

“A Great High Priest”

The Seventh in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

Texts: Hebrews 4:14-5:10; Genesis 14:17-24

The author of Hebrews has been relentless in building his case for the superiority of Jesus Christ. Jesus is superior to the angels—he is their creator and they worship and serve him. Jesus is superior to Moses—Jesus is without sin, and the mediator of a better covenant with much greater promises.

The Christian Sabbath (the Lord’s Day) has much better promises than those of the Jewish Sabbath—on the Lord’s Day (Sunday) we are given a foretaste of our eternal rest, in addition to being given an opportunity to rest our weary bodies. Beginning in verse 14 of chapter four, the author of Hebrews returns to a theme he introduced earlier in the epistle, the superiority of the priesthood of Jesus Christ to the priesthood of Israel. The author will now spend several chapters demonstrating to his readers/hearers a number of the specific ways in which Jesus’ priesthood is superior to that of the priests of Israel.

As we continue with our series on the Book of Hebrews, this we take up what amounts to the central theme of this epistle—the superiority of Jesus Christ to all those elements in the Old Testament which pointed ahead to the coming of our Lord, yet which served as the heart of first century Judaism. While we don’t know the name of the author of the epistle (he is likely someone well-known in the Pauline circle), and we don’t know which congregation was receiving this letter (likely a struggling house church in Rome or even Alexandria), we do know that this letter was written to a church composed largely of Hellenistic Jews who were recent converts to Christianity. Hellenistic Jews (Greek in culture, Jewish in theology) accepted the authority of the LXX (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), and many Hellenistic Jews converted to Christianity during the apostolic age.

The issue which the author of Hebrews is addressing is that many of the members of this church had made professions of faith in Christ and were baptized, but began to wilt under the pressure from their Jewish friends and family, or from the civil authorities. Sadly, many in this church renounced Christ, and returned to the synagogue. Others, apparently, were seriously considering doing the same thing. Therefore, the unnamed author writes this epistle to warn the members of this church about the serious nature of the sin of apostasy. It is no small thing to make a profession of faith in Jesus Christ, be baptized in his name, and then renounce him by returning to a religion founded upon the types and shadows which had pointed ahead to the coming of Jesus in the first place.

To make his case, the author repeatedly appeals to the Old Testament (specifically, the LXX, seen as authoritative by his audience), demonstrating how the Old Testament writers spoke of the coming of Jesus Christ and his superiority to those things which Hellenistic Jews found central in the Old Testament. Throughout this epistle we not only see how Jesus was hidden in the types and shadows of the Old Testament, but we, as Gentile readers two millennia removed, are given a lesson in how to read the Old Testament through the lens of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Last time, we took up the author’s case for the superiority of the Christian Sabbath (the Lord’s Day) to the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday). The author must argue this case, precisely because one of the primary reasons for Jewish Christians to return to Judaism was the huge cultural shift which took place when a Jew stopped attending the synagogue on Saturday, and began attending Christian worship on the Lord’s Day. Ceasing to attend synagogue on Saturday was bad enough, but to worship on Sunday was seen by Jews as something akin to behaving like a Gentile. The author of Hebrews is able to make a powerful case that the person and work of the Lord of the Sabbath (Jesus Christ) completely transforms the Jewish Sabbath,

so that God's people now worship on the first day of the week (the Lord's Day, the day of Christ's resurrection), and that Christian worship on Sunday is a rehearsal for our heavenly rest.

So, with this larger context in mind, we now turn to the author's case for the superior priesthood of Jesus Christ beginning in verse 14 of chapter 4.

As the author continues to set out his case, we need to keep in mind that his case for the superior priesthood of Jesus Christ is spelled out in great detail throughout the next six chapters (running through Hebrews 10:18). The author will make his overall case upon the following grounds. **First**, since Jesus is both God and truly human (two natures, one person – the Christian doctrine of the incarnation), Jesus is fully able to sympathize with us in our human weakness. Jesus is as human as we are. **Second**, since Jesus is also fully God, he alone is without sin. In this, he is unlike Moses, Aaron or any of the priests of Israel. This is why he is not only the perfect priest who is without sin and who has no need to make sacrifices for himself, but he alone can offer the perfect sacrifice for sin (himself). No one else has such credentials. **Third**, Jesus belongs to order of Mechizadek (the mysterious high priest of Salem—a theme we will address momentarily), because Jesus is himself the eternal son of God. **Fourth**, Jesus presides over the heavenly temple (the reality), of which the earthly tabernacle and Jerusalem temple are but types and shadows. **Finally**, because Jesus is all of these things, he alone can apply salvation to his people, enabling them to participate in his own perfection, rendering us perfect. This is why the New Covenant, over which Jesus is covenant mediator, is so vastly superior to the Old Covenant which foreshadowed it.

The first plank in the author's lengthy discussion of the priesthood of Jesus is that in light of the arguments already touched upon in Hebrews 2-3, Jesus is not just *a* great high priest, he is *the* great high priest. The author says as much in verse 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.”* Jesus is the “mega” priest who has already taken his place at the Father's right hand—a point made in verse 3 of the opening chapter of this epistle. *“He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.”*

Because this is who Jesus is (the radiance of God's glory, the exact imprint of his nature, the one who upholds the universe), the author exhorts us to “hold fast” to our confession. Simply put, since Jesus is God in human flesh and now sits at the Father's right hand, why go back to Moses? Since Jesus is God and Moses isn't, this is a rather important reason for us persevere to the end in faith. Here again, we see the familiar pattern in which the author exhorts his audience to persevere in their faith in Christ (i.e., “hold fast”), while at the same time giving them ample reason to persevere—Jesus is God incarnate.

Having reminded his readers of who Jesus is—focusing upon his divine nature—in verse 15, the author of Hebrews now reminds us that Jesus is also fully human. The implications of this assertion are tremendous and very important for us as we live every day in the midst of the struggle against our sinfulness and our weaknesses. As the author reminds us, *“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.”* In his incarnation, Jesus gave up that eternal glory he had with the father and the Holy Spirit in the beginning, and took to himself a true human nature with all our weakness and infirmities—sin excepted.

But because he is fully human, Jesus knows full well what it is like to grieve and to be afraid. Jesus knows what it is like to be hungry, to lack sleep, and to feel pain. Frequently we read in the gospels that Jesus had compassion on the people and was deeply moved by the sight of human suffering. Therefore, our great priest is one of us, who truly sympathizes with us whenever we experience any of these things, because Jesus knows firsthand the human predicament. Jesus is just like us in every respect, but one.

Although Jesus is truly human and like us in all ways, the Holy Spirit sanctified our Lord's supernatural conception, so that even though Jesus derived his true human nature from the substance of the virgin (i.e., Mary's DNA), Jesus does not have a sinful nature as we do. Nor is Jesus guilty for the sin of Adam, as we are. Yes, Jesus truly experienced temptation—especially from the Devil who attempted to get Jesus to cut short his messianic mission by offering Jesus all the kingdoms of the world (i.e., Matthew 4). Although Jesus was truly tempted, he is not tempted in the same way in which we experience temptation. Jesus does not have a sinful nature, as do we. The critical point here is not *how* Jesus was tempted, but that he *was* tempted, and when tempted, he did not sin. Jesus never had a sinful thought, never said a sinful word, and never once failed to obey God's commandments. This is yet another reason as to why Jesus is the great high priest, far superior to any of the priests of Israel.

Because of Jesus' sympathy for us in our human condition (he is fully human, he has been tempted, and he has suffered all the way unto death), this is why the priesthood of Jesus so far exceeds that of anyone else. Who is it who sits at God's right hand as high priest? Someone fully human, someone fully divine, someone who knows our struggles, yet can do something about them! Therefore, the author of Hebrews can state in verse 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.*" What a wonderful word of encouragement to a congregation filled with people facing hardship and persecution, and struggling with keeping the faith. Jesus, who is God in human flesh, fully sympathizes with us.

Therefore, we can approach our Lord in prayer, even as he sits in his preeminent glory at the right hand of the father. In fact, we can come to Jesus with great confidence (a word which means boldness) because of who Jesus is, and because of the fact that he has accomplished everything necessary to forgive us from our sins. We can approach our Lord knowing full-well that he will extend to us both grace and mercy to help us when we are in need because he has promised to do so. Jesus can do these things because as that one who has ascended on high, he is the very same Savior who offered himself as a propitiation to the father, and who tasted death for us before being raised from the dead. Of course, he will hear us and extend to us grace and mercy, because Jesus died for us, and we are his people. Furthermore, he was raised for us and is as human as we are. Jesus was even tempted as we are tempted. He suffered as we do. And yet he alone is without sin, and has provided salvation for us. This is why Jesus is the great high priest!

And so as we move into chapter 5 of Hebrews, the author now spells out the two biblical qualifications necessary for someone to serve in this office. **First**, the high priest must be able to sympathize with those whom he represents, and **second**, he must be appointed by God to this office.¹ The first of these two qualifications are spelled out in chapter five verses 1-2. "*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. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness.*" Since Jesus represents us before God, he must be human as we are. The *Heidelberg Catechism* helpfully puts it this way – **Question 16.** Why must He be a true and righteous man? **A.** Because the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should make satisfaction for sin; but one who is himself a sinner cannot satisfy for others.

This is very important to consider, given Israel's own history in which Aaron and the Levitical priesthood of Israel were themselves Israelites, fully aware of the difficulties facing the people of God as they wandered through the wilderness of the Sinai before entering Canaan. Aaron and the priests wandered with the people and lived among them. Furthermore, it was the high priest's duty to offer gifts and sacrifices to God on the people's behalf. And this is what they did.

¹ Bruce, Hebrews, 118.

But these sacrifices (sin offerings) were offered because the people of God were sinners, and these offerings turned aside God's wrath for a time. Not only were the priests themselves sinners (and had to make offerings for themselves), but the sacrifices had to be continually repeated. Fully aware of the people's sinful condition (especially in light of his own sinful state) the priest is to be merciful to the people of God because they go astray through their ignorance,² just as the priest is apt to do. But then these are the limitations intrinsic to the Old Covenant, and which must be overcome by the final and perfect high priest. By merely pointing out what was characteristic of the Old Covenant priesthood, ironically the author is making a powerful case for the superiority of Jesus Christ to Moses and Aaron!

The author points this out in verse 3. The sinfulness of the priest should enable him to be patient with his fellow sinners, on behalf of whom he is performing his priestly duties, yet *"because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people."* This procedure is spelled out in Leviticus 16:6—*"Aaron shall offer the bull as a sin offering for himself and shall make atonement for himself and for his house."* This fact alone exposes one of the great shortcomings of the Old Covenant—Israel's priests are themselves sinners, therefore, they must offer sacrifices for themselves and their own families. What is more, these sacrifices must be performed over and over again.

As to the fact that the priest must be appointed by God—the author spells this requirement out in verse 4: *"And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was."* In the case of Israel, God called Aaron and his descendants to this office. But in the case of Israel's recent history, the high priest was appointed by the house of Herod—in other words, the high priest (although a religious office) had become a mere political appointee.³

In reminding his readers of this, the author makes two important points. **First**, the high priest must be called by God, as in the case of Aaron and his descendants. Yet Jesus Christ has the ultimate calling from God! **Second**, the current high priest (presiding over the temple in Jerusalem at the time this letter was written) was not called by God, but was appointed by Herod. In fact, things in Jerusalem were so bad that the last priest before Jerusalem fell to the Romans in A.D. 70 was elected by a popular ballot.⁴ The point is simple but compelling—not only is the Aaronic priesthood superseded by the coming of Jesus Christ, the current high priest in Jerusalem was not called by God, but is a political hack. In light of this point, do those in the church considering returning to Judaism really want to go back to that?

Because Jesus Christ is greater than Aaron, and like Aaron did not seek his office, in verses 5-6, the author reminds us, *"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,' as he says also in another place, 'You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.'"* The author cites from two well-known passages to make his point. Even Jesus Christ, the great high priest, must be called to his office by the Father, as confirmed by the quotation from Psalm 2:7, which has already been cited by the author in Hebrews 1:5. In verse six, the author also cites from Psalm 110:4 (from which he has also cited in Hebrews 1:14).

Psalm 110:4 was a verse which Jews understood to refer to a Messiah who would some day come from the house of David (a sort of princely/kingly figure). He would also be connected in some way to the Aaronic priesthood. The author of Hebrews applies this verse to Jesus, making a powerful case that Jesus is both

² Bruce, Hebrews, 120.

³ Bruce, Hebrews, 122.

⁴ Bruce, Hebrews, 122.

from the lineage of David (and therefore the Messiah), and is in some way tied to Aaron (who came from the line of Levi). In applying these two passages from the Psalms to Jesus in this way, the author is making yet another powerful argument that Jesus Christ is Israel's messianic king, as well as the great high priest. No figure in either first century or ancient Judaism can make such a boast.

Then, there is mention of the mysterious figure of Melchizedek. Melchizedek enters redemptive history in Genesis 14:18-24 (as recounted our Old Testament lesson, this morning). Described as the king of Salem (the ancient site of Jerusalem), and as a priest of the most high (YHWH), we read that even the patriarch of Israel (Abraham) stops in Salem to offer a tithe to the mysterious Melchizedek. Centuries later, when Jerusalem became the capital of Israel during the time of David, David and his heirs became both successors of Melchizedek's kingly and priestly offices (as indicated in Psalm 110).

But it was not long after David died that the office of priest and king were separated, and although David's descendants were kings, Israel's priests now came from the family of Zadok, who had no ties to David. Whatever expectations that the Jews had about seeing the priestly and kingly lines reunited in a single person, these never came to fruition—until the coming of Jesus, who both sits at God's right hand with his kingly authority, and yet who does so as the great high priest who offers the perfect sacrifice for sin. Everything the Jews expected God to do in restoring the priesthood of Melchizedek, he has already done in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

As a priest who is clearly in the line of Melchizedek, the author now recounts the priestly work of Jesus during his messianic mission to Israel. As the author states in verse 7, *“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, and he was heard because of his reverence.”* The “days of his flesh” is a reference to our Lord's entire life on earth—from his supernatural conception until that time he ascended into heaven.

As we read throughout the gospels, Jesus was a man of prayer. There is the account of Jesus' high priestly prayer as recounted in John 17 (*“when Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said . . .”*), as well as Jesus' agonizing time of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane before his horrific death on the cross for our sins. Although Jesus is God in human flesh, Jesus still must submit to the father's will in order to fulfill all righteousness. As we read, for example, in Luke 22:42, *“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.”* Jesus prayed that the cup of God's wrath would pass from him—the reference to “loud cries and tears”—but it was the father's will that Jesus drink it down to the bitter dregs, which he did.

Jesus was heard when he prayed because of his reverence for his father. In this, Jesus is the example to all of us of what a life of prayer entails. But the best news of all is not that I can pray like Jesus (imitating him)—which in fact I can. Rather the best news is that Jesus prays for me. And this is the author's main point. That one at the father's right hand (who is both God and man) and who now intercedes for us is the man of prayer, who prays for us because he has died for us, and because we are his people.

We now learn from the author of Hebrews that Jesus needed to learn obedience. *“Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.”* Jesus had many divine rights, privileges and prerogatives, all which he could have exercised. But in his incarnation, Jesus set these things aside to as to be born as one under the law (Galatians 4:4-6), and as Paul recounts in Philippians 2:6-8, *“who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”* The author of Hebrews is making much the same point here that Paul is in Philippians 2.

The gospels bear witness to the fact that Jesus was fully obedient to God's will (obeying the commandments of God perfectly), and Jesus was without any sin. Yet, by taking to himself a true human nature, Jesus must learn obedience. What does the author mean by this? Geerhardus Vos is very helpful here when he points out that, "the obedience referred to was in the way of suffering, that is, it was an obedience which conquered the disinclination to suffering."⁵ Given his knowledge of human pain and suffering, Jesus was tempted not to complete his work of redemption which required suffering and dying in great agony upon the cross. If Vos is correct, and I think he is, Jesus learned obedience by suffering all the way to the point of death, when at any moment in the process, he could have summoned a legion of angels to rescue him. But he did not, because it took his death and resurrection to save us from our sins.

Wrapping up this first plank in his extended argument, in verses 9-10, the author offers a summation for argument so far. "*And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.*" We have heard the point before, as in Hebrews 2:10, the author had written, "*For it was fitting that [Jesus], for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.*" By virtue of his incarnation, Jesus did not have a sinful nature. But as human he had to grow from infancy to adolescence, to manhood. It was necessary for Jesus to grow and learn so as to be perfect (fulfill all righteousness). It is through (or because of) our Lord's obedience that we are saved (or delivered from the wrath of God).

Again, the author of Hebrews affirms a monergistic view of salvation—that God saves us (not that we save ourselves with God's help). Jesus is the source of our eternal salvation because he has accomplished our salvation for us and in our place—by dying for us and then being raised from the dead. Because Jesus is a sympathetic high priest, assigned by God to this priestly office which he performs perfectly, Jesus is a priest and a king after the order of Melchizedek. The qualification which appears here—that eternal salvation is the possession of all who obey him—refers to those who believe God's covenant promises and then persevere to the end in faith. We are obedient to God when we believe his promises.

What, then, do we say by way of application?

Despite all of our sins, all of our weakness, our continued faithlessness, as well as our gross ignorance of the things of God, the author of Hebrews directs us away from ourselves, to the greatness and perfection of Jesus Christ. If our salvation depended upon us, and anything we must do, we would have no hope whatsoever. If the requirement to persevere is to be fulfilled, we must look to our faithful high priest to sustain us, that one about whom the author has stated, "*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. 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.*" Let us draw near to Jesus in great confidence then, because Jesus will help us. He has promised to help us! And because Jesus is God, he always makes good on his promises!

Beloved, it all comes down to this. We have a great high priest, Jesus Christ. Therefore, let us draw near with full confidence to our blessed Savior on this, the Lord's Day. Let us enjoy his Sabbath rest even now. For Jesus extends to us his grace and mercy, without cost or limit because he sympathizes with us in our weakness. Amen!

⁵ Geerhardus Vos, The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews, 103.