

## **“Cross that Bridge When It Comes to You”**

Hebrews 4:15-5:10

*Series: Love Came Down Week 2. Jesus the High Priest*

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Rivers bring water. Rivers give life. Yet rivers also kill. The river becomes a barrier. When Harmon Parker, a bricklayer, was serving people in Africa he heard a frequent and unusual request. The people would say, “Thank you for the fishponds, the irrigation systems, the wells. But can you build us a bridge? Our children can’t go to school; we can’t go to market or the health clinic. If anyone tries to cross the river they get swept away.” In Kenya, a flowing stream can instantly swell twelve to fifteen feet in a flash flood. Yet no one was building bridges.

For Harmon it was a call from God. Moving to Kenya with his wife and three-year-old son he set about building footbridges for villages which suffered from the dangers of flash flooding and crocodile and hippo attacks. “I hate it when I hear someone has drowned when they didn’t need to.” Offering technical assistance, he helps the people to build their own bridge.

One of the men who works alongside Harmon is David Kakuko. “Before the bridge, so many who lost their lives,” remembers Kakuko. “I know. I have no parents because this river took them.” Harmon Parker formed a charity called “Bridging the Gap in Africa.” To date he has built 80 footbridges and has a vision to build half a million. Now villagers can cross that bridge because it came to them.

Jesus the Carpenter came to build a bridge to save lives. In our Advent series Love Came Down, we are examining key roles Jesus fulfilled when He came down to earth: Prophet, Priest, King, Servant, Shepherd and Savior. In each one, Jesus meets and exceeds what we expect. Last week we saw how Jesus is THE Prophet came to show us the way to heaven because He is so much more than just a Prophet. Today we see Jesus is not just a Priest but the Great High Priest. As the Great High Priest, Jesus actually becomes the way to heaven. He is the Bridge to God.

Presbyterians do not have priests. I was in the grocery store recently and someone called out, “Father Doug.” After a few minutes I realized they were talking to me. It was someone who heard me speak at a community event. I didn’t correct the person. I also did not mention my wife and kids. If you were raised in the Catholic or Orthodox or Episcopal Church your pastor was called a priest. For Presbyterians, every believer is a priest with a direct connection to God. Yet we do have one Great High Priest.

The role of a priest is crucial in the Old Testament. Moses’ brother Aaron is the first priest, and all priests are his descendants. Priests are the go-betweens. They stand between God and humanity. When people sinned under the Old Covenant, they brought an animal as an offering. The priest at the Temple in Jerusalem received this gift and sacrificed it on the altar. The lamb you offered became your substitute. It died in your place. It paid the penalty you deserved. It suffered the punishment that should have fallen on you. The priest was a peacemaker between you and God. By offering this sacrifice, the priest helped reconcile you to God.

The leader of all the priests is the High Priest. In addition to performing the most essential sacrifices, the High Priest has the special duty of entering the Holy of Holies, the most sacred place of the Temple. In the days of Solomon, it was the innermost room where the Ark of the Covenant lay, where the presence of God touched the earth. It was a dark and mysterious chamber filled with incense. Only priests were permitted to enter the Temple and only the High Priest could pass through the heavy woven curtain into the Holy of Holies. He could enter only on one day of the year: Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement. On that day, the High Priest made sacrifices for his sins and all the people of Israel. Each year, the High Priest performed this ritual reconciling God with His people for one more year. Through the ministry of the High Priest they were atoned - “at-one” - again. So, the High Priest is a bridge uniting the Israelites with the Lord.

The Letter to the Hebrews gives us a job description for the High Priest.

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. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. And no one takes this honor on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was. Hebrews 5:1-4

Like all good bridges, a High Priest must have a foot firmly on our side. As this job description points out, he is chosen from the people and selected as their representative to God. He is one of us. The High Priest is gentle with us since he is an imperfect human being like us. In fact, the High Priest offers sacrifices not just for the people, but also for his own sins. Priests don't run for this office. They are called by God. In the ancient days, the High Priest had the job for life.

‘Yet there were problems with this bridge. It was a powerful position. That's why, in Jesus' day, the High Priest was chosen by the Roman governors. They did not obey God nor did they represent the people. The bridge was not firmly attached to either side. What's more, the High Priest was a sinner just like us. He needed to offer sacrifices for his own sins as well as for others. additionally, the sacrifices he offered only cleansed the outer sins. As Hebrews says,

The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. Hebrews 9:13

These sacrifices took care of our *sins*, the things we do wrong, but not *sin*, the inner power which causes us to do wrong. All these sacrifices were like an over-the-counter medication that removes the symptoms but leaves the disease untreated. They clean up the outside but leave the inside, the real issue, untouched. This is why the sacrifices are repeated. Every year the High Priest must go again into the Holy of Holies to reconcile God and the people once again.

Yet the greatest weakness of this bridge to God was the fact that it never reached God. The High Priest went into the Holy of Holies in the Temple, a building here on earth. That's as close as any human could get to God. Even getting part of the way across the gap still misses the mark completely. “Almost” is not enough. Then, forty years after Jesus, the Temple was utterly destroyed by the Romans and never rebuilt. If that is the way to God, it utterly collapsed like a bridge falling into a swollen Kenyan river. So God provided another way.

**Jesus is the Bridge Anchored on Our Side.** The author of Hebrews declares, 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. 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. Hebrews 4:14-15

Jesus is completely human. He was born a helpless baby, depended on parents, wrestled through the tough teen years, held down a job, faced hunger, cold, heat, exhaustion, pain, and sadness. Jesus knows and understands your fears, feelings and frustrations. Do you have to deal with the seven deadly sins: anger, envy, greed, gluttony, pride, laziness, lust? So did He. The only difference is He did not give in to them. He's the only human in history who did not sin.

On Thanksgiving I got down on the carpet and crawled around with my youngest grandchildren. For a brief moment, I experienced the world from their point of view. When God became human in Jesus He did more than just crawl on the carpet. He entered into all our sorrow and sadness, all our fears and feelings, all struggles and shortcomings. In your pain and loneliness you may be tempted to say, "God you just don't understand." But He does. He's tasted it all. And because He did not give in to it, we can lean on Him so He can lead us out of it. The author of Hebrews says,

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. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him Hebrews 5:7-9

Jesus prays for you and brings you to His Father in Heaven. How can a human be tempted in every way, just as we are, yet not sin? That's the second side of this bridge.

**Jesus is the Bridge Anchored on God's Side.** Jesus overcomes all the weaknesses of the Old Covenant's bridge to God. Jesus was chosen by God the Father not a Roman governor.

And no one takes this honor on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was. 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." Hebrews 5:4-5

Jesus was fully human and, at the same time, fully God. He is the only Being in all creation that can bridge the gap. And what is that gap, that bottomless canyon? Our sin. All the wrong we do digs an ever deeper hole, an enormous gulf, a raging impassable river between us and God. The former High Priests all had sin on their souls. This High Priest faced temptation but did not sin. The former High Priests could only enter a human-made Temple here on earth which was later destroyed. This High Priest crossed all the way over into heaven.

Now the main point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being. Hebrews 8:1-2

For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Hebrews 9:24

Jesus made it to the other side. He crossed over more than just a swollen flash flooded stream. He is the way across the bottomless canyon of our sin. He reaches out a hand to you and says, "Let me help you across." How is it possible for Jesus to be the way across our sin when so many others failed?

**Jesus is the Bridge that Spans Our Sin.** Under the old system, sacrifices had to be offered again and again every time we sinned. It takes care of the outer symptoms but not the inner sickness of sin. Hebrews says,

The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God. Hebrews 7:18-19

We need something better. We need a High Priest who is human but never sinned. We need a High Priest who lives here on earth who made it to heaven. We need, above all, a High Priest who can stop the endless cycle of sacrifices by offering one great sacrifice that cures our inner sin problem once and for all. No ram, no goat, no heifer, no lamb will ever be enough. So Jesus, the Great High Priest, offers Himself as the sacrifice. Hebrews says, Jesus did not,

...enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Hebrews 9:25-26

As John the Baptist says, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). His death is the one sacrifice which cleanses us from the disease of sin within. His Cross is the only crossing that leads us back to God. Some say there are many pathways up the mountain to God. Take any one you choose. They will all get you there. The Bible tells a different story. It says there is only one way across the unfathomable abyss of sin and that Way is Jesus, the God-human who laid down His life across the chasm separating God and us.

For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant. Hebrews 9:15

Now there remains just one decision. Will you cross the bridge? Two things usually prevent people from trusting this Bridge and taking this Crossing. One is pride. We want to do it our way. We want to make it on our power or by our own pathway. We don't want anyone to tell us we are sinners or that we need a Savior. The other reason we don't trust this Bridge is fear. We are not sure it is strong enough to hold the weight of our sin. We are not sure we will be allowed to Cross or that we can afford the cost. We think others may be worthy of salvation but we've sinned too many times for God to forgive us. If fear is keeping you from crossing, please hear this: It's all true. It's all for you. You are completely forgiven and it's all free. Hear again this unconditional invitation.

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. 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. 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 4:14-16

Through the sacrifice of our Great High Priest we can approach God’s throne and receive, not judgment or wrath, but mercy and grace. We can enter His throne room with confidence. We can receive all the help in our struggles and our time need. Hold on. Hold firmly to that faith.

In 2010 Harmon Parker, the bridge builder, was honored as one of the Top Ten Heroes of the Year by CNN. But honors and awards are not why he does it. His desire is to love Christ and to serve people.

I want to inspire all of you, no matter what your ages are. Everyone one of us has the innate ability every day to be a bridge. There are bridges of hope, bridges of peace, bridges of life. Jesus is our bridge. I’m not a hero. Not even close. But there’s a Hero inside me. And he guided me. He truly is our hero. I feel I'm blessed to do what I'm doing. I build bridges because I want to save lives.<sup>1</sup>

Cross the Bridge of our Hero. And then be a bridge for others.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.saddlebackcovenant.com/sermons/bridging-the-gap/>