

October 16

Lesson 7

THE GREAT

HIGH PRIEST

DEVOTIONAL READING:: Ephesians 4:7-13

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Hebrews 4:14-5:10

HEBREWS 4:14-16

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

HEBREWS 5:1-10

¹ Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. ³ This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. ⁴ And no one takes this honor on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was.

⁵ In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him,

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

⁶ And he says in another place,

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

⁷ During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸ Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered ⁹ and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him ¹⁰ and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.



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KEY VERSE

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.—Hebrews 4:14

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List ways that Jesus fulfills the role of great high priest.
2. Compare and contrast the priesthoods of Jesus, Aaron, and Melchizedek.
3. Praise God for giving us the perfect high priest.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

A. Power That Listens

B. Lesson Background

I. Sinless High Priest ([Hebrews 4:14-16](#))

A. His Greatness ([v. 14](#))

B. His Temptations ([v. 15](#))

C. His Mercy ([v. 16](#))

Entitled

II. Human High Priests ([Hebrews 5:1-3](#))

A. Nature and Role ([v. 1](#))

B. Weakness and Sin ([vv. 2, 3](#))

III. Appointed High Priest ([Hebrews 5:4-6](#))

A. God-Given Honor ([vv. 4, 5](#))

B. Eternal Order ([v. 6](#))

IV. Obedient High Priest ([Hebrews 5:7-10](#))

A. Suffering Son ([vv. 7, 8](#))

Been There, Done That

B. Perfected Founder ([vv. 9, 10](#))

Conclusion

A. Jesus Understands

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Power That Listens

Watch closely the next time you see video of a successful politician greeting voters. Even though politicians meet thousands, the best campaigners know how to connect with individuals one by one (or at least appear to do so). Meeting person after person, the candidate takes a moment to shake hands, make substantial eye contact, and listen. After such encounters, many voters will say, "I believe that candidate is listening to people like me and understands our problems."

All of us crave a listening ear. When we are in pain, in need, or in trouble, we especially want to be heard. When someone has the power to help us, we desperately want that person to listen.

Today's text reminds us of how God has given his listening ear for our deepest needs. If God in his glory seems distant, in Christ we have proof of something else. Christ, our divine high priest, has the power to meet our needs. Christ, the human who suffered like us, hears us as one who knows our problems firsthand.

B. Lesson Background

As the letter to the Hebrews urges readers to continue in their faith in Jesus, it focuses heavily on the concept of the high priesthood. This ancient office plays a crucial role in today's lesson and in the letter as a whole. The Law of Moses decreed that a high priest preside over worship, both in the tabernacle and in the temple that superseded it. Aaron was the first high priest, and all members of Israel's priesthood were required to be descended from him ([Exodus 28:1; 29:9; 40:12-15](#)).

Israel's high priest was one of many priests who offered sacrifices of various kinds on the sacred altar. But once a year, on the Day of Atonement, only the high priest officiated at the special sacrifices. *Atonement* translates a word meaning "covering over"; sacrifices were made on the Day of Atonement to cover over the sins of all Israel.

On that occasion the high priest first offered the sacrifice of a bullock. That animal's life was offered as a substitute, taking the punishment in place of the lives of the high priest and his household for their sins ([Leviticus 16:6](#)). The high priest also cast lots to determine which of two goats would be sacrificed and which would be sent away (alive) as a scapegoat ([16:7-10](#)). The high priest sprinkled blood of the sacrificed bull and goat on "the atonement cover," which was the top of the ark of the covenant ([16:2, 14, 15](#)). This was located in the inner room, called "the Most Holy Place," of the tabernacle or temple ([Exodus 26:34](#)). Only on this one day of the year did anyone enter that room.

The essence of the Day of Atonement therefore was that of substitutionary sacrifice: the lives of animals were given in place of the lives of human sinners. But equally important was God's ordaining the high priest to this ministry. Only the one who occupied the office that God created could preside over this sacred rite. As do other New Testament writers, the author of Hebrews explains Jesus' death as the fulfillment of Israel's system of sacrifices.

I. Sinless High Priest

([HEBREWS 4:14-16](#))

A. His Greatness (v. 14)

14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.

The writer of Hebrews begins the description of Jesus as not just an eligible high priest but as *a great high priest* (see also [Hebrews 3:1, lesson 6; 6:20; 7:26, lesson 8; 8:1; 9:11](#)). Unlike others, he has gone not into the Most Holy Place of the earthly tabernacle (see the Lesson Background), but *into heaven*, the true presence of God. That observation underlines how crucial it is to *hold firmly to the faith we profess*, continuing faithfully to confess that Jesus is God's promised one (compare [10:23](#)).

HOW TO SAY IT

Aaron *Air-un*.

Gethsemane *Geth-sem-uh-nee* (*G* as in *get*).

Levi *Lee-vye*.

Leviticus *Leh-vit-ih-kus*.

Melchizedek *Mel-kiz-eh-dek*.

Moses *Mo-zes* or *Mo-zez*.

Nazareth *Naz-uh-reth*.

B. His Temptations (v. 15)

15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.

Jesus' supreme magnitude as the divine Son of God may seem to imply that he is distant and unapproachable. But the writer reminds us immediately that there is another aspect to his person: he *has been tempted in every way, just as we are*. This was part of what it meant for the divine Son of God to become a human of lowly birth in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

The story of Jesus includes the account of his temptation in the wilderness ([Matthew 4:1-11](#)), which echoes Israel's wilderness experience. Jesus' story includes his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. There he expressed his desire not to die, but he ultimately submitted to the will of the Father ([Matthew 26:36-42](#)). He went on to experience horrific suffering on the cross ([27:26-50](#)).

These experiences show that Jesus' humanity was just as lowly as ours, just as tested as ours, if not more so. In his exaltation, he is not distant. He has suffered what we suffer.

What Do You Think?

How does the fact that Jesus underwent temptation as everyone else affect you personally?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

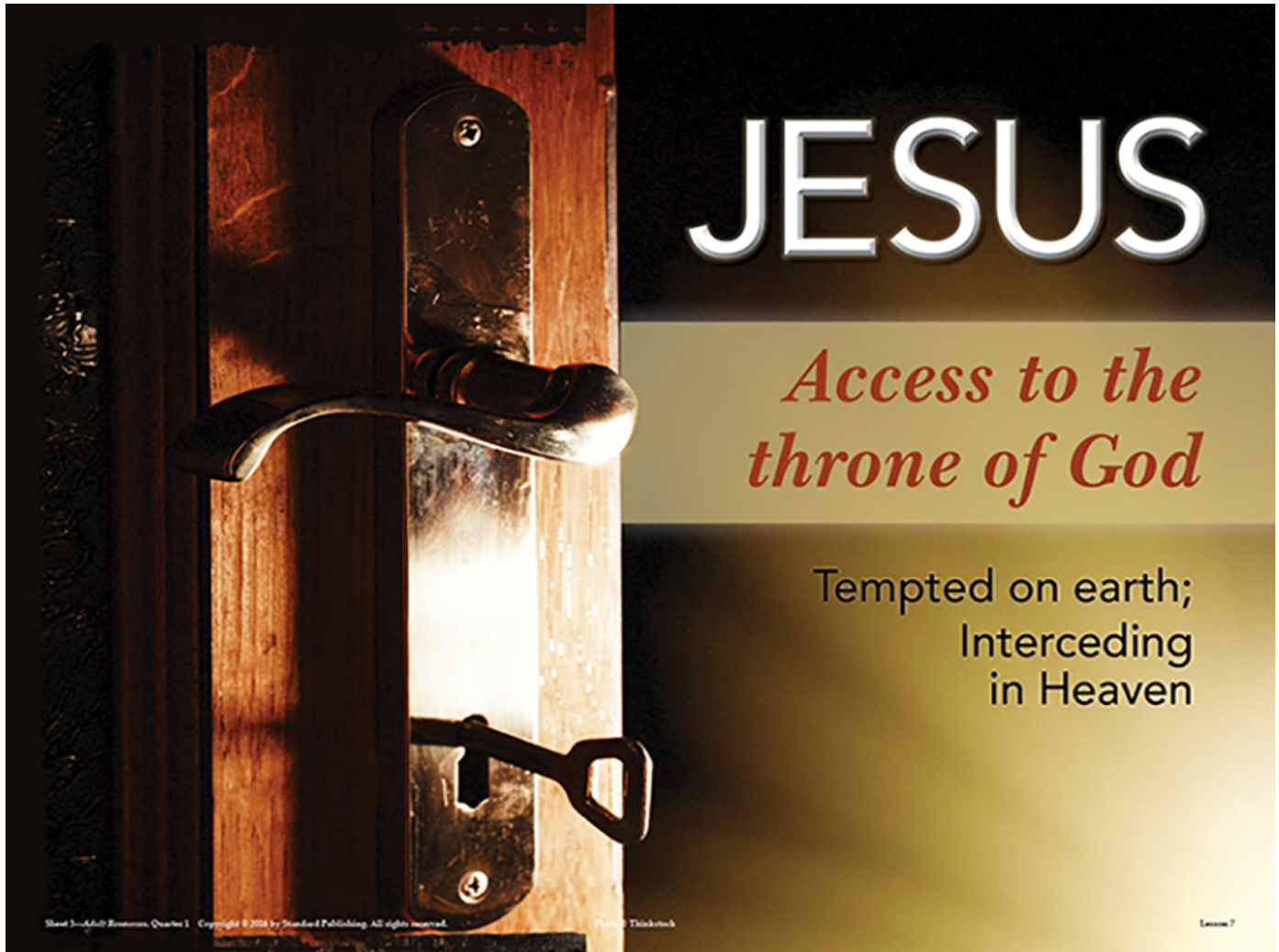
- In the way you pray
- In the example you set
- Other

Yet in his testing as a human, Jesus *did not sin* ([John 8:46; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 1:19; 2:22; 1 John 3:5](#)). Unlike Aaron and the high

priests after him, Jesus had no need to make sacrifice for his own sins because he had none.

C. His Mercy (v. 16)

¹⁶ Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.



Visual for Lesson 7. Start a discussion by pointing to this visual as you ask, “Exactly how does Jesus function as a key to unlock access to God’s throne?”

Jesus the high priest who entered the heavenly most holy place is also Jesus the king who is enthroned in Heaven at God’s right hand ([Hebrews 1:3](#), [lesson 5](#); [8:1](#); [10:12](#); [12:2](#), [lesson 9](#)). His people know him as high priest and king, the one who has made atonement for their sins and who rules the world.

Approaching a mighty king to seek mercy can be dangerous (compare [Esther 4:11](#)). The king holds absolute power. A plea for mercy may draw a harsh reaction (compare [1 Kings 12:13, 14](#)). But the king in view is also the high priest who has experienced in his lowliness what we experience. He is ready to give just the help we need, just when we need it. We approach him confidently, able to speak whatever our need may be (compare [Hebrews 10:19-22](#)).

ENTITLED

There she was, leaning on the horn of her SUV in the mall parking lot. How could that other driver have had the nerve to zip into the coveted parking space ahead of her? Surely that driver had seen that her blinking turn signal entitled her to that spot!

The verb *entitle* and its associated noun *entitlement* have taken on a negative ring over the years. The reason for this is that these words are

often uttered in contexts of demanding what one thinks is owed. People use these words as justification for behaving as though they deserve honor, acknowledgment, and other considerations. This is reflected in one particular dictionary definition that *entitlement* is a “belief that one is deserving of ... certain privileges.”

But that same dictionary also offers this definition of the verb *entitle*: “to furnish with proper grounds for seeking or claiming something.” Today’s text and others in Hebrews address a legal right that was purchased when God’s Son died in our place: his death furnishes the proper grounds for us to have eternal life (compare [Hebrews 9:15](#)). But let us be quick to add that the entitlement created is God’s not ours. He is entitled to us, not we to him. Jesus is the one who holds “the keys of death and Hades” ([Revelation 1:18](#)), not us.

Even so, God’s entitlement yields astonishing benefits. One is his invitation to approach his “throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” May we do so out of a sense of gratitude, not entitlement.—V. E.

II. Human High Priests

([HEBREWS 5:1-3](#))

A. Nature and Role (v. 1)

^{1a} Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God,

Developing Jesus’ priestly identity, the writer of Hebrews now lays out what *every high priest* is and does. First among these is that the high priest comes from the people for whom he ministers. He is taken from humanity to serve on behalf of humanity. Fully human, Jesus fulfills that role.

The high priest’s ministry for people is directed to God. As God’s eternal Son, ordained and sent by the Father for this role, Christ fulfills it like no other.

^{1b} to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

The work of the high priest is to make offerings at the altar to atone for the sins of the people (see the Lesson Background). Jesus stands supreme in that role, having offered himself—not an animal but a human being innocent of sin—for the sins of others. Again, he fulfills the priesthood as no other can.

B. Weakness and Sin (vv. 2, 3)

² He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.

A high priest must have empathy, able to understand the experiences of people who do not know God (the *ignorant*) or who have been deceived into abandoning the truth (those who *are going astray*). That is, the true high priest must minister not out of strength but *weakness*.

What Do You Think?

How can we better communicate that Christ shared and understands our weaknesses?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In worship (upreach)

In evangelism and benevolence (outreach)

In teaching (inreach)

³ This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people.

One similarity between Jesus as high priest and the high priests who came before him is the fact that they all offered sacrifices for *the people*. (In Jesus’ case, it was just one sacrifice—himself.) A crucial difference, however, is that every high priest who came before Jesus was required first to make a sacrifice for *his own sins*. But the sinless Jesus can approach God without the need first to be purified. Being without sin, Jesus himself was a suitable offering—the atoning sacrifice—for the sins of others. There is no sacrifice greater or more fitting.

III. Appointed High Priest

([HEBREWS 5:4-6](#))

A. God-Given Honor (vv. 4, 5)

⁴ And no one takes this honor on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was.

The writer addresses another possible objection to Jesus’ high priesthood. Even if Jesus is fitting in all the ways already noted, the high priest must be appointed by God himself to be valid. Clearly God had authorized Aaron and his descendants of the tribe of Levi to hold the priesthood

(Exodus 28:1; 40:12-15; Numbers 26:58, 59). But how can Jesus, standing outside that ancient line as he does (Matthew 1:1-16; Hebrews 7:13, 14), have any claim to divine appointment to priesthood? Are Christians being absurdly presumptuous in declaring Jesus to be the great high priest?

5. In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him,

**“You are my Son;
today I have become your Father.”**

The writer next begins to show that God had planned and promised for generations to provide his Son as the great *high priest*. Two Old Testament texts demonstrate how God made that promise.

The first text the writer of Hebrews offers is Psalm 2:7, quoted in the verse before us (see also Hebrews 1:5, lesson 1). This psalm celebrates God’s rule over his people through the king whom he has appointed. In verse 7, God addresses the king as “my son,” indicating the Son’s special, unique place in God’s plan. For God to say *today I have become your Father* indicates not the Son’s creation or physical birth. Rather, it is a figure of speech for his being appointed king by God.

While Israel used this psalm for generations to celebrate its kings, the faithful knew that none of those kings was what this psalm ideally described. So they looked forward with hope to the fulfillment of God’s promise to send a greater king, a Son of David, who would build God’s house and whose throne God would establish forever (1 Chronicles 17:11-14).

Jesus, says the writer of Hebrews, is that promised king. At both his baptism and transfiguration, Jesus was addressed by God with words that echoed Psalm 2:7 (see Matthew 3:17; 17:5). But wait—what does all this discussion about Jesus-as-king have to do with Jesus-as-priest? The answer to that unfolds as the writer of Hebrews brings to bear the analogy of Melchizedek (next verse).

B. Eternal Order (v. 6)

6. And he says in another place,

**“You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.”**

The author now quotes Psalm 110:4, which is the second of the two Old Testament texts that demonstrate God’s promise to send his Son as priest. This psalm, like Psalm 2, celebrates and expresses hope for Israel’s king. The first verse of Psalm 110, quoted eight times in the New Testament, is God’s invitation to his appointed king to sit at God’s right hand while God subdues the king’s enemies (compare Hebrews 1:13). Yet amazingly, here is a statement right in the middle of the seven verses of Psalm 110 that discusses being a priest! This is startling because kings did not serve as priests in ancient Israel (2 Chronicles 19:11; 26:18). Although there were seemingly rare occasions when a king performed priestly functions (2 Samuel 6:16-18; 1 Kings 8:62-64), the two offices were distinct.

Even so, the writer of Hebrews sees the two roles of king and priest come together in an enigmatic individual named *Melchizedek*. Several hundred years before the formation of Israel as a nation, this man was both “king of Salem” and the “priest of God Most High” (Genesis 14:18). He was a king and priest so great that even the patriarch Abraham paid tithes to him (Genesis 14:20b; Hebrews 7:1-4, lesson 8).

For the ministry of the promised Messiah to be *in the order of Melchizedek* therefore announces that the promised king of fulfilled prophecy will also be a priest. Two offices will come together in one person, Jesus, as foreshadowed by the ancient Melchizedek.

IV. Obedient High Priest

(HEBREWS 5:7-10)

A. Suffering Son (vv. 7, 8)

7. During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

Having established Christ’s divine appointment as great high priest, the writer now returns to Jesus’ lowly position in that regard. That lowliness was seen *during the days of Jesus’ life on earth*, an expression that emphasizes how he shared the weakness and vulnerability of physical existence with the rest of humanity.

What Do You Think?

How do you develop Christ-honoring qualities in light of his status as king and high priest?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In regard to truth

In regard to forgiveness

In regard to lowliness

Other

Jesus' *prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears* certainly suggest his struggle when he prayed that God would let the "cup" of death pass from him. How then was Jesus *heard because of his reverent submission* since he went to his death anyway? A vital part of his prayer is "yet not as I will, but as you will" followed by "your will be done" ([Matthew 26:39, 42](#)). Exalted though he was, Jesus experienced every aspect of human weakness. It was in that weakness he submitted utterly to the will of God the Father.

What Do You Think?

How can we use Christ's prayer in Gethsemane as a model for our own prayers?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding the prayer's form (frankness, sincerity, humility, etc.)

Regarding the prayer's content (addressee, focus, etc.)

Regarding the prayer's context (presence or absence of other people, location, etc.)

8. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered

We may wonder how the divine Son of God *learned* anything. After all, God already knows everything, right? And as the divine Son of God, eternal with the Father and sharing in creation, Christ enjoyed the most exalted position: the very position of God ([John 1:1-3](#)).

Yet the Scripture affirms that "Jesus grew in wisdom" ([Luke 2:52](#)) and that the Father had some knowledge that the Son did not have ([Matthew 24:36](#); [Mark 13:32](#)). Therefore what the Son was able to learn seems to be tied closely to his experience in becoming human ([John 1:14](#)).

In becoming one with humanity, Jesus established no boundaries to his submission to the Father (compare [Philippians 2:6-8](#)). This included accepting the limitations of the flesh. As a result, he suffered in the worst that humanity can suffer.

Some things can be learned only by experience. Solomon was "wiser than anyone else" ([1 Kings 4:31](#)), but it took the personal experience of disobedience for him to learn to obey ([1 Kings 11:4-6](#); [Ecclesiastes 4:13](#)). Jesus was never disobedient to the Father, but he too learned by personal experience.

BEEN THERE, DONE THAT

Celebrate Recovery® is a Christ-centered program that helps free people from addictions. The program is used in thousands of churches worldwide. Broader in scope than other multi-step programs, Celebrate Recovery recognizes that everyone has hurts and habits that must be addressed. While one person may not struggle with a certain type of temptation as another would, we all face temptation.

One temptation for everyone to beware of is a periodic desire to shake our fists toward Heaven and cry, "You don't know what it's like down here!" But God *does* know what it's like. He has never been an absentee God. In Jesus we see clearly what has always been reality: God's willingness to suffer alongside of, and on behalf of, those created in his image. Jesus never sinned, but he certainly felt the stress of every temptation.

Celebrate Recovery offers the healing freedom of being accepted as a fellow struggler. That's valuable, but there is something more valuable yet: as Jesus "learned obedience from what he suffered," so can we.—V. E.

B. Perfected Founder ([vv. 9, 10](#))

9, 10. and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Christ's humble obedience fulfills God's eternal purpose. By his obedient suffering he can exalt forever those who suffer for their own obedience to God. For sinners (and all are sinners) he makes God's mercy possible by taking the sinner's punishment on himself. For God's suffering people (and everyone suffers) he dignifies and exalts their suffering, providing the model for their obedience.

The *eternal salvation* he brings refers not only to the blessed life beyond death but also to God's blessing in the present. Fulfilling every divine promise of the past, Christ brings God's victorious salvation forward through eternity without end.

These observations help us understand what it means for Christ to be *made perfect*. This expression in this context means not the correcting of an imperfection but the attaining of a goal or purpose. It echoes Jesus' words from the cross, "It is finished" ([John 19:30](#)). God's plan from the beginning, even before the time of *Melchizedek* some 2,000 years before Christ, was for the Son to bring salvation as he would learn obedience by submitting to the Father.

What Do You Think?

What can we do to model our priesthood of [1 Peter 2:5, 9](#) after that of Jesus?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In terms of service to others

In terms of pursuing personal holiness

Other

Conclusion

A. Jesus Understands

People often ask, “Where is God when I hurt?” In hard times, we ask God, “Why?”

The Bible does not answer that *Why?* with the clarity we crave. But it provides something more powerful: Christ says he understands what we are going through. He understands it personally. He invites us to trust him again. When we do, our *Why?* question can become the better question *What’s next?*

B. Prayer

Father, may the obedience of your Son become the pattern of our own lives as your grateful, forgiven people. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

As Jesus learned from suffering, so may we.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

Say, “The following statement was made by the son of a famous businessman. Can you guess whom he was describing?”

By the time Sunday came, ... he was just worn out. ... So he was closed that first Sunday, and we’ve been closed ever since. He figured if he didn’t like working on Sundays, that other people didn’t either. He said, “I don’t want to ask people to do that [which] I am not willing to do myself.”

Accept either of the following answers: the founder of Chik-fil-A or S. Truett Cathy. Then say, “Cathy was willing to suffer a potential loss of income out of compassion for his employees. Have you ever worked for that kind of a boss? What was it like?”

After a few people have shared, say, “One reason Jesus was such a ‘great high priest’ was because he knew what it was to suffer. As a result he was able to have compassion for the people he came to save. As we read Hebrews, we’ll learn other reasons why Jesus was so great.”

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “What Do You Know?” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. Have volunteers share their answers. Then ask, “How is it possible for Jesus to be our ‘great high priest’ since he was not descended from Aaron? If you don’t know the answer, you will find it out in today’s lesson.”

Into the Word

Assign half of your class to be in the *Aaron Group*, and the other half to be the *Jesus Group*. Ask for a volunteer from the Aaron group to read aloud [Hebrews 4:14-5:3](#); then have someone from the Jesus group read [Hebrews 5:4-10](#). Instruct both groups to listen for verses that seem to apply best to either Aaron’s priesthood or that of Jesus.

Distribute copies of the following “High Priest Checklist,” which you have prepared in advance: 1. Sacrifices a bull for own sin. 2. Was tempted but didn’t sin. 3. Was called by God to the office of high priest. 4. Comes from the people for whom he ministers. 5. Offered a sacrifice in Heaven. 6. Has compassion for the ignorant and the wayward. 7. Is part of a superior priesthood. 8. Learned obedience through intense suffering. 9. Presides over worship in the temple. 10. Is considered “perfect.”

Distribute copies of the checklist. Within the larger groups have students form small groups of three or four, and tell them to check off the characteristics for their group. When most groups are done, go down the list and have them identify the items they checked. Both groups will have chosen some items. The suggested answers for Aaron are 1, 3, 4, 6, 9; the items for Jesus are 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10.

Use the following questions to lead a discussion about the similarities and differences between the two priesthoods. 1. In what ways were the priesthoods of Aaron and Jesus similar? 2. How were they different? 3. In what way did Jesus offer a superior sacrifice? 4. Since Jesus wasn’t from the tribe of Levi, how could he be a priest? 5. Why was the priesthood of Melchizedek superior to that of Aaron? Which came first? (See [Genesis 14:18-20](#).)

Into Life

Write the heading “Our Great High Priest” on the board. Then ask students to suggest why Jesus deserves that title. Encourage students to come up with as many short, pithy statements as they can. Then distribute strips of poster board and markers. Assign each pair of students one of the statements, and encourage them to draw it on the poster board in a colorful and creative way. Post the statements around the room. Close with prayer, praising God for sending us Jesus to serve as our mediator, Savior, and great high priest.

Option. Hand out copies of the “Whom Do You Tell?” activity from the reproducible page for students to take home for self-evaluation.