

Out of the Rut **Hebrews 4:14-5:10**

A few years ago I was doing some spring cleanup in our yard and loaded up my two wheel drive S-10 pickup with leaves and brush to dump behind the church in the eternal abyss. I remember driving onto the lawn to the west of the playground and heading back toward the edge of the ravine by the fire pit, but as I got past the playground something didn't feel right. I kept slowing down for some reason even though my foot was still on the gas. Eventually I came to a stop and realized with a bit of surprise that my tires were cutting through the sod and sinking into the mud underneath. I forgot how soft the ground can be after the spring thaw and I was leaving terrible ruts. I wasn't completely stuck yet and was able to pull forward onto more solid ground to turn around, but when I attempted to get out, I eventually got stuck. It didn't matter what I did or how hard I tried, I couldn't get out. I was stuck in a rut.

Sometimes we feel like that in our Christian lives. We keep struggling with the same weaknesses, sins and bad habits. We hold back in timidity, doubt and fear. We struggle to be consistent with spiritual disciplines like reading the Bible and prayer. We feel spiritually dull. No matter how hard we try, it seems like nothing is going to change. We keep reverting to where we were before. It feels like we're stuck in a rut with no way out. That's a common way for Christians to feel, and it's even worse when someone else points it out to us. The negative thoughts start to flood in and become overwhelming and it can feel discouraging and hopeless. "I'm never going to change."

We're continuing our study in the book of Hebrews this morning and that's the way some of the people would have probably felt after reading what we looked at last week. They had just been confronted about their waywardness and unbelief and probably would have felt discouraged and hopeless along with shame and guilt. They too were stuck in a rut and may have felt like there was no way out. When you feel like that, it makes you want to run and hide from God. But in our passage for today the author turns them in exactly the opposite direction and gives them a bright ray of hope. He puts his hand under their drooping chins and lifts them up. He points them to a source of hope that is the very same source we need today when it feels like we're in a rut.

Read Hebrews 4:14-16.

¹⁴ 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. 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. ¹⁶ 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 would have brought great hope to many of his readers. Rather than trying to run and hide from God he calls them to do exactly the opposite. He tells them to approach the throne of grace with confidence to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. How is that possible? If they have been turning against God in unbelief, which the author so painfully confronted them with in the preceding verses, how on earth could they come to him with confidence and expect him to help them? If you and I have been struggling with weakness and sin and have been stuck in a rut, how can we have any confidence that God will listen to us, much less help us and give us grace and mercy?

If you keep showing up late for work and violating the expectations of your employer, who's the last person you want to go and see? It would be your boss – the owner of the company. Yet here, the author of Hebrews tells them to go directly to the top for help. Why would God help us?

The author points them directly to Jesus. Jesus makes all the difference and is our incredible hope. And to help them to see that, the author describes him in a way that would have been very familiar. He tells them that Jesus is their great high priest. Now coming from a Jewish background and being very familiar with the worship and sacrifices at the temple, this was a powerful image for them to consider.

The average Jew was physically separated from the presence of God by the way that the temple was set up. (Picture) The temple was divided into several different sections and courtyards. Any Jew could enter the first courtyard, but only men with sacrifices and priests were allowed to enter the second courtyard. Beyond that was the Holy Place, which only the priests could enter, and beyond that, in the innermost chamber of the temple, was the Holy of Holies, which is where God chose for his manifest presence to dwell. The Holy of Holies was off limits to everyone, except for one person – the high priest. Only he could enter the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement to stand in the presence of God and offer the sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. And that's who the

author was telling his readers that Jesus was. He was the mediator between holy God and sinful man, the go-between so that we could have peace with God and be reconciled to him.

And he points out two things about Jesus and how he perfectly fulfilled his high priestly role. He said they didn't have a high priest who was unable to sympathize with their weaknesses, because in his humanity Jesus was in every respect tempted as they were. He faced every temptation, just like we do. And therefore, he knows what we're going through. He knows how hard it can be. He knows why we're weak and wayward and why sometimes we get stuck in a rut. So that's one way he's our perfect high priest. The other way is that he was without sin. And that's vitally important. Yes, he was tempted as we were, yet he was without sin. His obedience to the father was perfect; his righteousness complete. Though he was tempted, he was without sin and because of that is able to stand in the presence of God the Father to act as our intermediary. He is a perfect advocate to speak on our behalf.

Because of that, as he says in verse 16, we who are trusting in Jesus can draw near to God's throne of grace with confidence. With Jesus as our mediator, who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, yet is without sin, we know that we will receive mercy and find grace from God the Father to help in time of need. So he puts his hand under their drooping heads and lifts them up to see Jesus – the one who restores hope. Like a person who's been afloat at sea and about to give up, and then see the rescue ship coming, Jesus is our great hope to bring us to high ground when we're stuck in a rut.

He further explains this at the beginning of chapter 5, by comparing Jesus to the other high priests.

Read Hebrews 5:1-6.

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. ² He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. ³ Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people. ⁴ And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. ⁵ 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"; ⁶ as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek."

So Jesus is similar to the other high priests in that he was called by God and did not exalt himself. He was appointed from among men to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is also similar because in his humanity he was beset with weakness and thus able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, like I talked about before.

But there is one glaring difference between Jesus and the other high priests and you can see that in verse 3. The other high priests were sinners along with the rest of the people and thus had to offer sacrifices first for their own sins before they could do so for the people. By offering sacrifices for their own sins they became qualified to fulfill their high priestly role. But that's not the way it was with Jesus. Jesus became qualified as the perfect high priest in another way – by living a perfectly sinless life in perfect obedience to the father, and that's what he writes about in the last few verses.

Read Hebrews 5:7-10.

⁷In 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. ⁸Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. ⁹And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, ¹⁰being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

These were the verses that blew me away this week. What do they mean? I was very confused until I read a commentary by J. Vernon McGee who suggested something I've never heard before, but that fits with what's written in this text. Scholars agree that these verses are talking about what happened when Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. And most scholars, when they think about what Jesus asked for, say that his prayers had to do with asking the Father to take away the agony of the cross – If there could be another way.

Mark 14:33-36 says, *“And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. ³⁴And he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch.” ³⁵And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. ³⁶And he said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.”* In Luke 22:44 it says that his

agony in the Garden was so great that *“his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.”*

Now if Jesus was asking the Father to spare him from the agony of the cross, there are a few problems with that. First of all, that doesn't match up at all with the resolve that Jesus previously showed when contemplating his death on the cross. He had never tried to avoid it before, but willingly embraced it as his mission. Why would he change his mind in the Garden? Furthermore, if he was asking the Father to spare him from dying on the cross, then apparently the answer in the Garden was, “no.” But in the verses we just read in Hebrews it sounds like the Father said, “yes” to Jesus' request – *“he was heard because of his reverence.”*

So J. Vernon McGee offers a much different explanation. He thinks that when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane he was facing his final test of perfect obedience that if passed would qualify him to be the perfect high priest. What would be the greatest test of whether the Son would be obedient to the Father? If the Son was presented with the opportunity to die in the Garden in the last moment before his arrest and be spared from the agony of the cross. It is clear from the gospel accounts that Jesus was in such deep agony in the Garden that he thought he was going to die: *“My soul is very sorrowful, even to death”* is what he said. But if Jesus died in the Garden, he wouldn't end up dying on the cross. What would he do? Die in the garden and avoid the agony of the cross, or plead with his heavenly Father to spare his life in the Garden so he could make it to the cross to suffer and die? McGee thinks it's the latter, and so do I.

As Jesus was nearing the point of death in the Garden he fell to the ground to plead with the Father to spare his life: *“If it is possible, let this hour pass from me. Remove this cup from me. Don't let me die in the Garden...”* He didn't want to die before his mission was complete. He wanted to make it all the way to the cross. And in an act of total submission and obedience, he said *“but not what I will, but what you will.”* *“It's not what I want, but if you want me to die right now, I submit to you.”* But he didn't. He demonstrated total obedience and submission to the Father, and passed the test. He went on to die the kind of death that was according to both his and his Father's will. And he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

That seems to make the most sense and if you look at what the author of Hebrews writes again, that's what I think he has in mind. He's describing Jesus'

final act of perfect obedience and submission: *“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 (“Don’t let me die in the Garden...”), and he was heard because of his reverence. (“Not what I will, but what you will...”)*⁸ *Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.*⁹ *And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.”* Because of his perfect obedience that was demonstrated in completeness in the Garden, he was qualified to be our perfect high priest. Able to sympathize with us in our weakness, but perfectly sinless before the Father.

If you feel like you’re stuck in a rut and like there’s no hope for you to get out, I’m happy to say that there is. There’s tremendous hope! But it’s not going to be found in you just trying harder. If you go that direction you will get the same results. We are too weak to overcome our cravings, temptations and sins all on our own. We have to depend on another. We have to put our hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. We have to admit that we don’t have what it takes and then, in that freedom, fix our eyes on the only one who does.

Jesus lived a perfect life and then died on the cross and rose again and because of that you can be set free from the cycle of failing and then trying harder. You don’t have to try harder or do better in order to be acceptable to God because with Jesus as your high priest you already are. Instead of going back to that same cycle turn your attention to Jesus. Put your effort into seeking him and growing in your love for him. You will find that by focusing on him your desires for sin will begin to change and the things you once struggled to do will become easier. You will be able to break out of the rut because he will transform your life.

Because he is our perfect high priest, all your sins are forgiven and you don’t have to earn your way into God’s favor. If you are trusting in Jesus, he already loves and accepts you fully because of what Jesus has done. So you can walk in freedom and you can approach the throne of grace with confidence, knowing that you will receive grace and mercy to help in time of need – even when your fight against sin hasn’t been perfect. Break out of the rut by looking to Jesus and finding your greatest hope in him.