

Hebrews 4:14 – 5:6

In this passage the book of Hebrews talks about Jesus' role as our high priest. In order to understand what this means, we need to take some time to study what a high priest actually was. The people who originally read the book of Hebrews (Jewish Christians) would have had no problem understanding these references, because they had been familiar with the Levitical System for their entire lives. However, since we are Gentiles we are at a disadvantage. There hasn't been a functional levitical system in our lifetime – or in anyone's lifetime for nearly two thousand years. That means we will have to do a little bit of research.

The levitical system was ordained by God. After God delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt He led them through the wilderness to Mount Sinai, where He gave the Israelites His law. Part of that law was a system of holy days, priests, and sacrifices.

The levitical system is far too involved to cover here, but I would like to briefly touch on the role of the high priest. The first high priest was Moses' brother Aaron. In order to be a priest, you had to be a direct descendent of Aaron:

Numbers 18:1: “And the Lord said unto Aaron, Thou and thy sons and thy father's house with thee shall bear the iniquity of the sanctuary: and thou and thy sons with thee shall bear the iniquity of your priesthood.

2 And thy brethren also of the tribe of Levi, the tribe of thy father, bring thou with thee, that they may be joined unto thee, and minister unto thee: but thou and thy sons with thee shall minister before the tabernacle of witness.

3 And they shall keep thy charge, and the charge of all the tabernacle: only they shall not come nigh the vessels of the sanctuary and the altar, that neither they, nor ye also, die.

4 And they shall be joined unto thee, and keep the charge of the tabernacle of the congregation, for all the service of the tabernacle: and a stranger shall not come nigh unto you.

5 And ye shall keep the charge of the sanctuary, and the charge of the altar: that there be no wrath any more upon the children of Israel.

6 And I, behold, I have taken your brethren the Levites from among the children of Israel: to you they are given as a gift for the Lord, to do the service of the tabernacle of the congregation.

7 Therefore thou and thy sons with thee shall keep your priest's office for everything of the altar, and within the vail; and ye shall serve: I have given your priest's office unto you as a service of gift: and the stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death.

8 And the Lord spake unto Aaron, Behold, I also have given thee the charge of mine heave offerings of all the hallowed things of the children of Israel; unto thee have I given them by reason of the anointing, and to thy sons, by an ordinance for ever.”

In this passage God made it clear that Aaron and his sons were dedicated as priests. They and their descendents were the only ones allowed to serve in the Temple and offer sacrifices. However, God gave the tribe of Levi to the priests to help them take care of things. The Levites were divided into three groups, and (among other things) they maintained the tabernacle and kept it in good repair.

However, the Levites were not allowed to make sacrifices. Only the priests could do that.

The priest had to be physically perfect:

Leviticus 21:17: “Speak unto Aaron, saying, Whosoever he be of thy seed in their generations that hath any blemish, let him not approach to offer the bread of his God.

18 For whatsoever man he be that hath a blemish, he shall not approach: a blind man, or a lame, or he that hath a flat nose, or any thing superfluous,

19 Or a man that is brokenfooted, or brokenhanded,

20 Or crookbackt, or a dwarf, or that hath a blemish in his eye, or be scurvy, or scabbed, or hath his stones broken;

21 No man that hath a blemish of the seed of Aaron the priest shall come nigh to offer the offerings of the Lord made by fire: he hath a blemish; he shall not come nigh to offer the bread of his God.”

But being physically perfect was not enough. Priests also had to be holy:

Leviticus 21:6: “They shall be holy unto their God, and not profane the name of their God: for the offerings of the Lord made by fire, and the bread of their God, they do offer: therefore they shall be holy.”

There could be many priests serving at a given time, but there could only be one high priest. High priests served for life; after they died, another high priest took their place. The high priest was in charge of the other priests and oversaw their duties. However, there were some duties that only the high priest could perform. For example, the high priest alone had the power to use the Urim and the Thummim to inquire of God:

Numbers 27:21: “And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall ask counsel for him after the judgment of Urim before the Lord: at his word shall they go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he, and all the children of Israel with him, even all the congregation.”

The Bible doesn't say very much about the Urim and the Thummim. All we know is that when people (such as kings) had questions, they could go to the high priest and he would use the Urim and Thummim to ask God the question and get a specific answer in return. The answer could be as simple as yes or no, or it could be much more involved than that. However, the high priest was the one who used it.

The whole job of the priests was to act as a go-between between God and man. The common people were not holy enough to approach God. They needed someone to go to God on their behalf – someone who was holy and who could offer sacrifices for their sins and seek forgiveness. The priests acted as that go-between. People would bring their animals to the priests, and the priests would sacrifice them.

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would offer a sacrifice for his own sins. He would then enter the Holy of Holies and offer a sacrifice on behalf of the sins of the entire nation:

Exodus 30:10: “And Aaron shall make an atonement upon the horns of it [the

mercy seat in the Holy of Holies] once in a year with the blood of the sin offering of atonements: once in the year shall he make atonement upon it throughout your generations: it is most holy unto the Lord.”

The high priest was the only person who was allowed to enter the holiest place in the Temple, and he could only do so once a year – and even then he had to first make an offering on behalf of his own sins.

There is a lot more that could be said, but the point is that the high priest acted as the mediator between God and the nation. The high priest was the one who went before the very presence of God Himself in order to atone for the sins of the people. He was the one who sought the forgiveness of the nation. No one else could do that – only the high priest alone.

This finally brings us back to the passage. The Bible tells us that Jesus is our High Priest:

Hebrews 4:14: “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.”

This is one of the recurring themes of the book of Hebrews. Jesus is the one who made a sacrifice for the sins of the world – only instead of offering an animal, He offered His very own life. He is the one who went before God and obtained our forgiveness.

However, there is a key difference. In the Old Testament, the priests offered animals as sacrifices – but the blood of animals could never atone for sins:

Hebrews 10:4: “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.”

Those sacrifices were made looking forward to the work of Christ, who offered His own body and His own blood as an offering for sins. That particular sacrifice *was* able to take away sins. Therefore, Christ only had to offer Himself once; there was no need to offer Himself again. That one sacrifice finished our redemption.

Another important point is that in the Old Testament, the high priest only served until he died. After his death another man took his position. Christ, however, will never die again. He lives forever to make intercession for us:

Hebrews 7:23: “And they truly were many priests, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death:

24 But this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood.

25 Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.”

Since He lives forever, our salvation is assured. Christ will never lose His position as high priest. (This concept will be discussed in more detail later in the book of Hebrews.)

Next, the author goes on to remind us that Jesus really can understand what we are going through:

Hebrews 4:15: “For we have not an 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.”

This is the very same point that was made back at the end of Hebrews 2. Even though Jesus is the eternal, uncreated God, He knows exactly what it is like to be a man because He became a man in order to redeem us. He knows what it is like to suffer and be in pain, because He suffered and was in pain. He knows what it is like to face temptation and trials, because He faced temptation and trials. He has been there. He faced it all – and since He faced it all, He knows how to help those who are being tempted (Hebrews 2:18:).

Another key fact that this brings out is that *Jesus was sinless*. This is very important. One of the points of the Old Testament sacrificial system is that the offerings for sin had to be utterly perfect. They could not have any spot or blemish:

Leviticus 6:6: “And he shall bring his trespass offering unto the Lord, a ram without blemish out of the flock, with thy estimation, for a trespass offering, unto the priest:”

This is just one example; there are many more. If you read through Leviticus and Numbers you will see many, many references to the fact that the animals that were sacrificed had to be without blemish and without spot. If you were seeking forgiveness from God, your offering had to be perfect.

There is a reason for this. You see, God cannot simply brush sin under the rug. All sin must be punished; God's justice demands it. He cannot overlook sin or pretend that it didn't happen. It *must* be punished. This means that the only way we can possibly be forgiven is if some innocent party suffered for our sins. If that happened, then justice would be served and we could go free.

However, this is only possible if the person who suffered was innocent. If that person was not innocent – if he had sins of his own – then all he could do is suffer for the sins that he had committed. He could not suffer for the sins of someone else.

Therefore, in order for Jesus to save us from our sins, He *had* to be perfect. He had to be utterly sinless – otherwise He could not have suffered on our behalf. The sinlessness of Christ is *vital* to the gospel. Without it we cannot be saved. Therefore, the fact that Jesus never sinned is absolutely critical – and it is exactly what the Bible teaches, and what Jesus Himself claimed.

Since Jesus is our High Priest, the Bible says that we ought to take advantage of that fact:

Hebrews 4:16: “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.”

Our high priest is not some sort of unknowable God who has no idea what we're going through; instead He is someone who became a man and lived a life full of suffering and pain. The Bible even referred to Him as the man of sorrows who was well acquainted with grief:

Isaiah 53:3: “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.”

Our high priest is not someone who is uncaring or distant, but someone who actually loved us so much that He gave His very life to save us. We should have no hesitation in approaching Him.

Hebrews 4:16 says there are two things we need to seek: mercy, and grace. The first thing that

we ought to seek is the mercy of God. All men have sinned against God, and the wages of sin is death. The only way to escape God's wrath and the fires of Hell is to come to Christ, repent of your sins, and seek His forgiveness. Jesus will be merciful to all who come to Him, and will forgive all those who repent and believe.

We *must* go to Him for mercy, for there is no one else who can give us mercy. No one else can forgive our sins. No one else can cancel our debt and give us righteousness. No one else can save us from the wrath of God. Mercy and forgiveness can only be obtained through Christ. There is no other way.

But that is not all that Jesus offered. Jesus promised to be with His disciples and said that He would never leave or forsake them. He promised to give them grace in time of need. God did not say "I have forgiven you; now it's up to you to live a good life. Let me know how that works out for you." Instead He promised to intercede for us. God offers us grace to help, if we will but seek it. He has *not* commanded us to live our lives on our own, trying to do the impossible; instead He has commanded us to go to Him for grace and strength, for we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. Nothing is impossible with God – so we ought to run to the throne of grace and seek Christ.

The book of Hebrews then tells us that God is the one who appoints men to the priesthood:

Hebrews 5:1: "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 honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron."

Since we took some time at the beginning of this lesson to cover the functions of priests, these verses should be very easy to understand. The role of priests were to offer sacrifices in the Temple. They were to show compassion and help those who were in need. They made offerings for sins. Also, priests did not choose themselves; instead they were chosen by God. You could not simply say "You know, I think I'd like to become a priest." In order to be a priest you had to be of the lineage that God had chosen; if you were not a descendent of Aaron then you could not be a priest. God was very specific about who could be priests and who could not.

The same is true of Christ. Jesus did not appoint Himself as our priest. Instead, God the Father made Him our high priest:

Hebrews 5:5: "So also Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, to day have I begotten thee.

6 As he saith also in another place, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec."

God chose Christ to be our high priest. Just as God chose Aaron to be the high priest of the Israelites and said that his descendents should serve as priests, God also chose Jesus Christ to be our priest.

However, Jesus is descendent of the tribe of Judah, not the tribe of Levi. This means that Jesus is not a levitical priest; instead He is a priest of an entirely different order. The Bible says that Jesus

was a priest of the order of Melchisedec.

In order to understand what that means, we need to take a little history lesson. In the Old Testament, the patriarch Abraham had a nephew named Lot. Now, Abraham and Lot were so rich that they could not live next to one another – the land could not support them both. So Abraham gave Lot a choice: whichever way Lot went, Abraham would go in the other direction.

Lot then made the very bad choice to live in Sodom – a city that was filled with people who were exceedingly wicked sinners:

Genesis 13:12: “Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelled in the cities of the plain, and pitched his tent toward Sodom.

13 But the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly.”

This proved to be an extremely bad idea – in fact, it ultimately ended up costing Lot everything (although that's a different story that we don't have time to cover here). It is *never* a good idea to pitch your tent toward Sodom.

While Lot was living there, a coalition of kings invaded:

Genesis 14:1: “And it came to pass in the days of Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of nations;

2 That these made war with Bera king of Sodom, and with Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, and Shemeber king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela, which is Zoar.”

The Sodomites did not win this battle. The coalition was victorious and carried away everything – including Lot:

Genesis 14:8: “And there went out the king of Sodom, and the king of Gomorrah, and the king of Admah, and the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (the same is Zoar;) and they joined battle with them in the vale of Siddim;

9 With Chedorlaomer the king of Elam, and with Tidal king of nations, and Amraphel king of Shinar, and Arioch king of Ellasar; four kings with five.

10 And the vale of Siddim was full of slimepits; and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, and fell there; and they that remained fled to the mountain.

11 And they took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their victuals, and went their way.

12 And they took Lot, Abram's brother's son, who dwelt in Sodom, and his goods, and departed.”

So the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were looted, and Lot was abducted. When Abraham found out about this he trained his servants and launched a counter-attack. God gave Abraham the victory, and his small band of servants was able to defeat the combined armies of the coalition of kings:

Genesis 14:13: “And there came one that had escaped, and told Abram the Hebrew; for he dwelt in the plain of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol, and brother of Aner: and these were confederate with Abram.

14 And when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his trained

servants, born in his own house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued them unto Dan.

15 And he divided himself against them, he and his servants, by night, and smote them, and pursued them unto Hobah, which is on the left hand of Damascus.

16 And he brought back all the goods, and also brought again his brother Lot, and his goods, and the women also, and the people.”

Abraham was able to defeat the kings, recover all of the stolen goods, and free his nephew Lot. The rescue party was a complete success. That is when Melchizedek appeared on the scene:

Genesis 14:17: “And the king of Sodom went out to meet him after his return from the slaughter of Chedorlaomer, and of the kings that were with him, at the valley of Shaveh, which is the king's dale.

18 And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God.

19 And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth:

20 And blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And he gave him tithes of all.”

This is the one and only time that Melchizedek appears in the Bible. We see that he was apparently a king, because he is called the king of Salem (which, translated, means king of peace). We also see that he was a priest – and not just any priest, but a priest of the most high God. We see that he brought forth bread and wine, and that he blessed Abraham. He was such a great man that Abraham even gave him tithes.

(Now, some people use this passage as evidence that Christians need to tithe. However, I'd like to point out that the things that Abraham tithed *didn't belong to him*. Abraham tithed of the stolen loot that he recovered. This is a lot like recovering a stolen purse, taking out the wallet, giving 10% of the cash to your local church, and then returning the rest to its original owner. This is *not* tithing in the modern sense of the word. There is no record of Abraham ever tithing things that actually belonged to him.)

Christ could not be a priest after the order of Aaron, because He was not from the tribe of Levi. Instead God made Him a priest after the order of Melchizedek. Like Melchizedek, Christ was a king. Like Melchizedek, Christ was a priest. Just as there is no recorded end to the priesthood of Melchizedek, so there will be no end to the priesthood of Christ.

Now, this does *not* mean that Melchizedek was some sort of preincarnate appearance of Christ. If that were the case then being a priest after the order of Melchizedek would mean that Christ was a priest after the order of Christ, which makes no sense at all. Melchizedek was just a man. He was a very great man, as the book of Hebrews explains, but he was still just a man.

Christ, then, was a priest after the order of Melchizedek – not after the order of Aaron. Because of His actions He can save to the uttermost those who believe:

Hebrews 5:7: “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 an high priest after the order of Melchisedec.”

Who became the author of eternal salvation? Jesus did – and *no one else*; there is no one else who can save you. Who does Jesus save? All those who obey Him.

Now, this does not mean that we are saved by works. It does not mean that in order to be saved we have to obey God, and that God saves those who do good works and condemns those who do bad works. The Bible is very clear that we are not saved by the works of the law:

Galatians 2:16: “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.”

This is very important: *no one* is justified by the works of the law. Your obedience is incapable of saving you. When the book of Hebrews talks about obeying Christ it is actually talking about something else. You see, during Jesus' ministry He preached the gospel. His message was very simple:

Mark 1:14: “Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God,
15 And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.”

Last week we spent an entire lesson talking about what it means to have faith, and the consequences of unbelief. Jesus commands us to repent and believe. We are to repent of our sins and believe in the Biblical Jesus – that He is the uncreated God who created the world; that He became a man and was born of a virgin; that He died on the cross; that He rose from the dead on the third day; and that His sacrifice – and it alone – can save us from our sins. He wants us to believe that all who repent and believe on Him are forgiven and have everlasting life. That is what we are commanded to do.

But there is something else that I must point out. There are many people today who want to avoid Hell but who have no intention of ever submitting themselves to Christ. These people essentially say “Jesus, make sure I go to Heaven when I die, but don't you dare tell me how to live my life.” They believe that they can make Jesus their Savior *without* making Him their Lord. This is a very serious error. In order to be saved you *must* repent of your sins and submit your life to Christ. You must give your life to Him. Being saved requires total and absolute surrender. It means that you do as Jesus says. It means that you obey His commands. It means that if your opinions are different from His, you are wrong and you need to change. It means you adopt His priorities, His will, and His way of thinking. It means dying of yourself and living for God.

God will not save anyone who will not surrender to Him. All those who live lives in rebellion, refusing to obey God and doing as they please, are not saved. The apostle John was very clear about this:

I John 2:3: “And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.”

4 He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”

This does not mean that we are saved by our works, nor does it mean that we have to keep our salvation through a life of good works. Instead John is saying that *genuine salvation results in a changed life*. Salvation creates a person who hates sin and who seeks God's help in turning from sin and living a more righteous life. If a person is truly saved then *they will change*. One of the marks of this change is holiness. In other words, genuine salvation results in a more holy life.

Those whose lives are not characterized by holiness are not saved. Those who continue in sin, who love sin, who refuse to obey God, and who claim that God has no right to tell them what to do, are not saved. They do not know God and are utterly lost.

At this point the author of Hebrews switches gears. He says there is more he would like to say, but he cannot go into more detail because the people he is writing to are too immature:

Hebrews 5:11: “Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing.

12 For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat.

13 For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe.

14 But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.”

Things have not gotten any better since this letter was written. Churches are still full of people who have attended church their entire lives and yet have an incredibly poor grasp of Christian theology. People who have been Christians for decades and who ought to know the Bible well instead know almost nothing about it and are in constant need of being reminded of the basics.

It astonishes me how Christians care so very little about the Bible. Most Christians can't be bothered to even *read* their Bibles, let alone study them. Few Christians today have read through their entire Bible. Most would have a very hard time answering even basic questions about it. Ignorance is rampant. Pastors are forced to stick to basic messages because their congregations are too immature for any message with actual depth and complexity to it.

Lest you think I am being unfair, let me give you an example. The researcher George Barna did some research not too long ago, where he polled people in this country to find out if they were actually Christians or not. He found out that if you ask people if they are a Christian, nearly everyone will claim to be one. If you ask people if they are evangelical Christians, 38% of people will claim to be one.

He then asked them these nine questions:

1. They say they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today.
2. They believe when they die they will go to Heaven because they have confessed their sins and accepted Christ as Savior.
3. They say their faith is very important in their life today.
4. They believe they have a personal responsibility to share their beliefs with non-Christians.

5. They believe Satan exists.
6. They believe eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works.
7. They believe Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth.
8. They assert that the Bible is accurate in all it teaches.
9. They describe God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today.

How many people claimed to believe all nine points? Just *eight percent*. Keep in mind that 38% claimed to be an evangelical Christian – but it turned out that nearly 80% of those didn't believe even the most *basic* of Christian doctrines. In other words, our churches are full of people who, if the truth were known, actually *reject* Christianity. They don't even believe the basics – and if they don't believe that, you can forget about anything more advanced!

Do you think that it honors God when His people can't even be bothered to *read* His Word, much less believe what it says? Do you think He is pleased at the staggering ignorance that plagues our churches? I very much doubt it. If your church was quizzed on the basic doctrines of Christianity, how many people do you think would get a passing grade?

The book of Hebrews has a simple message for you: *grow up*. Learn what the Bible says, believe it, and apply it to your life. Do not remain an immature believer your entire life. Grow in the Word:

2 Timothy 2:15: “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

Study the Word. This is not optional! Do you really want to stand before God on the day of judgment and tell Him that you couldn't be bothered to read His Word or pay attention to anything He said?