

## Messiah the High Priest

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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"; 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, 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," (Heb. 5:1-10)

As the Jewish people had been scattered over the centuries through various persecutions, many of them settled in different countries around the Mediterranean. They encountered many different religions, with many different gods and practices. It would have been a normal or frequent conversation for a Jew to ask a Gentile, "So who is your god/gods?" "How do you approach him?" "Where is his Temple?" "Who are the priests, and how are they chosen?" "What sacrifices must they present?"

These were questions which most Gentiles would have had ready answers. Nearly all pagan religions had temples, priests or priestesses, and sacrifices.

For the Jew raised on the Scriptures, the priests were like ushers. Ushers open doors and give you entrance, and escort you. The priests were there for those limited moments when access to God would open, and they provided the sacrifice to open the door, provided the protection for the people, and then escorted them out when it was over.

So you can imagine the confusing conversation between a Jew living under the Old Covenant, and a Jewish Christian. The one would say to the other, "But you have joined a new religion, which has no Temple, no priests, and no sacrifices!"

And the Christian Jew would answer with the arguments of the book of Hebrews: but we do have a priest, and we do have a sacrifice, and we do have a Temple. But ours have been offered and are now resident in Heaven.

These arguments are exactly what chapters 5 through 10 of Hebrews concern themselves with. Jesus is a High Priest, Jesus has presented a sacrifice in a Heavenly Temple, inaugurating a final and eternal covenant. But this is not simply an argument for ancient Hebrew Christians. It is a crucial understanding of the nature of Christianity, and the meaning of the Gospel. Right now, you need to answer the question, how do I access God? How am I ushered into the presence of God? What gives me, a sinner, the right to approach and know and worship God?

The objection of the first century Jew still stands: you Christians don't have a visible Temple, a visible sacrifice, a visible priest? And very early in Christianity, by the end of the second century, Christians came to the wrong answer: moving back to visible priests, with altars, and the weekly sacrifice. One of the achievements of the Reformation was to show that in the New Testament this is no longer valid. Those who lead the church are called elders or overseers or pastors, those who assist them are called deacons. Every believer is part of the royal priesthood of God's children, but there is now only one, eternal priest.

We need to know why Jesus is a qualified High Priest, and why Jesus is a Superior High Priest. We

need to know why we cannot go back to the old covenant. We cannot do, like some are doing, revert to Judaism, and pray for the rebuilding of the Third Temple, so that animal sacrifice can resume. Nor can we turn to paganised Christianity with its altars and priests and weekly continual sacrifice, and mediating saints. Christ is either the Final High Priest and you go to Him alone, or you go in search of another priesthood. You cannot mingle the two.

The writer first gives us the three attributes of the Aaronic High Priest. He then shows us how Jesus met and exceeded those attributes.

## **I. The High Priest's Three Qualifications**

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.

### *a) The High Priest Was a Human Representative Before God By Sacrifice*

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.

A High Priest was to be: 1) A human, 2) appointed to represent men, 3) before God, 4) by offering gifts and sacrifices on behalf of sin. Angels could not be High Priests. You needed a man, appointed for men. But since men have this barrier between them and God, this particular man is appointed to represent man to God. He is no regular man; he is chosen for this role. Once in this role, he stands as a kind of mediator between God and man, and approaches God on behalf of man.

While prophets spoke to man for God, priests approached God on behalf of man.

To do so, the high priest approached God with gifts and sacrifices. These two words probably mean those offerings that were bloodless, and those that were blood-filled. Both were part of the sacrifices that opened the door for people to approach God.

The special garments, the special anointing oil, the special utensils, the particular order, all of this was not man “inviting God to come into his heart”. This was God inviting man to cautiously approach God and observe special sacrifices for his own safety, through one appointed representative.

### *b) The High Priest Was to be Compassionate Because of His Weakness*

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.

Here was another attribute of the High Priest, and another reason why He should be a man taken from men. He was to be compassionate. This word translated compassion is not the same word used in chapter 4 for Christ's sympathy. It's an interesting word that was used by the Greeks to mean a middle path between extremes of feeling. Between the extreme of being apathetic about the people, and the other extreme of being in utter despair over the people, was this middle path. *Metriopatheia* – one of the closest terms we have to *orthopathy* in Scripture. He was to feel rightly towards the people. He could moderate his feelings towards people, whether he was a high priest tempted to feel extremely angry, or one tempted to feel a little too sympathetic with the people.

Sadly, Israel didn't always have High Priests with this right feeling, this compassion. We remember Eli assuming that Hannah was drunk because she was praying silently. In the period between Malachi and John the Baptist, Israel had a terrible High Priest named Alexander Jannaeus. Alexander once refused to perform a ceremony at the Feast of Tabernacles and poured the water on his feet instead of the altar. The shocked and insulted crowd pelted him with the fruit they were carrying for that Feast, and he promptly ordered the soldiers in the courtyard to kill those who had insulted him – over 6000 people massacred. “Josephus reports that Jannaeus brought 800 Pharisee rebels to Jerusalem and had them crucified, and had the throats of the rebel's wives and children cut before their eyes as Jannaeus ate with his concubines” (Wikipedia).

Or we think of the High Priest during the time of Jesus, Caiaphas, happy to see one man unjustly condemned and crucified, so as to retain their relationship with Rome and keep their power.

But in spite of the failures of the men occupying that office, the design was good. Our text says that a High Priest is able to deal gently with the ignorant and the wandering because he himself is subject to weakness. The word *subject* actually means to be covered, to wear weakness. And if he had any doubt over his weakness, the Law instructed him to offer sacrifices for his own sins as well as for those of others.

If he was a humble man, he would have been deeply aware of his own sin. He would have felt covered in weakness, deeply beset by his own flaws, failures, and struggles.

One of the best qualifications for pastoral ministry is personal struggle. When you have battled with sin, and struggled to live the Christian life, and experienced fall after fall, failure after failure, it helps you to view the pains of others differently. You who have mastered the Christian life, and graduated from the school of perfection, please do not teach or counsel. For good reason angels are not called to shepherd the flock, because it takes one of the sheep learning to follow.

Notice, he was able to deal gently with the ignorant and the wandering. The entire Old Testament system was to deal with sins of ignorance, sins done through a lack of knowledge or a sudden loss of thought, or a wandering. Willful sins had no sacrifice. Already in Israel's economy, Israelites would have been thinking, we need an ultimate sacrifice, a final priest for those willful sins. That's where our compassion should be – not with one another's wilful disobedience, but with the ignorance and misguidedness that are mixed in with our sins.

He was to be a human representative of men before God. He was to be gentle and compassionate on his fellow man. But to remind us that he was not lopsidedly on man's side, we see the third qualification of the High Priest.

### *c) The High Priest Was Appointed By God*

4 And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was.

Although the high priest was human and supposed to be gentle with humans, the priesthood was not humanly initiated and humanly controlled. No one could apply to be a priest in Israel. It wasn't like being a fisherman or carpenter or tanner. If we imagined the birthrate across Israel's tribes to be equal, an Israelite had a 1 in 13 chance of being a priest. Twelve tribes, and one of them split into two, and only if you were born into the tribe of Levi could you be a priest.

You could only be a priest if God ordained you should be by birth. You could no more apply to be a priest than you could choose your parents. Moreover, to be a High Priest, you had to not only be from the tribe of Levi, but you had to be from the clan of Aaron within Levi.

And it was no small thing for non-Levites to attempt to set themselves up as priests. We remember the great abomination of King Jereboam of the northern kingdom. One of his first innovations we read in 1 Kings 12: 31 He made shrines on the high places, and made priests from every class of people, who were not of the sons of Levi.

Saul lost the kingdom, because he chose to offer sacrifice that only Samuel was qualified to do.

Later on, King Uzziah decided to offer incense in the Temple. We read

**2Ch 26:18** And they withstood King Uzziah, and said to him, "It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense. Get out of the sanctuary, for you have trespassed! You shall have no honor from the LORD God."

Uzziah pushed ahead, and lost his health, becoming a leper for the rest of his life, a fitting judgement, for lepers were ritually unclean and could never approach the Temple.

The point is, to be High Priest, it was as if you had to be born on a certain day of the year, or born with a certain combination of physical traits. These things are in the hand of God, not man, showing that the High Priests were appointed by God, sovereignly working.

So picture this man who was Israel's only ambassador to God, the one man on Earth who could represent man to the true God. A true man among men presenting sacrifice for atonement, compassionate because he knew weakness in himself, and one set apart by God through birth to this role.

Now, the obvious question becomes, why should anyone believe that Jesus of Nazareth has taken the place of this High Priest?

## II. Messiah's Threefold Priestly Qualifications

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";

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, 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," (Heb. 5:1-10)

The writer now takes those three and works backwards, taking those three in reverse order, forming a kind of chiasm.

### *a. Messiah Was Appointed By God*

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";

The average Jewish reader would have wondered if Jesus was an illegal intruder in the priesthood. How could a carpenter's son from the tribe of Judah be one of the priests, let alone the High priest? So the writer wants to show that Jesus possessed a divine call. The way He does that is by quoting two psalms about Messiah, Psalm 2, and Psalm 110. In Psalm 2, the Father says to Messiah, You are my Son, this day I have begotten you, and the same God the Father says to Messiah, David's son yet David's Lord in Psalm 110, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek".

Now he is going to give an extended treatment of Melchizedek in chapter 7, but here he introduces

the idea. When the Holy Spirit through David said that the Father had proclaimed the Son to be an eternal priest according to Melchizedek, from that day, everyone knew that there were actually two orders of priest: the Levitical priesthood, and the Melchizedekian priesthood.

Melchizedek is an enigmatic figure who appears in Genesis 14. He is the king and priest of the city of Salem, and is there called a priest of God Most High. We don't know anything about him, his nationality, his genealogy, or where he lived or died. In the time of Joshua, the pagan king of Jerusalem is actually called Adonizedek, so perhaps the king-priests of that city retained the title in their names.

Many centuries later, David conquered Jerusalem, and so became, at least in title, heir to the priesthood of Melchizedek. So the Son of David is now, in title heir to this king-priesthood of Melchizedek.

Now he's going to say a lot more about Melchizedek later, but now all he needs to establish is that there is a biblical order of priests different from the Levitical priesthood, and one that God has clearly appointed Messiah to. And Psalm 110 is all the evidence he needs. Messiah can be from Judah, and be a priest, since God has declared the Messiah to be a king-priest, king of Jerusalem, king of righteousness, king of peace. Jesus did not appoint himself to be High Priest, God did.

What about the second attribute of the High Priest, that he was to be compassionate with people?

#### *b. Messiah Was Compassionate Through Experienced Weakness*

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, 8 though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.

Here we read something quite surprising. Jesus, during His earthly life, prayed. He brought to God prayers, and in fact the word *supplications* is literally olive branches, which we still use today to men seeking peace or good will from someone else.

Jesus prayed. He prayed to the Father, the one who could save Him from death. Now how do you think the Son prayed to the Father? We might imagine a very easy, silent, wordless prayer. Since the Son and the Father are one in the Trinity, you would expect the prayer is effortless.

But that's not what we read here. He prayed with vehement cries and tears. The writer of Hebrews either knows some eyewitness accounts we do not know, or the Holy Spirit revealed to Him what is not as clear in the Gospels, though we see some of it in Gethsemane. Jesus prayed with deep earnestness. His prayers involved shouts, as someone in the deepest need, and crying out. He prayed with tears, His soul moved to the extreme of emotion.

Now ask yourself these questions. In the first place, what kind of person prays? We know what kind does not pray: a self-sufficient man, a proud man. People who sense their need pray. In the second place, what kind of person prays with loud cries and tears? Someone who senses his need in the deepest possible way, and knows God is his only hope.

Is this the picture you have had of the Son? That He lived a human life in which He felt the need to petition God with such earnestness? And ask yourself – was Jesus crying aloud and praying with tears needlessly? Could He not have just turned to His omnipotence or His omniscience or His infinitude, and supported Himself with His own infinite strength as God? Well, it doesn't appear so. When Philippians 2:6-7 tells us that Jesus emptied Himself and took upon Himself the form of a

servant, it appears that what He emptied Himself of was not His deity, but His independent exercise of His deity. He surrendered the right to use or access His deity independently, and gave up that right to the Father through the Spirit.

What did that mean? It meant that using His omnipotent power for a miracle came through dependent prayer and faith. Using His omniscience to know thoughts, or the future, or the will of God, came through prayerful, dependent trust. We could even argue that His fight against sin, resisting temptation, and finally accessing His impeccability came through strong cries and tear-filled prayer.

In fact, verse 7 calls this attitude that characterised Jesus “godly fear”. It is a word that is used only again in Hebrews 12:28 where we read that we worship God acceptably when we do so with reverence and godly fear. Jesus, though He was a Son lived in humble, dependent trust. We read that He was heard because He prayed this way. Obviously God did not save Him from death. But Jesus did not pray to escape death. We read in John that He prayed twin prayers, “Father, save me from this hour, but for this reason I came into the world. Father glorify your name.” or in Gethsemane, “Let this cup pass from me, but nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.” The Father answered Jesus' prayer to glorify His name and accomplish His will. Ultimately He saved Jesus out of death by the resurrection.

It was in this way that the Son learned obedience by the things He suffered. It is not that He learned *how* to obey; He was sinless and could not disobey. It is that through the struggle of having emptied Himself, He learned what was *involved* in obedience. He learned, according to His human nature, what it would cost to obey. And since this was an experience of sacrifice, of suffering, of struggle, He can have compassion on the weak and ignorant. The High Priest was supposed to feel his weakness, and remember his own sins, and be compassionate. Jesus had no sins to confess, but He experienced the great struggle of dependence, trust, and faith within a fallen, cursed world. And he has not forgotten.

The human nature that learned the cost and pain of obedience remains with Him even now. When you look up at Him, and say, “It's so hard”, He says, “I know. I know.”

Messiah is the High Priest because He is appointed by God, He is compassionate through exposure to weakness. The third thing he is going to say corresponds to the first thing he said about the Aaronic High Priest.

### *c. Messiah Became The Human Representative Before God Through Sacrifice*

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,"

Messiah was perfected through His training in obedience. That doesn't mean He was imperfect morally. It means that in his human nature, His experience of dependence and trust reached that place of perfect submission, and completion that culminated in Gethsemane and the Cross.

No human was ever as obedient as Jesus. No human could ever be a better representative of us to God.

Gethsemane was the test of whether Jesus would depend and trust all the way to the point of drinking the cup the Father gave Him. He did. And a few hours later, He became the author, which means the source, the cause of eternal salvation. The priest offered a sacrifice and the sacrifice was Himself.

Everyone who obeys Him receives eternal salvation from Him. Does this mean we must work and obey to be saved? No. The obedience here is the obedience of faith (Rom 16:26), it's obeying the Gospel. God commands all men everywhere to repent, and obeying that is to turn from your own

works and believe that Jesus Christ is the true human representative before God through the sacrifice of Himself. He is the immortal, eternal high Priest, according to the order of Melchizedek.

A good High Priest is come,  
supplying Aaron's place,  
and taking up his room,  
dispensing life and grace;  
the law by Aaron's priesthood came,  
but grace and truth by Jesus' name.

He died, but lives again,  
and by the throne He stands,  
there shows how He was slain,  
opening His piercèd hands;  
our Priest abides and pleads the cause  
of us who have transgressed His laws.

I other priests disclaim,  
and laws and offrings too;  
none but the bleeding Lamb  
the mighty work can do;  
He shall have all the praise: for He  
has loved, and died, and lives for me.