

## **Dr. David A. deSilva, Hebrews, Session 5, Hebrews 4:14-5:10: A Great High Priest**

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In the next major segment of the Sermon to the Hebrews, Hebrews 4, 14 through 5, 10, the author begins to focus at last on the topic of priesthood and thinking about Jesus as our great high priest, a topic he announced in chapter 2, verse 70. As this segment opens, the author draws a conclusion from the material that proceeds. Hebrews 4:14 to 16 provides quite a contrast from the way the previous section ended.

Hebrews 4:12 to 13 had appealed in effect to the emotion of fear, making the hearers afraid of how they might encounter God should they prove faithless with Jesus. 4, 14 to 16, by stark contrast, speaks of the confidence with which the hearers may approach God and seek help insofar as they remain connected with Jesus. It also draws a conclusion not just by contrast but based on the content that we encountered in Hebrews 2, 16 through 3, 1, where the idea of having Jesus as a sympathetic and faithful high priest was first introduced.

In 5:1 to 10, we find the author beginning to explore the idea of Jesus as high priest in earnest. We'll find him doing this in three fundamental moves. First, we look at the function of priests in general in Chapters 5:1 through 3. Then, in verses 4 to 6, we think about Jesus' appointment to this office and how we can be sure of our correctness in speaking of Jesus as a high priest.

Finally, in verses 7 to 10, Jesus prepares to fill the office of high priest. The preacher could then have moved directly from chapter 5, verse 10 into the beginning of chapter 7, but he will find it strategic instead to pause and challenge the audience more directly and starkly in 5:11 to 6:20 to make sure they are living up to what God has already invested in them. Thus, after the segment that is the focus of this presentation, the author will take a step back, as it were, to make sure the hearers are paying attention and understand even more fully the stakes of what is at risk in their present moment.

In Hebrews 4:14 to 16, the author presents what is, in many ways, a core appeal for his sermon. Since we have a great high priest, one who has crossed through the heavens, Jesus, the son of God, let us hold on to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but rather one who has been tested in every way as we are, though without sinning.

Therefore, let us draw near with boldness to the throne of favor in order that we might receive mercy and find favor for timely help. The importance of the content of these three verses is shown by the preacher's return to this very same content in

chapter 10, verses 19 through 23, on the other side of what the author himself calls his long and difficult-to-explain discourse about the priestly ministry and sacrifice of Jesus. Comparing 4:14 to 16 and 10:19 to 23 side by side, we can see that both start by talking about the benefit of having a great high priest.

Both include the exhortation to the hearers to hold fast to their confession. And both contain the exhortation, let us draw near, therefore. These fundamental assurances and exhortations bracket the whole central section that we will be studying in the next several presentations.

Given what the audience may have lost as a result of their aligning themselves with Jesus and the movement that gathers around his word, it is not surprising to find the author emphasizing what the converts have gained as a result of this alignment. Since we have a great high priest, one who has crossed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold on to our confession. As we read through the rest of the sermon, we will find the author emphasizing at various points what the addressees have rather than what they have lost.

They have an anchor for their souls in this hope that enters into the inner side of the curtain, where Jesus entered on our behalf as a forerunner. They have the boldness to enter into the heavenly sanctuary itself. They have better and lasting possessions in that eternal realm where God dwells.

They have an altar from which those ministering in the tabernacle have no right to eat. Here, in chapter 4, verse 14, the author reminds the hearers of the great privilege that is theirs. They have, as their high priest and mediator of God's favor, Jesus, the Son of God.

Not just a human priest, not even just an angel, but the very Son of God. This topic of being a son here reminds the audience of the proximity of Jesus to the divine fount of favor. It is not just a marker of Jesus' status in the cosmos as Son.

It is a marker of Jesus' strategic placement with God to successfully gain for Jesus' friends and followers what they need to persevere. Speaking of Jesus having crossed through the heavens gives us a window into the preacher's cosmology. The author regards the visible heavens, which he always refers to in the plural, as part of this material, visible creation.

In his ascension, Jesus had to cross beyond the material creation, including the visible sky, to enter heaven itself, the eternal realm. For the author, everything that belongs to the material creation, to the visible realm, is temporary and is destined to fail. But where Jesus has gone, on the far side, as it were, of the visible heavens, that's where abiding reality is.

That's where the investment in the hearer's lives needs to be made. And so, he urges them, let us hold onto the confession. This is a major goal of the sermon: to equip the hearers with the mindset they need and the relational strength among each other that they need to hold onto their hope together.

Confession here is probably not just a body of beliefs that they keep in mind but rather an act, a profession, a spoken and lived witness to the good things that they have received from God through their mediator, Jesus Christ. Toward the end of the sermon, at 13 verses 15 and 16, the author will urge them, through Jesus Christ, let us always offer to God a sacrifice of praise, namely the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name, as opposed to shrinking back from bearing witness to their divine benefactor out of fear for the reaction of outsiders. Holding onto the confession here is, in part at least, an act of parrhesia, an act of boldness, continuing to say to their unsupportive neighbors, God's patronage, the sun's favor, is worth enduring whatever you will put me through because you disapprove of my newfound allegiance to them.

The author reminds the hearers that this high priest is one who is completely sympathetic with their weaknesses, having been tested in every way just as they have been tested, with the one signal difference that Jesus came through those tests without compromise, without sin. In the sun, therefore, the hearers have all the benefits of a superhuman mediator between themselves and God, one who has not alienated himself from God by sinning, while losing none of the benefits of having a human mediator. Because of Jesus' own experience of sharing fully in the flesh and blood of the many sons and daughters, he has intimate knowledge of and sympathy for the difficulties and challenges that face the many disciples.

So the author can urge them, let us draw near with boldness to the throne of favor in order that we might receive mercy and find favor for timely help. This exhortation to draw nearer to the throne of favor is a suitable foil for drifting away, turning away, and shrinking back, which is the present challenge facing at least some of the hearers. Because of Jesus' mediation, the hearers have access to anything they might need from God to persevere.

How can they then think of falling short when they have such resources for their journey? In this section, therefore, the author is seeking to arouse the hearer's confidence based on the imminent availability of help. In the juxtaposition of Hebrews 4:12 to 13 and Hebrews 4:14 to 16, we see something of the recurring rhetorical strategy of the preacher throughout this sermon. An appeal to fear is matched with an appeal to confidence so that through this repetition of this strategy, the author is able to make the hearer associate defection with fear and remain steadfast with confidence.

He has also continued presenting an important alternative frame of reference for the hearer's situation. Joining the Christian movement may have pushed the converts into the margins of their cities socially and economically speaking, but it has also moved them closer to the center of the cosmos, the throne of favor, the throne of God. Adopting this view of things, returning to the bosom of their neighbors and society would mean moving further away from God, further away from the center of the cosmos, and moving into the margins as far as God is concerned.

In chapter 5, verses 1 to 10, the preacher of Hebrews begins to expand on Jesus' role and achievements under the lens of priest. He begins in the first verse by providing a definition of the role and qualities of a priest based on a general reference to the function and office of priest known from the Pentateuch. And so, he writes, for every high priest being received from among human beings is established on behalf of human beings in regard to the things of God in order that he might offer gifts and sacrifice on behalf of sins.

This definition highlights the role of priests as brokers, as those who stand between human beings and God on behalf of human beings, engaging in interactions with the divine that secure divine benefits for the human beings whom the priest represents or that remove obstacles in the divine-human relationship because of the affronts that human beings have presented to God, namely sins. One quality of priests that the author particularly wants to highlight here is their sympathy toward those on whose behalf they mediate. And so he goes on in the following verses, the high priest is able to moderate his passions toward the ignorant and the wandering since he himself also lies subject to weakness on which account he is obliged just as on behalf of the people also on behalf of himself to offer sin offerings.

The source of the typical priest's sympathy toward others who need mediation is that priest's own liability to sin. He knows his own weakness. He knows that he himself is unable to fulfill all the requirements of the covenant perfectly, and therefore, he is able to moderate his own feelings, be those of anger or indignation toward his brothers and sisters who are similarly liable to weakness.

With the terms ignorant and wandering or erring, the preacher highlights sins that are not committed willfully but those that are committed accidentally or in ignorance. The law of Moses, the Torah itself, does not make provision for sins willfully committed. The expression in the Torah is sins committed with a high hand, and the author of Hebrews will bring this up later in his sermon in another of the famous warning passages in chapter 10, verse 26.

Several times in the course of this sermon, the preacher brings up the fact that the Levitical priests had to offer sacrifices first to secure forgiveness for their own sins before they could stand in a position to mediate God's favor and forgiveness for other sinners like themselves. This requirement is spelled out very clearly in the Day

of Atonement ritual in Leviticus 16, which forms such an important background for the central discourse of Hebrews on Jesus' work as priest and mediator, especially in Hebrews chapter 9. The high priests, beginning with Aaron, first had to offer the blood of a bull to atone for the sins of the high priest and his family before he went on to offer the blood of the first goat on behalf of the sins of the people. The author will return to this theme in chapter 7, verse 27.

This is a flaw among human priests but not a flaw with Jesus. As the author has already emphasized, Jesus, though being tempted in every respect as we are, nevertheless remained without sin. He never offered that affront to God that would stand between himself and God and that needed to be removed before he could also act as an effective mediator on behalf of others.

The author goes on in chapter 5, verses 4 to 6, to talk about appointment to priesthood. He writes that no one takes this honor upon himself but is called by God, just as also Aaron was called. Thus also, Christ did not glorify himself by becoming a high priest, but rather the one who spoke to him, you are my son, today I have begotten you, glorified him.

Just as he says in another place, you are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. In both Greek and Roman religions and Jewish cultic practice, priests were typically chosen or appointed rather than assumed the role on their own initiative. This was particularly the case in Israel, where only members of the tribe of Levi could serve in the temple, and only certain clans within that tribe could serve as priests.

Aaron himself was selected by God as high priest. If a person were to take on more access to God's holy places and holy things than God allowed that particular person on the basis of his or her tribe and clan, that person faced the threat of death as particular laws in the Torah made clear. The preacher must, therefore, show that Jesus was himself appointed to serve as priest, just as Aaron was.

At this point, the preacher links Psalm 2, which he quotes here again, you are my son, today I have begotten you, with Psalm 110 verse 4, also addressed by God to particular you, you are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. Psalm 110 was one of the so-called royal psalms, celebrating the monarchs of the kingdom of Judah. This particular psalm highlights the special privilege that was given to the Israelite king or the Judahite king, not only to have kingly authority but also to have certain priestly authority.

The author of Psalm 110 looks back to the story of Melchizedek for a biblical precedent for such a thing, for some non-Levite to also have some priestly jurisdiction. Psalm 110 was also by now well-established in Christian circles as a messianic text pertinent to Jesus. While many early Christians refer to Psalm 110

verse 1, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet, the author of Hebrews has read on to verse 4, you are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, and he finds there the authoritative warrant for Jesus' divine appointment to priesthood.

You are a priest forever. When spoken to a Judahite king did not mean you're going to live forever. But now, because of the early church's belief that Jesus was resurrected to an indestructible life, this psalm text can be read far more literally.

Jesus' unending life, forever now beyond the power of death, allows him to remain this priest in perpetuity. The author will shortly return to the figure of Melchizedek and the significance of Melchizedek for Jesus' priesthood vis-a-vis the Levitical priesthood in chapter 7, verses 1 through 10. For now, he has at least established a scriptural warrant in Psalm 110 for God's appointment of Jesus, not only to the dignity of Christ, of Messiah and King over the Messianic kingdom but also to the dignity of the priesthood.

Having established the fact of Jesus' appointment to the high priesthood in chapter 5, verses 1-6, the author goes on in verses 7-10 to consider facets of Christ's preparation for appointment to this office. Verses 7-10 actually continue a sentence that began in the preceding verses. This is one of those places that gives us a window into the author's comfort in writing Greek, as he spins subordinating clause after subordinating clause.

A credit to him, a nightmare to modern Greek students. But, in this portion, he says, essentially, Christ, having offered in the days of his flesh prayers and intercessions to the one who was able to save him from death with great cries and tears, was heard on account of his piety, even though he was a son. He learned obedience from the things which he suffered, and having been perfected, he became the source of eternal deliverance for all who obey him, having been appointed by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

As one looks at this sentence in Greek, one sees more clearly than in many English translations where the emphasis and weight of this sentence fall. English translations inevitably have to break this material up, even as I did, into several sentences. But the real spine of this sentence is the fact that Christ learned obedience from the things which he suffered and became the source of eternal deliverance for all who obey him.

Everything else is dependent upon that and, in a sense, an ornament of that. Working through this passage, then, we first start with this image of Jesus' deep and passionate piety during his mortal life, offering prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to rescue him from death and being heard on

account of his piety. There's a widespread tendency to identify this image with the episode in Gethsemane, also known from the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

There, we also find Jesus praying in agony with deep emotional investment, even to the point of sweating, as if there were great drops of blood. While this may indeed be in our author's mind, we should also pay attention to the fact that there are some assumptions here in this identification that need to be examined. It assumes, first, that the identification of God as the one who was able to save from death reveals the content of the prayer, God, save me from death.

It also assumes that it would be natural to regard Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane as heard, in some sense, despite the fact that the crucifixion happened anyway. And it also, frankly, assumes that our author was familiar with these particular gospel traditions in the first place. Another resource that many Hebrew scholars look to as a possible source for the author's thinking and language here would be the general portraits and language of the prayers of the pious throughout the Second Temple period.

Many of the Psalms are spoken from a place of great anguish and tears. And as we read through descriptions of prayers in texts like Second Maccabees and Third Maccabees, we find the pious frequently praying with lamentations and tears or praying to the supreme God with both cries and tears. In Second Maccabees 11, the people of Judea, faced with the siege of Lysias under Antiochus IV, were praying with lamentations and tears.

In Third Maccabees, when the temple was threatened with desecration, the priests prayed to the supreme God with both cries and tears. Later in that same book, when the Jews of Egypt were herded into the Hippodrome to await their execution, they cried out with tears, praying. And a second time, they make tearful petitions, praying.

These prayers and the emotional investment that goes into these prayers very much resemble the portrait of Jesus in Hebrews 5:7 to 8. So, it's quite plausible that the preacher is drawing on these cultural resonances of fervent emotive prayers of the pious rather than making a specific reference to the Gethsemane tradition known within Christian culture. The author's goal is to display Jesus' piety as an essential qualification for his occupying the high priesthood, which God confirmed through hearing Jesus' prayer and indeed rescuing him from death in the sense of resurrection on the other side of his passion. In the days of his flesh, Jesus avails himself of prayer and the access it brings to God's throne of favor, finding in that experience the ability to endure all the hostility, pain, and shame that his opponents brought upon him.

In effect, Jesus provides a model here for doing the very thing that the author calls the audience to do in their situation of considerably milder harassment in chapter 4, verses 14 to 16. How the phrase, although he was a son, fits into this sentence is a point of some debate in interpretation. English translations often attach this phrase to what follows it instead of what precedes it.

Although he was a son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered. This stands in significant tension, however, with what the author will go on to say in chapter 12, verses 5 to 11, where being a son or daughter is not at all in odds with learning obedience through things suffered or experienced. Indeed, the author will be at pains to establish that such educative discipline is precisely what genuine sons and daughters ought to expect.

If he meant this verse to be heard as, although a son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered, he would be contradicting the very point he expects to make a few chapters later. I believe the phrase is actually better understood to qualify the preceding claim. He was heard on account of his piety, although he was a son.

The author would be making the point that God's responsiveness to Jesus and Jesus' prayers were not instances of nepotism or favoritism but of recognizing the virtue and dedication of the petitioner. In this way, God's responsiveness to Jesus is a fair indication of God's responsiveness to the preacher's audience, as well as they display the same piety and commitment to God. Jesus' sonship did not give Jesus an advantage, in other words, over the hearers in terms of God's responsiveness to Jesus in times of need.

A final piece in support of my suggestion would be the fact that the word although in Greek *kaiper* is also used clearly again, both in Hebrews 7:5 and 12:17 to qualify what precedes it, not what follows it. When the author writes that Jesus learned obedience from the things he suffered, he is drawing on a common Greek cultural maxim and pun, *emathen, epathen*. He learned, he suffered.

This pattern is found, for example, in Aeschylus and Sophocles. Jesus is, in this regard, the pioneer for the many sons and daughters who will also move from or rather through suffering to the formation of the piety and obedience that will produce in them the peaceful fruit of righteousness that pleases the God who shapes them through all these experiences. Again, this will be developed in chapter 12, verses 5 to 11.

When the author speaks of Jesus being perfected in Hebrews 5:9, he is not talking about Jesus getting all of his faults or bugs worked out. Rather, perfection language in Hebrews denotes something or someone being brought to its goal, its *telos*. The same root there in goal, *telos*, is found in perfection, *telos*, a final state.



Being perfected in this passage is contrasted specifically with being in the days of his flesh in which he learned through suffering. Jesus' ascension and crossing into the heavenly realm, the place of God's dwelling from which he is able to be the source of eternal salvation, constitutes his being perfected. It is the completion of his journey, this rite of passage through the liminal state begun in his incarnation and continued through his suffering and death, that is now brought to completion, to perfection in his ascension and session, his seatedness at the right hand of God.

Jesus uses this privilege of being at the right hand of the majesty on high for the benefit of his followers. The author here stresses that he is, from this exalted position, the source of eternal salvation for all who continue to obey him. The author is reminding the hearers here of the ongoing need for fidelity to this Christ, to this high priest, if they are to continue to experience his benefits now and the ultimate benefits that he brings on the other side of their own journey through this life.

He concludes this then by reminding the hearers that Jesus was appointed by God as a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. Again, he could very well have gone directly from here into the beginning of chapter 7, but he finds it important rather to hit the pause button in this exposition for a digression that will shake up the hearers and make sure they are indeed committed to moving forward, not just with the sermon, but with the Christian walk itself. Hebrews 4.14 to 5.10 has advanced the author's rhetorical strategy in a number of important ways.

First, following hard upon an appeal to fear in 4:12 to 13, the author has launched an appeal to confidence in 4:14 to 16. The hearers have access to all the help they could ever need to arrive at the end of the journey they began at their conversion. They enjoy a perfectly placed and fully sympathetic mediator standing ready to help them.

In this regard, the author is reassuring them that perseverance in the face of the challenges that beset them is entirely feasible. As they commit themselves to persevere, they can be confident of God's help every step of the way. The same exhortation has also advanced the author's ideological strategy as he urges them to draw near to the throne of grace.

He is urging them to see, in effect, that as they come together, as they continue to come before God, they are approaching the center of the cosmos, the throne of God itself. By contrast, implicitly, as they drift away or shrink back from the assembling of themselves together where God is found in their midst, as they drift back into the society that they left behind, they would be moving further away from the divine center of the cosmos toward the margins, as it were. This is quite the opposite of where the Christians find themselves vis-a-vis society, where their neighbors have, in effect, pushed them to the margins, both socially and conceptually, in their own cities.

But that move into the margin of their society has also drawn them closer to the center of the universe itself, the throne of favor, the very throne of God. In 5.1-10, the author begins to spin his discourse about Jesus as a mediator or high priest. Here, he focuses on the legitimacy of Jesus' calling in this regard and his personal qualifications, thus assuring the hearers, through Scripture and through presentations of the pious person at prayer and being heard by God, that Jesus is a divinely appointed mediator for them and not someone who is, in some maverick way, taking this office upon himself.

He is indeed God's final high priest, selected by God to serve this role on behalf of the hearers and on behalf of all people ever after. The reminder of Jesus' commitment in the midst of sufferings and willingness to pass through sufferings on the way to his installation as high priest at the right hand of God should once again serve to arouse gratitude and motivate loyalty since it again reminds the hearers of how much Jesus endured on their behalf in order to bring benefit to them. Also, the concluding statement of this section reminds them of the importance of continued obedience toward the Son if the hearers hope to enjoy eternal salvation, the eternal deliverance that the Son will provide.

He, and no other, has become the cause of eternal deliverance for those who obey him. This passage also continues to speak a challenging word to us in our setting. First and foremost, Hebrews 4:14-16 impels believers to pray at every age.

It reminds us that access to the throne of favor is one of the primary benefits won for the many sons and daughters by Jesus' giving of himself. Prayer is not merely a ritual or the retreat of the weak. It is the means by which to find God's help in the midst of the trials, testing, and temptations that beset us so that we are able to triumph through them and continue in faithfulness and obedience.

The sympathy of the priest toward those on whose behalf he or she mediates, whether this be the Levitical priest or Jesus as high priest, reminds us of the fact that those who continue to minister in Christ's name need to continue also to embody this essential quality of sympathy toward the ignorant and the erring. The remedy for a harsh, judgmental spirit is for us, just as it was for the Levitical priests, the remembrance of our own weakness, of our own liability to the power of sin, of our utter dependence on God to avoid sin and do what is pleasing to him. Out of such reflection comes a gentle spirit that knows how to love and help the sinner, which reflects the love and care of the great high priest who always calls those sinners back to himself.

Jesus' example in this passage also remains a model for us of encountering hardships or sufferings endured as a result of our commitment to do God's will and work in this world. This he did with courageous commitment but also with utter dependence upon God in honest, no-holds-barred prayer. What Jesus experienced or suffered

became opportunities for him to learn obedience and deepen his acquaintance with and groundedness in this core value.

Such experiences remain opportunities for us also to do the same. Now, with this, the preacher does not seek to sanctify all kinds of suffering or hardship, but he certainly sanctifies any difficulty that arises as a result of aligning oneself with Jesus and doing what God desires in a given situation. Such episodes, such as encounters with hardship or suffering, become opportunities to be trained by the Spirit, to be shaped and formed in the virtues that please God, and, above all, the virtue of wholehearted commitment to obey God.

Wherever Christians endure such sufferings, the value of their calling and their hope is deeply implanted into their souls. The Godward orientation of their desires is strengthened. Through perseverance in the face of the fires of suffering, they arrive at a strong sense of the priorities of life and learn to place obedience to God in partnership with Christ at the head of the list of those priorities.

So also, the voices crying out for justice in those places where injustice is the accepted norm inevitably call down upon themselves the hostility of sinners. Their refusal to mute their own witness to God's vision and will for human society imprints upon them what it means to live for God and God's kingdom before all else as they, like Jesus, continue to embrace the endurance of the hostility of sinners for the sake of obedient witness to God's vision for this world.