

Hebrews, Part 5

God's Priest-Son

In the last two chapters, the writer of the Epistle has shown the general superiority of Jesus, the Founder of the New Covenant, over Moses and Joshua; furthermore, the divine promise partially fulfilled by the occupation of Canaan still awaits its complete and absolute fulfillment in the Kingdom.

The writer first briefly characterizes the work and the qualifications of a High-priest. He also shows that the qualifications for this position are possessed by Christ in ideal perfection, and He completes the (theocratic) type of the Aaronic high-priest by adding to it the features of the (natural) type of the High-priesthood of Melchizedek (5:1–10).

In the first major movement of the epistle (1:5-4:16), the author set forth two major truths: The exalted position and destiny of Him who is uniquely God's King-Son and the salvation-inheritance of those who cleave to Him by faith. Included have been solemn warnings not to neglect or forfeit the blessings that His exalted station makes so attainable. The Son's future kingship has been at the center of all this discussion. At the same time, it has been made clear that the King-Son is also a High Priest. The importance of this reality has already been briefly pointed out. Now, however, the Son's priestly role will be considered in detail.

The Hebrew Christians were not familiar with Christ as a high priest. They did not understand the application of the title and office to him. They could not infer it from his early life, since he was not of the lineage of Aaron, nor from his ministry since he claimed no special privilege of access to the Temple, performed no priestly functions, and contradicted the whole Jewish conception of the priesthood. The concept was foreign to them and is here explained by the writer.

Qualifications for High Priesthood

Heb 5:1 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. 2 He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray since he himself is also subject to weakness. 3

Because of this he is required as for the people, so also for himself, to offer sacrifices for sins. 4 And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was.

If it is asked what a high priest really is, the answer is easily drawn from the Old Testament institution with which the readers were familiar:

- He is selected from among men.
- He is their representative in matters related to God. These “matters” include the offering of both gifts (*dōra*) and sacrifices (*thysias*) for sins (cf. 8:3; 9:9).
- The high priest must also be a man of compassion, as the word *metriopathein*, which underlies the phrase “have compassion,” implies. This is the capacity to moderate one’s feelings to avoid the extremes of cold indifference and uncontrolled sadness. For an ordinary high priest of the Old Testament, this sympathy grew out of an awareness that he himself was subject to weakness and prone to failures of his own.
- Hence in his sacrificial activities, he must make the necessary offerings for his own and the people's sins. In this respect alone, as the author will show later (cf. 7:27), Christ did not exactly correspond to the characteristics described here, since He “was without sin” (4:15). But it is also possible that the writer thought of the compassion of the Son-Priest as being far richer than the moderate gentleness he ascribed to other high priests.
- But one thing is certain. The high-priestly office was a divine appointment and could not simply be entered because one aspired to that honor. Just as Aaron was, this High Priest must also be called by God.

The word “ignorant” in verse 2 “He can have compassion on those who are ignorant...” is *agnoeo* and means not to understand or even to err or sin through mistake. The high priest is to have compassion for those who sin out of ignorance. For most of us, we probably sin way more than we realize, with most of those sins being sins of ignorance. Sins of ignorance because we do not always grasp that some of what we do, say, and think is actually sinful. First John 1:9 deals with that. It says, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Note that “all unrighteousness” of which He also cleanses us. That would be those sins we committed not even realizing

they were sinful, therefore going unconfessed. We tend to get focused on the “biggie” sins like murder, adultery, stealing, and lying while forgetting that behind those are many mental attitude sins that are just as damaging to your spiritual walk as the four biggies I mentioned. Ever have a “haughty” attitude? Been angry, jealous, or contentious? Bet you have. Did you confess it? How about that idiot that cut you off on the road? Did you think, “Idiot, you should have your license revoked?!” He stole your peace. Did you confess it?

A Priest Forever

Heb 5:5 So 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.”

6 As He also says in another place:

“You are a priest forever
According to the order of Melchizedek”

In the statement, “Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest,” the author insisted that no one is to suppose that Christ began His priestly functions without the appropriate call from God. On the contrary, the same One who declared Christ to be the King-Son, declared Him also to be a Priest forever, “according to the order of Melchizedek”.

The writer unites the text of Psalm 2:7, which he had quoted in Hebrews 1:5 and again here in 5:5, “For to which of the angels did God ever say, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you?’” with the text of Psalm 110:4 “You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.” In so doing, he skillfully joined the two great truths about the Messiah which lie at the heart of this epistle. The declaration of Psalm 2 had proclaimed Him the Davidic Heir whose destiny was to rule the nations (cf. Ps. 2:8). But Psalm 110 had also been earlier quoted to much the same effect in Hebrews 1:13 “And to which of the angels has he ever said, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet?’”

Now, however, a further statement from Psalm 110 was cited to show that the future Conqueror is also a Priest of a special order, the order of Melchizedek. In this way, the author united in the person of Christ the dual

offices of Priest and King. In doing so, the author was probably countering a sectarian position like that at Qumran, where they seemed to have anticipated two Messiahs, both a lay or kingly, Messiah and a priestly Messiah. The writer is declaring here that both titles belong to one Person.

The two quotations given here from Psalms 2:7 and 110:4 capture the concentrated essence of the author's thoughts about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Heb 5:7 who, 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,

Here, the writer gives evidence for this argument that Jesus is qualified for His priesthood. If it is a question of offerings, it can be pointed out that when Jesus was on earth, He offered up prayers and petitions. In the expression "offered up" the writer employed the same verb (*prospherō*) he had used in verse 1, "That he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins."

"With vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death...." "Vehement" is *ischuros* and means strong, violent, forcibly uttered, firm, sure. This is not simply crying; it is an intense form of crying. This "vehement crying" was directed to "Him who was able to save Him from death," and that is, of course, God the Father.

The statement, "with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death" has often been thought to refer to the experience of Gethsemane. But the Greek here seems to reflect the Septuagint rendering of Psalm 22:24.

Ps 22:14 For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; Nor has He hidden His face from Him; But when He cried to Him, He heard.

The writer probably has the sufferings of the Cross in mind, as does the psalm. This would be appropriate since the cries of the Savior would then be linked directly with His sacrificial work. That these "cries and tears" were accepted by God is evidenced by the observation, "was heard because of His godly fear," that is because of His reverent submission (*eulabeias*

“Godly fear”). Used in this context, the word refers to reverence, respect, or veneration. Jesus Christ did not fear His God but had a profound respect for His Person that we often do not demonstrate.

In the latter half of Psalm 22 are the words of One who has emerged from suffering in triumph and praises God for that.

Ps 22:22 I will declare Your name to My brethren;
In the midst of the assembly I will praise You.
23 You who fear the Lord, praise Him!
All you descendants of Jacob, glorify Him,
And fear Him, all you offspring of Israel!
24 For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted;
Nor has He hidden His face from Him;
But when He cried to Him, He heard.
25 My praise shall be of You in the great assembly;
I will pay My vows before those who fear Him.
26 The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
Those who seek Him will praise the Lord.
Let your heart live forever!
27 All the ends of the world
Shall remember and turn to the Lord,
And all the families of the nations
Shall worship before You.
28 For the kingdom is the Lord's,
And He rules over the nations.
29 All the prosperous of the earth
Shall eat and worship;
All those who go down to the dust
Shall bow before Him,
Even he who cannot keep himself alive.
30 A posterity shall serve Him.
It will be recounted of the Lord to the next generation,
31 They will come and declare His righteousness to a people who will be
born,
That He has done this.

The psalm's first note of triumph has already been quoted from Psalm. 22:22 in Heb. 2:12.

Heb 2:12 "I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to You."

Thus the "reverent" Sufferer who "was heard because of His godly fear" (Heb 5:7) was indeed saved from death, and this by means of rising from the dead. Also, the Resurrection furnishes the decisive proof of God's acceptance of Jesus' sacrificial activity that qualifies Him for the priesthood.

Heb 5:8 though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. 9 And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, 10 called by God as High Priest "according to the order of Melchizedek," 11 of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain since you have become dull of hearing.

J. Vernon McGee professes to not understand the two truths expressed in this passage, and for him, they remain a mystery. How can Jesus learn obedience? And how can the One who is perfect be perfected? He claims to have read the many commentaries on this and remains unsatisfied with their answers. I have to admit that the two questions are indeed perplexing.

The passage states that the whole experience just referred to was a form of education for Jesus before He served His suffering people. His unique relation to God notwithstanding (He was a Son), He had to experience the true meaning of obedience in terms of the suffering it entailed. To have academic knowledge of something is one thing, but the one knowing remains somewhat detached from that which is known until he experiences it firsthand. We know that a mile is a long way, but do we fully appreciate how far it is until we run a mile? The experience of running that mile illuminates our understanding of it. We know man can be a hateful and violent being under the right conditions. Though Jesus knew that in His omnipotence, He perhaps did not fully appreciate it until He became the object of that hate and violence himself.

How was the One who was perfect perfected? Having experienced all that we as humans experience in this fallen world, His academic knowledge

was enhanced with the experience of that knowledge firsthand. The Lord knew man was potentially violent and hateful. Man's hate and violent tendencies were manifested in mankind because of the fall and our gaining the knowledge of good and evil. The Godhead had witnessed the results of that from afar over the centuries, but the Second Person of the Trinity representing the whole Godhead became one of us and experienced firsthand the consequences of the Sin of Adam. He was thereby made perfect for the role He would play as His people's Captain and High Priest.

That there is an element of mystery in all this is undeniable, but it is no greater than that found in Luke's words, "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52). In a real sense that is not fully comprehensible, the Incarnation gave the already infinitely wise and perfect Son of God the experiential acquisition of knowledge about the human condition. Suffering thus became a reality that He tasted and from it, He can sympathize deeply with His followers.

The Greek has an interesting play on words in the verbs "He learned" [*emathen*] and "He suffered" [*epathen*].) This is what the writer had in mind when he affirmed that He became the Author of eternal salvation for all who obey Him. The Greek word translated as "author" is *aitios* — that which is the cause of anything, its source. The salvation here is the same as that which is termed an inheritance in Hebrews 1:14.

Heb 1:14 Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation

It is also to be identified with the "eternal inheritance" mentioned in 9:15.

Heb 9:15 And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.

"Inherit" in 1:14 is *kleronomeo* and means to obtain by right of inheritance, to receive an allotted portion. It can also mean simply to receive as one's own. If it is viewed as an inheritance based on the death of someone, then that someone was the Lord Jesus Christ, and we are to now take

possession of our inheritance. Furthermore, it is eternal as seen in Hebrews 9:15. It should not be confused with the acquisition of eternal life which is conditioned on faith, not on obedience (cf. John 3:16). This inheritance is not just the promises associated with the Kingdom's ultimate manifestation at the Second Advent but also the spiritual aspects of the Kingdom available to believers in this Church Age now. "May receive" in 9:15 is *lambano* and means to take with the hand, lay hold of any person or thing to use it. We are to take hold of this eternal inheritance now and use its blessings now.

In Hebrews 5:9 "He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him," the word "salvation" *soteria* means to be delivered from something and is pictured in Scripture in three tenses: past, present, and future. The past tense is our deliverance (salvation) from the fires of Hell and is a product of faith. In the present tense, it is deliverance (salvation) through the trials and tribulations of this life and our spiritual walk. This salvation is a product of faith to enter and obedience to remain in its place. The future tense is deliverance (salvation) from this life into glory. This salvation is the ultimate manifestation of the past-tense salvation that saved us. We look forward to it in faith.

The writer had in mind deliverance from and victory over all enemies, or what we call the present tense salvation. This kind of salvation or deliverance is explicitly contingent on faith in the power and leading of the Holy Spirit and obedience modeled after that of Jesus who also suffered. It is thus closely related to the saying of the Lord in which He declared, "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:34-35). Or more simply, stop living for yourself and start living for Me. Living for self is done in the power of the flesh. Living for Christ is done in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The High Priest has become the "Source" of this kind of salvation experience for those who are willing to live obediently. Obedient living will result in rewards at the Bema.

In describing Him this way, the author was chiefly thinking of all the resources that flow from Christ's priestly activities that make a Christian's life of obedience possible. Whatever one's suffering, the High Priest

understands it, sympathizes, and makes available the “mercy” and “grace” which are needed to endure it successfully. As the writer will later say, “He is able to save (deliver) completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them” (Heb. 7:25). With precisely this end in view, Christ was designated by God to be High Priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Heb 5:11 ... of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain since you have become dull of hearing.

The Hebrew readers of this epistle get slammed here. The author tells them he has much more to say on this subject but it is complicated, doctrinal, red meat, and not the milk for a babe in Christ – “it is hard to explain” because they have become “dull of hearing”. “Dull” is *nothros* and means slow, sluggish, indolent, dull, languid. “Hearing” is *akoe* and means simply hearing or the thing heard. He has charged them with being stupid. “It went over your heads!” “You didn’t get it!”

The Third Warning.

The author had barely begun his consideration of the topic of the Melchizedek priesthood of Christ, but he felt constrained to pause for another warning section before proceeding further. After the author called his audience “dull of hearing,” he did not hold back but laid into these Hebrews. The charges were serious and indicated a failure of discipleship to bring these believers to spiritual maturity.

The immaturity and sluggishness of his audience made him wonder how much exposition they could digest. No doubt he hoped to arouse them to greater attentiveness to the truth he wished to unfold. But at the same time, he wanted them to face squarely the danger of remaining where they were since this could lead to tragic retrogression.

Heb 5:12 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.

“We have much to say about this,” he began, referring to the subject of Jesus’ Melchizedek priesthood. As it turned out, his subsequent discussion

was indeed lengthy from 7:1 to 10:18, and it was also deep. Accordingly, he anticipated that it would be hard to explain it to them because his readers were dullards. They had been Christians a long time, he reminded them, so by this time they ought to be teachers. Others who had been in the faith less time than they should be profiting from their instruction. Instead, they needed someone to instruct them again in the basics, “the first principles of the oracles of God”.

“Principles” is *stoicheion* and refers to primary and fundamental principles. They didn’t even have the basics of Scripture right. “You have come to need milk and not solid food.” In alluding to the elementary truths (“first principles”) the writer employed an expression in Greek which could refer to the letters of the alphabet as they might be learned by a school child. “You seem to need your ABCs reviewed”. They should be advancing to spiritual maturity and consuming spiritual red meat – advanced and complicated doctrines. Instead, they were so dull they were in need of starting over. Despite his rebuke, at the same time, he indicated he had no intention of going over old doctrines with them.

What he had in view was their wavering state of mind regarding the error that sought to lure them away from the faith. If they were being urged, whether by sectarians or others, to abandon their Christian profession, then clearly this called into question the fundamental truths they should have been firm in by then. They should not have been susceptible to this apostasy. Instead, “you need milk, not solid food!” But what he would shortly offer them would be solid food indeed, by which he hoped to pull them dramatically forward in their Christian experience.

Heb 5:13 For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. 14 But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

It is unsatisfactory to remain a baby in spiritual matters. This is true because a spiritual infant living on milk is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. The word “unskilled” (*apeiros*) means inexperienced in or without experience of righteousness. It might be better rendered “inexperienced.” These milk drinkers don’t understand the meaning of

righteousness as demanded of the believer. It is not so much that a spiritual “infant” lacks information – though at first, he does – but rather that he is inexperienced on how to put “the teaching about righteousness” to effective use. He lacks the skill which goes with maturity that results in the ability to make appropriate moral choices. Such ability is exactly what is possessed by those who “have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil”. This is a mature believer. That kind of person can handle solid food. What the writer seems to be saying is these Hebrew believers are so unskilled in how to live a righteous Christian life, a life lived by faith, that they, in effect, have none.

For the immature believer, living the Christian life victoriously can often be a very hit-or-miss situation, as they have not absorbed all the promises of God nor experienced much of the testing God puts a believer through to build faith-muscle, which the writer calls “have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.” “Senses” is *aistheterion* and means faculty of the mind for perceiving, understanding, judging. “Exercised” is *gumnazo* and means to exercise vigorously either the body or the mind.

The term “by this time you ought to be teachers” (v. 12) strongly implies they have been lax in their development and often failed the tests God has put before them. That suggests they have not grasped how to righteously live the spiritual life and have not developed the ability to reject the false ideas which confronted them. Had they been sufficiently mature they would be able to distinguish those ideas as “evil” over against the truths they should have known were “good”.

Heb 5:14 But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

By contrast, mature believers (“of a full age”) can consume “solid food,” the red meat of advanced Christian doctrines. These mature believers have had their “senses exercised” and built faith muscle. They can discern between good and evil.

Chapter 6

And here we are at chapter 6, but before we launch into this more than challenging chapter of a very challenging book, first some review to set the stage for next week.

Of primary importance to interpreting this epistle is remembering:

- Who is the intended audience? They are Christian Hebrews who have been believers for some time and are considering going back to their traditional faith of Judaism and keeping the Law with all the rituals, sacrifices, feast days, and other observances associated with that.
- Why are they doing this? Because Jesus promised to come back and establish the Kingdom, but it has been 30+ years since the Cross. They are losing (or have lost) faith in Him being the promised Messiah and thus He cannot fulfill the associated promises of the Kingdom. Their concept of the Kingdom has become primarily earthly and physical with Messiah reigning from Jerusalem and Israel enjoying unprecedented respect, peace, and prosperity.
- These Hebrews are getting pressure from other Jews to return to their ancestral faith, Judaism, including keeping the Law and the animal sacrifices for sin.
- What are the consequences for them if they do this? The writer will go into more detail later, but mainly they will lose any possibility of having a victorious spiritual life that glorifies God (rest) and, with that, any possibility of rewards in Heaven. Furthermore, they will be returning to a system of works and sacrifices that is no longer in effect, having been replaced by the superior system of faith and grace.

The Shadow.

1. The Mosaic Covenant (the Law) was established to manage Israel, a people called out by God as His own and through whom He would relate to mankind. It applied to ALL of Israel, believers and unbelievers alike. It was also designed to reveal the righteousness of God and demonstrate the need for a Savior.
2. It was a conditional covenant between God and Israel, meaning both parties have obligations under the agreement. It promised blessings for Israel if they met the terms of the covenant, and it promised discipline if they did not, including being kicked out of the Promised Land (temporarily).

3. Unlike the Church Age, there was no general indwelling of believers by the Holy Spirit, thus no divine empowerment over sin. There was, however, temporary indwelling (called “endowment”) in rare cases such as some kings, prophets, and some clergy to accomplish some divine task. Thus the Israelites, saved or unsaved, had to generally meet the terms of the Mosaic Covenant (the Law) by human effort alone.
4. Knowing man would sin, God designed the Levitical system of animal sacrifices to deal with sin and to point to the need for a Savior.
5. The sinning Israelites were required to present specified sacrifices and confess their sins before the altar. The High Priest was required to do the same once a year at Yom Kippur where he made sacrifices for his own sins and the sins of Israel. The blood of the sacrifices atoned for sin. That is it figuratively covered and hid them from God’s eyes – for one year. Then it had to be repeated the next year – and each year after.
6. Having met all the requirements specified in the Mosaic Covenant agreement, the individual Jew would be declared “judicially righteous,” not sinless, but blameless before God under the terms of the covenant. Paul speaks of this in Philippians 3:6 where he says he was “righteous under the law, blameless,” meaning he met the terms of the covenant.
7. The promised rest for the Israelites was to be fulfilled for them in the land as long as they remain faithful to their God. As such, they would enjoy enormous earthly blessings.

The Reality.

1. A Church Age believer has the blessing of being declared righteous by faith in Christ with the imputation of the righteousness of Christ at salvation the moment he/she declares faith in what Christ did on the Cross.
2. As such the believer can enjoy fellowship with God as long as he remains without sin. That fellowship is damaged by any sins.
3. However, should he commit sins knowingly or unknowingly, the believer, through the use of 1 John 1:9, is forgiven for his sins and is restored to fellowship – until he sins again.
4. In fellowship, the believer can experience the “spiritual kingdom” which includes the filling of the Spirit, being Spirit led, being called to

a ministry, being enabled by the Spirit to fulfill that ministry, to have victory over sin (Gal 5:16) and experiencing the very same lifestyle of Christ, the Fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23).

5. "Rest" for the Church Age believer is experiencing the blessings of that lifestyle promised in Galatians 5:16 and 22-23, the very lifestyle of Christ.
6. This represents the very core of the promised Kingdom. All that is missing is the iron scepter rule of the King physically ruling from His Throne in Jerusalem.

As you can see the two systems are quite different. The Mosaic Covenant was merely a shadow of what was coming, The Kingdom is the reality. But since Israel rejected the King, they forfeited the Kingdom – temporarily. With Israel's rejection of the King, the Age of the Law (Age of Israel) was temporarily interrupted and the Age of Grace (Church Age) was inserted. The spiritual aspects of the Kingdom were offered to those the Jews looked down on, the Gentiles. After the termination of the Church Age with the yet future rapture of the Church, God will return to dealing with Israel during the last seven years of the interrupted Age of Israel in what we know as the Tribulation. Christ will return at the end of the Tribulation, establish His earthly Kingdom, and rule from Jerusalem, exactly as Israel understood and expected it.

As we dig deeper into Hebrews 6 you must keep in mind the details I have outlined above. They form the core context to interpret what the writer is saying in Hebrews 6.