

Hebrews 5:1-10
“Christ our High Priest”

Introduction:

In the previous passage the author wrote for the third time in this letter that Christ possesses the role of High Priest for the people of God (2:17; 3:1; 4:14-15). Here the author turned to explain the superiority of Christ's priesthood to that of the Levitical priesthood. In order to do this, he had to begin by answering a question. How can a descendent of the tribe of Judah serve as a priest? The dilemma is rooted in the OT revelation that all priests were to be from the tribe of Levi and specifically be descendants of Aaron. The author needed to answer this question if he was to demonstrate that the doctrine of Christ's High Priesthood did not contradict God's revelation in the Old Testament.

I. Qualifications to be High Priest: (1-4)

The author began his explanation by writing about what the OT taught concerning the nature of and requirements for High Priests, *“for every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins”* (vs.1). The first thing revealed is that a High Priest is selected from among his fellow human beings. The idea being that a priest must be human (since the nature of his calling is to represent men and women to their God). This of course is important in regard to the rationale for the incarnation. The incarnation was essential for a number of reasons, but the reason that is relevant in this discussion is that it qualified Christ to serve in the capacity of High Priest (2:17). The author then stated that a High Priest was appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices. This explains that the sort of representation accomplished by OT High Priests was making atonement for the sins of the people and thus maintaining their fellowship with God.

The author then went on to add that the High Priest *“can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness. Because of this he is required as for the people, so also for himself, to offer sacrifices for sins”* (vs.2-3). The Greek word translated as *“compassion”* refers to the capacity to have balanced feelings; specifically, to balance sympathy and judgment. The point is that the High Priest was to be neither judgmental and harshly critical of those He represented (because as the author notes the priests were also guilty of sinning), nor were they to be so compassionate that they failed to properly represent the righteousness and holiness of God. The background of the discussion here (as was true of the latter part of chapter four) is the Day of Atonement when the High Priest would offer the sacrifices that covered the sins of the nation for that year. The author reminded his readers that since even the High Priests were sinners, they too had to make atonement for themselves before they could make atonement for the nation. This is important in light of what the author had just revealed about Christ. Being sinless, He was qualified to enter God's presence at any time without the need to atone for His own sins.

In summing up this review of OT instruction regarding High Priests, the author noted that “*no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was*” (vs.4). The idea here of course is that God ordained who would serve as High Priest. No one could simply aspire to and then qualify for the role, it could not be bought, it could only be bestowed upon someone because God chose them for that crucial role.

It is helpful to know that there was a historical irony involved here. These Jewish Christians were considering retreating from Christianity and returning to Judaism. However, not only did the revelation from the Old Covenant nor longer represent God’s will for His people, but the Judaism of the day also did not even reflect what the Old Testament had taught. This was specifically true regarding those who served in the role of High Priest. For over two hundred years the High Priests who served did so because they paid their pagan masters (first Greeks, and later Romans) to install them in that role even though they were not descendants of Aaron. They were installed by paying bribes, not because they were chosen by God, and they were motivated to have the role in order to gain political power and wealth, not because they wanted to serve God. So, not only did Judaism have an inferior priesthood to what was offered in Christ; even what it had was corrupt.

II. Christ’s Perfection as High Priest: (5-10)

Having explained the OT role of High Priest, the author next turned to demonstrate how Christ had become perfectly suited to fill that role. The author began where he left off regarding God’s appointment of High Priests in general. He wrote that “*also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but it was He who said to Him: ‘You are My Son, Today I have begotten You’. As He also says in another place: ‘You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek’*” (vs.5-6). The author made it clear that Christ did not exalt Himself in arrogance to seize the role; rather God the Father had appointed Christ to the position of being the High Priest of the people of God. To demonstrate that this was so and was consistent with OT teaching, the author quoted two recognized Messianic Psalms. First the author quoted (for the second time) Psalm two (vs.7). When the author quoted it earlier (1:5) he used the verse to demonstrate the superiority of the exalted Divine Messiah over the angels. Here he used it to connect the royal and priestly roles of the Messiah. These quotations are both from enthronement Psalms (songs that were sung to celebrate the Messianic king taking His position of authority over the earth). The quote of Psalm two relates to Christ fulfilling the Messianic role of being the heir to the throne of David. The next Psalm the author quoted (Psalm 110) also speaks of the coming Messiah who would be a king descended from David. However, the author does not quote the verse that relates to taking the throne (vs.1), he quoted one that foretold the Messiah’s priesthood (vs.4).

The Question is, what did it mean that the Messiah would be “*a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek*”? It speaks of important distinctions between the Levitical Priests, and the Priesthood that the Messiah would possess. First, the Messiah would have an eternal priesthood; something that was only possible

because the Messiah was Divine. Second, the Messiah's Priesthood would not be associated with the tribe of Levi but would instead be associated with Melchizedek. Melchizedek is briefly mentioned in Genesis 14, and nowhere else in the OT except for the Messianic quote in Psalm 110:4. The nature of the "*order*" of this priesthood is not one of ongoing succession. Instead, the idea is that the Messiah's Priesthood would be like that of Melchizedek's. This naturally leads to the question, in what way would the Messiah's Priesthood be similar to that of Melchizedek? The similarity emphasized here was that the Messiah would be both a king and a priest just like Melchizedek had been (Gen.14:18). This then answered the conundrum regarding how the Christ could be both a king and a priest; it was possible because His Priesthood would not be associated with the tribe of Levi.

The author had noted earlier that the High Priest would need to have compassion balanced with truth when dealing with God's people (vs.2). In light of this qualification, the author reminded his readers that Jesus "*in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered*" (vs.7-8). Based upon what is written in these verses, it is clear that the specific time of Christ's incarnation that the author had in mind was the period of Christ's passion (from Gethsemane through the crucifixion). The words "*prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears*" refer to Christ's agonized request in the garden that God allow the cup of His wrath to pass by Jesus if it was within the Father's will. It was a time of deep anguish and thus it demonstrated that Christ was genuinely human and definitely knew what it was like to feel the dread of pain and misery. Like those He represents He too had prayed to God for deliverance. However, He had also prayed for God's will. Christ's prayer was heard in the sense that it was answered in the affirmative. The Greek word translated as "*godly fear*" actually refers to reverence that expresses itself in subjection to the will of another. This indicates that this is not only why Christ's prayer was answered, but what part of Christ's prayer was answered. Christ was not granted deliverance from the cross, He was given what He desired more, that the Father's will be accomplished in Him. Christ had complete confidence that God could save Him from death, and asked that He be spared, but more importantly He desired that His Father's will be fulfilled. This represented precisely the perspective that these Hebrew Christians (as well as all later Christians) needed to adopt.

Finally, from these verses we see that Christ learned obedience from the things He suffered. Since He was God in flesh, obedience was never something that He had experienced. But in order to be our representative He had to know what it meant to submit His will to God and obey what God said. This He learned through His experience in the garden and on the cross.

In light of this experience, the writer states that Christ, "*having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him*" (vs.9). Christ was perfected in that He had become completely prepared and equipped for the role of being the High Priest for the people of God. And as a result of becoming a perfect

High Priest He became the source of eternal salvation (the one through whom individuals can gain eternal life). And Christ is the source of salvation to anyone who obeys Him. The obedience that is in mind here is not keeping the Law or good works; it is the response of ongoing faith in the salvation that God has provided in His Son. This is God's ultimate command to the human race, and obedience or disobedience to this command determines whether or not one will receive the eternal life that is available through the only Savior God has ordained.

Conclusion:

There is a common notion that Americans have about final judgment. That final judgment will be a hearing to determine whether or not they are good enough to enter Heaven. This idea is false and represents a fundamental misunderstanding about what the New Testament has revealed about final judgment. The truth is that final judgment will be the time when God pronounces His judicial verdict and passes sentence upon the guilty. The process of judgment has already taken place. Everyone has been found guilty of sin, and therefore, everyone is awaiting the pronouncement of condemnation. The only way of escaping this fate is if the punishment has already been paid by a substitute. In Christ's role as High Priest, He offered Himself as an object of God's wrath in the place of those who have put their faith in Him as their Savior. Through that atonement, believers are granted forgiveness and eternal life. This same thought is expressed in John's Gospel:

“He who believes in Him is not condemned; but He who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”

John 3:18

When John wrote that those who do not believe in Christ are condemned already, he was teaching that condemnation has been pronounced on all people before they ever appear before God in judgment. When he added that it was because they had not believed, He wasn't saying that the sin of unbelief alone condemned them, he was saying that they were condemned because they rejected the only means of escaping the pronouncement of condemnation, the atoning work of Christ. Therefore, the point of the passage is to make it plain in yet another way, that salvation is only available to those who trust in Christ to save them. The application for those who believe is to cherish Christ who saves us.