3:16? That may sound heretical to some of you, but hear me out. If I were asked to quote one verse of Scripture that best encapsulates the gospel I would turn to 1 Peter 3:18. There the apostle says,

**“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.”**

I have no intention of unpacking this powerful text today. I mention it as a beautiful summation of the gospel not only because it describes the sacrificial death of Jesus in the place of sinners, but also because it clearly tells us what the purpose of that substitutionary sacrifice was: it was ***to “bring us to God.”*** Jesus died as our substitute, which is to say, he died in our place, suffering what we should have suffered, in order to bring us to God.

What Peter is saying is that our greatest need is to ***get to God!*** The most glorious gift we could ever receive isn't forgiveness of sins or eternal life or redemption or justification. Don't misunderstand me. These are genuinely glorious and marvelous gifts we receive when we get saved. But they are glorious and marvelous and to be cherished because they make it possible for us to get to God!

Now, why am I saying all this and what does it have to do with Hebrews? The simple answer is that ***this was the assigned task of the person known in Israel's history as the High Priest.*** According to what we have just read in Hebrews 5:1, the High Priest was an individual appointed to act on behalf of other men and women. His assignment was to offer to God those sacrifices for sin that would make it possible for others to get to God.

I could give you numerous biblical texts that make the same point, but consider this one from the prophecy of Isaiah:

**"Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you" (Isaiah 59:2).**

Although this applied directly to the people of Israel and the breach in their relationship with God that their sin had created, the *principle* extends beyond them to all of us. Our sins have created a spiritual, moral, and relational chasm between us and God. We are separated from him. We are under his judgment. We need someone who can make an offering for our sins and in doing so bring us to God. This, in short, is what the High Priest was assigned to do under the terms of the Mosaic Law in the Old Covenant.

Before I go any further let me say that I run something of a risk even by using such terminology as *high priest*. People in our society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century don't immediately understand to what or to whom that refers. And most people today aren't familiar with the religious life of ancient Israel and the rituals associated with the Levitical sacrificial system. So let me give you a very short course in the beliefs and practices of ancient Israel.

Not just anyone could serve as a priest in the Old Testament. In the first place, you had to be a member of ***the tribe of Levi***. But not everyone in the tribe of Levi qualified. You also had to be ***a descendant of the family of Aaron***. Aaron, you will recall, was the brother of Moses. And ***only one of the descendants of Aaron was given the privilege of serving as the High Priest***. The High Priest wore a *breastplate* on which were inscribed the names of all the tribes of Israel. This pointed to the fact that his role was to represent all the people in the presence of God. He alone could enter the Holy of Holies on only one day each year, the Day of Atonement. On that day he offered sacrifices for the sins of the people and made it possible for them to remain in relationship with God.

We see all this here in Hebrews 5:1-4. It might even be said that the High Priest in Israel was chosen to serve as something of a ***go-between*** on behalf of the people and God. He would represent them in the presence of God and offer blood sacrifices for their sins.

Let me illustrate for you what a high priest is and does. The Latin phrase for “high priest” is *pontifex maximus*. The word “maximus” means great. The word “pontifex” is interesting and is itself comprised of two words: “*pons*” (bridge) and “*facio*” (to make or build). A high priest, therefore, is a bridge builder. He makes a way for man to be connected with God and relate to God. And what our author is about to unpack for us is that Jesus Christ is the bridge that spans the gap created by our sin, the gap that had separated us from God. Through his sinless life, sacrificial death, bodily resurrection, and his current ministry of interceding for us at God’s right hand, he has built a bridge for us to get to God!

It is almost impossible to overestimate or exaggerate the elevated position that the High Priest held in the minds and imaginations of the Jewish people. There was a mysterious aura that surrounded the High Priest. His garments were made with threads of gold and the breastplate he wore was covered with precious jewels such as emeralds, sapphires, and diamonds. There was a sacred and glorious atmosphere surrounding the High Priest and his ministry.

But there were fundamental flaws in the entire system. One such flaw is that ***the High Priest was himself a sinner***, as Hebrews 5:3 indicates. In other words, there is a sense in which the High Priest himself needed a priest. He needed a “go-between” for his relationship with God. Furthermore, as a sinner, ***his sympathy for the people would be imperfect***. And because he was himself a sinful man, ***he would eventually die and need to be replaced***.

Yet another flaw, perhaps the greatest one of all, is that the High Priest could only offer as a sacrifice for sins the blood of bulls, goats, and lambs. And our author makes quite clear in Hebrews 10:1-4 that ***such sacrifices could never fully and finally take away the guilt of sin***:

“For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:1-4).

So here is the question that all this requires us to ask: If the OT High Priest and the animal sacrifices he offered could never fully and finally take away the guilt of sin, *what hope do we have of ever getting to God?* And the answer is that *we need a High Priest who is fully qualified to serve in that role and is himself sinless and is able to offer a sacrifice for our sins that is perfect and flawless and capable of forever and finally wiping away the guilt of our sin.* And who might that High Priest be? And what sort of sacrifice must he offer? The answer, of course, is Jesus Christ! And the sacrifice is himself, his own blood, by which the guilt of our sins is cleansed.

That, in a nutshell, is not only what our author is saying here in Hebrews 4:14-5:10 but what he will continue to say and to explain for us all the way through chapter 10 of Hebrews. *Jesus is our High Priest. Jesus is the “go-between” for us and God.*

### *Jesus, Qualified as High Priest*

***But is he qualified?*** To answer that we need to look again at what our author says in vv. 1-4. There we see three basic qualifications that must be met.

(1) A High Priest must be “from among men” (5:1a). ***He must be human.*** What right would an angel or animal have to represent us before God? We are the ones whose sins have created this barrier between us and God and therefore one of our own must serve as the “go-between”.

And we have already seen in Hebrews 2:11 that Jesus shares our human nature and is happy to be called our brother! Again, we see in 2:14-18 that Jesus is human, as well as divine. He shares in our flesh and blood (2:14). He was made like us in every respect (2:17). And here again in Hebrews 5:7 we read that “in the days of his flesh” he found it necessary to pray to his Father and that he had to learn obedience “through what he suffered.” These are all declarations that point to his true humanity.

(2) A High Priest must also be ***able to sympathize with those whom he represents*** and must be able to “deal gently with the ignorant and wayward” (5:2). And we know that Jesus fulfills this perfectly. In Hebrews 2:18 we read that since “he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” And we saw last week in 4:15 that “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.”

These first two dimensions of our Lord’s qualifications are seen most vividly in Hebrews 5:7-8. Here we see not only the genuine humanity of Jesus but also the reason why he is able to sympathize with those of us for whom he serves as High Priest. So let’s take a minute and explore this further.

**First**, the humanity of Jesus is vividly portrayed in v. 7. That Jesus was truly a human being is seen in the word translated “flesh”. Jesus wasn’t a ghost. He wasn’t a phantom who merely played at being human. He didn’t masquerade as a human being or “dress up” in a body and thus only pretend to be one of us. Remember John 1:14 – ***“And the Word became flesh.”*** The word “flesh” isn’t used here with reference to a fallen sinful nature but rather to the literal flesh and bones, the physical body, the genuine human nature that Jesus shared with us. It also points to the weaknesses and frailty inherent within being human and living in a fallen and corrupt world.

That Jesus lived on this earth as a real human being and experienced life as we do is proved by the fact that ***he found it absolutely necessary to pray***. In other words, Jesus had needs. He needed his Father’s help. He faced challenges and temptations and experienced exhaustion and frustration just like us. He was entirely dependent on the sustaining presence of God the Father through the Holy Spirit, just like we are. And don’t overlook the fact that Jesus cried aloud. Jesus wept aloud. ***Those were real tears expressing real anguish coming from a real man facing real dangers and threats.*** All this to say that Jesus qualifies as our High Priest because he truly is one of us.

Many see here an explicit reference to his experience in ***the Garden of Gethsemane***, and that is true. However, notice that the word “days” is plural: the “***days*** of his flesh” and not just a singular day. This means that prayerful supplication and crying out to God for help and wisdom and strength was typical of Jesus ***throughout the course of his earthly life***.

But yes, his experience in Gethsemane is particularly in view because of his request that God “save him from death.” You will recall that Jesus asked the Father three times that, if possible, this cup of suffering and death might pass from him. And yet in the final analysis Jesus yielded and submitted to the will of his Father: “Not as I will [Father], but as you will.”

Have you ever wondered what would have happened if Jesus had died in Gethsemane, or anywhere else for that matter, other than on a cross? If he had, the true significance of his death would not have been apparent. Something more than merely dying was needed. It needed to be made perfectly clear that he was altogether innocent and righteous and was unjustly condemned by a human court. It was essential that he be subjected to a public judicial process in which he was condemned as a common criminal, although plainly innocent. His death was the sacrifice of the innocent for the guilty, or as Peter put it in 1 Peter 3:18, “the righteous for the unrighteous.” It was essential that his death be more than merely a physical expiration. He had to be hung on a cross and exposed to public humiliation and made the object of human taunting and slander and mocking. In this way he took upon himself the shame of our sin and suffered to the full the wrath of God that we deserved.

Someone might still push back and ask the question: Why “loud cries and tears”? After all, a lot of men and women have faced public execution without this sort of wrenching emotional anguish. Yes, they have. But none of them have faced public execution under the wrath and judgment of an infinitely holy God.

Socrates, for example, was publicly condemned and stood tall and unmoved and faced death without flinching. But Jesus is portrayed as groveling in the dust, while weeping uncontrollably. Why? Because Jesus, unlike Socrates or any other human being, was looking not merely at death but judgment: eternal judgment, the righteous wrath of God, poured out on him in the place of sinful men and women. It was hell itself that lay in Jesus’ path. It was the curse of the Law that he was to endure. It was the penalty that we deserved that awaited him on the cross.

Some have argued that it wasn’t from death itself that he asked to be delivered but simply that his sufferings not be prolonged eternally. In other words, he was asking that when the hour of suffering was to come that it might pass and that he be delivered from unending torment.

But I remain persuaded that it was from the experience of death itself that he asked to be set free. However, it isn’t exactly correct that he asked the Father for this. Remember, he said: “***if it be possible***, let this cup pass from me.” And then he immediately yielded to the Father’s purpose: “***nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will***” (Matt. 26:29).

We read here in Hebrews 5:7 that because of the holiness and humility and submission of Jesus to the Father’s will his prayer was heard. But was it answered? Yes. ***The deliverance from death for which Jesus prayed and the deliverance from death which the Father granted were not the***

*same. Jesus prayed for deliverance before death, that he might not enter into it. The Father delivered Jesus out of death, that he might not be held by it. Jesus prayed that he might be spared death on Good Friday. The Father answered by delivering him out of death on Easter Sunday.*

So, God did hear and answer Jesus' prayer. But he answered it at a different time and in a different way from how Jesus had prayed. And in doing it this way, as we'll see in v. 9, Jesus "became the source of eternal salvation" for those who put their faith in him.

[Now, remember what we're doing. We are looking at the reasons why Jesus is qualified to be our High Priest. The first two reasons, as stated in vv. 7-9, are that he was genuinely human and that he is able to sympathize with us. We've just seen evidence for the authenticity of his humanity. We now turn to the reason why he is able to sympathize with us.]

**Second**, that Jesus is able to sympathize with us is seen in the fact that he suffered like we do and in doing so he "learned obedience" (v. 8). This is very similar to what we saw back in Hebrews 2:10. There we read that God made Jesus "perfect through suffering."

But what could it possibly mean to say that the sinlessly perfect God-man, Jesus Christ, was *made "perfect through suffering"* or that *"he learned obedience through what he suffered"*? And again, in Hebrews 5:9a, we read that through his suffering he was *"made perfect"*. The "perfecting" in view has to do with Christ's vocation, his calling to be the savior of his people. It was a process by which he was shown to be fully equipped and qualified for his office.

He does not mean that Jesus was sinfully flawed or that he was morally imperfect and had to be purified and cleansed. We know this because of what he says in 4:15, 7:26, and 9:14. The sinlessness of Jesus has never been in question. The perfection here has to do with completing one's preparation to fulfill a task. He is saying that Jesus was fully qualified as our High Priest to make a sufficient atonement for sin and was able to secure for us a righteousness that becomes ours through faith because he faithfully obeyed his Father and offered up a sinless sacrifice for sin. Our Lord demonstrated that he was competent and qualified to be our Savior because he trusted in his Father from beginning to end, even when he suffered horribly at the hands of sinful men.

Here in Hebrews 5:8 it says that Jesus “*learned obedience* through what he suffered.” I think the words “made perfect” in 2:10 mean the same thing as his “learning obedience” in 5:8. It **doesn’t** say that Jesus learned “*to obey*” as if to suggest he was formerly disobedient. Rather he entered into a personal and experiential understanding of what obedience is and what obedience entails *by actually obeying*. As Piper has explained, “This does not mean that he was once disobedient and then became obedient. It means that Jesus moved from untested obedience into suffering and then through suffering into tested and proven obedience. And this proving himself obedient through suffering was his ‘being perfected’”(from the sermon, *Our Captain Made Perfect Through Sufferings*, June 2, 1996).

Our inclination and habit is to suffer and conclude that God isn’t worthy of our devotion or praise. We bail out on him precisely in order to avoid suffering or to diminish its discomfort. Not Jesus. He pressed through suffering in complete devotion to the Father and his saving purpose and in doing so showed himself “perfect” for the job at hand.

***And what was “the job at hand”? What did Jesus do as our fully qualified High Priest? “He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him” (5:9)!***

Don’t listen to the musing of religious leaders or political pundits or atheistic philosophers who insist that the *primary* contribution of Jesus Christ to the human race is that he provided us with an ethical model of how to respond to undeserved suffering or that he educated us in a life of wisdom or that he modeled humility and kindness and love. Yes, he did all those things. But the *primary* contribution of Jesus Christ is that he provided for us ***eternal salvation!***

Let me address this point by asking a question: *What is the greatest threat facing mankind?* Many would say it is climate change, while others would point to the increasing presence of radical Islamic fundamentalism. Others would highlight the uncertainties of our global economy or perhaps the threat of new diseases that are resistant to all medical remedies.

As important as those issues may be, the greatest threat to the eternal welfare of the human soul is ***divine judgment!*** As we saw earlier, the greatest threat to mankind in general and to individual men and women in particular, and that includes you and me, is that our sins have “made a separation” between us and God. ***Our greatest need, therefore, is “eternal salvation” (5:9).***



And thus our greatest need is for someone in some manner to heal this breach, to interpose himself, as it were, and bridge the gap between us and God. We need someone in some manner to bring us back to God. We need someone to deal with this issue of our sins and to reconcile us to God. We need someone to serve as a go-between in our relationship with God. And we find this in Jesus Christ and in him alone.

Whatever you come to church to find in Jesus Christ, come first and foremost to find in him the cause and source of **eternal** salvation from the guilt and condemnation of sin, **eternal** salvation from the wrath of God, **eternal** salvation from the penalty of God's holy law. The salvation that is found in Christ alone lasts forever and ever. It never ends. It begins in this life when you throw yourself on the mercy of the cross and lay claim to no works, no good deeds, no promises kept, no sins avoided.

***No priest of Aaron's line could do this for you. No angel sent from heaven could do this for you. Only Jesus of Nazareth, fully qualified and competent to serve as our High Priest, could obtain for us eternal, unending, everlasting, never-to-be-reversed-or-overtaken salvation!***

And this is for all who "obey" him. The obedience he has in view is to respond to the call for faith in Christ. It means to trust him, to cast your all upon him, to believe him when he claims to be God in human flesh, dying and rising again for sinners like you and me. To "obey" him is to hope in him and to "hold fast" (3:6, 14; 4:14) your "confession" that he is Lord and that he alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, can save you!

(3) The third and final qualification that Jesus fulfilled in order to be a High Priest is that he was ***called and appointed by God*** to discharge this ministry (5:4). We see in Hebrews 5:5 that "Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by" God.

But wait a minute! In the OT a high priest had to be a member of the tribe of **Levi** and a descendant of Aaron. Jesus was a descendant of the tribe of **Judah**. How, then, could he possibly hold the office as our High Priest?

The answer is that in the case of his Son (5:5b) God has appointed Jesus to serve as a High Priest after ***the order of Melchizedek***. We see this in Hebrews 5:6 and again in 5:10. In other words, Christ's priesthood is no illegal intrusion into the office. It's simply that with the coming of Jesus Christ God has established a new and superior and everlasting priesthood, not from the tribe of

Levi but in accordance with someone named Melchizedek. But you will have to be present when we arrive in Hebrews 7 to learn more of this strange man and the priesthood that bears his name.

### *Conclusion*

There are times in the book of Hebrews when one has to struggle to find what we would consider some practical application of the truths being taught. Sometimes we are presented with a portrayal of the superiority of Jesus Christ, his majesty, his kindness, his power, his sympathetic love, his service on behalf of both his Father and us, and we are meant by our author to ***respond only with marvel and adoration and praise and thanksgiving and worship***. This is what we have encountered in Hebrews 5:1-10.

There is no exhortation that we can find in this paragraph. The exhortations were already given in advance, in 4:14 (“let us hold fast our confession”) and in 4:16 (let us “draw near to the throne of grace”).

All that I ask of you now, all that God is seeking from those who have obeyed Christ by trusting his word and turning from all else to depend wholly and solely on what he accomplished on the cross, is that we marvel and stand in awe and adore and love and worship and exalt and extol and enjoy our Great High Priest, the source of our eternal salvation.