

Session 4: A High Priest Able to Sympathize

A Kingdom of Priests: Priesthood in the New Covenant

Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim

The study crosses fully into the New Testament tonight, and it arrives at a person before it arrives at an argument. From Hebrews 2, 4, and 5 the group discovers what kind of high priest Jesus is: one made like his brothers in every respect, tempted as we are yet without sin, appointed by the Father rather than self-exalted, and perfected through suffering. Two live discoveries anchor the night: the group traces Hebrews 5:7 ("loud cries and tears") back to Gethsemane, and Hebrews 5:4 ("one does not take the honor upon himself") back to the rebellion of Korah. The aim is that by the end of the night, "Jesus is our high priest" has stopped being a slogan and started being a face.

Catholic Touchstone

The Catechism teaches that the one priesthood of Christ fulfills and surpasses everything the old priesthood prefigured: he is the one mediator between God and men, and his sacrifice, offered once for all, is unique (CCC 1544 to 1545). It also teaches that in Gethsemane, in his agony the sinless One accepted the cup, his human will consenting to the Father (CCC 612). Hebrews holds both truths in one frame: total solidarity with us, and a priesthood no one else could exercise.

What You Need to Know

The Letter to the Hebrews is the New Testament's sustained meditation on Christ's priesthood, and the group has spent three weeks unknowingly preparing to read it. Everything they discovered on their own, the carrying of names, the mediator who himself needed mediation, the "once in the year" that never ends, the oath of Psalm 110, is the raw material Hebrews works with. Tonight deliberately takes the letter's pastoral chapters first (2, 4, 5) and saves its heavy artillery (7 through 10) for next week; do not let an eager group drag you into chapter 7 early.

Start with Hebrews 2:14 to 18. The logic is stunning: to be a priest FOR human beings, the Son became one OF them, "made like his brethren in every respect," so that he might be "a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people." Where every son of Aaron was a sinner who happened to be human, this priest is the sinless One who chose to be human. His solidarity for the work is the Incarnation itself; the appointment is the Father's (5:5 to 6). Note verse 16 and Hebrews 1:6 in the background: he is the "first-born," and he is "not ashamed to call them brethren" (2:11); the firstborn thread from Numbers 3 is quietly waking up.

Hebrews 4:14 to 16 gives the night its warmth. "We have not 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." The verb is strong: he suffers-with. And the consequence is an invitation with no asterisk: "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace." Every believer is summoned to draw near; be clear and glad about this, because it is Catholic teaching, and because tonight's steelman will try to turn this very verse against the Church.

Hebrews 5:1 to 10 supplies the anatomy of priesthood: taken from among men, appointed on behalf of men in relation to God, able to deal gently with the wayward, and, decisively, called by God rather than self-appointed: "one does not take the honor upon himself... 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" (citing Psalm 2:7), and then, inevitably, Psalm 110:4, the group's own memory verse, quoted back to them by Scripture itself. Let them find it on the page and enjoy the recognition. Verses 7 to 9 then hand you Gethsemane without naming it: "loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death... he learned obedience through what he suffered." The group finds the Gospel scene themselves.

The steelman tonight is the strongest one so far, and it comes from inside tonight's own texts: if Jesus is the one sympathetic high priest, and if every believer is invited to draw near to the throne with confidence, then human priests are worse than unnecessary; they rebuild the barrier Christ tore down. Handle this with total honesty. Affirm the access; the Church teaches it (the whole common priesthood rests on it). The answer tonight is deliberately partial: Hebrews itself sees no contradiction between universal access and ordered ministry (the same letter says "obey your leaders... for they are keeping watch over your souls," 13:17, and Hebrews 5:4's rule against self-appointment implies real, appointed office); and in Hebrews the high priest is never a barrier between the people and God but precisely the God-given way of approach. Whether and how Christ shares his priesthood is the question the rest of this study answers; tell the group plainly that the full answer is still four sessions away.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Tonight is the hinge where roots visibly become fulfillment. Hebrews 5 quotes Psalm 2:7 and Psalm 110:4 as the Father's own words of appointment; the group's memory verse from last week reappears inside the New Testament. Hebrews 5:4's "one does not take the honor upon himself" sends the group back to Numbers 16 and 17 (Korah's rebellion and Aaron's budding staff), where God settled forever that priesthood is conferred, not claimed. And Hebrews 5:7's loud cries and tears send them to Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36 to 44). Both connections are live discoveries; do not pre-announce either destination.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Gregory of Nazianzus

"What has not been assumed has not been healed." St. Gregory's famous line, written against those who wanted a Christ with something human missing, is the deep grammar of Hebrews 2:17: he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, because whatever the priest does not share, he cannot carry to God. Our whole humanity, body, mind, fear, and tears, went into the sanctuary with him.

Letter 101, to Cledonius

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Augustine

"He is the priest who offers, and he is himself the offering." Augustine compresses the whole mystery into one line: at the altar of the cross, priest and victim are the same person. No son of Aaron could say that; every one of them offered blood not his own, first for his own sins. This priest has no sins of his own, and the blood is his.

City of God, Book 10, chapter 20

VOICE OF THE CHURCH St. Leo the Great

In his celebrated Tome, received with acclamation at the Council of Chalcedon, St. Leo teaches that in the one person of Christ each nature performs what is proper to it in communion with the other: the Word doing what belongs to the Word, the flesh what belongs to the flesh. This is the deep grammar of Hebrews' high priest: one person, truly God and truly man, which is why his single offering can carry every human being in it. (A faithful summary of the Tome.)

Letter to Flavian (the Tome), received at the Council of Chalcedon

Catechism Connection

- CCC 1544 to 1545: Christ the one mediator and unique high priest; his sacrifice offered once for all, fulfilling and surpassing the old priesthood.
- CCC 612: the agony at Gethsemane; the sinless One accepting the cup, taking on the full weight of our condition, his human will consenting to the Father.

Thread Watch (leader only)

- THREAD A (sealed guess): untouched. Two more weeks. Hebrews 5:10 names Melchizedek in passing; if eyes light up, enjoy it and move on.
- THREAD B (serve and guard): quiet development; the sympathetic high priest "keeps" his own in temptation (2:18, "he is able to help those who are tempted"). One sentence if it fits naturally.
- THREAD C (the firstborn): developing. Hebrews 1:6 calls him "the first-born"; 2:11 to 12, not ashamed to call us brethren. The firstborn who was swapped out at Sinai has walked back on stage in person. You may say that sentence aloud tonight; it earns its keep.
- THREAD D (kingdom of priests): untouched tonight. The "draw near" invitation of 4:16 is its seed; do not label it yet.

Session Goals

1. The group articulates from Hebrews 2 why the Incarnation is Christ's priestly qualification.
2. The group discovers Gethsemane behind Hebrews 5:7 with the texts open.
3. The group discovers Korah and the budding staff behind Hebrews 5:4, and states the principle: priesthood is conferred by God, never self-claimed.
4. The group recognizes their own memory verse (Psalm 110:4) quoted in Hebrews 5:6 and feels the study's architecture clicking together.
5. The access steelman is felt at full strength, the universal invitation of 4:16 is wholeheartedly affirmed, and the ministerial question is honestly deferred, not dodged.

Timed Plan (90 minutes)

- 0:00 Welcome and opening prayer (5 min)
- 0:05 Win questions (10 min)
- 0:15 Build I: Made like his brethren, Hebrews 2 (20 min)
- 0:35 Build II: Able to sympathize, Hebrews 4, and the steelman (20 min)
- 0:55 Build III: Appointed, not self-exalted, Hebrews 5 and Korah (15 min)
- 1:10 Build IV: Loud cries and tears, Gethsemane discovery (10 min)

- 1:20 Send (5 min)
- 1:25 Live It, memory verse, closing prayer (5 min)

Pre-chosen cuts for a 75-minute room: drop the Dig Deeper, read the Korah background yourself in three sentences instead of the full live discovery (keep Numbers 17:8 on the table), and take one Win question. Never cut the Gethsemane discovery or the steelman.

Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Leader: Lord Jesus, high priest of our confession, you were tempted as we are and you carried our flesh into the holy place. Tonight, as we read the letter written about you, let us not merely learn about a priesthood; let us meet a Priest. We ask this in your own name. Amen.

Win

1. When something goes badly wrong in your life, what kind of person do you instinctively want beside you: the expert who can fix it, or the friend who has been through it? Why?
2. Who is someone who truly gets what your daily life is like, and how did they earn that? What is it like to be understood without having to explain?

Build I: Made Like His Brethren

Read Hebrews 2:14 to 18 aloud.

Q1. According to verse 17, WHY did the Son have to be made like his brothers in every respect? What is the job title this passage attaches to that reason?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

"So that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people." The Incarnation grounds his priestly solidarity; the office itself, as 5:4 to 6 will insist, is the Father's appointment. Aaron's sons were sinners who happened to share our nature; this priest is the sinless Son who chose to share it, down to blood, death, and temptation (2:14, 18). And notice 2:11: "he is not ashamed to call them brethren." Recall together, briefly, who got swapped out of priesthood at Sinai: the firstborn of every family. Hebrews has already called Jesus "the first-born" (1:6). The firstborn has walked back on stage, in person.

Build II: Able to Sympathize

Read Hebrews 4:14 to 16 aloud, then have everyone re-read verse 16 silently.

Q2. What exactly does verse 15 claim about Jesus and temptation? And who, according to verse 16, is invited to draw near to the throne of grace, and how?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Tempted "in every respect... as we are, yet without sin": real temptation, fully felt (sinlessness means he never gave in, not that it was easy; a classic spiritual reflection, not a doctrine, adds that only the one who never surrenders feels temptation's weight to the very end). And the invitation of verse 16 has no fine print: "let US draw near with confidence," all believers, directly, to the throne of grace itself. Affirm this without hedging. The Catholic Church teaches exactly this access; your baptism is your standing invitation. Do not let anyone leave tonight thinking Catholicism ration access to God.

STEELMAN: BUILD IT UP. At full strength: "A Protestant friend, Bible open to this very page, says: there it is. One sympathetic high priest, and every believer invited to draw near with confidence. The curtain tore. So what exactly is a Catholic priest for? Any human priesthood now rebuilds the barrier Christ died to remove; it inserts a man where Hebrews just removed one. If you take Hebrews 4:16 seriously, the Catholic priesthood is not just unnecessary; it is a step backward. Let that one land. It is the strongest objection this study will face, and it is made from a true verse."

Q3. First: what in that objection is simply TRUE, and should be affirmed with joy? Second: from tonight's chapters alone, what complicates the conclusion?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

True and to be affirmed: direct access for every believer is real; Christ's priesthood is unique and unrepeatable; no Christian minister replaces, supplements, or improves on Christ. If anyone has been taught to fear approaching God without an intermediary, Hebrews 4:16 is God's own correction, and the Church says amen.

What complicates the conclusion, from this same letter: (1) In Hebrews the high priest is never a barrier between people and God; he is the God-given WAY of approach. The objection quietly assumes priest means obstacle; the letter's whole vocabulary assumes priest means access. (2) The same letter that says "draw near" also says "obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls" (13:17): universal access and real, ordered office coexist in Hebrews without embarrassment. (3) Tonight's own chapter insists that priesthood is never self-claimed but conferred (5:4). And be fair about scope: Hebrews 13:17's leaders are not called priests, and many Protestants affirm ordained leadership while denying a sacrificial priesthood; these verses show that universal access and real, ordered office COEXIST in Hebrews, no more. Then say, honestly: whether and how Christ SHARES his priesthood, with a priestly people and with ordained men, is the question the rest of this study exists to answer, from the text. Tonight we do not finish it; we refuse to fake it. Sessions 6 through 11 are the answer.

Build III: Appointed, Not Self-Exalted

Read Hebrews 5:1 to 6 aloud.

Q4. Verse 4 lays down a rule about how a man becomes a priest. What is the rule? And in verses 5 to 6, who appoints Christ, and with which two Old Testament quotations? (One of them you may recognize.)

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

The rule: "one does not take the honor upon himself, but he is called by God, just as Aaron was." Priesthood is conferred, never seized. Christ keeps the rule perfectly: "Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest"; the Father appoints him with Psalm 2:7 ("You are my Son") and Psalm 110:4, your memory verse, quoted back to you by the New Testament itself: "You are a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek." Enjoy the moment; the study's rails just met the train.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Say: "That rule in verse 4, no one takes this honor on himself, was written in blood and almonds somewhere in Numbers 16 and 17. A rebellion, and then a sign involving a wooden staff. Find the story: what did the rebels want, what happened, and what settled the question permanently?" Give the group several minutes; it is a longer hunt. (Key verses: Numbers 16:1 to 7, 16:31 to 35, 17:1 to 8.)

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Korah, a Levite, with 250 leaders of the congregation, demands the priesthood itself: "all the congregation are holy, every one of them... why then do you exalt yourselves?" Moses puts it to God with censers of incense; the earth opens under Korah, fire consumes the 250, and then God settles it with a sign of pure grace rather than terror: twelve staffs laid in the tent of meeting before the testimony overnight, and in the morning Aaron's dead wood has sprouted, budded, blossomed, and borne ripe almonds. Priesthood belongs to the one God makes alive to it. Notice the irony worth naming gently: Korah's slogan ("all the congregation are holy") was TRUE, Exodus 19:6 said so, and it still did not entitle him to seize the priesthood. A holy people and a conferred priesthood were never contradictions in Israel. File that; it returns in Session 8.

DIG DEEPER

Hebrews 5:8, "he learned obedience through what he suffered," has puzzled readers for centuries: how does the sinless Son LEARN obedience? A traditional theological explanation, held carefully: not by moving from disobedience to obedience, but by living out in real human suffering the obedience he eternally is; what he possessed as God he experienced, inch by inch, as man. The Word did not skip any of the cost. It is fine to tell the group this remains a mystery the Church handles with reverence rather than a puzzle she has flattened.

Build IV: Loud Cries and Tears

Read Hebrews 5:7 to 10 aloud.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Say: "Verse 7 calls one specific scene to mind for nearly every reader. Prayers and supplications, loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death. Find the scene in the Gospels." (They will land in Gethsemane; Matthew 26:36 to 44. Read verses 36 to 39 aloud once someone finds it.)

Q5. Set Hebrews 5:7 and Matthew 26:36 to 39 side by side. What was Jesus doing in Gethsemane, in priestly terms? And what does it mean for you that THIS is what our high priest's prayer looked like?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

In Gethsemane, where the Church's tradition and most interpreters hear Hebrews 5:7 (an identification the texts invite rather than state), the high priest of our confession is doing his priestly work: offering prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears, his own will consenting to the Father's cup on behalf of all of us (CCC 612). Sympathy was purchased at full price. When Hebrews says he is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, it is not a greeting card; it is Gethsemane. No one in your group will ever pray from a darker place than their priest has already prayed from.

Send

1. "Let us with confidence draw near." What keeps you personally from drawing near with confidence: shame, busyness, the suspicion that God is tired of you? What would you bring to the throne this week if you actually believed verse 16?
2. Jesus' priesthood ran through Gethsemane: he prayed for others from inside his own agony. Who could you pray for this week from inside something you are suffering, not after it resolves, but during?

Live It This Week

- Once a day, pray one sentence of raw honesty at the throne of grace: the thing you actually feel, not the thing you think God prefers to hear. Hebrews 4:16 is your warrant.
- Read the Gethsemane account (Matthew 26:36 to 46) once this week at night, slowly, as the prayer of your high priest for you.
- When temptation hits this week, try the short prayer of Hebrews 2:18 in your own words: "You were tempted. Help me now."

Memory Verse

"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."

Hebrews 4:16 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Leader: Lord Jesus, you were made like us in every respect, you wept in the garden, and you carried our names through the veil. Give us the confidence you paid for: to draw near, to be honest, to receive mercy. And as we draw near, teach us what it costs and what it means that you have called us brethren. Amen.

Leader Reference Card: Session 4

Every passage used tonight, in order:

- Hebrews 2:14 to 18 (Build I, read aloud; 1:6 and 2:11 leader reference)
- Hebrews 4:14 to 16 (Build II, read aloud; memory verse source)
- Hebrews 13:17 (Build II, in the steelman ANSWER)
- Hebrews 5:1 to 6 (Build III, read aloud; quotes Psalm 2:7 and Psalm 110:4)
- Numbers 16:1 to 7, 31 to 35; 17:1 to 8 (Build III, live discovery)
- Exodus 19:6 (Build III, leader reference: Korah's true premise)
- Hebrews 5:7 to 10 (Build IV, read aloud)
- Matthew 26:36 to 44 (Build IV, live discovery)