

## Jesus is Better:

*The Better High Priest* (Hebrews 4:14-5:10)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on December 24, 2017

### Introduction

- ❖ Winter officially arrived three days ago on December 21st. For those of you who moved down to Houston this year from somewhere up north, you've probably been wondering if it was ever going to get cold. You've been waiting for winter to arrive. But some of you have already been experiencing a winter of sorts – **a spiritual winter of the soul.**
  
- ❖ Did you know there are seasons of the soul? Most Christians can recall summer seasons in their past where they've experienced significant spiritual joy and growth. Those were days of fruitful ministry and a clear sense of God's presence in our lives. We cherish those seasons.
  - But summertime never lasts forever, even in the spiritual sense. Winter always comes around. **We all face these seasons of the soul when your heart feels cold towards God.** When you don't see much spiritual growth. When you're struggling day to day with the same old sins. When you face unending disappointments in life. When God himself seems distant or maybe even absent.
  
- ❖ That's what we call a spiritual winter of the soul. **Some of you are there right now, and you might even be on the verge of giving up on your faith, giving up on God.** Maybe some of you are here this morning simply because you're back home for the holidays. You're staying with family, and so you've come to church with family because that's what you do for Christmas. Maybe some of you even grew up in this church, and you can remember those spiritual summers you experienced in those days. But now your faith is in a much different place. A much colder and more dreary place.
  - I believe the Lord brought you here for a reason. He has a word for you in this morning's passage. You may have noticed the main imperative (exhortation) in our text has two prongs. We're told to do two things, which boils down to one main thing. We're told in v14 to "*hold fast our confession*" and in v16 to "*draw near to the throne of grace*". **We're exhorted to hold fast to our faith and draw near to our God, which boils down to saying don't give up.** Don't give up on faith. Don't give up on God. Hold fast and draw near to him. That's his word to you.
  
- ❖ Now I realize some of you feel like you're personally in a spiritual summer right now, so you can't really relate. Well there might be a word from the Lord that he wants you to share with someone else. Or maybe God just wants you to carefully listen so that you can be prepared when a spiritual winter eventually comes knocking at your door. So no matter what season you're personally in, there's a relevant word from the Lord here.
  
- ❖ So what does God want to tell people who feel like their faith is stuck in the dead of winter? What does he want to remind those on the verge of letting go and giving up? **He wants to remind them that in such times they have a priest to turn to.**
  - And he's not just any priest. He's a high priest. A great high priest. And I want to introduce him to you this morning. He's described in our text in three different ways. We're going to see 1) The high priest we've been waiting for, 2) The high priest who sacrificed for us, and 3) The high priest who sympathizes with us.

## The High Priest We've Been Waiting For

- ❖ I'm going to start by arguing that all of us have been waiting for a priest. All of us need a priest. **Which I know for most of us sounds strange since we didn't grow up with priests.** We had pastors, elders, or ministers. Priests are for Israelites. Priests are for Catholics. We're Protestant Christians. We believe in the priesthood of all believers. We don't need priests. We have direct access to God. We don't need to go through someone to get to God.
  - But actually, that's not true. You'd be mistaken to think that. Our passage is clear that you and I still need a priest. **We still have to go through another human being to get to God. But not just any human.**
  
- ❖ He's identified for us in v14 as Jesus, the Son of God who became a Son of Man. He's the Anointed One, the Christ, the Messiah. In the OT, there was a well-recognized expectation that God would send a **kingly Messiah** to deliver his people. Israel's hope and consolation rested on a Son of David, a kingly figure, arriving to conquer their enemies. But there was also a minor theme within the messianic tradition about a coming priest, a **priestly Messiah**.
  - These two messianic traditions ran parallel for years until here in Hebrews. **This is the first time someone brought these two traditions together and argued for their fulfillment in one man.** He's the first to claim that Jesus is not just a king but a priest.
  
- ❖ But this raises a sticky theological problem for the author of Hebrews. **Because in the OT, there was already a history of Israelite kings overreaching and performing the duties of a priest.** And each time they paid for it dearly. There was Saul who lost his throne for making a sacrifice himself (1 Sam. 13:8). And Uzziah who was struck with leprosy for the rest of his life because he entered the temple himself to burn incense (2 Chron. 26:16).
  - The author explains, in chapter 5:1, how high priests were never self-designated but always chosen and appointed to the task. **So a king can't just make himself a priest.** They have to stay in their lane. Kings rule. Priests sacrifice.
  
- ❖ **But here in Hebrews, King Jesus is said to do the work of a high priest.** But he's not from the tribe of Levi (only Levites served as priests). And he's not a descendant of Aaron (the designated family of high priests). He's from the tribe of Judah and a descendant of David. **It appears he's fit to be a king but not a priest. So how can he be both?**
  - This is where the author of Hebrews shines as a master exegete of Scripture. Listen to chapter 5:5-6 and how he weaves two strands of messianic tradition together. *"<sup>5</sup>So also 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"; <sup>6</sup>as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.""*
  
- ❖ **His point is that Christ did not make himself a priest or presumptuously adopt the role of one.** Like any good priest he was called by God. He was appointed. The author first quotes from **Psalm 2** which was a well-known messianic psalm about God appointing a **chosen kingly Son**. And then he quotes from **Psalm 110** which was another messianic psalm about God appointing a **chosen kingly priest** from the order of Melchizedek.

- ❖ That's a reference to a rather mysterious figure that shows up only in Genesis 14:18. **He's identified as the king of Salem (traditionally identified with Jerusalem) and as a priest of God Most High.** So apparently when David took over Jerusalem and made it his capital, the priesthood of God Most High now belongs to him and his successors.
- ❖ So Jesus may not be a levitical priest. But that's okay. He's of a more superior order. That's what the author of Hebrews goes on to prove in chapter 7 – that priests of Levi ought to show deference to priests of Melchizedek. But we don't need to go into that argument right now. **The main point here is that Jesus is superior over the entire levitical priesthood, including the high priests.**
  - Jesus, the *great* high priest, doesn't serve in a mere temple on earth. **It says that he has passed through the heavens and carries out his priestly role before the very presence of God.** The high priests of old merely served among earthly symbols and representations of heavenly realities – realities that Jesus deals with.
- ❖ Scripture tells us that the temple in Jerusalem was designed with a central room of perfect cubic dimension. **It was called the Holy of Holies,** and it housed the ark of the covenant. It was where God's manifestation of his earthly presence – his Shekinah glory – would reside.
  - Scripture tells us that the entrance to the Holy of Holies was blocked by a very thick curtain. **And only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest was allowed to pass through that curtain and serve before the mercy seat of God.** It was the golden cover of the ark, which had two large cherubim hammered out. The glory of God was said to have rested between the cherubim on the mercy seat.
- ❖ So think just about how Jesus is better. The high priests of old would pass through the curtain and serve in the Holy of Holies for only a few moments and only once a year. **But our Great High Priest passed through the heavens (not just curtains) and serves before God's actual throne of grace, remaining there forever.** He ever lives to intercede for us.
- ❖ As we explained before, the author is writing to a congregation converted out of Judaism that's being persecuted for their newfound Christian faith. **They were under extreme pressure and temptation to refer back to their former Judaism.** To go back to the synagogues and temple. To return to priests and all their sacrifices. It would be safer. The persecution would stop.
  - But the author of Hebrews is trying to say, “Why would you do that? **Why would you fall away from Jesus and fall back to the temple and its priests?** You have a far better High Priest. *“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.”* (4:14)
- ❖ **Look, I know when you're in the middle of a spiritual winter, when a spiritual blizzard has blown in, it's so hard to keep a firm grasp on your faith.** Your fingers feel frozen. You're not sure if you can keep your grip any longer. But, friend, I urge you to hold fast. Hold fast to Jesus. Hold fast to the gospel you profess to believe in.

- ❖ But you say, “That’s the problem. I don’t know if I believe in it anymore. **My faith is so weak. I’m not sure if I have enough faith to be saved.**” That reminds me of an illustration Tim Keller has in his book *Reason for God* about falling off a high cliff. Imagine you’re tumbling down a cliff, but you happen to see a branch sticking out of the side. It’s strong enough to support your weight. It’s your only hope of salvation. But how can it save you?
  - If you’re filled with fears and uncertainties about this branch, so you don’t reach out and grab it, you’re a goner. But if you’re filled with fears and uncertainties, but you reach out and grab that branch anyways – if you hold fast – you’re saved. Keller says, *“It is not the strength of your faith but the object of your faith that actually saves you. Strong faith in a weak branch is fatally inferior to weak faith in a strong branch.”*
  
- ❖ **Friends, I’d rather have weak faith in a strong and better High Priest than to be utterly convinced in lesser saviors and false gods.** Hold fast to Jesus. No matter how weak and feeble you feel – just hold fast.

### **The High Priest Who Sacrificed For Us**

- ❖ I believe what will help you do that is to see what makes Jesus such a strong branch, what makes him such a better high priest. It’s not just because of what order of priests he’s from. Jesus is a Great High Priest because of what he was able to accomplish in his priestly service.
  - This leads to our second point: Jesus is the high priest who sacrificed for us. As mentioned earlier, the high priest has one distinctive role when it comes to sacrificing. **To perform the necessary sacrifices on the Day of Atonement.**
  
- ❖ On that special day, the entire nation of Israel sought atonement for all the sins they committed throughout the course of that year. And on that day, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies. It was a dangerous task. **We’re told in Exodus 28 that the high priest was fitted with garments that had little golden bells attached to the hem of his robe.** Some scholars think that those jingling bells were there to signal to his colleagues, who were waiting outside, that the high priest was still alive and still ministering on their behalf.
  
- ❖ **The high priest had the most dangerous job in Israel.** If he could make it into the Holy of Holies without dying, he would first take the blood of a bull to make atonement for his own sins (Lev. 16:6). And then he’d take the blood of a goat and sprinkle it on the mercy seat of God (Lev. 16:15; Heb. 9:7). He would secure forgiveness for the sins of the people.
  - That’s why this was the most important day in the entire Jewish calendar. **But the fact that it showed up on the calendar every year proved that this Day of Atonement was insufficient to deal with sin.** The blood of bulls and goats were not enough. Not enough to fully and finally take away sin.
  
- ❖ That’s why they needed a better high priest. **One who offers a better sacrifice that can put away sins once for all.** And that’s how Jesus is presented to us in the book of Hebrews. He’s the great high priest who passed through the heavens and ministers forever in the heavenly throne room, before the very presence of God.

- ❖ **Hebrews 9:24-26** says, *“<sup>24</sup>For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. <sup>25</sup>Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, <sup>26</sup>for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.”*
  - **That's the better sacrifice – the sacrifice of himself.** He shed his own blood in our place and bore on sins upon himself, putting them away once for all.
  
- ❖ After a levitical high priest finished his work, he can walk out of the temple and tell people, “I’ve made the requisite sacrifices on your behalf. Let us now with confidence go home knowing we’re forgiven until we gather again next year on the next Day of Atonement.”
  - But Jesus can walk out of the heavenly temple and he tells his people, **“I’ve made the requisite sacrifice on your behalf. Now come inside with me and draw to the throne of grace yourself.”** Look at the command in chapter 4:16, *“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”*
  
- ❖ Do you realize that in the Old Testament no one spoke like that? No one would have dared draw near to the Holy of Holies. Definitely not with confidence. No one had confidence to draw near to God. Only the fear of certain death (cf. Num. 18:7).
  - **I think Christians fail to recognize how dangerous it is to draw near to God’s presence.** We take it for granted, but the Bible is replete with warnings. Remember when the Israelites reached Mt. Sinai, the glory of God appeared on the mountaintop, but the people were forbidden to go up and meet with God. It wasn’t safe (Ex. 19:12).
  
- ❖ But they were fine with that. They heard the peals of thunder. They saw the clouds of thick darkness and the consuming fire resting on top of the mountain. **And they had no interest in drawing near. They were sure they’d die.**
  - Listen to what they said to Moses. This is out of **Deuteronomy 5:25–27**, *“<sup>25</sup>Now therefore why should we die? For this great fire will consume us. If we hear the voice of the LORD our God any more, we shall die. <sup>26</sup>For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of fire as we have, and has still lived? <sup>27</sup>Go near and hear all that the LORD our God will say, and speak to us all that the LORD our God will speak to you, and we will hear and do it.”*
  
- ❖ **They were begging Moses to draw near for them.** Go be a priest for us and come back and tell us what God has to say. Tell us what it was like to be in his presence. But there was no way you’re going to get regular Israelites to draw near themselves.
  - **Chapter 4:16 would sound as strange to them as telling them to draw near to a blazing fire.** Let us with confidence draw near to a live volcano. Let us with confidence draw near to a category-5 tornado. That’s what it sounds like to tell them to draw near with confidence to God Almighty.

- ❖ Friends, until you read this passage from that perspective, the full significance of Jesus's high priestly work will be lost on you. You won't realize how badly you still need a priest. Even today. Even this very hour. You still need a priest to represent you before God.
  - **But because of what this Great High Priest has accomplished, he can now turn to you and say, "Come with me. Climb up the mountain with me and draw near to God yourself."** The thunder is still there. The thick darkness, the consuming fire are all still there. He's still the same fearsome, omnipotent, holy God Almighty.
    - But because Jesus shed his blood in our place, because he put away our sins for good, we can then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace.

### **The High Priest Who Sympathizes With Us**

- ❖ But I know what some of you are thinking. "You don't understand, pastor. My sin runs too deep. My shame is far too great. My temptations are far too strong. There might be hope for other but not me. You don't understand."
  - Perhaps I don't understand. But there is one who does. **There is one who knows exactly what you went through and what you're going through.** One who identifies with your pain, with your weaknesses, with the temptations that plague you. He's the high priest who sympathizes with us. That's our third and final point.
- ❖ There are two things that make a good priest. **Two things you looking for in a priest. Someone who is like you and yet unlike you at the same time.** You want a priest who can walk the hard path with you (so he can sympathize), and yet you want a priest who's off the path. Who's already reached the destination (so he can help you get there).
  - **So you want to be able to bare your soul to your priest.** To pour out your heart. To speak of your unfulfilled longings, of your loneliness and disappointments. And for him to get it. To understand. That's why you need a priest who's been there.
    - **And yet you don't want to bare your soul to your priest, only to have him respond by sharing his own set of problems.** You're looking for a priest not an accountability partner. You don't want a priest who's too much like you. Who's so much like you that he can't help you.
- ❖ **What you want is a priest who is like you and unlike you all at the same time.** So look with me at v15, "*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.*" As we are...yet. Like us. Yet unlike us. Do you see how Jesus is the perfect priest?
- ❖ The reason why he can sympathize with us is because "*in every respect has been tempted as we are.*" **He knows how hard it is to walk the straight and narrow. He knows what you're going through.** But you're probably wondering, "How can that be? How does Jesus know what I'm going through in every respect? He's never been through a bad break up like I have. He's never had a miscarriage like I have. He's never been tempted to cheat on his finals like I have. He hasn't felt the lure of pornography like I have. How does he know? He's never been through these things."

- ❖ You're right. He hasn't. He only lived 33 years, so he never experienced the unique trials and temptations of an elderly man. You could say the same about the unique trials and temptations of a single woman or a married person. He's hasn't personally experienced them.
  - **But you have to realize that there's the surface of an experience, and then there's the core of an experience.** On the surface, our experiences are all unique. But at the core, every experience is going to touch on the same basic emotions. And when it comes to difficult, painful experiences, at the core you'll find weakness, suffering, disappointment, confusion, abandonment, loneliness, betrayal, sadness.
    - And of those raw human emotions, Jesus is familiar. He knows them all too well. Jesus knows weakness and suffering. He knows abandonment and loneliness. He knows betrayal and sadness.
  
- ❖ Most commentators believe chapter 5:7 is referring to Christ's experience in the Garden of Gethsemane, right before he was betrayed and arrested. Look at it with me, "*In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.*" **But as the story goes, his Father didn't save him from death.** He didn't let the cup of wrath pass over. Instead he asked his Son to drink it down to the dregs for us.
  - **That tells me that Jesus knows what it's like to cry out to God for relief and not have your prayer answered.** Jesus knows what unanswered prayer feels like. He knows what the silence of God sounds like.
  
- ❖ **Jesus went through a spiritual winter himself. He knows what forsakenness feels like.** He felt it in the Garden. He felt it on the cross as he cried out, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Mk. 15:34) He knows what you're going through.
  - For those of you in that spiritual winter of the soul, know that you have a sympathetic high priest. **And take encouragement in the fact that even the Son of God had to go through a season of darkness, of coldness, of forsakenness.** And yet that experience was no indication of having fallen out of God's will or having lost his love. It was the exact opposite. That winter *was* the will of the Father, and he was sustained through it by his Father's love.
  
- ❖ Jesus gets it. He's like you, which allows him to sympathize with you. **But he's unlike you in that he never sinned but always obeyed.** He was obedient to the point of death even death on a cross. So we're told in chapter 5:8-9 that, by his perfect obedience, Jesus "*became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him*". **So he's not just a priest who sympathizes. He's a God who saves.** The source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.
  - Remember how this passage boils down to one main command: Don't give up. Draw near to him – even if it feels like the dead of winter. Hold fast to him – even if your grip feels weak. And trust that he's holding fast to you. Believe that he's drawn near to you. That is what Christmas is all about.