

5/24/26**A New and Greater High Priest*****Hebrews 4:14-5:10*****Pastor Nathanael Ryan, Brewster Baptist Church**

Good morning. To all of our visitors who are joining us this Memorial Day weekend, welcome, and we're glad you could make it. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Nate Ryan, and I have the pleasure of serving as one of the pastors here at Brewster Baptist Church. If you've been following along with us in worship over the last few Sundays, we've been making our way through the Epistle to the Hebrews – a series that will take us all the way to the end of August, the end of summer. We'll be spending 18 weeks on this one letter, this one book of the Bible, and deservedly so. Hebrews is one of the most theologically rich – but also most profoundly challenging and sobering – books in the entire New Testament. Its unflinching and urgent call to remain firm in the faith, and to avoid drifting, makes it unique. It has a very forceful, but also a very gracious and compassionate, pastoral heart. It casts for us a beautiful and deeply assuring portrait of the hope we can find in Jesus, and the rest for our weary and burdened souls he provides for all who call upon his name. But it also does not mince words about the dangers of hardening our hearts and falling away, and what one can reasonably expect if they resist so great a salvation and refuse to listen to God's voice who shows them the way.

Last week, we learned that “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (*Hebrews 4:12*). That means that no matter what defense we may use to justify our actions, no matter what mask we wear to hide our true motives, and no matter what excuses we make to explain ourselves away, the Word of God exposes us fully before him, and we are left with nowhere to hide. It should make us very afraid.

I know that's not popular to say these days, but it's true. God's Word gives us a very clear image that we cannot ignore, lest we dull the sharp edge of Scripture's sword we claim to believe. “Before [God] no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account” (*Hebrews 4:13*).

Imagine, for a moment, you are standing in a courtroom, where every secret of your life is about to be publicly played out on screen – every one of them. Every cruel

word you've ever spoken, every addiction you've suppressed and kept hidden behind closed doors, every selfish motive you've acted out on, or lie you've told that you then decided to double down on, every person you've ever wounded that you never quite had the courage to apologize to, or the choices you made that in the moment you knew weren't right, but you decided to do them anyway. Every moment of your life captured on a screen and laid bare, all for the judge to see.

And then you turn beside you, and you realize there's no one there to plead your cause. There's no defense attorney to object or explain the context or take up your case. You're alone. It's just you, the judge, and no one else. Standing before the judge, you have no credibility, no reason for him to believe you when you try to explain away your behavior or rationalize your actions. He's *seen* the evidence. He *knows* it was you. You have no defense, and you're helpless. You're purely at the mercy of his righteous judgment. And that's not good, brothers and sisters, not "good news" at all. In fact, that's profoundly **bad** news for us. That image of a courtroom without a defender isn't just some abstract illustration representing some distant or far-off reality. No. It is, in a very real sense, a glimpse into what it looks like to stand before a holy and just God on the Day of Judgment, without a mediator, or an advocate, or someone to plead our cause.

Later in the text of Hebrews, it says, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (*Hebrews 10:31*). I think some of us have forgotten, perhaps even willfully, just how much that's true. It's easier – and way more comfortable – to just pretend like it's not: to imagine an image of a God who is *less holy* than that, who's *less just* than that, who's *less serious about dealing with sin* than that, who's a *little less scary* than that. But the problem is, if you remove that kind of image of God completely, perhaps you might lose a little sense of fear of God, but you also lose something that's quite concerning – the Gospel. Because it actually *minimizes* the Gospel to reduce the seriousness of sin and the holiness of God. If God is *not that holy*, then Jesus is *not that necessary*. If the consequences of sin are *not that serious*, then the cross is *not that costly*. And if God's judgment for sin is *not that real*, then grace is *not that amazing*. The Gospel is **good** news, and in order for it to be good news, it has to offer us something that fixes the bad news. And the bad news, brothers and sisters, is that if left on our own to defend ourselves before a holy and just God, we don't stand a chance! But

thanks be to God – because in his great love for us, he has chosen not to leave us that way. It actually *grieves* God to leave us that way, so he has sent us an answer, he has sent us a lifeline, he has sent us the greatest defense attorney and advocate the world has ever known. And in the language of Hebrews, that advocate is called a High Priest. Let me introduce you to him from *Hebrews 4* and *5*. His name is Jesus, and boy is he good news.

“Since, then, we have a great high priest who passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you’; as he says also in another place, ‘You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.’

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek” (*Hebrews 4:14-5:10*).

For many of us, the term “high priest” is not a category we use very often. It isn’t something we generally spend a lot of time thinking about. Perhaps you come to worship this morning with a pretty set idea in your head of what a priest is, and, depending on your experience, that image is either positive or negative. I would encourage you not to get too bogged down by the language of priesthood here. A priest,

in its truest definition, is just one who serves as a mediator between humans and God. I described earlier how, due to our sinful state and our inability to save ourselves, we need someone who can stand between us and God, and advocate for us on our behalf. God is *holy* and we are *sinner*s who cannot match up with his perfection. **God cannot dwell where sin exists**. And furthermore, God is *just*, and in order to be just, he must make proper judgment for sin – which means that if sinful humanity is ever going to be able to stand in the presence of a holy God without being declared guilty by his righteous judgment, then someone must stand in the gap between us, to advocate for us before God the Father, to be our intermediary, to be our defense attorney, the one who pleads our cause. That’s the role a priest has, and without a priest, we’re dead where we stand – condemned, and eternally separated from God.

This role of intermediary between God and people was exactly what the high priests of the Old Testament were designed to fill. They stood before God on behalf of the Israelites, God’s chosen people. And we read in *Leviticus 16*, once per year – on the Day of Atonement – the High Priest was commanded to make sacrifices in the Temple for the forgiveness of the people’s sins. Here’s how it would work. First, the High Priest would need to undergo a ceremonial cleansing ritual to prepare himself to enter into God’s presence, and then, on behalf of the entire nation, he would enter into the innermost part of the Temple – a place called the Holy of Holies – where God’s glory literally dwelled. They called it the “Holy of Holies” because it was believed to be the most sacred place on the entire earth. It was the place where heaven and earth were believed to literally meet, where God’s presence literally dwelt among creation.

But, as I said before, **a holy God cannot dwell where sin exists**, so no one was ever allowed to enter into the Holy of Holies except the High Priest, and even then, only once – once per year – on the Day of Atonement. And once he entered the Holy of Holies, the High Priest would offer the sacrifice of a goat before the presence of the Lord, and that sacrifice would serve as the symbolic atonement for the people’s sins over the last year. The blood of the sacrifice represented the cost of sin being carried away so that the people would no longer stand condemned before a holy God. It was Israel’s annual reminder that sin is a deadly serious thing, that guilt cannot be ignored, and that true reconciliation with God – as opposed to being condemned guilty – requires sacrifice.

But here's the problem: the sacrifices of the high priests in the Old Testament were only temporary solutions. They didn't address the root problem of sin itself. They only covered it for a time – one year. They didn't solve our standing before God forever. It's like in the news, when you hear that a sentencing for a criminal has been delayed. Maybe their lawyer was able to delay the process, but they weren't able to convince the judge to overturn the ruling altogether and set the prisoner free. At some point, you have to ask the question, "Maybe you just don't have a good enough lawyer." Or perhaps more accurately, "Maybe the problem isn't just the case... maybe the problem is the one trying to stand in for you." And that's exactly what our passage today from Hebrews is trying to help us see.

The problem with the high priests of Israel is that they weren't perfect mediators, and when we're standing before the judgment seat of a perfect God, we need one. If not, we're dead where we stand, as I said before. The problem with the high priests of old was twofold: first, they were sinners, too – just like you and me. They were just as guilty as we are, liable for the same judgment, unable to advocate for themselves – much less us – in a way that could actually resolve the problem of sin before a holy God. Earlier this morning, David read for us a sobering passage about just how corrupt and unfaithful the Levites – the priestly class of Israel's people – actually were. At one point, God throws a curse on them because they had despised the name of the Lord, perverted their calling, and led the people into scandal and spiritual ruin, instead of the holiness and righteous living they were called to (*1 Samuel 2:27-35*). The priests of old were **sinner**s, so they could never serve as the perfect mediators we truly needed. This is why, on the Day of Atonement, as the author of Hebrews tells us, the High Priest had to first offer sacrifices for his *own* sins, before he could ever go and offer sacrifices for the people's sins.

The high priests of old were sinners, and because they were sinners, this means that, even at their very best, their ministry was always going to be incomplete – limited. They could never truly advocate before God the Father on our behalf in a way that could bring final resolution to the problem of sin and forgiveness to the world. The sacrifices had to be repeated *over* and *over* again, *year* after *year*. A patchwork job, at best, to a completely torn relationship between humanity and God – which means that the high priesthood of the Old Testament was never going to be the final answer. It was never

God's solution. God instituted this imperfect system as a way to make us feel the weight of something unfinished, something broken, something always in need of completion. Something that, even at its very best, was only ever meant to point us to something greater, something final, something more hopeful, and finally, something that's really, *really* good news. Jesus: A New and Greater High Priest.

Into what was previously incomplete, into what was previously broken, into what was a previously helpless state where the fullness of our guilt and shame was laid bare before the terrifying judgement seat of God, Jesus – a *new* kind of High Priest – enters in, and does what no other high priest could ever do. He stands in our place, he advocates before God the Father on our behalf, he bears the weight of our sin and secures once-for-all access to God's presence that will last forever. In every way that the high priests of old were insufficient in making perfect atonement and forgiveness of sin, Jesus accomplishes it perfectly, and the author of Hebrews makes this clear. While the old high priests were still sinners who had to offer sacrifices, first, for their own guilt, before they could ever enter God's presence, Jesus is a High Priest who we're told has "passed through the heavens" (*Hebrews 4:14*) and stands before God's glory as one who "in every respect has been tested as we are and yet is without sin" (*Hebrews 4:15*). Jesus enters God's presence to stand as our advocate and defense – not as just another pitiful, broken, guilty, and unbelievable sinner, as we are, but as a human being who is **perfect in every way**, holy and blameless, never once succumbing to sin's power, and remaining faithful. This means that Jesus does not stand in the courtroom of God as just another defendant needing his own advocate, but instead, stands as the sinless Son of God, who represents us perfectly and pleads our cause before a Heavenly Father, who is rich in mercy and longs for us to be forgiven. As opposed to being a high priest who has to fear escaping judgment himself, Jesus absorbs the judgment of God's wrath, and does so on behalf of others.

And, where the old high priests had to enter into the Holy of Holies *again* and *again*, *year* after *year*, because their sacrifices were only temporary, Jesus offers himself for us, once-and-for-all – not a repeated Band-Aid or a temporary fix, not a yearly reminder that the case is still open and sentence is pending – but instead, a final and complete atonement that never has to be opened again. When Jesus died on the cross, he became the atoning sacrifice that provided us forgiveness of sins forever,

because he was the **perfect advocate**. The Scripture tells us that, “Although Jesus was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of **eternal salvation** for all who obey him” (*Hebrews 5:8-9*). The text doesn’t say “seasonal salvation,” or “partial salvation,” or “until next year’s Day of Atonement salvation,” but **eternal salvation**. It’s over. We need not stand in fear of judgment anymore. There’s no more need for shame.

And that is why the author of Hebrews says we can “approach God’s throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need” (*Hebrews 4:16*). I know that many of you are shackled by the weight of guilt and regret for past mistakes that still haunt you, or present indiscretions you don’t want anyone to know about. I’ve been there. I know what that’s like. You aren’t alone. Take comfort in the mercies of God, which are new every morning, and because of what Jesus has done, never come to an end. We have been pleaded for, we have been advocated for, we have been died for, we have been atoned for, and now we are forgiven and free.

So, brothers and sisters, do not stand at a distance from God, for, in Christ, we have been brought near to God. There’s nothing more to be afraid of. God **loves** you. You’re no longer on trial with the verdict still out. There’s no need to keep rehearsing a case against yourself when Christ has already pleaded on your behalf and won: He died on the cross and rose again. Come, instead, to the throne of grace – not even *timidly*, but **boldly**. What you’ll find there might surprise you: not condemnation, nor reason to fear, but instead, an abundance of mercy – a wellspring of love. For those who are in Christ Jesus, “mercy triumphs over judgment” (*James 2:13*), and that is **really** good news.

Let’s pray.

Lord Jesus, our Advocate, our Defense, our Mediator, our New and Greater High Priest, We are in awe of you and what you’ve done for us. Without you, we stand naked and condemned, guilty, overwhelmed by the weight of sin and the misery of shame. We deserve judgment, and a life eternally separated from God. But in your Father’s great love and divine plan for us, you plead our cause, you take the weight of our sins, you take the punishment and judgment that we deserve, and joy springs forth from our hearts as we realize we can enter the throne of God’s grace with boldness to receive mercy in our time of need. We are incomprehensibly grateful, with the words that are impossible to utter. We find comfort and rest in the knowledge that we are forgiven, and an eternity of life in the presence of you starts today. In your name we pray, Amen.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Pastor Nate described standing before God like standing in a courtroom with every hidden thing exposed. Why do you think Hebrews uses such severe and unsettling imagery when talking about sin and judgment? What effect do you think this is supposed to have on us spiritually?
2. One of the sermon's key lines was: "If God is *not that holy*, then Jesus is *not that necessary*." Do you think it is important for Christians to hold together both the holiness of God and the mercy of God? What do you think are the costs of emphasizing one over the other?
3. *Hebrews 4:15* says Jesus is a High Priest who can "sympathize with our weaknesses" yet is "without sin." Do you think both of these truths matter? Why or why not? What kind of Savior do you think we would have if one of them were missing?
4. The Old Testament sacrifices had to be repeated year after year, but Jesus offered himself "once for all." What might it look like to practically live as though Christ's sacrifice was truly sufficient to forgive *all* sin – past, present, and future?
5. Pastor Nate spoke about guilt, shame, and our hesitancy to embrace the love God has for us. Why do you think so many Christians still struggle to believe they are truly forgiven? What do you think might help us to rest in God's grace, instead of continuing to fear his condemnation?
6. *Hebrews 4:16* invites believers to "approach the throne of grace with boldness" in light of what Jesus has done for us. Pastor Nate says, "We need not stand in fear of judgment anymore. There's no more need for shame." What keeps you from approaching God's presence with boldness? What might boldness in prayer, confession, and worship look like for you in your everyday life?