

Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 6, 2003
Hebrews 5:7-10

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Jesus Is the Incomparable High Priest

1. Sympathetic
2. Obedient
3. The Source of our Salvation

NIV Hebrews 5:7 During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. 8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered 9 and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him 10 and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The Passion history offers a striking contrast between high priests. The one high priest we see is the man in office at the time Jesus was crucified, a fellow named Caiaphas. The high priest Caiaphas was corrupt, conspiratorial, and callous, a man who seemed not to feel a twinge of conscience or a shred of sympathy as he orchestrated the judicial murder of Jesus.

The other high priest we see is Jesus. Now the Gospels never call Jesus a high priest. In fact, no other book in the New Testament—except this book of Hebrews—calls Jesus a high priest. But here in Hebrews 5 the author defines the office of high priest. He says, **“Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.”** (Heb. 5:1) Jesus fits that definition perfectly. God selected him as our high priest. Jesus did then and he does still now represent us in matters related to God and he offered the one perfect sacrifice for sins. What’s more, where Caiaphas was corrupt, conspiratorial, and callous, Jesus is innocent, pure, and sympathetic.

This book of Hebrews was written for the encouragement of Jews who had converted to Christianity but were now wavering in their commitment to Christ. Facing the pressure of persecution, they were contemplating a return to the relative safety of Judaism. They seemed to think—in their weak moments, at least—that they could trade the high priest Jesus for a merely human high priest and be none the poorer for it. The author of this letter warns them, though, that such an exchange would cost them dearly—cost them even their salvation. As we read over the shoulder of the author of this epistle, we grow in our appreciation for Jesus. Jesus is not someone we can take or leave. Jesus is precious. Jesus is our one and only hope. Jesus is, in the language of Hebrews, **The Incomparable High Priest**. He is incomparable, the complete package as high priest, first, because he is sympathetic, second, because he is obedient, and third, because he is the source of our salvation.

1. Sympathetic

It says here, *“During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death...”* There is no specific mention of Gethsemane here, but that’s certainly what comes to mind when we hear these words: Jesus praying with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death. Jesus went to that garden called Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives on the night he was betrayed. As his arrest drew near, Jesus was feeling the horrible weight of the world’s sins. He was feeling the dread of his approaching death. So he prayed. The evangelist Luke says that when Jesus prayed there at Gethsemane he was “in anguish” and he prayed so earnestly that **“his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.”** There in Gethsemane Jesus not only knelt in prayer, but **“fell with his face to the ground and prayed.”** (Matt. 26:39)

We know what Jesus prayed about. In fact, we know the exact words of his prayer. He prayed, **“Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me.”** (Luke 22:42) The cup to which he was referring was the cup full of pain and death that stood before him. True human being that he was, Jesus had no burning desire to undergo pain, especially not unnecessary pain. And his reaction to prospect of death was even stronger than our own, because in his holiness he was not condemned to suffer the wages of sin as we are. *If there’s another way, Jesus was saying, then, Father, I beg of you, take that way.*

But Jesus was careful to say, **“Yet not my will, but yours be done.”** (Luke 22:42) That’s what the author of Hebrews means when he refers

to Jesus' "reverent submission." He exhibited a godly kind of fear, that is, an awe and reverence for his Father when he said, "Yet not my will, but yours be done." Jesus' prayer is an example of how we are to pray for anything that Scripture does not specifically promise to us. If we pray like Jesus did, then we don't issue ultimatums or demands about such things, but we reverently and submissively ask God for them. We can pray earnestly—even persistently—for what we believe is best, but ultimately we leave the decision about what's best to our wise and loving Father. That's what Jesus did.

Does it surprise you that it says here that Jesus' prayer was heard? "*And he was heard because of his reverent submission.*" We might think that because Jesus asked to be saved from death and wasn't, that his prayer went unheard. But that's not the case. Jesus' prayer was heard: both his request to be saved from death and his request that his Father's will be done were heard. God answered Jesus' prayer in a way that was best for Jesus and best for all of us. What's more, God not only heard Jesus' prayer, he hears every prayer we Christians pray. And he answers them all in a way that's best.

Whenever I think of Jesus praying in Gethsemane, I think of a painting that I first saw as a child and have seen many times since. In the painting, Jesus is kneeling in prayer, his elbows propped on a rock and his face turned toward heaven. In the painting, Jesus looks calm and composed. A halo surrounds his head. But if we look carefully at the portrait painted by the author of Hebrews and the Gospel writers, we see something a bit different. There, though Jesus may have begun his prayer kneeling, he eventually is lying facedown on the ground. His cheeks are wet with tears. His body is drenched with sweat, a sweat tinged with the blood that the pressure of that moment is forcing through his pores. Sorrow is overwhelming Jesus there. And I find that revised portrait of Jesus in Gethsemane...comforting! It shows me that Jesus, though he's sinless and holy, is not distant or cold to the difficulties we face and the emotions we feel. It shows me that in Jesus we have a high priest who is touched by our plight. It is as it says just a few verses earlier here in Hebrews: **"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way—yet was without sin."** (Heb. 4:15) Our Savior's sympathy makes us bold to approach God's throne in prayer, confident that what we'll find there is God's mercy and his grace to help us in our time of need.

Sympathy is what the author of Hebrews expects will be the strong suit of a high priest who is merely human like we are. He says that a

merely human high priest can be expected **“to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.”** (Heb. 5:2) But Jesus is sympathetic, unflinching so. And more than that, Jesus has what no merely human high priest can offer: Jesus is flawlessly obedient. Jesus’ obedience is another reason for regarding him as our incomparable high priest.

2. Obedient

As this section continues, the author says, *“Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.”* Actually, the sense here is more like, “Son though he was...” The author is emphasizing Jesus’ identity as the Son of God and pointing out that though Jesus is the Son of God, “he learned obedience from what he suffered.” That’s the way it is with us, isn’t it? We learn obedience through suffering. Maybe the suffering comes from a parent who disciplines us for our disobedience and we learn obedience that way. Or maybe we pay some other price for our disobedience and learn the hard way that obedience is a better course. But since Jesus is the Son of God, we might think that he doesn’t need to learn obedience. Maybe he should just be given credit for obedience. But God the Father didn’t permit his Son any exemption from demonstrating what obedience in the face of suffering means. Jesus suffered poverty and pressure and persecution. Jesus had close friends deny him and he was denied justice by religious and secular authorities. Jesus suffered sorrow and ultimately he suffered death on a cross. But through it all, Jesus was obedient. He did his Father’s will. He kept the law of God.

The priests who were mere mortals couldn’t do that. We’ve already mentioned the faults of Caiaphas. What about Aaron, who when he was about to become Israel’s high priest, bowed to the pressure and constructed a golden calf for the Israelites to worship? And what about his sons, Nadab and Abihu, who not long after they were ordained as priests disobeyed God and “offered unauthorized fire” and “so fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them”? (Lev. 10) The fact is, there wasn’t a single merely human priest who could step into the presence of God to intercede for the people without first bringing a sacrifice for his own sins.

We have the same failing. The record of our disobedience is long and dreary and it ought to be punished with a sudden burst of God’s fierce anger. And it would be, but for one thing: Jesus is our incomparable high priest. A couple chapters later in Hebrews it says, **“Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other**

high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.” (Heb. 7:26-28) Jesus was absolutely obedient, he is perfectly sympathetic, and— finally—he is the source of our salvation.

3. The Source of our Salvation

That’s what it says here: *“...and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.”* As we noted before, Jesus wasn’t like other priests in Israel a descendant of Aaron or a member of the tribe of Levi. He wasn’t a member of any of the 24 priestly orders listed in the book of Chronicles. He was, it says here, a high priest in the order of Melchizedek, that mysterious man who emerges on the scene in Genesis 14 and meets with Abraham. The Bible simply describes him as “priest of God Most High.” He didn’t seem to have the right bloodlines either—in fact, there is no genealogy listed for him. But he was great enough that Abraham gave him a tithe of the plunder he had collected in battle. Jesus belonged to that order by the promise of God in Psalm 110, where it says about the Messiah, **“The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind; ‘You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.’”**

But the most important thing about Jesus is not the order to which he belongs, but what the priestly work he does for us. Jesus, our high priest, is for us what no other priest could be: he is the source of our salvation, that is, the basis for our salvation. His holy sacrifice for sin has purged us of guilt and paid the price to bring us to God. He is not just the priest; he is the sacrifice. He is the source of our salvation.

As this Lenten season moves on toward its Holy Week culmination, keep the eyes of your faith on Jesus. Watch him pray in the garden and realize that it’s you and me that he’s got on his heart. Watch him move resolutely to his appointment at the cross and realize that he’s offering a sacrifice for us there. Even now, Jesus is still interceding for us at the Father’s throne. Sympathetic and obedient, Jesus is our incomparable high priest, the source of our salvation. Amen.