

Message Nine: The High Priesthood

Hebrews 5:1-10 — Understanding Hebrews Series, Part 9

By Escape the Mustard Tree

Introduction

We have already met Melchizedek once, in passing, when Psalm 110 first named him back in our study of Hebrews chapter one. Now the letter finally stops to explain why that name matters so much. Chapter five opens by describing the ordinary work of an ordinary high priest, and then, in the space of a few verses, shows us Christ stepping into and beyond that role entirely — appointed by the Father Himself, perfected through suffering, and named the source of a salvation this letter has been building toward from its very first page.

This is dense material, but it rewards careful attention. By the end, you'll understand exactly what it means that Jesus is our High Priest — and why the author, just a few verses later, will tell his readers he has much more to say about it than they're currently able to hear.

I. A High Priest Taken from Among Men

"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. He 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. And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was" (Hebrews 5:1-4).

Notice what qualifies a man for this office. He is one of the very people he represents, weak the same way they are weak, and for that reason able to "have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray" rather than looking down on them from some untouchable height. And notice, too, that this office was never self-appointed. Aaron didn't nominate himself. He was called, set apart, washed, clothed, and anointed entirely at God's initiative and by God's command — the record of his ordination in Leviticus repeats, three separate times, "just as the LORD had commanded."

One more thing is worth fixing firmly in mind before we go further: a high priest never, under any circumstance, ministered on behalf of people who had not already been redeemed. His entire office existed downstream of redemption, not as a road toward it. The priesthood was for an already-saved people who needed ongoing care, not for the lost who needed to be saved in the first place. Keep that distinction close. It will matter enormously in a moment.

II. The Day of Atonement

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest performed the most solemn duty of his office. He first offered a sacrifice for his own sin and his household's, then for the sin of the whole nation, carrying the blood behind the veil into the Most Holy Place and sprinkling it on the mercy seat. But the ritual didn't end with blood alone. A second goat — the scapegoat — was brought forward, and the high priest laid both hands on its head, confessing over it all the sins of the people, before it was led away into the wilderness, never to return to the camp.

Notice the two separate needs those two goats addressed. The blood covered sin — it satisfied what justice required. But blood alone could not carry sin away; it could only cover what remained. The living goat pictured something the blood by itself never accomplished: sin removed, sent to a place from which it could never return to trouble the camp again. God gave His people, centuries before Calvary, a physical picture of a completeness their own sacrifices could never fully deliver. And every year, the whole nation was commanded to observe this day with real humility of soul — anyone who refused was cut off from the assembly entirely. God did not treat this day as optional.

III. Appointed, Not Self-Appointed

Now the author draws the same principle straight into Christ: "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.' As He also says in another place: 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek'" (Hebrews 5:5-6).

Notice that the author reaches for the same two Old Testament texts we have already spent considerable time in — Psalm 2 and Psalm 110. This is not new material dropped in out of nowhere. It's the same foundation from chapter one, now unpacked for a purpose we hadn't yet seen. The same begetting that installs the Son as King also installs Him, at that same future moment, as King-Priest after the order of Melchizedek. Sonship, kingship, and priesthood are not three separate offers held out to Christ at different times. They are one appointment, still awaiting its full exercise, held together by the same word the Father spoke over Him.

IV. Loud Cries and Tears

Then the letter turns somewhere unexpected — into the Garden of Gethsemane: "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" (Hebrews 5:7).

Read carelessly, this verse can sound like Jesus begging the Father to let Him escape the cross. But listen to what Jesus Himself said only days before His death: "unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain... Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour" (John 12:24, 27). He did not come to escape this hour. He came for it.

The phrase "save Him from death" carries a preposition in the original language that means, more precisely, out of death — not away from it, but through it and beyond it. Jesus knew the Father was able to raise Him up out of death, and that is what His prayers and supplications were actually reaching for. So why the vehement cries and tears? Because He entered fully, without shortcut, into everything that dying under the weight of the world's sin actually required of Him. This is the same Jesus who wept openly at a friend's grave — "Jesus wept" (John 11:35) — and who, in the Garden and on the cross, felt the full desperate weight of what He had come to bear. In the middle of that anguish, He was heard, "because of His godly fear."

V. Learning Obedience, Being Made Perfect

"though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, called by God as High Priest 'according to the order of Melchizedek'" (Hebrews 5:8-10).

Two phrases here deserve careful handling, because a quick reading can leave the wrong impression. "He learned obedience" does not mean the sinless Son of God lacked obedience and had to acquire it the way a flawed person corrects a flaw. It means He *experienced* obedience — personally, concretely, under real pressure — in a way that could never be true of Him in the abstract, apart from actually walking through suffering. And "having been perfected" does not mean He became, at some point, less imperfect than before. He was always without sin, without flaw. The word carries the sense of reaching a complete, finished goal — the very word behind His own cry from the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Through suffering, He was brought all the way to the position His mission was aimed at from the start.

And notice exactly what He became to those who obey Him: not simply "salvation," full stop, but salvation tied specifically to obedience — a very different thing from the free gift received the moment anyone believes. This is the same salvation this whole letter has been circling since chapter one: the inheritance, the rest, the coming Messianic Era, when Christ will reign for a thousand years before delivering the kingdom back to the Father, "that God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28) — that defined, bounded reign John describes six separate times in Revelation twenty as lasting exactly "a thousand years" (Revelation 20:2, 4), standing apart from the unending new heavens and new earth that follow it, where God Himself dwells with His people and makes "all things new" (Revelation 21:3-5). It is that age-bounded reward, not the believer's already-settled eternal standing before God, that Christ has become the source of to all who obey Him.

This is precisely why the author, in the very next breath, will tell his readers he has much to say on this subject and cannot say it — not because the truth is thin, but because they've grown dull of hearing. If this were simply the free gift every believer already possesses without condition, there would be nothing here difficult to explain.

VI. Applying "The High Priesthood"

If the sinless Son of God needed vehement prayer, real tears, and total dependence on the Father to walk through suffering toward obedience, none of us should expect anything less for ourselves. Prayer offered with tears in hard seasons is not a sign of weak faith. It is the very pattern the Source of our salvation walked before us.

And remember what we established at the start: a high priest ministers only for an already-redeemed people. Christ's present priestly work is not aimed at saving you — that was settled, finished, the moment you believed. It's aimed at sustaining you, cleansing you, and forming in you the very obedience that this age-lasting salvation is calling you toward. Draw near to Him on that basis, and keep pressing on.

Looking Ahead

Next, we follow the author into the sobering heart of the third warning, where he tells his readers plainly that he has much to say about Melchizedek — and cannot, because they have become dull of hearing.