

OUR HOPE: JESUS THE BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER

Hebrews 4:14 - 5:10

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.¹⁶ Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need.^{5:1} For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins;² he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness;³ and because of it he is obligated to offer sacrifices for sins, as for the people, so also for himself.⁴ And no one takes the honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God, even as Aaron was.⁵ So also Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest, but He who said to Him, “Thou art My Son, today I have begotten Thee;”⁶ just as He says also in another passage, “Thou art a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”⁷ In the days of His flesh, when He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and who was heard because of His piety,⁸ although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered;⁹ and having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation;¹⁰ being designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Someone has said a really good communicator will tell his audience what he’s going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what he told them. The writer of Hebrews follows that scheme when, early in his treatise (2:17,18) he tells us what he’s going to tell us later on (5:1—10:25). In essence, he says Jesus was wholly human that “*He might become a merciful and faithful high priest*” (2:17).

An immediate question pops into the mind of a questing, contemporary Christian, “Why all this

emphasis on the priesthood of Jesus?” There are two reasons: One is logical; the other is practical. From the standpoint of pure logic, it follows that, having shown Jesus to be superior to prophets, angels, Moses, and Joshua, the next thing our author must do is show Jesus to be superior to Aaron, the high priest.

Remember his purpose in writing this book. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he has been moved to strengthen the faith of his fellow Hebrew Christians. To instill hope in them. To infuse them with the will and courage to stand against the pressures and persecutions to which they were being subjected. One way to achieve this goal was to demonstrate the absolute superiority of Jesus over all the practices of Judaism and the people who performed them. One such key person was the high priest.

Very early in Hebrew life, God made it clear to the people they were to become a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6). In Exodus 36 through 39, the Lord gave Moses the details of the tabernacle. The book of Leviticus spells out with great care the functions of the priesthood, the high priest in particular playing a most significant role.

As history unfolds, the high priest becomes more and more important. In the inter-testament period, leading up to the time of Christ, this is especially true. After the exile, the kings and prophets who had been such a dynamic force in the shaping of Israel’s destiny during earlier days, were replaced by the temple priesthood. With one oppressor after another denying Israel a national life, she turned, almost out of sheer self-preservation, to a religious life. The high priest became the dominant voice in her affairs.

William Neil records how “during the Maccabean period in the second century BC, the role of the priest was almost synonymous with kingship.” Neil offers this to explain how Caiaphas, the high priest, and Annas, his father-in-law who occupied that post before him, could play such a prominent part in the plot to arrest and kill Jesus (Matthew 26:3; John 18:13,24). Politically

speaking, the high priest carried a lot of clout. In fact, from just about any way you wish to look at it, the priesthood was an exceedingly important part of Hebrew life.

It is entirely possible some well-meaning, first-century orthodox Jews -- in misguided concern for their friends who had become Christians -- were saying that, unlike Judaism, Christianity did not have a high priest. Therefore, it was an inferior religion. If such were the case, the book of Hebrews refutes the charge. It claims Christianity not only has a high priest, but “a great high priest” (4:14). One who is superior to Aaron in that He ministers, not in an earthly temple as Aaron did, but in the very presence of God Himself.

Along with this logical reason for emphasizing the priesthood of Christ, our author had a practical reason: sin. Every last one of us is faced with the fact of sin and the problem of what to do about it. We know what it is to be estranged from God. Along with our unsaved friends, we saved-sinners have a deep, often subconscious, longing for access and communion with Him in whom we have our ultimate rest. The burning question of all time is what to do about the problem of sin.

If you examine the great world religions, you will find in each of these systems a way of dealing with sin. It may consist of saying there is no such thing. But, if you look long enough, you will find in every religious faith a way of coping with this inescapable, painful fact of life.

In Judaism, the sin problem was resolved through a system of sacrifices and offerings culminating in the Day of Atonement about which we read in Leviticus 16. The Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, was the greatest day in the Jewish religious year, and still is. On this day, until the temple was destroyed in AD 70, the high priest entered into the Holy of Holies to stand between a righteous God and a wicked nation, representing each to the other. In that sense, the high priest was a bridge across the troubled waters between God and man.

The Day of Atonement centered around an awe-inspiring ceremony fraught with meaning and significance to a people plagued by guilt and shame. It began with an offering of a bull by the priest to “*make atonement for himself and for his household,*” the latter meaning his fellow priests (Leviticus 16:11). Using contemporary language, the minister and his associates needed to get right with God first.

There is a saying, “Water never rises above its source.” It is equally true a congregation rarely rises above the spiritual life and temperature of its pastor. Personally, this is something I do not take lightly. I never mount my pulpit stairs without first pausing outside the sanctuary to pray, not as a ritual but as a deep, personal act of confession and repentance, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Help me to preach as a dying man to dying men.”

The first act on the Day of Atonement was the offering of a bull for what we might call the sins of the clergy. (I hope the selection of animals is not too symbolic!) Then, having gotten right with God himself, having made this offering for himself and his associates, the high priest returned to the people, who had provided two goats. One of these was slain. The high priest re-entered the Holy of Holies to spread the blood of the slain goat around the Mercy Seat.

This completed, he came outside again and performed the most dramatic part of the ritual. Placing both hands upon the head of the live goat, he confessed the sins of the Hebrew people, praying God to forgive them. Then the scapegoat, as it was called, was led away into no man’s land, symbolically carrying away the iniquities of the people (Leviticus 16:21).

It was a powerful and effective visual aid to intensify their sense of having been forgiven. They could literally see their sins being carried away from them. One can imagine a shout going up from the congregation, “There they go! Our sins are gone!”

The leading player in this sacred drama was the high priest. Because these first-century Christians

also had a sin problem, as do we, the big question for them, as for us, is: what do we do about our sin? Is there forgiveness and cleansing for saved-sinners, as well as unsaved sinners? Do Christians have a high priest who can deliver us from our sense of shame, guilt and despair? Do we sinner-saints have a mediator between ourselves and God?

The writer of Hebrews answers, indeed, we do! Jesus is our bridge over troubled waters. He is our high priest. Our mediator before the Lord. He is sufficient to our every need. For, in a positively thrilling way, Jesus is “*to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation*” (5:9).

Jesus Is Our Bridge

There were two basic qualifications for the Old Testament high priest. First, he had to be a man among men. Second, he had to be a man appointed by God. “*For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins; he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided since he himself also is beset with weakness; and because of it he is obligated to offer sacrifices for sins, as for the people, so also for himself. And no one takes the honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God, even as Aaron was*” (5:1-4).

A high priest must be a man among men. He must be someone who is in touch with his fellows. Who is caught up in the human struggle. Who knows the heights and depths, strengths and weaknesses, joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, agonies and ecstasies of man because he himself is one. A high priest separated from the human situation could not in any way understand the weakness and sin of those for whom he was to minister.

By way of parenthesis, I’m positive that’s why God called some of us into the ministry. At least, I feel that’s why He called me. I’ve often looked at my life to find reasons why God put this mantle on me. In all candor, it is not because of any virtue, strength or special talent.

It may have been because, as a human being, I am able to identify with the weakness and sin of

my brothers and sisters. I, too, am weak and sinful. There have been times when I did not believe in God. There has never been a moment when I did not believe in the devil! He parks on my shoulder and dogs me all day. It's a constant struggle with the world, the flesh and the devil. Often I lose. My humanity keeps getting in the way.

I finally concluded some years ago, if I ever start being more of a minister than I am a man, I will cease being useful as a minister. I decided then and there that as long as God could use me, He would have me. Some people don't want a man for a minister. They want a kind of plastic saint who never doubts. Never gets mad. Never cusses. Never lusts. Never fears. Never loses his way. A super-sanctified soul who never shirks his duties. Never shrinks from the painful aspects of his calling. Never gets discouraged and wonders if it's all worthwhile.

But, that's not the kind of minister I am. I've been guilty of all these things and more. There is comfort in the Biblical revelation (5:2) that a truly helpful mediator for men, be he pastor, priest or rabbi, is a distinctively human being. Conscious of his own humanity. Able, therefore, to understand and accept the manhood of others. This was a qualification God Himself set for the high priest. He must be a man among men.

Second, he must be appointed by God. The priesthood was not something to which a man appointed himself. It was not an office he sought or took. Rather, it was a privilege, a servanthood, put upon him by divine appointment.

In the strictest sense of the word, the ministry of God among people was not and is not a career. It is a calling. If there is anything else on earth a young man can do and be happily fulfilled, he ought to stay clear of the ministry. The pressures, demands, frustrations and disappointments of this calling are such that only one who knows beyond any shadow of doubt this is something he has to do, can happily survive.

Bishop Hughes of the Methodist Church has an autobiography entitled, I Was Made A Minister.

I think that should be the feeling of every God-called man. He must be able to say I was made a minister; this was something I could not escape. *“And no one takes the honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God, even as Aaron was”* (5:4).

The writer of Hebrews takes these two qualifications for priesthood and, in reverse order, shows how Jesus fulfilled them. Jesus was appointed by God. *“So also Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest, but He who said to Him, ‘Thou art my Son, today I have begotten Thee.’”* (5:5). Jesus was priest by divine appointment.

At this point, our writer runs into a snag. The high priest must be a Levite. Jesus doesn’t fill this bill. He was from the tribe of Judah (Numbers 24:17). So the writer of Hebrews goes on to show there is a priesthood superior to that of Aaron and his ancestor, Levi. It is the priesthood of that mysterious fellow called Melchizedek (5:6,10). Christ belongs to that order.

We will deal with Melchizedek more fully later on in this series. For now, Melchizedek was a contemporary of Abraham. Therefore, he was older than Aaron and Levi by at least three generations. Furthermore, he was King of Salem, thought by most scholars to be Jerusalem. Thus, his priesthood surpassed, both in antiquity and dignity, the priesthood of Aaron. To rank Jesus as *“a priest after the order of Melchizedek”* (5:6,10) was to identify Christ’s priesthood as both royal and perpetual.

To further substantiate his claim for the superiority of Christ’s priesthood over that of Aaron, and to fix the fact that He was appointed and approved by God, the writer to the Hebrews says, *“We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens”* (4:14).

With our modern day interest in space travel, this is a little phrase with which we could spend a great deal of time. In a sentence or two, however, this reference to passing through the heavens does not mean Jesus moved through time and space as our astronauts do. Rather, He moved

outside time and space. He escaped the boundaries which cabin and confine us. He got outside the space-time continuum and is no longer limited by it.

If we are to have a grown-up faith adequate for our time, one with which our contemporaries can identify, we must learn to stop thinking of God and heaven in spatial terms. When we were little, because of the figurative language of the Bible, it was easy to think of going “up” to heaven and going “down” to hell. Now that we are grown, in the words of Paul, we can “*do away with childish things*” (I Corinthians 13:1 I), and realize the lovely language of scripture is trying to tell us heaven is outside of time and space.

Therefore, heaven can be around us, as well as within us, as Jesus said (Luke 17:21). God is not a distant, cosmic blur out there somewhere in space. Through the person and ministry of Jesus, He can and does actually live within our hearts. Thanks to scientific discoveries, we now know everything is in motion. Nothing is really “solid.” Every atom is in motion. The relative distance between the moving proton, neutron and electron of an atom is as great as the space between earth, moon and stars. Thus, it is possible for more than one creation to occupy the same space at the same time, with one not being aware of the other. It may be closer to the truth to think of Christ’s ascension, not as a trip to some distant place but as a step into another dimension of life where He is as near to us as hands and breath.

For first-century Christians, “*passed through the heavens*” (4:14) meant something super-special. They saw it as a clear reference to the Day of Atonement and the function of the high priest, who went through the curtain into the Holy of Holies. To them, the writer of Hebrews was saying, Christ, the Christian’s high priest, does not merely penetrate an earthly veil, He pierces the ultimate curtain to enter the very presence of God Himself. There, in God’s presence, He carries out His ministry on our behalf. Thus, He knows God. Not merely as a man may know Him, from afar, but as One who naturally lives and moves comfortably in God’s sphere because He, too, is God.

Having made this brief reference to the deity of Jesus, showing Him to be appointed to His high priesthood by God, our author hastens to reaffirm the humanity of Jesus. In other words, Jesus also met the second qualification for priesthood: He was a man among men. This fact is so important the writer mentions it three times (2:18; 4:15; 5:7,8). The latter reference transports us “to the shadows of Gethsemane and the mysterious darkness of Calvary.”² *“In the days of His flesh,”* when Jesus was a real man among men, *“He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and who was heard because of His piety, although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered”* (5:7,8).

The agony Christ felt the night of His awful struggle in Gethsemane beneath the olive trees was not born of any fear of death or physical pain. Rather, it came from the overwhelming sense of shame, guilt and despair He felt as He began to get under the burden of man’s sin.

He had previously known, at the intellectual level, of the havoc and hurt sin can produce. There, in the garden, He began to know it experientially. Emotionally. At the gut level of His being. As the awful agonizing weight of undiluted evil began to press down upon Him, the whole of His humanity cried out for deliverance. And he was heard (5:7). Not in the sense of the cup passing from His hand, but “heard” because real communication occurred between Him and His Father.

Though His prayer was answered with “a shake of the head,” rather than “a nod,” there was no break in the relationship between Father and Son. He was heard. The prayer behind His prayer, that He might be the agent through which mankind could be saved, was answered. He was provided with the courage and strength of will to face the test before Him.

Actually, it is precisely because the cup did not pass that Christ is better equipped to be our high priest and share with us in our human struggle. Many of our prayers are greeted with a “shake of

the head,” rather than a “nod.” The divine vocabulary is not limited to yes answers only. No is an answer, too. So is, wait a while.³

Because Jesus exposed His humanity to the full fury of hell’s hot blast and stood firm, He is able to “*deal gently*” (5:2) with us when we face the tempter’s snare and fall. It’s difficult to do that. It’s difficult to “*deal gently*” with sinners. It’s easy to be severe with them. That doesn’t take any effort. It’s also relatively easy to be lenient with them. But to understand the devastation sin results in, to detest sin, and at the same time “*deal gently*” with the sinner, is hard. Yet, that’s what Jesus does.

That’s why He is such a great high priest. He is the only adequate bridge over troubled waters. Connected with God? Yes. Also connected with man. Able to understand what it’s like to be human. Capable, therefore, of “*dealing gently*” with us saved-sinners. He has “*passed through the heavens*” and we have hope.

There’s A True Man In Heaven

There’s a man in heaven! A complete man. A whole man. True man. And that’s powerfully important. Only true man, that is, man as God meant man to be, can really identify, empathize and sympathize with us in our struggle.

None of us is a complete person. Even as Christians we retain the residual effects of sin upon mankind (figures 4-B and 4-C, in the previous chapter). One would think we’d remember our own sin and be tender toward our fellow sinners. But, being aware of our weakness does not automatically produce understanding of others. As a matter of fact, the very toughness with which we sometimes judge others is a defense against the weakness we see in ourselves.

After ending a sermon one Sunday on the happy note, “Good or bad, Jesus loves me,” Monday morning I was talking to a worshiper who said, “I sure wish I could get my spouse to love that

way.” There was a wistfulness in the way this person described the conditional nature of so much of our human love. If someone is good -- makes us proud or happy -- we love him or her. But, if he (she) doesn’t, look out!

A woman had been a real chore to live with. When her husband died, he left the bulk of his estate to other members of the family. Enraged, she went to the monument maker to have the words changed on his tombstone. “I’m sorry,” the workman said, “You ordered ‘Rest in Peace’ and it can’t be changed.” “Well, then,” said the woman, “add, ‘till we meet again’!” Let’s face it; many of our relationships are like that. Love on condition. But Jesus is different. That’s what gives us hope. There’s a man in heaven. A complete man. A true man. A man unencumbered by the residual effects of centuries of sin on human nature. His love is unconditional. Having been “*tempted . . . as we are*” (4:15). He is able to identify with us when we are tempted.

This little phrase, “*tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin*” (4:15), has caused folks a lot of problems. It does not mean Jesus was tempted to do exactly the same kinds of sins we fall into. We create many of our temptations. For instance, we sin, and then are tempted to lie to cover up our sin. This, of course, is a temptation Jesus never felt. Not having sinned in the first place, there was nothing for Him to lie about.

Nor was He tempted to drive fifty miles an hour in a thirty-five mile zone, or cheat on an exam at the university. His temptations were characteristic of His time. But, in one way or another, they ran the gamut of our temptation to cater to “*the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life*” (I John 2:16). The most important thing to remember, however, is that there was no limit to the evil Jesus could have done had He made the wrong choices! Fortunately, there is a limitation to the evil you and I can do.

One night I stood on the pier of our lakeshore lodge in Wisconsin. The sky was clogged with stars. Their number was so vast I was overwhelmed. Intimidated by the size of the universe, I

felt small and weak. Ineffective against that vastness. “God, what good can I possibly do to in any way change that for the better?” The knowledge there was little by way of good I could do to positively affect the universe depressed me. Suddenly, however, the liberating thought came: “There’s nothing so evil you can do as to *upset* the universe either!” There’s a limit to what *our* sin can do.

But, because of who and what Jesus was and knew, there was no limit to the evil Christ could have perpetrated on the universe had He chosen the kingdoms of the world instead of the will of God. Therefore, the temptation He confronted had our temptation beat all hollow. Yet, He faced it without sin.

“Of course He did,” you say. “He had an edge. He didn’t have a sinful nature.” True. By virtue of His virgin birth, Jesus did not inherit, as we do, the residual effects of centuries of sin upon the make-up of mankind. Jesus was like Adam, not us. He was true man. Not the caricature of man we are. Thus, the comparison must be made between what Jesus did with His humanity and what Adam did with his. God does not expect us saved-sinners, with the residual effects of inherited evil, to perform perfectly. That’s why He has provided us with a high priest who makes continual intercession on our behalf.

Adam and Jesus both began with moral innocence. However, there’s a difference between moral innocence and virtue. Innocence is purity which has never been tested. Virtue is innocence which has been tested and found true. Adam began with innocence, tested it, fell and lost his purity. We’re in that mold. Jesus began with innocence, tested it, stood true, maintained His purity and gained virtue. He did it in the face of a fury of temptation neither you, nor I, nor Adam ever felt.

Most of us are like a candle which bends under minimum temperature. None of us has ever felt the fury of the tempter’s full blast. Long before it gets that hot, we capitulate. So, none of us can ever really understand the intense pressure under which Jesus worked and lived. His capacity for

evil, as well as good, was incredible. So were the temptations to which He was put.

This gives us reason to hope. There's a man in heaven. A complete man. A true man. A man who is able to sympathize with our weakness because He was “*tempted . . . as we are*” (4:15). Who “*learned obedience from the things which He suffered*” (5:8). Not that He disobeyed and had to be taught to obey. He learned obedience by discovering first-hand what obedience demands. What obedience implies. By personal experience, Jesus learned what it's like to obey when every fiber of one's being wants to disobey. Because of that, He's able to help us with our temptations. To recognize the wonder and extent of our victory if, and when, we win one.

“*Jesus passed through the heavens*” (4:14) into the presence of God. But, remember, He just changed His location, not His compassion! In fact, His location near to the heart of God only intensifies His compassion for us who struggle afar off. As someone has said, “Jesus may be out of sight now, but He is not out of hearing, nor out of sympathy, nor out of service.”⁴

Every Help We Need

How did Jesus win in His struggle with Satan? By keeping the lines of communication open between Himself and His Father. The writer of Hebrews instructs us to follow this example. “*Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need*” (4:16)

That word “*confidence*” is significant. It means the child of God, in the presence of God, need have no inhibitions. Play no games. Before our fellows we may tend to be cagey. There may be certain things we'd just as soon not discuss. Not so before Jesus our high priest. He knows it all, sees it all and understands! As T. H. Robinson observes, “There's just no point trying to hide something from Someone who knows us better than we know ourselves!”⁵

When you remember “*God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself*” (2 Corinthians 5:19), you realize that what we're saying about Jesus, we're saying about God! God knows it all, sees it

all and understands! Thus, with confidence we can draw near to the throne of God where we are received with mercy and given grace.

We are received with mercy. When we come to God through Christ He does not condemn us. He receives and redeems us. What good news that is! Jesus is not only able to sympathize with us, as did the Old Testament high priest, Jesus is able to save us (5:9). To reach down and lift us up. That's another reason He is a great high priest. He brings us the quality of mercy.

We are also given the provisions of grace. Not one of us is capable of living the Christian life alone. Try and you will fall flat on your face. When it comes to a contest between you and Satan, you're beat before you begin. We all are.

Therefore, we need grace. **God's Riches At Christ's Expense.** G-r-a-c-e. Grace! That's what we receive from our high priest. Being in the presence of God, all Jesus receives from the Father, He passes on to us. That's grace! So, put it down and don't forget it! There is help in time of need.

Dear fellow sinner-saint, don't let your sense of sin and feeling of unworthiness keep you from coming boldly to the throne of God. Christ's worthiness is the perfect counterpart for your and my unworthiness. If you come to God through Him, you will be greeted with mercy and treated with grace. Given every help you need. Every time you need it!

Notes

1. William Neil, The Epistle to the Hebrews, Ritual and Reality (London: SCM Press, 1955), p. 57.
2. Charles R. Erdman, The Epistle to the Hebrews (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1934), p. 61.
3. For further development, see John Allan Lavender, Why Prayers Are Unanswered (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press).

4. Magazine clipping attributed to Perry F. Webb.
5. Theodore H. Robinson, The Epistle to the Hebrews, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd., 1933), p. 54.