Hebrews 5:1-10 “When God Feels Far Away”

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[0:00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama.! Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

! Amen. That is a sermon and a song. It's good stuff. Thank you all. You don't want to skip over the other sermon though, right? We can still do the other one.
No voting for that. We're studying through the book of Hebrews. Hebrews is a sermon written to an early church to urge them to hold on to Jesus because of His incomparable greatness. Last week, we started a long section of the book that talks about how Jesus is our great high priest, greater than any other priest. We talked about the fact that we need a priest to be our representative with God, to bring us access to God, the one who made us for relationship with Himself. We need that and we need a priest for that. Before we read this next passage, I want us to see this, what may be for many of us, an unfamiliar concept of our needing a priest through another lens. Let me ask it this way. Have you ever felt alone in this world? Have you ever felt alone in this world? I've told you before that when Christy and I were newlyweds and we were in seminary, we got pregnant.
We were so excited. And then we miscarried our first child. It was hard on so many levels, but I remember having that feeling of being alone. We had prayed. We had asked God to care for our baby.
And here we were, we thought we were doing what He wanted us to be doing. Where was He? On top of that, Christy and I were experiencing grief differently from one another. And so, we're the only two who knew at first. Then for a while, very few other people knew. And I felt alone in that. I was so discouraged after having been so excited. And with all those emotions, could I really talk to God about how I was feeling when that, I mean, that didn't turn out so great last time.
[2:49] I would learn soon how untrue this was, but I remember feeling alone in the world that day.

Maybe you can relate to that feeling in one way or another. Perhaps you've been in a season of praying to God for good friends and then an injury comes and you're not able to be a part of that team or you get, you feel like you're losing out on a group of friends, right? The opposite of what you've been asking for.
Maybe it's a breakup or a divorce and you're left hurting and feeling like no one really understands you, your specific experience. Perhaps you're later in life and you've lost loved ones.
You feel like you're not able to engage the same way physically or mentally, just limited more than it used to be.
Maybe for you, you've chased after sin and you know it. You've gotten stuck in addiction or you've run away from God and from others just hiding for so long that honestly, you look around and you say, no one knows the real me.
[4:13] And God seems like the last person that I could talk to about that. The first people reading Hebrews can relate to that feeling.

They've embraced this Jesus whom some of them may have actually met in the flesh. They talk all about him, they sing about him, but he's not around anymore.
They've lost so much of the community that they used to enjoy at the synagogue, plus the priests there and the sacrifices and the other things that reminded them about God.
They're not around anymore. And now life is getting hard. Persecution is real. They've got other struggles already, but now the Romans are ramping up persecution and they're feeling the heat. Some of their fellow church members had just quit showing up altogether. And they've been praying for unity, for endurance, for perseverance. Was God even there?
[5:18] Was anyone listening to them? Was anyone fighting on their side? Or were they really alone to navigate an increasingly hostile world?

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That they lived in each day. They wondered, are we alone? Even in a room full of people, are we alone in this world? Hebrews speaks to these feelings and it offers hope in these struggles.
As God continues to tell us about Jesus as our great high priest, that's why this matters. Let's listen to Hebrews chapter 5 at verse 1.
This is God's word for our good. 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.
He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward since he himself is beset with weakness.
Because of this, he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins, just as he does for those of the people.
[6:31] And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.
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.

As he also says in another place, you are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. 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. 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.
Being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. This is God's word. Let's ask for his help. Father, would you speak to us now?
We are those who need to hear your voice. Those who are prone to feeling like we may be alone and maybe you don't see us or hear us.
[7:48] Would you make yourself clear to us this morning? Reveal yourself through your word, by your spirit. We ask in the name of your son. Amen.

This passage opens up by reminding us of the qualifications for being a high priest in the Old Testament. That basic idea we said last week was a representative for mankind in the presence of God.
In other words, the high priest had a close connection to God's people and to God himself, right? He acts especially, it says, on behalf of men in relation to God.
He's a mediator, a go-between, keeping God and man connected. That's what the sacrifices are all about, right? He offers sacrifices to God on behalf of those people who bring them.
That's what the priest does. I think you get the idea. The high priest has to be qualified to represent the people and to be with God.
[8:59] Both of those things. First, he highlights here that he's connected to humanity. This is that idea we saw generally last week that he understands, that he can relate.

He can be gentle with weak people because he's one of them, verse 2 says. I mean, can you imagine all of the people coming to the high priest with all of the stuff, all their situations, I ate the wrong thing, I touched the wrong thing, I lost my temper with my kids, I forgot to clean my room, I stole from my boss, I think, I violated the Sabbath, maybe, I don't know, did I, high priest?
Think of all the stories he heard, right? Can you even imagine? These people needed to know what to do about their sins, especially the unintentional ones.
Maybe they didn't even understand. What sacrifice should they make to honor their relationship with God? They had to ask the priest. The high priest needed to be able to respond truthfully, right?
Honestly, not minimizing sin, that's important, but being gentle and tender as well. The high priest is not supposed to scoff and say, seriously?
[10:26] You did what? Again? What an idiot. No, that's not the high priest. No, he actually gets the struggle, right?

Maybe he lost his temper with one of his kids before he came to the temple that morning. My kids were asleep when I left this morning. This is hypothetical, okay?
Maybe, maybe he understands. He deals with pain and lust and greed and sickness. You can't surprise him when you bring your mess to him.
In fact, the high priest himself may be our best reminder that weakness and ignorance and limited understanding of God shouldn't keep us from God.
No. No, in fact, God himself is drawn to our weakness and our need for him. The one who comes closest to God, he's weak too.

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[11:27] Don't forget that. And it's for just this reason that the priest also brought sacrifices for his own sins.

Now, you can read about this in great detail all over the book of Leviticus. I'm just going to show you a couple places. And I'm doing this because it's important that we understand this concept. Because those of us who are priests or pastors these days, we have these same issues. Right at the beginning of the whole sacrificial system that God puts in place, it says the first thing he says, if anyone sins, and there's a lot of possible people who could sin, what's the first example God comes up with?
If the anointed priest is the one who sins. That had crossed God's mind. He has provision for that right at the beginning of the everyday sacrificial system.
God's not surprised the priest will be a sinner. Later, on this special day of atonement, the day when God especially is going to deal with the sins of his people, even after the priest puts on all the holy garments, and he gets ready to enter the holy place, he's had a good bath and everything, what does he still have to do first?
[12:46] He has to sacrifice a bull as a sin offering for himself and his family. Only then, not until he's done that and gone through a whole process and God has accepted the sacrifice, can he offer a sacrifice for the sins of the people.

I just want to remind you to pray for your leaders to be quick and deep at repentance, at running to Jesus with their own sins so that they can be restored to him, so that they can then restore you with gentleness because they know what it's like to sin and they know what it's like to be forgiven.
This is a huge deal. I'd love to talk about it more, but it's also not the main point of this passage. Human leaders are not the focus. Jesus is, actually, the great high priest. So, let's keep going. The high priest is connected to humanity, yes, but equally important, he's called by God.
Verse 4, no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. Aaron, the first high priest.
[14:06] And you would assume that's what's happened, right? It was Aaron and then his son and then his son all the way down, but actually, we know that the priesthood had been corrupted for decades before Jesus arrives.

Priest after priest were not even Levites. They weren't descendants of Aaron as God required in his word. See, what had happened is that many men, especially recently, the Romans, had started using those positions to appoint high priests for political influence, for good alliances or so they could keep control of things, using the religious power of God's people for worldly purposes.
Friends, be warned, religion is not to be used for selfish gain. It's not a game. It's not to be co-opted for the purposes of power.
No. No. God calls qualified representatives to serve his people before him, like Aaron and his descendants called to be the priestly tribe.
Make sure. But that presents a problem for us, doesn't it? Because which tribe did Jesus come from? Is Jesus from the tribe of Levi, the priestly tribe?
[15:28] No. No. No. Jesus is from the tribe of Judah, the royal family line of David, right? And so, the author wants to make clear that Jesus actually fits and even exceeds the qualifications of a high priest.

God appointed Jesus to this role, he says. Look back to Psalm 2, it's right there in his word. Appointed son and king. And then Psalm 110, where the king is appointed to be priest.
We're going to talk about this Melchizedek guy later. He's a minor Old Testament character who gets a lot of attention later in Hebrews, so we're going to come back to it.
But for now, for today, know that Melchizedek is an example of a king appointed by God as a permanent priest, even though he wasn't a descendant in Aaron's line.
So, there's precedent for this, the author is telling us. God can appoint someone to this role. Jesus was called by God. God, and that's important, but if that's the case, is he truly connected to humanity?
[16:48] Because we need both, right? If you've gotten lost or distracted at this point, I understand it's a lot of priest talk and Old Testament stuff.

Don't get distracted now. Don't miss this. These next verses are so good. Can Jesus relate to our struggles, to our feeling alone in this world?

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Look at verse 7. You bet he can. It takes us most vividly to the Garden of Gethsemane on the way to the cross, right, where we're told Jesus is alone while his closest friends in the world fall fast asleep.
While God, his father, hears his prayers through loud cries and tears and sweating drops of blood and agony, but does God spare him from death on the cross?
No. Now, let's be clear. Jesus was heard, especially in his reverent submission to his father's will.
[18:02] Not my will, father, but yours be done. God does hear even when he's not answering the way we want him to. And certainly there was a sense in which God would deliver Jesus from death, wasn't there?

How did God deliver Jesus from death? Through the resurrection, eventually, that was coming. But the longing that Jesus expressed to avoid the pangs of death, the punishment of sin that he would bear for others on the cross, it's not granted.
Do you think Jesus understands those dark times when you've prayed? You've asked God for something maybe over and over, and God promises, he hears, but nothing seems to go the way you ask.
It doesn't change anything, you feel. Your child keeps wandering. Your loved one keeps declining. Your dark depression keeps returning.
When you start to wonder if it would be better to try to handle things yourself, because you're just alone in the world, than to trust this God to come through for you, does Jesus understand that feeling?
[19:25] Does Jesus understand that feeling? Absolutely, he does. He has entered that exact situation that he feels most distant in.

He has entered into it. Friend, you are not navigating life alone, even when it feels like it. And he knows that it does, so he says, I'm with you.
Don't be afraid. And then verse 8. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.
Obedience is certainly not natural for us. You don't even have to go down to the nursery to prove that, although you could. Adults will do just fine. We're not great at obedience, but it is needful to learn, isn't it?
Can we really talk about Jesus that same way? He learned obedience? Does that mean that he used to be disobedient?
[20:33] No. It's saying that he doesn't merely remain blissfully obedient in heaven forever. Rather, he enters into our world, into real temptation, into real suffering, and into that real struggle, and he learns how to continue obeying in that context.

He learns how to obey when it counts, when the game is on the line, when submission to God's will is required, not merely just doing my own will perfectly.
That's not really all that hard to obey myself, right? I'll just perfectly do whatever I want and say I'm obeying. No. This is when, well, when Jesus is betrayed, but doesn't respond with vengeance. When Jesus is unjustly accused, and he's harshly treated, but he doesn't respond with unforgiveness, which would be so natural.
See, Jesus was already God's son. That's not a change in position. He's this perfectly obedient son, but he hadn't yet been a son in this context.
[21:50] That's what the author is saying. You could think of it like a human son who's about to inherit his father's business. His father's gonna retire, give the business to his son, but he has first to learn every aspect of it, not just how to be the boss, but every aspect of the business from the ground up, from the lowest level employee with the dirt under his fingernails, to the guys above them, all the way up.

Then he'll be ready to take the position of son with all it entails in that company. Y'all, submission in suffering is the process through which God shapes, like a diamond forged in heat and pressure, God shapes some of his most beautiful people, displays some of his most wonderful glory, isn't it? That's how he works. So it's not merely that God's great and glorious and far off and above others, but he's a God who hurts and hungers.
He's a God who dwells with the lowly and is near the brokenhearted. He's a God who faces temptation and after resisting and obeying, still bears our sin.

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That's what Jesus was doing as he learned obedience. Listen to these beautiful words from Bible teacher Nancy Guthrie about Jesus here. She says, his was not automatic obedience, it was authentic obedience.
[23:32] This obedience was prayed for and begged for and cried out for and wept over with tears. Jesus learned through his own experience what it feels like for obedience to God to cost something, something painful.

Wow. Have you learned that kind of obedience? Is it possible that you're learning that kind of obedience right now?
If so, I want to say to you, friend, you are not facing the struggles of life alone, even when it feels like it.
And he knows it does, so he says, I'm strengthening you in your weakness. That's how I work. Don't give in. You can stand because I'm your strength.
Verse nine. Being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him. Made perfect?
[24:45] You getting uncomfortable yet? He's pushing the envelope here, isn't he? Was Jesus imperfect? No. It's not a moral criticism. Of Jesus, right?

Stay with me. God is reminding us that the high priest who could actually save us, who could represent us before the throne of God, who could connect, remember, humanity and divinity, had to obey when tempted and suffering.
Jesus came down from heaven and was then fitted, qualified for the role of high priest by trusting God to the end. By trusting God to the end. By fulfilling all righteousness.
By paying for our sin on the cross. That's what he means. Became perfect. Became fit. He became the source of eternal salvation.
See, the one who didn't need to make a sacrifice for his own sins, right? But bore the sins of many. He truly and finally and eternally made sufficient payment with his all-sufficient merit so that you and I can stand before the God of glory without guilt, without shame, but clothed in the glorious, righteous robes of our great high priest.
[26:05] Friend, if you will but trust Jesus today, if you'll ask him to be your great high priest, then no matter how far you've run, no matter how low you have fallen, no matter how far away God feels, you're not standing before God alone, alone, even when it feels like it.

And he knows it does because you feel your failure so acutely when you think about him, don't you? So what does he say?
He says, it is finished. I've paid it all. I am ever living to intercede for you before the Father. I am your advocate, your legal representation here to help Jesus Christ the righteous.
He's yours by faith, your high priest. Listen to how our catechism says Jesus serves as our high priest. Christ executes the office of a priest in his once offering up himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice and to reconcile us to God and in making continual intercession for us.
Do you see that? Yes, there's the sacrifice to secure our salvation and then the beautiful relationship with God that he restores as priest and right there with it.
[27:44] He doesn't just leave you. His ongoing intercession, today he's with you. You're not alone. Listen, I know sometimes it feels like he's not there.

He doesn't know the struggle. He'll never accept someone like you but he is and he does and he will and you can count on it because we have a great high priest who does the job of connecting men to God exceedingly well.
He is so great. He stretches to reach the furthest and bring us to God. Thank you, Jesus, that you reached that far because you had to go a long way to reach to me.
Amen? Let me just notice one last wonderful reality before we come to this table.
How do you think God feels when you feel alone? You ever wonder?
[28:51] A lot of times you feel that. You think, he doesn't care. That's where you already are, right? You think he doesn't hear. You think he doesn't see. You think he doesn't understand.

You think he would never forgive. I want you to notice verse 10. Being designated by God a high priest in the permanent order.
He's already proven to us that Jesus meets this qualification of being called by God to this role. This is something a little more. Now he is assuring us that God is so drawn to our need that his heart so goes out to you when you feel like he's far away that he actually enters into it in Jesus.

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He designates someone for exactly your problem so that the far away may be near to him. Look what God is saying to those of us feeling he's far away.
I want you close to me so much so that I sent my son to make sure that nothing, no struggle, no doubt, no sin would be strong enough to keep you away from me.
[30:03] I saw you out there wandering lost sheep and the one with a bunch of sheep already in his fold sends the good shepherd out after you.

God says, I saw you lying face down in the pigsty having wrecked your life run as far away from me as you could and you're embarrassed and you're ashamed in your sin and I came running out to meet you and brought you home as my child.
That's why I designated a high priest because God never wants you alone again. So he designated a high priest for you.
So he comes in the person of Jesus to be the perfect high priest offering the perfect sacrifice to bring you into perfect relationship with him.
Isn't that amazing? That's how he feels when you feel alone. Does he even hear? Look at Jesus. You know he does.
[31:07] Can he even understand? Look at Jesus. You know he does. Will he even let me come back home?

Is it possible? Look at Jesus. Jesus. You know he will. And this table is here today in part because God doesn't want you to just hear my voice and take it from me.
It's not enough for him. He wants this gloriously good news to land on your tongue as well as your ears.
To fill your your whole being not just your mind. He sets the table. He sends the priest with the sacrifice and he invites all of us who will trust him to draw near.
To eat with him. This is the way Jesus explained it. The night that he was betrayed to die he took bread and he broke it and he gave it to his disciples as I ministering in his name give this bread to you.
[32:21] He said take and eat. This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. And in the same way after supper he took the cup and he said this cup is the new covenant in my blood shed for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Drink from it all of you for as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. You say that this is where my hope is.
Friends this is not the table of Southwood or of the Presbyterian church. This is the Lord's table. So if Jesus is your high priest if you look here and you see his body and his blood as your only hope of a restored relationship with God forever then if you've made that profession public you've been baptized into his church even if it's not this one then you come and eat with him and with us this morning.
We'd love to celebrate with you. If that's not where you are this morning we want you to know we're so glad that you are here and we would invite you if you would like still to come forward with us when we celebrate this to observe to pray with us if you'd like just ask us we'd love that it's our great joy it's also okay if you'd prefer to remain right where you are there is no shame in letting these elements pass this morning but I do want to say that if right where you are is feeling alone in this world especially feeling alone before God don't miss the offer of Jesus it's not so much coming to take these elements would you as we celebrate consider his offer that he would stand with you would forgive you would welcome you would assure you of your standing with God forever he would offer you to be your high priest if you trust him today let's pray and we'll come and celebrate him together oh Jesus we thank you for your sacrifice for us that you have stood in where no one else was able to be perfectly human and perfectly divine and you have made a way for us to our father would you use now very common elements bread wine and juice that we would have assurance in our heart in a deep way that you're with us that you'll never leave us and that you welcome us home we come needy not with our record but with yours and we're so grateful to have it we give you thanks amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org

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