

Intro: Garrison. Pastor. Hebrews 4. Last week we kicked off our Vision Series for the year where we're laying out who we are as a church. We want to be a Jesus-Centered Family on Mission with Him. This week my job is to unpack some of what we mean when we talk about Jesus Centered **Pray**.

Martin Luther, the theologian who started the Reformation, was rumored to once have been approached by a church member and asked - "Why do you feel the need to bring up the gospel in your sermon every week?"

"Well, because week after week you forget it, because week after week you walk in here looking like a people who don't believe the gospel. And until you walk in looking like people who are truly liberated by the truth of the gospel, I'm going to continue to preach it to you." Later when telling this story to a group of clergy: "Most necessary it is, therefore, that we should know the gospel well, teach it unto others, and beat it into their heads continually."

Now a lot of churches are known for a lot of different messages. - politics, self-help, care for the poor, etc. But we have one message- the Gospel of Jesus.

His life, death and resurrection for us. And to be honest, we want to be like the band that only knows one song. And we're going to play it on repeat. We don't take requests. Can't play them. We just know the one song. We want to be known for one thing- Jesus. And we're going to preach it and remind ourselves of it every single week.

That's ultimately what we mean when we say 'we're Jesus-Centered.'--we know the one song. That's what we're about.

Now there's a lot of ways that you could go about preaching Jesus Centered. But I think one of the best ways to unpack it is with two categories we'll hit over the next 2 weeks.

1. Jesus is our Great High Priest
2. Jesus is our King of Kings.

For this morning: Jesus is our Great High Priest.

Hop over to Hebrews 4.

14 Since then we have ^da great high priest ^ewho has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, ^flet us hold fast our confession.

Pause there. If you're not familiar with the book of Hebrews, it's a letter written to a church of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. This church is struggling due to false teaching and they're mixing Jewish practices and the Jewish law with the Christian life. So the writer is pushing back on these false teachings with a ton of theological arguments.

You'll see the writer unpack Christ's divine nature, how He's greater than angels, greater than Moses(which was a big thing to say) and other OT figures.

Which is important to note that something we get from Hebrews is that all of the OT is pointing to Jesus. The law. The leaders and kings. The prophets. All pointing to Jesus. And one of the lines that gets drawn is that Jesus is our great high priest. (joke?)

In order to understand what that means, let's talk a little bit about priests in the Old Testament.

So jump with me to Exodus 28.

1 "Then bring near to you ^aAaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests—Aaron and Aaron's sons, ^bNadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar.

And Leviticus 21:6-8

6 They shall be holy to their God and ^cnot profane the name of their God. For they offer the Lord's food offerings, ^dthe bread of their God; therefore they shall be holy. 7 ^eThey shall not marry a prostitute or a woman who has been defiled, neither shall they marry a woman ^fdivorced from her husband, for the priest is holy to his God. 8 You shall sanctify him, for he offers the bread of your God. He shall be holy to you, for ^gI, the Lord, who sanctify you, ^ham holy.

Lots to unpack here:

Early on in Scripture God establishes a special relationship with Abraham and his family. In Exodus, we find Abraham's family - God's chosen people, in slavery. God frees them from slavery in a miraculous way (read Exodus!).

And after that he establishes a new, special way of relating to his people. He tells the people to build a tabernacle (a big tent where His presence would be) and He establishes the office of the priest. This office would be hereditary. Moses' brother, Aaron of the Levite tribe was the first priest, and the priesthood was always to remain in his line. Priests were essentially the spiritual leaders of Israel.

Priests had to be "whole" physically (without any physical defects) and holy in their conduct.

There were extensive laws for all priests to maintain their cleanliness and holiness. Because at the time in order to worship God, you'd have to maintain the law and certain rules around purity in order to worship.

And many of those rules revolved around animal sacrifices. See the Jews in Jesus' time, and for hundreds of years before, still knew they were sinful like we do. They believed just like us that we're all fallen and guilty before God. They knew that the punishment for sin is death.

So God had them set up extensive sacrificial systems.

You'd have to go to the temple and sacrifice an animal in order to make yourself right with God. Blood had to be shed in order to be forgiven. Throughout the year, the priests would help people make individual sacrifices in the temple every day.

If you boil it down, the priests functioned as a group of leaders that mediated on the behalf of the Israelites. Or another way of saying it: they stood between a holy God and a sinful people praying for forgiveness and mercy. And they facilitated the sacrificial system.

Now even among the priests, there was a special class known as the High Priests.

The high priest was the supreme religious leader of the Israelites. All the rules of normal priests were maintained by the high priest but with a little extra. That's because of his main job.

The high priest's main responsibility was to make the offering to God on the day of atonement. Now atonement very simply means to make a wrong, right. To make amends. Think about it like this - if you were to borrow my car and then wreck it. That was a wrong you need to atone for or make amends for. To atone for the wrong you committed you would buy me a new car.

That's how atonement worked in old testament sacrifices. The Israelites had sinned against God, and something needed to be done to pay for and make amends for that sin before God. So they would make sacrifices.

And the Israelites had a specific day in the year set aside where a sacrifice would be made on behalf of the entire nation.

Here's how it's talked about in Exodus 30:10.

10 ^sAaron shall make atonement on its horns once a year. With the blood of the ^tsin offering of atonement he shall make atonement for it once in the year throughout your generations. It is most holy to the Lord."

Now there was a really particular way that this went down. Within the temple there were 3 sections designated for worship. The Outer Court, The Holy Place and the Most Holy Place; together these were referred to as the tabernacle. All of these were sacred as it was a place of worship but the Most Holy Place or Holy of Holies was unique.

It was a small room separated from the rest of the temple by a thick curtain or a veil. Inside, it held some of Israel's greatest relics; the ark of the covenant(which held the 10 commandments, manna and Aarons staff). On top of the ark was a special area called the mercy seat. Which was seen as the throne of God.

While God is omnipresent, this location was seen as a special place for God to dwell in the middle of His people.

, He tells Moses that He would appear in the Most Holy Place. Hence why it's separated from the rest of the temple by the veil.

The veil existed as a barrier between man and God. The holiness of God could not be accessed by anyone but the high priest, and then only once a year.

God can tolerate no sin so the veil and the elaborate rituals undertaken by the high priest were a reminder that man could not carelessly enter God's presence. Anyone who entered this chamber when he was not supposed to would be killed by God.

—which is worth noting, and we'll get into this more next week- God is much much bigger and holier than we realize. And should be taken much more seriously than most of us do in our lives.

So before the high priest entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, he had to wash himself, put on special clothing, bring burning incense to let the smoke cover his eyes from a direct view of God, and bring sacrificial blood with him to make atonement for sins.

The high priest would enter in, make the sacrifice and then get out. Many scholars say that you'd be utterly terrified as the high priest on the day of atonement and that they'd even tie a rope around the priest's waist or leg just in case. Why? Because if he gets part of this wrong he would literally drop dead, and no one else could enter so they would have to drag him out. They knew that sinful humans and a holy God don't mix. They were terrified. But that was their main job as high priest. To enter into the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement.

So if I had to sum up what it meant to be a high priest:

- 1. A man who is holy before God.**
- 2. A man who enters into the presence of God to atone, or pay for, the sins of the people.**

The problem however is that this system was incomplete. The sacrifices didn't change peoples' hearts. And the people didn't change. It wasn't enough. It had to be repeated every year. Sacrifices had to be constantly made.

We needed a new High Priest. Which is exactly, according to Hebrews 4, who Jesus came to be. The author of Hebrews gives us more detail in Hebrews 9.

11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest ^aof the good things that have come,⁵ then through ^bthe greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) 12 he ^centered ^donce for all into the holy places, not by means of ^ethe blood of goats and calves but ^fby means of his own blood, ^gthus securing an eternal redemption. 13 For if ^hthe blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with ⁱthe ashes of a heifer, sanctify⁶ for the purification of the flesh, 14 how much more will ^jthe blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit ^koffered himself without blemish to God, ^lpurify our⁷ conscience ^mfrom dead works ⁿto serve the living God....26 But as it is, ^ohe has appeared ^ponce for all ^qat the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.

Jesus was the better, perfect high priest. When Christ died He atones for us, not with the blood of animals but with His own blood.

The animals that were slaughtered in the OT were only foreshadowing of what was to come. These animals without blemish were pointing to the true sacrifice, God Himself made flesh, who would become the perfect Spotless Lamb.

And unlike the old system, this sacrifice will actually change you. Your conscience has been purified; your mind, your soul is being transformed to serve the living God!

And it says He did it once for all to put away sin by His sacrifice. The sacrificial system is done. Your sin has been wiped away by His sacrifice. There are no more sacrifices. There are no more holy of holy places that only one man goes to. Look at what Matthew 27 says happens to the Most Holy Place.

51 And behold, ^athe curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.

The curtain separated the presence of God from the people. The Israelites couldn't be near the presence of God because of their sin. But when Jesus goes into the Most Holy Place, He deals with sin forever and clothes us in His righteousness, so that we can be near God.

The curtain rips in half, showing that we're no longer separated from God, but reconciled by the death of His Son! Now through God's spirit, all of God's people have full access to God all of the time! What amazing news.

Jesus is our great High priest. What this means for us is:

1. **Jesus is our mediator.** Like the priests of old Jesus goes before us into the presence of God to make us right with God. He prays and pleads on our behalf even now.

But He doesn't just mediate a sacrifice. He becomes it:

2. **Jesus is our sacrifice.** He offers Himself in our place. He made atonement once and for all. For those in Christ we are forgiven, forever, no more needs to be done.

But Hebrews doesn't leave it there. Yes, that's huge news. But there's even more for us:

15 For we do not have a high priest ^awho is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been ^dtempted as we are, ^byet without sin.

Not only is He our sacrifice and mediator. He's also our:

3. **Jesus is our friend.**

As Hebrews says, we have this high priest who has gone between us and God, paying the price for our sin. Which would have been enough, but there's more. This priest of ours isn't cold and standoffish towards us. He doesn't treat us as a burden, like gosh look how much I did for you will you get it together now? Or, I'm perfect, you're not, so if you want my love, if you want to pray to me you better clean yourself up. No.

It says this high priest is able to sympathize with us too. That He's been tempted as we are in every way that we have. Without sin!

Some of us don't really get that. There's something about when someone is better than us, or we perceive them as better, we struggle to believe that they could understand us. So Jesus being perfect... how could He actually understand and sympathize with me in my weakness?

But that's not true with Jesus. He's perfect. And He understands temptation and our sinful hearts deeply. In fact, He knows the depths of your sin and weaknesses better than you do. CS Lewis says it this way:

No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good. A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of the German army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness — they have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it: and Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means — the only complete realist.”

So because of His perfection, He can sympathize perfectly. There are things about your heart, your weaknesses, your sin that you're aware of and things that you aren't yet. And He sympathizes through it all.

Jesus' heart towards us is one of grace and kindness. In our weaknesses, He gives grace. He understands. Not just in theory. But from experience.

This is why it's so important that Jesus comes to earth as an actual human person. He puts on flesh. He was tempted just as we are. He experienced temptation, pain, grief, loss, rejection and the brokenness of the world. He has real emotions, just like us. Yet He did it perfectly.

Which means He's our perfect savior, but also our perfect friend.

This has huge implications for us. Look back to v 16:

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.*

Because Jesus is our savior and friend we go to Him. No longer are we separated from God by the curtain. Our high priest entered the Holy of Holies and ripped the curtain wide open. We have access to God now. Always at all times. We draw near to the throne with confidence. And receive mercy and find grace to help us in our times of need.

This will change your life! Why? Well how many of us if we're honest when we're tempted to sin, when we're afraid, when we're ashamed, when we're grieving; default to self sufficiency? Self reliance? Or

believing that God doesn't care? Which really fuels the self reliance to begin with. That's the human condition. Our default is to avoid the throne of grace and rely on ourselves.

To try to be the mediator. To try to save yourself. It won't work. It's exhausting.

Jesus says I'm your savior. I'm your friend. Come to me and find mercy and grace that has the power to fuel you and change your life. Love how pastor Ligon Duncan says it:

Jesus can sympathize with all our weaknesses because He lived as a human being and experienced the things that we experience. According to John Owen, Christ's sympathy with us means three things. First of all, it means that He is concerned for us. Christ is concerned for us when we are hungry. He is concerned for us when we are in trouble. He is concerned for us when we are tempted. Secondly, Christ's sympathy with us means that He can relieve our suffering. He can provide for our daily needs. He can save us when we are in trouble. He can help us avoid engaging in sin. And thirdly, Christ's sympathy with us means that He can experience what we feel emotionally, insofar as our emotions are not sinful. He rejoices with us when we rejoice for good and godly things. He mourns with us when we mourn over the loss of good and godly things.

Now let me get this on the ground for us. When we talk about being Jesus-Centered, you need to know that this is a massive part of what we're talking about. We really believe it to be true. It's not just a platitude. We believe the Gospel so therefore being Jesus-Centered means we live in light of it. That's what we preach and it's what we hold each other to as well.

Because we have a great savior and friend we run to Him in our times of need.

- When we're lonely. Jesus Himself was lonely. His friends and disciples abandoned Him on His way to the cross. In your loneliness, He sees you and knows. And He's there. He will help you.
- When we're anxious. Jesus understands the temptation towards fear and anxiety. He sweats blood in agony the night before the cross, knowing what's to come. He sees you and knows. And He's there. He will help you.
- When we're grieving. Jesus Himself was called a man of sorrows. He wept over the pain sin and death have wracked on the world and still does. He sees you and knows. And He's there. He will help you.
- When you're tempted. Sexual sin. Anger. Lying or twisting the truth. Jesus Himself was tempted face to face with Satan. It took a toll on Him. He sees you and knows. He's there. He will help you.
- When you're ashamed and feel like a failure. Jesus says come to me and let me clothe you in my righteousness. He will help you.

He loves you. He's made a way for you. He sympathizes with your weaknesses.

Gospel Conclusion

Christianity is unique amongst world religions. If you're figuring out the whole Jesus thing and are unsure, one thing you have to know is that this is unlike anything out there. Every other philosophy and world religion says this is what you have to do to be a good person or be made right with God. It's exhausting. Christianity says look at what Jesus has done for you. Every other religion says this is how you get to God. Christianity says God has come to you.

For the rest of the series, we're going to talk a lot about what we're called to as a church. It's a lot of practical things we are supposed to do. We're called to show up, serve, confess, give of ourselves and sacrifice. All good stuff. But don't miss that you are loved by God.

With his death He tears open the veil that separated us and welcomes You into relationship with open arms. And that never changes. He never adjusts His love and kindness towards you based off how you feel. Or how bad you were this week. Or how little or how much you prayed. Or how much you read your Bible. It's always, draw near to me, I've made a way, I see you, I know you, I love you.

Pray.

Stand and receive the prayer.

Communion.