

Hebrews 4:14-5:10: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Hebrews chapter 4 verse 14 to chapter 5 verse 10. Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God. Let us hold fast our confession.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness.

Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifices for his own sins, just as he does for those of the people. And no one takes this honour for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, You are my son, today I have begotten you. As he says also in another place, You are a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek.

[1 : 11] In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death. And he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.

And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. Hebrews introduced the theme of Christ as the great high priest back at the end of chapter 2.

Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house.

Now, after an exhortatory interlude, the author of Hebrews returns to the theme. One of the things that he will be demonstrating is that Christ both enters fully into our weaknesses and can graciously act on behalf of us in his strength.

[2 : 25] Both dimensions of this will be very important to his argument. The final three verses of chapter 4 are the transition into the chapters that follow, concerning the priesthood of Christ.

Jesus, the Son of God, has passed through the heavens and sat down at God's right hand. He has gone in advance of us as our great high priest, completing his sacrifice and entering into rest.

However, despite his character as the great champion that goes before us, he has entered into the same struggle with temptation that we face. The temptation here isn't so much with sin as such, as it is with the temptation to draw back from our calling, to fail to persevere through suffering to the end, the temptation of not firmly holding on to God's promise and entering into rest.

Despite being tempted to divert from the pain of the cross, Jesus endured the pain and the shame, and has entered into the glorious rest of God as the high priest and the leader of his people.

This is an assurance to us that we will enter too. We must faithfully follow Jesus and look to him.

Through him we also can draw near to God's very throne, which is a throne of grace for us, a place where we will find aid when we need it, and from where we will discover the strength that we need to persevere and to receive the promise of rest that God holds out to us.

[3 : 42] There will be many times of need, times when we feel the weakness of our flesh, the empty seductions of Satan, the bitter assaults of others, and the darkness of a veiled heavens.

Christ has been there before us. When we come to him, we come to the one who has gone before us and blazed a trail for us. We come to the one who fully entered into our struggle, so that we might fully enter into his life.

His throne is the throne of grace, not the throne of one who is seeking to trip us up, but one who desires as our great high priest to bring us to God. The opening verses of Hebrews 5 give a sort of job description of the high priest.

The author of Hebrews will seek to demonstrate that not only does Christ fulfill the requirements of a high priest, he fulfills the duty of a high priest more perfectly than any other could. The argument of verses 1 to 10 of Hebrews 5 takes a rough there and back again, or bookended character, what scholars can often call a chiasm.

It begins with the function of the high priest in verse 1, moves to the person of the high priest in verses 2 to 3, proceeds to the appointment of the high priest in verse 4. Then it moves back through these aspects of the high priest, like drawing the boxes that a high priest needs to tick, before going back through the list, placing a big tick in every one of the boxes.

[5 : 02] However, while doing this, he shows that not only does Jesus clearly fulfill each of the criteria, he goes far, far beyond. He begins with his appointment in verses 5 to 6, then moves to his person in verses 7 to 8, before concluding with Christ's fulfillment of the function of his high priesthood in verses 9 to 10.

The high priest is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, offering both gifts and sacrifices for sins. They are representatives, acting on behalf of a people to whom they belong. They are also mediators, acting on behalf of that people towards God, going between the people and God. However, while these official functions of the high priest's role are important and primary to the definition of what he is about, his person matters too.

The high priest is not only a representative and a mediator, he is also a shepherd of the people. He needs to pastor those under his oversight, exhorting and encouraging them in faithfulness. As a fallen human being, like those to whom he is ministering, the high priest should be all too aware of the struggles those in his flock are experiencing. Consequently, he is gentle in dealing with the weak, the wayward and those lacking in wisdom.

[6 : 13] However, given his own sinful nature, he must sacrifice both for his own sin and also for the sins of those to whom he is ministering. His greater suitability as a pastor comes at the expense of his capacity to act vicariously for them.

He always has to deal with his own sins first. The high priest doesn't appoint himself, nor for that matter is he appointed directly by the people he is serving. He is a minister of God.

Aaron, who was directly chosen by God, is a clear example of this. Christ meets the criterion of divine appointment. To prove this, the author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 2 verse 7 and Psalm 110 verse 4.

Like a number of the other ways that he uses the Old Testament scriptures, these might seem rather strained as proofs at first glance. However, this is almost certainly because he expects his hearers to be familiar enough with, and as imaginatively steeped in, the story of Christ and the scriptures to be able to join the dots.

We should be able to reconstruct the reasoning that led him to connect these things. The first quotation from Psalm 2 verse 7 speaks of the anointing of the Davidic Messiah as king. However, anyone familiar with the story of Christ should know that this verse corresponded with an event in Christ's life.

[7 : 28] In Luke chapter 3 verses 21 to 23, the baptism of Christ is described. Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.

Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about 30 years of age. Throughout Luke's gospel, the temple and priesthood are prominent. From the first announcement of the birth of John the Baptist, to Jesus' presentation in the temple, to the boy Jesus in the temple, through to the end of the book, when they are continually in the temple praising God, priestly themes pervade the book.

There is a need for the purification of the Lord's house, and John the Baptist, the son of a priest, announces the coming one who will accomplish this. In the Old Testament, entrance into priesthood involved the baptism, as we see in Exodus chapter 40.

Levites, and we should probably assume priests also, began their ministry at the age of 30. Christ's sonship had already been connected with his presence in the house of his father. Beyond this, a number of scholars have noted the presence of several names in Luke's genealogy, with suggestive associations with priesthood.

Jesus will later implicitly appeal to John's baptism as the basis of the authority by which he cleansed the temple. John's baptism is framed then as a baptism into, and an anointment for, a sort of priesthood.

[8 : 55] A priesthood that perhaps might also remind us of the prophetic priesthood of Ezekiel, whose ministry also begins with an appointment in the 30th year, by a river with opened heavens and a vision from God.

Ezekiel is also frequently called son of man. At the heart of Jesus' baptism, however, are the words of the father, These are the words with which Jesus' public ministry begins, the words of the father's approval, and as the early readers of scripture recognised, the words of his appointing to office.

The words allude back to the words of Psalm 2 verse 7. The author of Hebrews is not randomly reaching for a text here, but is alluding to the event of Christ's baptism, an event with a manifestly priestly character, as the fulfilment of the messianic appointments spoken of in Psalm 2.

And the second text is similar. It comes in another Psalm, which is more famous for its first verse, the verse that is the Old Testament verse, which is the most quoted in the new, Psalm 110 verse 1, which he himself had quoted in chapter 1 verse 13.

The Lord says to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool. That verse connects not with the beginning of Christ's priestly ministry, but with the elevation of Christ into the heavenly temple in his ascension, having completed his once-for-all sacrifice.

[10 : 16] To the mind of the reader that is familiar with scripture and the story of Jesus, it should be clear that the author of Hebrews has selected two texts that between them sandwiched the full reality of Christ's priestly ministry in divine statements of appointment.

Going back through his list, the next box that needs to be ticked is that of personhood. Is Christ suitable, not just as one properly appointed, but also as an effective pastor of the flock, compassionate and gentle?

We are to be left in no doubt. He has experienced the same struggles as we have. His anguish in wrestling with God in the tribulation of Gethsemane and on the cross at Calvary set the pattern for the tribulations that come upon his people.

What priest has experienced such extremes of suffering? What priest has such acquaintance with the depths of human anguish and struggle? Yet while the typical high priests were sinful in their flesh, and so their compassionate acquaintance with the struggles of their flocks came at the cost of effectiveness as vicarious servants on their behalf, Christ is faithful in his suffering.

Christ is the Son himself, one with all of the prerogatives and authority that come with that. Yet he also enters fully into the reality of suffering and is formed in his humanity by the full trials of suffering that we experience.

[11 : 35] How much more effectively can he represent us, acquainted with the weakness and the struggle of faithfulness in the flesh, but uncompromised by sin and enjoying all of the privileges of the Son, so that while acting with gentleness and compassion, he can act with power on our behalf?

The function of the high priest was to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. They were limited in their performance of this function by their human sin and frailty.

But Christ is the source of salvation. His salvation is eternal, not something that requires the continual repetition of sacrifices. His priesthood is also unending, as he is a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.

Christ not only ticks the box of the high priestly function, the last box of the list, he completely eclipses anything that any other high priest could perform. A question to consider.

In relation to Christ's priesthood, this passage alludes to Christ's baptism, his sufferings in the garden and on the cross, and his ascent into heaven. Where else in Jesus' earthly ministry can we see him as the great high priest?

