

Prayers

Thoughts on prayer

What is happening in your life today? In truth, how does any of this relate to your faith? The answers to these questions may or may not be obvious; your daily work may have nothing to do with your faith in Jesus, or it could have everything to do with it. Nevertheless, ask the Lord to help you do His will in every part of your life, and let Him search out every dark place hidden from His gaze.

A prayer for today

All praise be to You, sovereign Lord of all. Your great power has been shown in thousands of ways; save us from failing to notice You within Your world or being insensitive to Your authority. Challenge us by Your presence, and lead us in all truth and love, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit we may be Your truest agents and servants in this sinful world. All praise to be You, Lord Jesus Christ: AMEN

Meditation

(a meditation based upon 1 Timothy 6:11)

Do I rise to the call of righteousness and peace?

Do I know what it means? Do I care to find out?

Do I build my life on 'godliness' and do God's will?

Or am I too worried about what others might think?

Do I profess faith, and am I devoted to the truth?

Or am I scared of God, or struggle with doubt?

Do I show love to all, not merely those I love?

Or do I love the loveless, just as Jesus did?

Do I have faith which can endure the testing?

Or do I ignore truth, and shy away from the Kingdom?

Do I take care to be bold in the things of God?

Or do I hold back from being used by my Lord?

Do I 'fight the good fight' and follow my Lord's example?

I pray so, Lord Jesus, help me I pray ...

Bible Passage

Hebrews 5:1-10

¹ Every human High Priest who is chosen is responsible for the things of God on behalf of other people, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He is able to empathise with those who are ignorant or have been misled, since he himself is subject to weakness; ³ and for this reason, he must offer sacrifices for his own sins as well as for those of the people. ⁴ No-one takes this honour on himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

⁵ Therefore Christ did not take glory for Himself when He became a High Priest, but the glory belonged to the One who said to Him,

'You are my Son, today I have become Your Father';

⁶ as it says also in another place,

'You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.'

⁷ During the days of Jesus' earthly life, He offered up prayers and requests with loud cries and tears to the One who could save Him from death, and He was heard because of His fears. ⁸ Although He was a Son, He learned about obedience from what He suffered; ⁹ and once He was made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him, ¹⁰ having been designated by God to be a High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Review

SUMMARY

Hebrews says that Jesus is like a High Priest, but there is a problem. Jesus was born into the High Priestly family, so for a Jew, the illustration would have been invalid! There is an answer however, which is that Jesus is a High Priest simply because God makes Him so by His sovereign authority. God can do this, just as He made Melchizedek a priest (in Genesis 14) centuries before the Jewish Priesthood came into existence.

This extraordinary passage of Hebrews delves further into the priesthood, in order to explain salvation. It says that Jesus is now our '*High Priest*' (5:5), having died for our sins to become the '*source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him*' (5:9). Hebrews is trying to explain the nature of salvation through Jesus Christ to Jewish people who asked, quite naturally, how Jesus could minister salvation as a man of David's line, not being a Levite or a priest. We would not be worried about this question, but it certainly bothered first century Jews!

Priesthood, salvation and Melchizedek!

The crowning part of the passage comes at the end when Hebrews says boldly that Jesus is a '*High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek*' (5:10). A phrase which sends modern Christians scurrying into the Old Testament, and Genesis 14 in particular, to find out more about this strange ancient figure of Melchizedek!

before exploring this fascinating idea we need to do three things. First, check out some of the presumptions Christians today have about what the priesthood means; we must clear the air of

some misunderstandings to find out what Hebrews is saying about Jesus being a 'High Priest'. Second, we must look at the specifically Jewish ideas lying behind what is said here. Lastly, we must check out the story of Melchizedek to find out why Hebrews thinks this person is so important to our understanding of the ministry of Jesus, and it is not immediately obvious!

There are one or two controversial points to deal with here. So throughout, we must keep close to what Hebrews is trying to explain, which is the meaning of salvation to first century Jews. Christians of each generation and of each culture must give an account of God's salvation consistent with scripture and the historic revelation of God.

Jewish High Priests and the work of Jesus

Our passage describes the work of a Jewish High Priest, in particular his offering of a yearly sacrifice for the sins of the people (see Leviticus 16). Hebrews does this to explain how Jesus wins salvation, and the main point is that while a Jewish High Priest has to offer a sacrifice for the atonement of his own sins to be good enough to perform this duty (5:1-4), Jesus does not have to do this because He was appointed by God to the task (5:5,6). He '*suffered*' for our sins not His own (5:7,8), and His life was '*made perfect*' and His sacrifice therefore became '*the source of eternal salvation ...*' (5:9). We will soon look at some Jewish objections to this, but for now, we must check out some other issues with priesthood.

Priests in the New Testament church

The church has big problems with 'priesthood'. Some Christians of traditional denominations (e.g. Catholic, Anglican), retain the title of 'priest' for their leaders. Priests are ordained to a leadership by which, just like priests of old, they represent people to God and God to people. Other Christians object to this very strongly claiming that because Jesus is our one 'High Priest' we need no other. 1 Peter 2:5-9 is often quoted to back up the primary importance of the '*priesthood of all believers*' which requires no other priests. Leaders of such churches are ordained to the diaconate or to eldership or 'ministry' in general.

But this should not affect how we read this passage. In scripture, priests and High Priests are different things; priests are the descendants of Levi, and High Priests are the ruling family of Judaism descended from Aaron. So to proclaim Jesus as our 'High Priest' is indeed to cut out the need for further High Priests, but not other aspects of spiritual leadership required by God's people. So we should be able to hold the two together. The whole church is called to fulfil Jesus' High priestly ministry and represent God to the world and the world to God, but they also need effective and spiritual leadership, and it is not contrary to scripture to call them 'priests'.

How can Jesus empathise with our 'weakness'?

Another key feature of this passage is the idea of 'empathy'. This is the notion that the one who performs the work of salvation should have some understanding of the needs of those he represents. Clearly a Jewish High Priest is a man just as any man, and when he performs a sacrifice, he must do this for his own sins first before he can come into God's presence to do it for the nation of Israel (see Leviticus 16). Hebrews emphasises in verse 4 that this is a special and holy calling, to be performed only when '*called by God*' (5:4), and for a Jew, this meant someone of the lineage of Aaron (Exodus 28,29).

It was necessary first for Hebrews to explain that Jesus was called by God to this High Priestly task by God Himself, and it quotes a combination of Psalm 2:7 and the famous words spoken from heaven at Jesus' baptism, '*You are my Son, today I have become Your Father*' (Psalm 2:7 and partly, Luke 3:22 etc.). Second, Hebrews explains that Jesus, who was God made man,

endured all the hardships of human life (5:7-9). Crucially, despite the problems of life, He remained *'obedient ... through suffering'* (5:8); Jesus, though sinless, qualifies to be a priest on our behalf because He has shared human life with us.

The Priest Melchizedek, from the story of Abraham.

Yet there is a good objection a Jew might have to the idea of Jesus doing High Priestly work on our behalf. Jesus was not born into the line of Aaron, so how could He do the work of a High Priest? There is an answer to this which snuffs out any further criticism; Hebrews says that Jesus was a *'High Priest of the order of Melchizedek'* (5:6). But what does this mean?

Here, Hebrews plays one of its trump cards. The details are not explained here, because they are not part of how we discuss or define salvation today, which is understandable as most Christians are not Jews. We must realise however that although God ordained High Priestly rule in Judaism through Aaron, this does not mean there were no priests before that time (around 1,400 years BC). A few centuries previously at the time of Abraham, Genesis 14 records that this great forefather paid tithing duties to a man called Melchizedek, described as *'King of Salem (Jerusalem) ... priest of God most High'* (Gen 14:18).

So by describing Jesus as a priest *'of the order of Melchizedek'* (5:6:10), Hebrews is saying that He is made priest by direct command of God, something God has always been able to do even outside the formal High Priestly family of Aaron, as in the story of Melchizedek in the time of Abraham!

Application

Discipleship issues

Jesus, a Priest who empathises with us ...

Hebrews presents us here with the idea that Jesus is like Priest, who can take us into God's presence and also show us something of the nature of God. Of course this is another way of saying that in Jesus we see God, and he enables us to come into His presence by graciously taking away our sins. In every respect, this passage talks about this in language designed to persuade Jews to believe in Jesus Christ and leave behind the strictures of Judaism.

If, having made sure we understand it, we read through this passage again, there is a great deal for us to enjoy and appreciate. One feature of it is the way it describes the glory of salvation as belonging to God; so Jesus did not seek His own glory, but only that of the Father (5:5). Jesus' obedience in this matter is a part of His humanity, and is a demonstration to us that in all things we should seek the glory of the Father, and not our own honour.

The sufferings of Jesus for our salvation

Perhaps the most significant sentiment comes in the last part of the passage, where Hebrews speaks of Jesus' own suffering; *'He offered up prayers and requests with loud cries and tears to the One who could save Him from death ..'* (5:7). This seems to refer to Jesus' prayers in Gethsemane, where he agonised over the offering of His life for the salvation of humanity. In this light, it seems that when Hebrews says in the verse after next *'once He was made perfect ...'* (5:9), this is a way of speaking about Jesus' own death on the Cross. His suffering for us is the means of our salvation.

It is perhaps important that we remember Jesus suffered for our salvation. It is possible to preach the message of the Gospel with such an emphasis on the empty tomb that we fail to explain the suffering of death which preceded it. Yet by demonstrating that great good can come out of suffering, Jesus is able to give great hope to us, especially those who suffer in this life now.

Questions for groups

- 1. Discuss in your group what you know about the work of a priest in Old Testament times, and talk about whether the term 'priest' is suitable for a spiritual leader of the church.*
- 2. Give examples of how people take the honour of God's work for themselves and not give it to God*
- 3. How does Jesus' suffering in this life and on the Cross affect you? If you are suffering, does it help to know that Jesus suffered for you and for your salvation?*

Final Prayer

You have understood my soul O Lord. You know the full extent of my feelings and my thoughts, and You know how and why I decide to do what I do. Give me the grace to allow You to guide my actions, and may I therefore become more content with myself and at peace with You, my Lord and my God: AMEN