

SERIES: The Absolute Supremacy of Jesus Christ

SERMON: **One Greater than Aaron: A Priest Who Never Disappoints**

SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 4:14-5:10

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We began this series on Hebrews with a message whose theme was really, “Jesus is greater than the OT prophets.” Then the next theme was that “Jesus is greater than the angels.” A few weeks ago I preached on “Jesus is greater than Moses.” Last week Josh’s sermon might have been entitled, “Jesus is greater than Joshua.” Today I want us to consider that “Jesus is greater than Aaron.” What the author of Hebrews is doing is carrying on a series of tailor-made arguments for his particular audience. He is taking all the Jewish heroes one by one and demonstrating that Jesus is greater than all of them.

Aaron was famous as the first High Priest of the Jewish nation. He was the brother of Moses and was appointed by God Himself as Moses’ right-hand helper. You may recall how Moses was reluctant (to put it mildly) to take on the assignment of being the one to lead the Israelites out of Egypt to the Promised Land; in fact, he all but refused. He complained to the Lord, “Who am I? I have never been eloquent. I am slow of speech and tongue.” Later he added, “O Lord, please send someone else to do it” (Exodus 3-4). The Lord was ticked by that time and replied,

“What about your brother, Aaron the Levite? I know he can speak well. . . . You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do. He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him” (Exodus 4:14-16).

Moses wisely quit arguing.

Well, God established a new office for Aaron—that of High Priest, telling Moses, “Make sacred garments for your brother Aaron, to give him dignity and honor” (Exodus 28:2). Then God ordered that an elaborate consecration service be held for Aaron (Exodus 29), and extensive instructions were given to him about how to serve as High Priest of the people. Aaron became the second most important person in the nation next to Moses himself. Yet Jesus (Hebrews will argue) is a far greater high priest. And this emphasis on Jesus as high priest *par excellence* will continue almost unabated through chapter ten; we will come back to it again and again.

Now please stand as we read Hebrews 4:14-5:10:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

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. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people.

No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was. So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him,

"You are my Son; today I have become your Father."

And he says in another place,

"You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."

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. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

As we have done with the previous comparisons drawn for us in Hebrews, we're going to focus first on the one whom the Israelites elevated as a hero so that we can understand why he is a hero, for only then can we grasp in what ways Jesus surpasses that hero. So, we'll start with chapter 5, and then return to the end of chapter 4.

What are the qualities that made a high priest like Aaron so important and valuable?

1. He was a mediator between God and the people. (5:1) The Latin term for priest, *pontifex*, translates literally as "bridge-builder," and refers to a person whose specific calling is the building of a bridge from man to God. Verse 1 tells us that every high priest is a representative for the people in matters related to God. Why do God's people need a representative, a mediator, bridge-builder? I think there are three primary reasons:

- (1) the holiness and awesomeness of God,
- (2) the sinfulness and weakness of mankind, and
- (3) the presence of an accuser (Satan) who accuses us day and night (Rev. 12:10).

If God weren't so holy and powerful, or if people weren't so sinful and weak, or if our accuser weren't so persistent, then perhaps we could represent ourselves. But you've heard the old saying that "he who serves as his own lawyer has a fool for a client." If that is true in human courts, imagine how much more true it is when you're going up against almighty God. You'd best have a mediator to bridge the gap between you and Him.

2. The high priest was selected and appointed, not a volunteer. (5:1, 4) Lots of people would have loved the dignity and honor of being a high priest, but the office was not for sale, nor was it open to volunteers. One could not just aspire to the priesthood, memorize the sacrificial codes, score in the top 10 percent on entrance exams, and become high priest. For example, if you were not of the tribe of Levi, you could forget it. If you weren't of the family of Aaron, you could forget it. If you were a woman you could forget it. High priests were a select group, chosen by God. Verse 4 adds, "No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was.

3. The high priest passed through the curtain into the Holy of Holies. (9:6-7) This fact comes from chapter 9:6-7, but I mention it here because it is so relevant to the comparison

with Christ. That passage reads, “The priests entered regularly into the outer room (i.e., the Holy Place) to carry on their ministry. But only the high priest entered the inner room (i.e., the Holy of Holies), and that only once a year, and never without blood.”

Both the Tabernacle and the Temple were constructed in such a way that certain areas were off-limits to certain groups of people. Women were restricted to the court of the Women and Gentiles to the Court of the Gentiles. The inner court was open only to Jewish men, the Holy Place open only to priests, and the Holy of Holies open only to the High Priest. Between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies was this enormous curtain or heavy drape. It is described in Exodus 26:31 as follows:

“Make a curtain of blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen, with cherubim worked into it by a skilled craftsman. Hang it with gold hooks on four posts of acacia wood overlaid with gold and standing on four silver bases. Hang the curtain from the clasps and place the ark of the Testimony (Covenant) behind the curtain. The curtain will separate the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place.”

Can you imagine being the only living person in the nation who had ever been inside the Holy of Holies or seen the Ark of the Covenant? Imagine the mystique and even fear that would accompany that annual entrance. In fact, while the High Priest was in there, no one was allowed to even be in the Tabernacle. This was a big, big deal!

4. The high priest was able to sympathize with human weakness, being weak himself. (5:2) Hebrews 5:1 says that the high priest was selected “from among men.” That’s rather obvious, yet still important, because the priest’s humanity was an essential aspect of his representation. An angel couldn’t serve as a priest. Only a fellow-human being could fill this task. Verse 2 goes on to say of the high priest, “He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.” Being weak himself, he is able to show grace to others who are weak.

We often wonder why we have to go through certain tragedies in life, yet we know down deep that because of those experiences we are much better able to feel the pain of others who experience similar tragedies and thus minister to them. If you have never lost a member of your immediate family, you cannot possibly—no matter how much you desire to—fully empathize with someone who loses a child. But the person who has suffered such a loss can come alongside a grieving parent and at least share the pain.

The problem, however, is that while the high priest’s weakness allowed him to sympathize and comfort, the same weaknesses means that . . .

5. He had to offer sacrifices for his own sins before he could offer them for others. (5:3) That’s what we are told in verse 3. You see, priests were not just weak; they were downright sinful. In fact, at some points in Israel’s history the priests were so sinful that God absolutely denounced them. I’m thinking, for example, of Malachi 2:

“For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should

seek instruction.

But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi," says the LORD Almighty. "So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law" (Malachi 2:7-9).ⁱ

Even the best of high priests were still sinful, and when the high priest went into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, he had to offer sacrifices for himself and his family first before he could offer sacrifices for others.

But there was a problem also with the sacrifices themselves, for they could achieve atonement for the people, but they could not provide forgiveness. Atonement and forgiveness are two entirely different things. Atonement refers to a "covering" for sin. When the high priest went into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement and followed the elaborate ritual prescribed in Leviticus 16, God agreed to cover the sin of the people for one more year until the next Day of Atonement.

But eventually something needed to be done to get rid of those sins. It's kind of like the national debt. It gets bigger and bigger. Congress regularly covers it up by passing a debt ceiling resolution (like the one on the table as I speak for about \$1.8 trillion), but someday it will have to be dealt with. What mankind ultimately needs is forgiveness, but that can never be provided by the offerings of bulls and goats and sheep and grain.

Well, I think we have given sufficient attention to the office of high priest to ascertain that he was a significant figure in ancient Israel. He had a great deal of honor and authority, and if he performed his duties faithfully he could have a great ministry in behalf of the people.

But we are told all this primarily to make the point that as great and important and valuable as the high priest of Israel was, Jesus is even greater.

What are the qualities that make Jesus an even greater High Priest?

1. He is today the *only* mediator between God and His people. (1 Timothy 2:5). People still need someone to represent them in matters related to God, because God is just as awesome as always, people are just as sinful as the ancient Israelites, and the Enemy is still accusing God's children. But there is no longer a legitimate professional priesthood among God's people. Pastors are not priests. A lot of people think of them as such, and therefore, pastors are called upon to "hatch 'em, match 'em, and dispatch 'em." That is, they are often called upon to officiate at a child's dedication, at marriage, at funerals, and lots in between—baptism, confirmation, graduation, hospital visitation, etc.

But clergy today have no unique mediatorial role for the people of God. Pastors are teachers and undershepherds and encouragers and equippers, and those are important roles, but one role they are not given is that of mediator for the people of God. Listen to 1 Timothy 2:5-6: "For there is one God and *one mediator* between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men."

I have never understood what drives some very religious people to seek mediators other than the One God has appointed. I guess they're stuck in pre-Christian religion. Why would anyone seek

mediation through Mary, the mother of Jesus, when they have the right to go straight to Jesus? Why would anyone go through saints when the Son of God is available? Even if Mary or the saints had some mediatorial ability (of which there is absolutely no hint in Scripture), why use them?

If I were a defendant in court and needed a lawyer, and if I had the choice between a public defender and the highest priced defense attorney from the top legal firm in the country, would I take the public defender? No way! I'd go right to the top! But the fact is no one else besides Jesus has the right to practice law in the court of heaven. Jesus is our mediator, our defender, our lawyer, our advocate.

2. He was appointed by God, and God alone. (5:5-6) The high priest, you will recall, was selected *and* appointed (5:1), indicating probably both divine and human affirmation. Not so with Christ. God appointed Him and he needed no other affirmation. Just after the claim that Aaron was called by God (verse 4), the author of Hebrews says,

So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father."

And he says in another place, "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."

These quotations are from Psalm 2 and Psalm 110, as were several similar quotes in chapter 1. The point here seems to be that Jesus did not appoint Himself, nor was He ordained by humans, nor did He become a high priest by lineage; in fact, He wasn't even a Levite but rather from the tribe of Judah. Most importantly, He is a priest in the order of Melchizedek. We're going to be talking in great detail about Melchizedek when we study chapter 7 in early January, so I will leave most of my comment for that fascinating passage. But allow me to at least observe here that Melchizedek was an OT priest who lived in the time of Abraham, centuries before the tribe of Levi even existed. So Jesus' right to the priesthood pre-existed even Aaron's right.

Psalm 110 also points out that Jesus' priesthood is eternal. He is a priest "forever," while priests in Israel couldn't take office before age 25 and had to retire by age 50.

3. Jesus passed through the heavens into the very presence of God. (4:14) If you back up to 4:14 you find this interesting reference: "We have a great high priest who has gone *through the heavens*, Jesus the Son of God." I believe this is a clear analogy to the OT high priest passing through the curtain into the Holy of Holies. But Jesus didn't just pass through a curtain from one room to another in the same building. Following His resurrection and ascension He passed through the heavens into the throne room of God, where He sits at the right hand of the Father.

4. He is able to sympathize with human weakness like no one else, having been tempted in every way, yet without sin. (4:15; 5:7). Look first at chapter 5:7, where we read, "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." I think the author may be anticipating an objection from one of his listeners,

perhaps something like this: “How can someone in heaven help me here on earth?” Well, Jesus knows all about life here on earth. It was during his days on earth that He prayed with anguish. To whom did He pray? To the one who could save him from death, namely the Father.

One cannot help but think here of the last night of Jesus’ earthly life in the Garden of Gethsemane. He prayed that the Father would take the cup of death from Him. But I do not believe the author of Hebrews is thinking only of that prayer. Jesus prayed for His people far more than He prayed for Himself. If you look at the High Priestly Prayer of Christ in John 15-17 there are only one or two sentences that constitute petition for Himself; the rest is all for us.

But it is in chapter 4:15 that the truth of Jesus’ unique ability to sympathize is driven home most clearly. The fact is stated negatively, actually a double negative in the original, which only serves to make it more forceful: “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, just as we are—yet was without sin.” This verse contains profound truth, but it also raises some interesting theological issues. Was Jesus “not able to sin” or simply “able not to sin”? There’s a big difference, you know.

Before the Fall Adam and Eve were “able not to sin,” and as a result they enjoyed unfettered fellowship with God as He walked with them in the cool of the day. But clearly it is not the case that Adam and Eve were “not able to sin,” because they *did* sin. Was Jesus like Adam and Eve before the Fall, or was He *impeccable* (that is the theological term which means “unable to sin”)?

Well, the Greek language has the words and grammar to state that Jesus could not sin, but the NT never says that. It *does* say—in four different places—that He did not sin. And when theologians go beyond what the Scriptures actually say, they usually end up distorting the truth. I simply ask what encouragement it would be to any of us to know that Jesus refused to yield to temptation if it was impossible for Him to yield? I assume Jesus was able to sin (at least in respect to His human nature), but He never did.

The principal point of verse 15 is that Jesus was fundamentally like us in this matter of temptation; in fact, the text says He was tempted in every way, just as we are. That doesn’t mean He experienced exactly the same temptations, for He wasn’t tempted to watch too much TV, or eat too many Dove Bars, or text while driving, but every category of temptation was experienced by Him. He experienced the temptation to lust and to overeat, to lie and to cheat, to be a hypocrite and to feel pride. In fact, I think a strong argument can be made that Jesus experienced temptation to a greater extent that we ever do. C. S. Lewis wrote about the intensity of Christ’s temptation:

A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is . . . A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people in one sense know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in . . . Christ, because He was

*the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means.*ⁱⁱ

By the way, verse 8 can easily be misunderstood. When it says, “Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered,” this does not mean that he moved from being disobedient to being obedient. It means he moved from being untested to being tested and found genuine. As John Piper expresses it, “It means that the gold of his natural purity was put in the crucible and melted down with white-hot pain, so that he could learn from experience what suffering is and prove that his purity would persevere.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Friends, it is good to be reminded during the Advent season that Jesus did not accomplish salvation by being born in a stable. Nor did He redeem us by means of His example of selfless love. It was because he lived in perfect obedience to God every moment of his life and then gave his life. Had Jesus faltered just once, had he rebelled against God just once, He could have died a thousand deaths and we would still be in our sins. Such was the case with human high priests. Sacrifice was offered yearly, weekly, daily, yet sin remained covered, not forgiven.

5. He offered a *once-for-all* sacrifice. While the priests offered daily sacrifices, and the High Priest offered an annual sacrifice, Jesus offered just one sacrifice—that of His own body on a tree. How often this is spoken of in Scripture! Let me share just a few examples:

Heb. 7:27: “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.”

Heb 9:12: “He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place *once for all* by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.”

Heb. 9:26: “He has appeared *once for all* at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed *once* to take away the sins of the people.”

Heb.1:10: “We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ *once for all*.”

1 Peter 3:18: “For Christ died for sins *once for all*, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”

Rom. 6:10: “The death he died, he died to sin *once for all*.”

Now Josh has been reminding us that the book of Hebrews is eminently practical. Yes, it has lots of doctrine and even some difficult theology, but constantly the author keeps coming back to application. So also here.

What is the proper response to the superior High Priesthood of Jesus?

I want to mention two things:

A grave responsibility: “Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.” (4:14b) I return to the very first verse of our text this morning, Hebrews 4:14: “Therefore, since we have a great

high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.” For weeks now we have been confronted with strong exhortations to pay more careful attention, to stop drifting, to fix our thoughts on Jesus, to not harden our hearts, to not turn away from the living God, to not be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness, to hold firmly to the end the confidence we had at first. and to make every effort to enter the rest God has provided. Now he adds, “Let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.” And what is the reason? “Since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens.”

One might think the logic should be, “Since we have a great lawyer, it’s OK to flirt with danger, to push the envelope, and to play with heresy, because Jesus will bail us out.” But no, he says the opposite. “Since we have a great mediator, let us imitate Him, follow Him, hold fast to Him.” He uses a present tense command: “Keep on clinging with your life to that which you have confessed with your mouth.”

An amazing privilege: (4:16) “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” What does this throne represent, anyway? It is the place from which almighty God rules, where decisions are made affecting all of life and history and the future. It speaks of God’s power and awesomeness. We are invited to approach that very throne!

Do you realize there is no way this verse could ever have been written before Christ came. Do you remember what happened when a man named Uzzah just touched the Ark of the Covenant back in King David’s day? (And he wasn’t trying to sneak a peek! He was just trying to keep it from falling off an oxcart when the ox stumbled. But he was toast).

Do you remember what happened to King Uzziah when he decided to enter the temple to burn incense on the altar of incense, even though he was not a priest? Leprosy broke out while he was standing there, and he had to live in isolation until the day he died. What happened to the sons of Aaron himself, destined to take his place as high priest, when they brought strange (unauthorized) fire before the Lord? They were struck dead (Numbers 26:61).

God didn’t tolerate those who messed with His holiness, or with the place He consecrated as His home, or with the priesthood He set up to represent the people before Him! But when Jesus died, the veil of the temple was rent, and everything changed. Suddenly God said to His people, “You may enter the Holy of Holies! You may touch the Ark of the Covenant. You may approach the throne of grace.”

Not only are we urged to approach, but to do so with confidence. Do you remember the story of Queen Esther, who wanted desperately to speak to her husband the King about the plight of the Jews. The only problem was that he had not called for her, and to enter the king’s presence without being summoned was a capital offense, even for the Queen herself! Esther approached, but with trembling. But we can approach with confidence, and before the very throne of God! How so? Because of the kind of throne it is—a throne of grace. It is not a throne of condemnation or a throne of threat or a throne of indifference, but a throne of grace.

And what is the result if we approach with confidence? “We may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” Mercy refers to God’s forbearance of punishment, grace to His active compassion on the needy.

Is it important for you to receive God’s mercy and grace? Well, only if you are needy. If you are self-sufficient—financially, morally, spiritually, psychologically, emotionally, relationally, physically—then I guess you don’t need it. But you know better than that. Everyone one of us is weak, we are confused, and we have limitations of all kinds. WE NEED HELP!

But we are sinful, so we don’t deserve the help we need. We would be trapped, except for the fact that God has provided for us a great High Priest, a wonderful bridge-builder to help us in our time of need, and to forgive us, not just cover our sin. When the accuser levels his accusations against us, Jesus acts as our attorney, saying to the Father, “Yes, he may have done that, yes, she may have said that, but I died for that sin.” And God forgives us and grants us eternal life on the basis of what Jesus did at the Cross. Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift!

i. Or one could look at Ezekiel 34, where God engages in a long tirade against the priests of Israel:

“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally.”

ii. C. S. Lewis, quoted by John Piper in “*Draw Near to the Throne of Grace with Confidence*,” a sermon preached on September 15, 1996. See www.desiringGod.org.

iii. John Piper, in sermon of September 22, 1996, “*He is the Source of Eternal Salvation for All Who Obey Him*,” 7. See www.desiringgod.org.