

Jesus the Source of Eternal Salvation

Sermon Series on Hebrews

Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

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TEXT: Hebrews 4:14-5:14

We continue this morning in our spring series on the New Testament letter or book to the Hebrews, and I encourage you to have a Bible open before you. Hebrews is a thick and dense



portion of God's Word. Hebrews is unique in the New Testament: the author is unknown; the location is unknown; and yet what is very, very certain about Hebrews is that the writer has a breathtaking and lofty view of Jesus Christ. This description of Christ is immense; the writer has a rich vocabulary; there are 169 words that

don't occur anywhere else in the New Testament. He is someone with eloquence and a varied portrait of the exultation and beauty of Christ. We have seen that the first sentence of this sermon or this letter is a beautiful sentence that draws our attention to God's climactic word to the world in Jesus Christ. That means that the word about Christ is the most important word that the world has ever received. It demands our attention, concentration, and there is truth revealed in this document that shapes our lives. We call Hebrews a book, although it is not really a book. We call it a letter, although it is not really a letter. Finally, in Hebrews 12, we discover, to the preacher's delight, that it is actually a sermon; it is a word of exhortation, he tells us. This word takes about 45 minutes to hear in its entirety. Can you imagine, this whole text is a single sermon?

I was going for a run the other day, and I know exactly how long I was running because I listened to Hebrews while I ran, and it was about 45 minutes. There were moments when I heard *let us pay close attention*, and when I finally got to chapter 12 and I heard *run with perseverance*, I thought, "Oh, yes, that's right!" The uniqueness and grandeur of Christ in Hebrews is something we all really need, and we have been stressing that this spring. I have mentioned a study by the Barna Group that says that millennial generation people describe why they have stayed connected to the church. We often hear statistics about people drifting away, becoming interested in other things, but when you're asked why you stay vitally connected, vibrantly involved, engaged with Christian faith, why is that true? The top reason

people give is that they have been connected to a church where they are given a robust, theological vision of Christ that helps them recognize their own calling and mission in the world. That is what we need, and that is what we are striving to be at Kenwood. We want to see this great and glorious vision of Christ, and in light of who Christ is, we will discover our own calling and mission. We see that relationship very, very clearly in the text we read this morning.

Let's jump into Hebrews 4:14. I've mentioned before that the chapter divisions in the Bible are not original, that they were added in the 13th century by Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury. He did most of the work while he was riding on horseback to Paris, and so he blew some of the breaks. This is another one of the places where the break is not in the right place. Hebrews 4:14 begins a new section that flows into Hebrews 5, and that is why we are beginning here. Hebrews 4:14 draws our attention in this unit to Jesus as the source of eternal salvation. It begins a discussion of Jesus as our Great High Priest. He is the Great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, and His role as High Priest to mediate for the forgiveness of our sins calls forth a response from us that we will see throughout our text. Keep your Scriptures open, and we begin with Hebrews 4:14. The writer says:

“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.”

We have someone who is going through the heavens. When we think of that spatially, it means that Jesus is somewhere else, and yet He has passed through the heavenly realms. He has traversed heaven, if you will, and appeared in this world. As N.T. Wright says: “The coming of Christ into the world makes this world a very different place.” Hebrews affirms that Jesus has passed through the heavens. He is the Son of God, and the first summons for us is right at the beginning. Usually the applications are at the end. In this passage, the application is at the beginning. At the very beginning, the writer says: “You have got to hold tightly to Jesus. You have to hold fast to your confession.” When he uses the word *confession*, this is a word that means our confession of faith—we confess Jesus to be the Son of God, our Savior. Early Christians would often recognize themselves in times of persecution by seeing another Christian and drawing a curved line in the sand. If someone was also a believer, then they would mirror that line drawn in the sand, and it would make the shape of fish. Maybe you have seen this symbol. This fish symbol was used by early Christians because it stood for the Greek word *ichthys*, which is an acronym for *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior*. This is our central confession: We believe that Jesus is in fact the Son of God; He is the anointed Messiah, and as such He is our Savior. The writer summons us to hold tightly to that. It doesn't mean hold tightly to suffocate it, but it means to not lose our grip on this most central truth that shapes our lives. We hold fast to our confessions, he says in Hebrews 4:15:

“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.”

When we think of the greatness and the grandeur of Christ, sometimes Christ can seem so high, so lofty, and we can seem so small, so insignificant, so unlike Him, that He can seem distant, and that chasm between us and Him can seem unbridgeable. The writer of Hebrews, however, wants us to see that Jesus is exalted yet intimately acquainted with each of us. He is transcendent in power. That means when you go to Him, you go to someone who can actually do something about your situation, and yet one who is very near. Jesus our High Priest knows the fiery furnace of temptation. He knows this territory, but He also knows that the path to victory is through holding fast to Him. The writer then applies this in a second way right at the beginning. Hebrews 4:16 says:

“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.”

This verse summons all of us to draw near to God. This is technical language in Scripture of priestly ministry. The priests in the Scriptures, in the Old Testament, are summoned and ordained and appointed to draw near to God. God in His holiness would be unapproachable without an offering for sin. The language *to draw near to God* is a summons because we have this High Priest in Jesus Christ. It is a summons for all of us to draw near to God. The remarkable thing about this is that God's presence is guarded throughout the Scriptures. God's presence is in the Holy of Holies in Israel's sanctuary. It is a presence that cannot be approached except by those who are ordained to function and serve as priests.

We see the ordination and commission of the priesthood in Leviticus 8 and 9. The Lord speaks to Moses and Aaron, and his sons are consecrated to function as mediators between us and God lest we be consumed by God's holy presence. In Leviticus 8 and 9, Aaron and his sons are gathered together before the assembly of the people. The priests are washed; they are clothed with elaborate garments; they are anointed with holy oil; offerings for their sins and for the sin of the people are provided. Then, in Leviticus 9:7, Moses says to Aaron, again using this technical term:

“Draw near to the altar and offer your sin offering and your burnt offering and make atonement for yourself and for the people, and bring the offering of the people and make atonement for them, as the LORD has commanded.”

When the priesthood is first installed, the offerings are received; God's glory appears to the people; and there is worship and blessing with great joy. This has been the ministry for thousands of years. The staggering thing that we hear in Hebrews 4:16 is a summons in the first person plural. The writer says:

“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.”

In other words, let us follow Jesus Christ in this high priestly ministry and come before God. This

is a recovery of our calling. In Exodus 19:6, the Lord says:

“ . . . and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

The apostle Peter describes the church in this way I Peter 2:9:

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

Paul sees his ministry in priestly categories. In Romans 15:16, he says he was called:

“ . . . to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”

In Revelation 5:9-10, we see the worship in heaven; an innumerable multitude of people are gathered before God praising God and the Lamb and celebrating His saving action,

“ . . . and by Your blood You ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and You have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, then you are summoned to follow Christ in this priestly ministry. I know for some of us, this seems like a strange and foreign category, and yet it is central to who we are all called to be. When we look at the rest of this passage in Hebrews 5, we are summoned together to follow Christ in this very particular way. Especially in the Protestant church, we don't use this category that often, yet it is a very deep and broad one in the Scriptures, and so we need it. We need this category; we need this summons to follow Christ: “Let us hold fast to Christ, and let us draw near to God's throne of grace together with Christ.” He is our Great High Priest, and He makes us into a priestly people living in this way.

What does this mean in real terms? I want to read the rest of Hebrews 5 and explore with you five ways that we together follow Christ in this way. Hebrews 5 becomes a very practical passage for us to imitate and follow Christ our Great High Priest. What does this mean for us? How are we really supposed to live as a people who hold fast to Christ and who then draw near to God with boldness, with confidence? Let's follow these five ways together.

Number one: The Scriptures challenge us that the vocation of a priestly people is to ***stand for God in the lives of the people around us***. Look at Hebrews 5:1. It says:

“For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.”

In other words, every priest is a real human being, but every priest stands in between other human beings and God. That means that you and I are called as followers of Christ, as a priestly people, to mediate these worlds, to mediate God's presence into the very ordinary, everyday,

often very secular, experience that people have drifting, wandering, living this life often without conscious awareness of God. We are to be a peculiar people living in the world called Christians who stand for God in the lives of people around them. I'll never forget my own conversion. I remember that one of the first very real genuine Christians I ever met struck me with his integrity in the context of his role. He was a student, a classmate, and he manifested personal integrity at a deep level that I had never seen before. I thought it was strange. In fact, he was forsaking a very obvious advantage to himself and clinging to his integrity. It struck me as odd. It was only later that I found out that that integrity, the ethic of his work, flowed out of a very real relationship he had with Christ, and in that moment I thought: "I need to know more about that." Maybe he wouldn't have looked at me and said he was functioning as a priest, a conscious imitation of Jesus Christ our Great High Priest, but he was.

What do priests do? They act on behalf of others in relation to God, and they offer gifts and sacrifice for sin. Priests function to offer gifts. Perhaps you remember the compelling series we had on Leviticus two years ago. It changed my life. Leviticus set before us a beautiful picture of God calling to His people, and the priest within that picture offered a range of sacrifice: a burnt offering, a full dedication to God; sin offering, covering our transgressions; but also thank offering, mediating thanksgiving to God; and then the fellowship offering, offered on the altar and eaten by the community in celebration of our fellowship with God. We consciously imitate Jesus our Great High Priest by standing for God in the lives of the people around us. Are you willing to say 'yes' to that? It will be very interesting, at the least.

Number two: If you are to stand for God in the lives of people around, you need ***to deal gently with people and be aware of their weakness and temptations.*** Hebrews 5:2 says:

"He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, . . ."

If you stand for God in the things of God in the lives around, you will quickly discover that people don't know very much about God, and you will be tempted in that moment to say: "Well, let me tell you all the things I know about God." You may be tempted to judge the person who doesn't know. I remember one of the first people I ever gave a Bible to was a graduate student from China. She read it voraciously and almost finished Genesis after just a couple of days, and then asked to come see me. She said she had all kinds of questions. I hoped I would be able to answer her questions. The first question was: "Are the places in the Bible real places? Is this made up or is this real?" I said: "It's real!" There was a moment there to deal gently. Deal gently when people don't have any idea about the things of God, and also deal gently with the wayward. The ESV translates this as *wayward*, but literally the word used here is the word from which we get *planet*. In Greek, these people are the *πλανωμένοι*, they are the ones who are wandering around. The ancients looked up at the same night sky you and I look at. They saw the stars. They saw the stars rotate daily, move throughout the seasons. They also could see, standing on planet earth, that there were seven visible objects that seemed to

wander around the night sky, and so they called those in Greek *the wandering things* or *planets*. We get the word *planet* from that term. Sometimes people have lost their way; they don't even know they are wandering. Sometimes we sanctify that and try to make it seem slightly more bearable by calling it *drifting*. Sometimes we elevate it even a little further and say: "I'm going through season where I am finding myself." That's a nice way of saying it, isn't it? But, when you encounter someone who doesn't know God, or someone who has really lost their way and wandering, how are you going to respond? Hebrews 5:2 says if you are going to imitate Jesus Christ, then you deal gently, you restrain your own impulse to judge or be angry, and you deal gently. Other versions say *have compassion*. Will you say 'yes' to that? Will you be compassionate with the people around you that actually don't know very much about God and seem to have lost their way?

Number three: If you are to stand for God in the lives of people around you, you need to ***serve out of calling from God, not from pride of self-selection, but with humility of service***. In Hebrews 5:4, we see that Jesus and His high priesthood does not take this honor for Himself. The writer says:

"And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was."

It is a great honor to stand for God and mediate the things of God with the people around you. That is a staggering honor. Sometimes I am overwhelmed personally right before I come up to preach that I am allowed to stand here and speak on behalf of the living God in your hearing. This is overwhelming, and whether you do that from a pulpit or cubicle, it is a staggering honor to speak for God in the lives of people, and we need to have a posture of humility with this sacred calling. Hebrews 5:4 says: "*No one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God,*" so if we are going to imitate Christ, we have to stand for God in the lives of people. We have to deal with compassion and have a posture of humility as we do this. The writer of Hebrews wants us to see that even Jesus Himself did not exalt Himself but rather was appointed by God. He is appointed as saving Son of God. In Hebrews 5:5, we read:

"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.'"

In Psalm 2, the Lord speaks of the Messiah as the anointed King, and He is the anointed King, the Son of God by God's royal decree, appointed. He also says in Hebrews 5:6:

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

The figure of Melchizedek will occupy our attention more in the weeks to come. The writer will spend a couple of chapters on that so we are going to hold that for now. The point he is making here is simply that even Jesus Himself was called and appointed: "You are My son; You are Priest forever," quoting the Word of God, God's decree. For some of us who have been around

Kenwood for a little while have started to use the expression *Qal va-homer* in more natural ways, and this thrills me. *Qal va-homer* is the Hebrew expression for the *light and the heavy*, and it is a way of thinking in the Bible that occurs in many places as a way of saying that if this is true in the light item, how much more is this the case in the heavy item. Hebrews is filled with *Qal va-homers*. It is a way of seeing the consistency of God. Here we have a second very common way to read Scripture that we find in the first century. It is a second hermeneutical principle, or interpretive guide, and it is called the *gezerah shavah*. A *gezerah shavah* means in Hebrew a *similar decree* in or *similar word*. A good *gezerah shavah* is a way of reading the Bible that recognizes that when you have a word used in one passage and the same word is used in another passage, it can be meaningful to join those two passages together. It is actually a very common-sense way to read a text. If I am using a word here and I use the same word in another place, maybe there is something shared by those two texts. That is what we find here, and we will see more of these along the way. A good *gezerah shavah* in this passage is in the simple word *you*. The writer notices that in Psalm 2, God's decree is: "You are my Son," and he notices in Psalm 110 that *you* is used again in the same way: "You are a priest forever." He combines these two Psalms and says that they both describe the ministry of Christ, exalted Son and Great High Priest, and we are called to imitate Him: called and appointed.

Number four: The author gives us a fourth way that we are called imitate Christ in His great high priesthood by ***entering into prayer, serious prayer, for the needs around us***. Those who serve in priestly ministry not only stand for God in the lives of people, they deal gently, with compassion. They have a posture of humility and are aware that they are called to be in that place, but when they are in that place, they pray. They pray in serious ways. When you are given access to the lives of people, you discover sometimes great joys; sometimes you discover great sorrows; sometimes you discover great burdens that people are carrying. What will you do with these? If we will follow in imitation of Jesus our Great High Priest, then we will take what we learn, will not gossip about it, will not post online about people's troubles, but we will go to that throne of grace on the behalf of other people. Hebrews 5:7 invites us to follow along in Christ's own intercessory life of prayer. Look at this. Hebrews 5:7 says:

"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."

Have you prayed in that way? Have you come to a situation in life or a circumstance with someone that you love and care about or friended, and you can say: "I don't know what to do, but I do know that I can go to God on your behalf. I can pray loudly; I can cry because of what you're going through; I can shed tears, and I will bring you to God's throne."

Dear friends of ours, a family that has visited Kenwood several times, their son just became ill with a serious headache. They didn't know what was going on, what was wrong. The family

doctor didn't know. Finally they decided to take him to Children's Hospital. They discovered a really severe infection in his brain. He is a gifted high school student. They have to do brain surgery on him and are not sure if he will have permanent brain damage or not. He was getting ready to be discharged, but I got the post last night that he still has the infection, still has the swelling and is going back in for another surgery. They said: "Would you pray?" "I will pray with loud cries and tears," and we pray to God because He is the one who is able to save us from death. The living God has all power in the universe, and He is the one to whom we go seeking grace, mercy, and timely help. Jesus, in His full humanity, modeled for us this life of prayer. Mark 1:35 says:

"And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, He departed and went out to a desolate place, and there He prayed."

It was His regular practice. We are given access into Jesus' life of prayer in John 17, sometimes called Jesus' high priestly prayer. The passage that may be in view for the writer is that great prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane where Luke tells us that Jesus came before His Father with the sin of the world before Him, the cup of God's wrath filled, and Jesus prayed in John 17:42:

"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from Me. Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours, be done."

He prayed with such earnestness that His sweat became like great drops of blood falling to the ground, the capillaries in His forehead burst. We enter into prayer, serious prayer, for the needs around us.

Number five: In Hebrews 5:8, we read, and this challenges deeply:

"Although He was a son, He learned obedience through what He suffered. And being made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him. "

We imitate Christ our Great High Priest is being willing to **carry the suffering around us, not only to pray for it, but to bear it**. We imitate Christ in this way following Him, because it is in exactly these five ways that Jesus Himself draws near to God and mediates an eternal salvation for all who obey Him. Jesus is our Great High Priest, the source of eternal salvation, and He invites us to follow Him in these five ways.

I can speak first for myself and say that these are challenging things. It is very challenging to say I want to stand for God in the lives of people. It is very challenging to say I want to function with compassion on people who don't know or have lost their way. It is challenging to say I want to function with humility to the people who are around me. It is challenging to say I want to go to God in prayer with everything I know, and I want to be willing to carry and help shoulder the burden the people around me are carrying. I know for me, and I know that some of you think

that is Jesus' job, not mine. That is very dangerous, because the New Testament challenges us the other way. The New Testament says we are to imitate Christ in all things.

The writer of Hebrews knows that he has pushed us hard. I said at the beginning that this document is actually a sermon, and although we are six weeks into the sermon, trying to understand it, the original speaker is only ten minutes into the sermon at this point. Can you imagine, everything we looked at for six weeks is the first ten minutes of the original sermon? He knows that we are gasping for theological breath; he knows that at this point he has pushed so hard that we are saying: "Whoa, that's Christ; that's not me!" So the writer does what a good preacher will do at times, and that is to slap us lovingly with a two-by-four. In Hebrews 5:11-12, he says:

"About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God."

He says we need milk and not solid food, and we are feeling insulted at this point. We are slow of hearing. We should be teaching, and we're just drinking milk like a baby. Aren't you glad that God's Word doesn't coddle you? Sometimes we need to hear that, don't we? Listen well: you should be teaching others. In other words, you should know these things so well that you have not only learned them but are living them and communicating them to others. Sometimes we get into the habit of just ever learning but never doing and never teaching others. The writer says we need milk not solid food, and we are unskilled in the word of righteousness. We are like a child. This is a negative use of the imagery of a child. Jesus uses the imagery of a child in a very positive way when He says the Kingdom of God is for children as an image of innocence and coming to God with simple trust. But what he says here is the negative use of our being a child: "Look, you need to grow up." This is like speaking to a teenager, a junior or senior in high school or a freshman in college. Hebrews says, "You have to grow up and eat solid food." The writer says in Hebrews 5:14:

"But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil."

This is a very beautiful picture of maturity. People who are mature have taken in the Word, learned it, and are living it. People who are mature hear this very high and lofty calling to imitate Christ, and they are seeking to do it. They actually don't want to learn more; they want to put into practice what they have heard and walk and live in these ways. The only way to do that is to practice doing it. In the Greek of Hebrews 5:14, the *practice* is fronted. It literally says: "Solid food is for the mature, the ones who through constant practice have trained their senses to distinguish between good and evil," echoing the original call of humanity—to know the difference between good and evil, to see the good and do it. We need to fix our eyes, then,

again, anew, afresh, on Jesus, our Great High Priest. Will you say 'yes' with me, even trembling, to the Word of God in this passage, to say: "I will seek to follow Him; I will stand for God in lives around me; I will be compassionate on people who don't know or have lost their way; I will live and posture myself with humility; I will go to God in prayer with cries and tears for the needs around me; and I will not shrink back from carrying the burden"? If you will say 'yes' with me, let's make your 'yes' by standing, and let's go to God in prayer.

Gracious, powerful, almighty Lord Jesus, we fix our eyes on You. Lord, we desire this day to follow You, our Great High Priest. Father, we desire to walk in the ways that Your Son has marked out before us. Lord, we ask for Your forgiveness even now where we of lost hold of our confession, where we have been afraid to enter in, where our fears have kept us back from people. Lord, help us to draw near to You and to function as You describe us to be. Lord, we love You. We praise You. Thank You for Your Word that challenges us.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.