

## Jesus Is Our Eternal High Priest

Text: Hebrews 7:23-27 for 4/1/2018 – Easter Day

All throughout the season of Lent you have been hearing about the high priesthood that served the nation of Israel. God had established that office of high priest to care for the spiritual well-being of his people. God wanted to make sure that people's souls were cared for until the promised Savior would come. Now, we have heard how God first filled that position of high priest with Aaron, the brother of Moses. Aaron served as high priest during most of the time Israel was wandering in the desert, before God allowed them into the promised land. But Aaron died on a mountain out in the desert, and then his son Eliezer became high priest. Then, as Eliezer's life was coming to an end his son Phinehas became high priest. This same transition, the son taking the place of his father as high priest, happened over and over and over again throughout Old Testament history. The historian Josephus lists the names of 83 high priests who are known to have served from the time of Aaron until the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

It is that constant passing of the mantle from one high priest to another that the writer of Hebrews is focusing on in this portion of God's word. And as we study this portion of scripture we see yet another reason why Jesus is our Great High Priest. It is because he **is the eternal High Priest** who met all our needs for us and still intercedes for us.

We have heard so many ways of how Jesus, our Great High Priest, is different from all the other high priests who served God's people. Today the author of Hebrews points out how Jesus is different in that he had no sin. All the other high priests were sinners; that's why they died. Whether they were obviously wicked men like Annas and Caiaphas, or whether they were good and decent men like Zadok, the high priest who supported King David, in the end they were all sinners. That's why, as our reading states, they had to offer sacrifices first for their own sins, and then for the sins of the people. It was because of their sin that every one of those men had their high priesthood come to an end, because each one of them died.

Yet Jesus is different. We saw it time and again throughout this Lenten season. He did not deserve to die because he had no sin. Christ did not deserve to be on trial for his life. He clearly had done nothing wrong. Pilate flat out admitted it: **"I find no basis for a charge against this man"** (Luke 23:4). Even the Jewish Sanhedrin admitted that also, in an indirect way. Because they couldn't find any sin in Jesus they ended up hiring false witnesses to testify against Jesus, yet even they couldn't agree on their accusations. Finally, there was Judas, who confessed his sinfulness with the words: **"I have betrayed innocent blood"** (Matthew 27:4). The writer of Hebrews brings out this truth when he says that in Christ we have **"a high priest [who] meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners"** (v. 26). Look at Jesus anyway you want—on the inside he is holy. That is why the all-seeing God could testify about him: **"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased"** (Matthew 17:5). Even on the outside, Christ had no sin. Jesus even challenged his enemies with these words: **"Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?"** (John 8:46). Christ's enemies, who were always watching Jesus' every move, tried asking him trick questions to trip him up in his

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words, but they failed. Because Jesus was sinless he didn't have to first offer a sacrifice for his own sins before offering a sacrifice for the sins of the people.

For that reason, the results of Jesus' sacrifice are different. Notice, the writer of Hebrews stresses the repetition of the sacrifices offered by the Old Testament priests. Day after day, they were offered. There was a reason for that: those animal sacrifices couldn't take away sins. God says, **"The soul who sins is the one who will die"** (Ezekiel 18:20). Those endless animal sacrifices of the Old Testament couldn't take sin away from human souls. All those sacrifices could do was point people to the promised Savior who could take away sin. And that's exactly what Jesus did. As the Great High Priest, he offered *himself* as a sacrifice for all sins. And that one sacrifice was able to satisfy the justice of the holy God. Jesus' sacrifice did what the Old Testament priesthood couldn't do. It removes the filth of sin from all whose souls are stained by sin. But how do we know Jesus sacrifice did that? How can we be sure? Because our Great High Priest lives forever! This is how we know that Jesus is God's Son and that our sins are forgiven. Jesus lives forever! On Easter Day God raised his Son from the dead to proclaim to the world that Jesus sacrifice was the perfect payment for every single sin. The one who was delivered over to death for our sins was raised to life for our justification, so that we could be declared "Not guilty" by God.

This fact is what leads the Apostle Paul to rejoice as he proclaims to the church in Corinth: **"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ"** (1 Corinthians 15:55-57). Paul understood what makes death so scary: It is sin. Unless someone intervenes, death delivers sinners into the horrifying punishment of hell. Hell is a place of eternal torment and complete separation from God. This knowledge, found even in the hearts of unbelievers, makes death something people fear. But Jesus met our every need for us. By paying for sin, Christ removed the sting of death. Death is now powerless to hurt those who find forgiveness in the wounds of the risen Savior. Instead of being something that hurts us as Christians, death serves us, bringing us into the glorious presence of our Great High Priest. In addition to that, by his resurrection, Jesus shattered the iron grip of the grave. Our Lord promises that all who fall asleep in him will rise as he did to live forever with him in heaven. Death can't hurt us any longer and the grave can't hold us. This is the promise of Jesus, who lives forever and who says, **"Because I live, you also will live"** (John 14:19). Jesus has met our every need. He has risen from the dead, and even now he still lives to intercede for us.

Our reading started out with the statement that **"there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office"** (v. 23). The author is talking about how death prevented Israel's high priests from continuing in office. The death of a high priest was a sad occasion in Israel. The nation mourned for 30 days when Aaron died. On the other hand, the anointing of a high priest became something that represented joy. King David wrote in Psalm 133 of how good it is when brothers live together in unity. David went on to say that

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it is like the oil that was poured on Aaron on the day he was installed as high priest. Having a high priest was a good thing. The high priest made intercession for the people. He was the mediator between the sinful people he served and heaven's holy God.

Aaron was a good example of the interceding work of the high priest. On one occasion, as Israel was wandering in the wilderness, a man by the name of Korah led a rebellion against Moses and Aaron. As a result of that rebellion, God caused the earth to open up and swallow Korah and his family. The next day, the rest of the people complained about what happened to Korah and his rebellious clan. The Lord became angry. God told Moses and Aaron to move away from the people because he was ready to destroy the whole group. And God struck the people with a plague. But Moses told Aaron, **“Take your censer and put incense in it, along with burning coals from the altar, and hurry to the assembly to make atonement for them. Wrath has come out from the LORD; the plague has started.’ So Aaron did as Moses said, and ran into the midst of the assembly. The plague had already started among the people, but Aaron offered the incense and made atonement for them. He stood between the living and the dead, and the plague stopped”** (Numbers 16:46-48). Almost 15,000 people died in that plague, but because of Aaron's intercession a greater loss of life was prevented. What compassion Aaron showed! That was the work of the high priest—to plead and intercede for the people he served. Aaron did that until he died; then his work was done.

But Jesus, our Great High Priest, is an eternal High Priest. Yes, he died, but then he rose from the dead, and now he lives to intercede for his people. But Jesus was already doing that intercessory work on behalf of his people during his earthly ministry. A few weeks ago we heard in the Passion History reading how Jesus warned Simon Peter about his pride, and then Jesus said to him, **“I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail”** (Luke 22:32). We heard Jesus on the cross praying, **“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”** (Luke 23:34). And in the upper room Christ prayed for all who believe in him, saying, **“I want those you have given me to be with me . . . and to see my glory”** (John 17:24). We also see the compassionate heart of our Great High Priest on this Easter day. Mark's gospel tells us that our Lord's angel messengers told the first visitors at Jesus' empty tomb to make sure Simon Peter heard the good news of Easter. For three days, a burden of guilt weighed on Simon's heart because he had denied his Lord! But on the third day, the risen Christ through his angels said, **“Go, tell his disciples and Peter”** (Mark 16:7) all that you have seen. **“Tell Peter,”** Jesus says, to make sure he knows the joy of forgiveness and the peace of Easter. What a joy for us to have such a compassionate High Priest interceding with his Father on our behalf. May we who are now the messengers of our risen Savior, go with that same compassion to others, telling them the good news of forgiveness and peace in Jesus!

Let us take to heart the message God sets before us on this Easter Day: Jesus our Great High Priest lives forever! Jesus' resurrection assures us that he is able to save completely. He is our Great High Priest who met all our needs for us and who still intercedes for us at the right hand of God. Amen.