

Hebrews 5–7: A Better High Priest

November 16, 2014

Objection: Is Jesus actually a priest (5:1–10)?

Jesus Christ then, is our “great high priest” (4:14). However, the Jews already had priests: the tribe of Levi, and specifically, the descendants of Aaron. How does Jesus Christ compare to these Aaronic high priests? First, a priest represents man before God (5:1). The Levitical priests offered sacrifices to God for the people’s sins as well as for their own sins (5:2–3). Second, a priest was called by God (5:4). No Israelite boy said, “I want to be the high priest when I grow up!” God chose the tribe of Levi, he chose Aaron (5:4), and then Eleazer from among Aaron’s sons (cf. Num 20:25–26). The office of priest was by God’s calling, not man’s choosing.

So how does Jesus Christ measure up? As far as his calling, he was appointed by God the Father. Just as God calls him his Son (5:5), he also appoints him an eternal priest in the order of Melchizedek (5:6; Ps 110:4). Second, Jesus can represent human beings because he lived and suffered as a human being (5:7). Even though he was God’s Son, he still learned by experience what it was to suffer, as he obeyed the Father to the point of a brutal death on the cross (5:8; cf. Phil 2:8). In this way, Jesus Christ perfectly fulfills the requirements of a high priest and is the source of eternal salvation for those who obey him as a God-ordained high priest (5:9–10).

Warning: A refusal to continue following Christ would be catastrophic (5:11–6:12).

The writer could say more about Jesus Christ and his high priestly ministry, but his readers simply are not ready to listen to these deep things (5:11). They have professed faith in Christ long enough that one would think they were ready to teach other people, but they still need the basics themselves (5:12). The basics are fine for babies (5:13), but the readers should be developing into mature, discerning adults (5:14). Just as it would be unhealthy for a baby never to mature, so it is not enough to remain in our “infant” understanding about Jesus Christ and our spiritual lives (6:1–3). Imagine if someone professed faith in but then turned his back on Jesus Christ: what hope would there be for salvation apart from Jesus Christ? His future would be certain and eternal punishment (6:4–6). Think of land that was carefully cultivated, fertilized, watered, and seeded, but never produced fruit. What a worthless piece of ground that would be (6:7–8)! The writer does not think his readers are like that, but they must press on in faith in Jesus Christ (6:9). They must demonstrate in their own lives the enduring faith that godly men of the past have demonstrated (6:10–12).

“He who promised is faithful” (6:13–20).

God is always faithful to his Word. When he promised to make a great nation out of Abraham, he did so in spite of unbelievable odds (6:13–17). His faithfulness is like an Old Testament city of refuge where someone could flee for safety (6:18) or an anchor that keeps a ship safe in the harbor (6:19). We can safely trust in God’s faithfulness in the Person of Jesus Christ, our perfect Mediator and High Priest (6:20).

Fact: Jesus Christ is superior to Abraham (7:1–10).

Since Jesus is a priest in the Melchizedekian order, he is superior to Abraham (7:1), the father of the Israelite nation, who gave Melchizedek a tenth of the spoils he had taken in battle (7:2–4). The descendants of Abraham, the nation of Israel, are commanded in the law to pay

tithes to the Levites (7:5), but Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, who in return blessed him (7:6), indicating that Melchizedek was superior (7:7). You could almost say by extrapolation that Levi himself, the great-grandson of Abraham, paid tithes to Melchizedek (7:9–10)! So while mortal men from the tribe of Levi received tithes from Israel, Jesus serves as an eternal priest in Melchizedek's line (7:8).

Fact: Jesus Christ is better than the Levitical priests (7:11–22).

Why would another priest from Melchizedek's line come along if the Levitical priesthood was the ultimate priesthood? (7:11). This indicates an imperfection, not just in the priesthood, but in the entire old covenant (7:12). The Mosaic Law demanded that the priests come from the tribe of Levi, but Jesus of course was a descendant of David, from the tribe of Judah (7:13–14). Therefore, for Jesus to be a priest, not only would the priesthood have to change, so would the law. Jesus' right to be a priest (after the order of Melchizedek) does not rest on the law's requirements, but on his resurrection and eternal life (7:15–16). Only Jesus, the eternal God, could lay claim to being a priest *forever* (7:17; cf. Ps 110:4). Therefore, the old covenant has been set aside because it was imperfect (7:18), but at the same time, something new means something better—a better way to come to God (7:19). Aaron and his descendants were anointed and consecrated for their priestly ministry according to God's law, but God never promised them they would be priests *forever* (7:20). On the other hand, God swore to his Son that he would be a priest forever (7:21). Therefore, the covenant that Jesus brings in (cf. 8:6–7) is better than the old covenant under which Aaron and his sons served as priests (7:22).

“We have a great priest over the house of God” (7:23–28)

There were dozens of high priests over the years because they grew old and died and another was anointed in their place (7:23). In contrast, Jesus Christ holds his priestly office permanently, because he lives forever (7:24). Therefore, he can offer an eternal salvation for those who come to God through him (7:25). In Jesus Christ we find the ideal high priest: because he is holy and completely separate from sin (7:26), he does not need to offer sacrifices for his own sin, like the Old Testament priests did (7:27–28).

To Think About:

In what way were Jesus' prayers heard (5:7)? How does that apply to our prayers in suffering?

What is it about saving faith in Jesus Christ that makes it more than a mere profession? Does genuine faith have a “backup plan” or a “trial period”? How does that help us make sense of the writer's blistering warning in 5:11–6:12?

What is the significance of Jesus Christ's priestly ministry “entering into the inner place behind the curtain” (6:19)?

What significance do the interpretations of Melchizedek's name have in respect to Jesus (7:2)?

Praying through epistle of Hebrews:

For my own heart: thankful for “such a high priest...” (7:26)

For my brothers and sisters in Christ: to pursue diligently our hope until the end (6:11)

For my church: that WBC would show God's love by serving the saints (6:10)