Jesus, the Merciful High Priest

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

Key Verse: 4:16 “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

Last week in chapter 3 we studied how Jesus is superior to Moses. Jesus is compared to the builder of God’s house and Moses to a part of the house. Who is greater between the builder of a house and a house itself? Of course, it is the builder. God is the builder of everything. God is the Creator. He plans, prepares, works, and finishes. Without him we can do nothing. As Psalm 127 says without God the builders labor in vain. We need God the builder for whatever we do. We need him when we plan our lives, when we start school or business, when we seek direction, and so on.

In chapter 4:14-5:10 the author of Hebrews mainly teaches about Jesus’ priesthood. What kind of priesthood he has and how his priesthood affects us and our salvation? In verse 14 he calls Jesus a great high priest. Look at verse 14. “***Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.***” A high priest is the mediator between God and men. According to 5:1 every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. In the book of Exodus God ordered Moses to choose high priests from the descendants of Aaron and to anoint them to work at the temple. So, high priests are sacred and specially chosen to do the work of God as a representative of God and of his people.

Jesus is not a descendant of Aaron or Levites. How could he become a great high priest? This is because he is the Son of God. God anointed Jesus his Son as a high priest to do his will. All high priests from the descendants of Aaron and the Levites were dead and buried. But Jesus was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God.

There is another reason why Jesus is the great high priest. 2:17-18 says, “*For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*” These verses teach us two reasons why Jesus had to be born as a man like one of us. First, Jesus was born as a man in order to become a perfect atoning sacrifice for our sins. This means that Jesus became a man to take over all our sins as a perfect human being. Second, he became a man to experience all our pain and temptation in his own body so that we may overcome our sins by his death and resurrection. We call this Jesus’ substitutionary death.

4:15 gives us an additional explanation. Look at 4:15. “***For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin***.” Aaronic high priests had been selected from their childhood. They were treated special full time for the work of God, especially for working at the temple. So, they did not experience or understand the agony of ordinary people. This is the same as British royal families don’t experience and understand the poverty of people in India. People don’t understand other’s pain and agony if they were not in the same situation. I know one woman pastor who is taking care of all divorced women in her community. The pastor is also divorced woman. Because she went through the pain and agony from her own divorce, she could take care of other divorced women.

Verse 15 b says that we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. This means that Jesus has compassion on us and helps us our weaknesses. This is because Jesus also experienced our weaknesses as fully human and was tempted in every way, but he did not sin. We remember how Jesus got up every early morning to pray. We know how difficult for us to get up early morning to pray after working hard the previous day. Jesus served all kinds of sinners, healed all kinds of the sick, fed many hungry crowds, and taught his disciples until late night, and then got up early morning to pray. He was rejected by his own people. As the prophet Isaiah said, ‘*He was despised and rejected by people, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain*.” (Is 53:3) He was even betrayed by his own disciples and denied by his top follower. Finally, he had to die on the cross even though he was sinless. He endured excruciating pain on the cross when his two hands and foot were nailed to the cross. His body was crushed by the spear of the evil, and his blood and water were gushed out from his side. Jesus experienced sufferings and pain which all human beings on this earth have. Thirst, hunger, sleeplessness, loneliness, sickness, poverty, humility, discrimination, betrayal, and so on. Who was born in the animal’s stable on this earth but Jesus? Who was crucified on the cross even though he was sinless? From birth to death, from cradle to grave Jesus shared our weaknesses and death. This is the reason why he is able to empathize our weaknesses and help us, encourage us when we fall. This is the reason why Jesus is the merciful and great high priest for all.

One day while Jesus was walking through the grainfields on the Sabbath, his disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and ate them. At that time the Pharisees criticized Jesus’ disciples and accused them of lawbreaker. But what did Jesus say to them? Jesus defended his disciples. Jesus taught the Pharisees that God desires mercy, not sacrifice. God wants us to practice love more than observe the law. Our God is merciful God. The prophet Isaiah said, *“A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.*” (Is 42:3, Mt 12:20) We are often broken like bruised reed and weak like smoldering wick. A woman was caught on the act of adultery. She was brought before Jesus to be condemned by the religious leaders. The religious asked Jesus to condemn her by Moses’ law. But Jesus didn’t condemn her, but saved her and gave her new life. Jesus saw her as a helpless and harassed sheep without a shepherd. She was a bruised reed and a smoldering wick to his eyes. Jesus’ twelve disciples were always confident of their loyalty for their master Jesus. Once, Peter said to Jesus, “*Even if all fall away on account of you, I will never*.” Jesus loved Peter’s confession and knew his weakness. So, Jesus predicted Peter’s denial by saying, “*This very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.”* (Mt 26:33,34) Even though we don’t say much, our Lord Jesus knows our weakness. Still, he loves us, be with us, and helps us. In John’s gospel the Risen Jesus visited his disciples. They worked all night, but didn’t catch any fish. They were hungry and tired. They were sorry that they were not with Jesus to the end. They suffered from guilt, shame, and hunger. But Jesus visited them and didn’t ask them anything, but restored their failure by making them catch many fish. Then he cooked and provided breakfast for them like a loving mother. (Jn 21) Praise Jesus who is our good shepherd and merciful Savior!

Look at verse 16. “***Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need***.” Because Jesus understands us and helps us, we can come to Jesus with confidence. We can approach God’s throne of grace with confidence. In the past, it was impossible for sinners to approach to God. Those who approached to God at the Mount Sinai died. Those who touched the ark of God by accident also died. Only chosen and selected people like priests could approach and work at the temple. This is because our God is holy and we are sinful. The throne of the holy God is too high for sinners to approach or come near. But, Jesus, our high priest broke this gap. Even though he was the Son of God, he became a human like one of us. So, because of Jesus and through him, we can come to God and approach to him even though we are sinners. Jesus opened the new and living way for sinners to come to God. Indeed, when Jesus died on the cross, the curtain which divided between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place was torn into two from top to bottom. Hebrews 10:19-22 explains this well. “*Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.*” Amen!

People are often hesitant to come to God because of fear. But we approach the throne of God with confidence because Jesus made it possible. When Jesus said on the cross, “*It is finished*,” he meant that he completed the work of our salvation. He finished making the way for us to come to God. Therefore, we can call God, our father, and come to him as children run to their lovely father. We are sometimes hesitant to come to God because of fear of punishment and shame from our sins. But now it is time for us to come to God with confidence. When we come to him, we receive his mercy and find his grace. Mercy is God’s compassion and grace is God’s gift. No matter what situation we may be in, no matter what problem and difficulties we may face, when we come to him, we receive his mercy and find his grace. God does not condemn us, but accept us as we are and forgives our sins. As 10:22 says, he will cleanse us from a guilty conscience and wash our bodies with pure water, which means the Holy Spirit.

For this reason, John the Apostle urges us to come to God with repentance in 1 John 1:8-10. “*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us*.”

A high priest is an interceder who offers an atoning sacrifice for sins. As I mentioned before, the word ‘atoning’ means ‘making one with God’ or ‘reconciling between God and sinners by offering sacrifice (by paying the price).” In the Old Testament, a high priest offered an animal for his own sins and then offered another animal for his people’s sin. (5:3) Jesus, our merciful and great high priest, did not offer animals, but offered himself. He offered himself for our sins bringing his own blood. So John said in 1 John 2:2, “*He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world*.” Look at verses 5:8-9. “***Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered 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***.” We will study about Melchizedek and his priesthood in chapter 7. In short, Jesus, did not seek the glory and honor from this world, but offered himself as atoning sacrifice for our sins. Praise Jesus who was our sacrificial, selfless, and merciful high priest and Savior! Amen!

Look at verse 7. “***During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission***.” One of priestly duties as a high priest is to burn incense in the temple. In Exodus 30:7-8 God said to Moses, “*Aaron must burn fragrant incense on the altar every morning when he tends the lamps. He must burn incense again when he lights the lamps at twilight so incense will burn regularly before the Lord for the generation to come*.” Burning incense symbolizes prayer to God. Revelation 5:8 says, “*Each one (angel) had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God’s people*.” Our prayer is like fragrant incense reaching to God’s presence. Noah built an altar and offered a burnt offering. Abraham did the same thing many times. They were all act of prayer with thanks and submission.

Prayer is our privilege to have fellowship with God. As someone said, prayer is a channel to communicate with God. Others said that prayer is our spiritual breath. Without breathing and without communication, we cannot live. But we often do not know what to pray and how to pray when we are in extreme difficulties. We don’t know where to start, how to express our request before God because it seemed too big and too heavy to carry on. We just groan and mourn without saying anything, but “O Lord! O Lord! Jesus!” I believe that you experienced the same when you were in deep trouble.

But remember this! At that time you are not alone, but our great shepherd and merciful high priest Jesus is with us through the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised to his disciples, “I will not leave you as orphan, but I will come to you.” (Jn 14:18) Jesus comes through the Holy Spirit. by sending the Another Counselor, the Holy Spirit.” During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to God the Father. Do you remember how Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane? He prayed all night until his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. (Lk 22:44) He cried out and prayed to obey the Father’s will. He understood our weakness. He said to his disciples, “The Spirit is willing, but body is weak.” (Mk 14:38) Because he knew his disciples’ weaknesses, he offered up his prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears. This is the shepherd’s merciful prayer for his sheep and the high priest’s intercessory prayer for his people.

Now the Holy Spirit works in us and for us in Jesus’ place. The Holy Spirit understands our weakness and intercedes for us as Jesus did. So, we need the Holy Spirit. We must walk by the Spirit and have fellowship with the Spirit. In Romans 8:26 Paul said, “*In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.*” Amen!

Do you have problems and troubles now which we cannot handle by yourself? Come to Jesus, who is our great and merciful high priest, who knows our weaknesses and understands our sorrow and pain. Confess all our sins before him and be forgiven. He will carry on our burden and anxiety. Let us approach God’s throne of grace with confidence and assurance, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Amen! May God bless all of us to meet this Jesus and experience healing, restoring, and conquering today and forever. Amen!