

Sermon Preparation Notes - Hebrews Chapter 5

The Structure of the Chapter:

- (vv1-6) Continuing the theme of Jesus our High Priest, we see the qualifications and nature of High Priesthood and how Jesus fulfils these.
- (vv7-10) Jesus is shown to follow the priestly order of Melchizedek rather than that of Aaron. We also learn that Jesus was perfected by what he suffered.
- (vv11-14) The author challenges the Hebrew Christians about their failure to move on to spiritual maturity.

General Comments:

This chapter looks deeper into the nature of High Priesthood and shows how Christ qualifies as a High Priest, but not in the Aaronic descent, but rather after the different kind of priesthood undertaken by the mysterious O.T. priest-king Melchizedek.

We learn that Jesus' life of suffering was essential to his becoming our Saviour and that his life is the model for ours.

The chapter closes with a condemnation of the Hebrew Christians who are failing in their response to the gospel of Christ. They are not growing up into mature Christians capable of living well, rather they are still babies messing up and going wrong.

Verse by Verse Analysis:

(v1) The nature of High Priesthood.

The author wishes to make clear to these Jewish Christians that Jesus meets the criteria for priesthood laid out in the Torah.

Selected from among men - Every priest must be drawn from humans for the sake of humans.

Appointed - No priest appoints himself. God must call someone to this function. Those who sought to undertake priestly functions without having received the call of God to do so, nearly always met with disaster (Korah - Numbers 16, Saul - 1 Samuel 1, Uzziah - 2 Chronicles 26).

To represent them - To represent the people before God - intercession, offering sacrifice, asking forgiveness etc. and also to represent God to the people - teaching God's law, the meaning of man and his destiny etc.

In matters pertaining to God - The priest's one area of interest is God. He is interested in other aspects of life and society only in so far as they relate to God.

To offer gifts and sacrifices for sins - Man has one duty towards God - worship. Man has one necessity from God - forgiveness. The whole of religion is summarised in these two fundamentals. In the O.T. cult of Judaism worship and thankfulness was expressed concretely in gifts offered to God. Forgiveness was sought through the offering of divinely-sanctioned sacrifices.

(vv2-3) The humanity of a High Priest promotes his compassion.

The humanity and weakness of a High Priest are essential qualifications for his office. He is «*clothed in weakness*» to literally translate the Greek. He therefore ministers from besides not from above. His own battles against sin and weakness and therefore his own need of God's forgiveness, enable him to be compassionate towards his fellow men.

The phrase «*deal gently*» implies a course midway between anger and apathy, a moderate and measured manner of behaving. He is therefore not indifferent to sin, but he is measured in his response to it.

Note that the sins detailed are those committed out of ignorance or error. These are not therefore deliberate sins or choices such as apostasy, faithlessness and hardening of heart - about which the author has already spoken in much more severe terms. Rather these sins are those which fall into the category of Leviticus 4 - unwitting, involuntary sins committed through ignorance or error. In this life where we are surrounded by sin it is easy to be led astray. Only constant vigilance can protect us (c.f. v14).

The High Priest's ability to identify with those for whom he ministers is re-inforced by his own need for forgiveness. He also has to offer sacrifices for his own sins (Leviticus 9v9). In the first century a recorded prayer of the High Priest, prayed on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16v11), goes as follows;

«O God I have committed iniquity and transgressed and sinned before thee, I and my house and the children of Aaron, thy holy people. O God, forgive, I pray, the iniquities and transgressions and sins which I have committed and transgressed and sinned before thee, I and my house».

Only after praying this prayer was he able to minister on behalf of the people.

(vv4-6) All High Priests must be appointed by God, as was Jesus.

We see that Aaron and his sons were specifically called and appointed by God to the office of priest (Exodus 28v1). A rôle that was to be theirs in perpetuity (Leviticus 6v15). Although only Aaron is specifically appointed by God to the High Priesthood it is implied that it should be one of his sons that is selected for this role.

With the passage of time the direct family succession was broken. The High Priest Abiathar was deposed by king Solomon (1 Kings 2v27) and a new priest Zadok from the line of Eleazar (the second son of Aaron), was appointed in his place. Thus the High Priesthood was transferred between the two lines of Aaronic descent, from the line of Ithamar to that of Eleazar. This in fulfilment of the prophecy made by God to Eli and as a punishment due to the corruption of his sons and his own failure to control them (1 Samuel 2vv27-36). A telling reminder of the higher standards God demands from those he honours in calling them to leadership. *«From those to whom much is given, much will be required»* (Luke 12v48).

By the time of the Roman conquests it was the political power centre that controlled the appointment of the High Priest. Rival powers often appointed rival High Priests. At one point no less than 6 High Priests were officially designated.

The author chooses therefore not to focus on the contemporary priesthood in Israel - degraded and fallen far below its lofty origins. Rather he thinks back to the beginnings of the priesthood and of Aaron and he begins his consideration of priesthood from that original ideal.

Having outlined the qualifications necessary for High Priesthood, the author is now going to show how Christ specifically fulfils two of these - his calling by God and his intense identification with the weaknesses of those he represents.

The author repeats the first biblical quotation that he first used in Hebrews 1v3, where he set out the exalted status of Christ as the Son of the Father. This quotation from Psalm 2v7 speaks of the enthronement of a king. Taken messianically it speaks of Jesus enthroned by God as priest-king in heaven.

The next quote is somewhat surprising. The author quotes from Psalm 110, again a passage that he quoted from in the beginning of his letter (Hebrews 1v13), but instead of repeating his original quote *«Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool...»*, he instead selects the fourth verse of this Psalm, *«You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizadek»*. Since no mortal, earthly king could be expected to fulfil this prophecy, it is clear that something messianic is in view.

The reference to Melchizadek establishes two things about the nature of Jesus' priesthood. It is forever - the Aaronic priests passed away, so their ministry had to be transferred to others. It is without succession. As Melchizadek had no successor, neither will Jesus as he ministers *«on the basis of the power of an indestructible life»* (Hebrews 7vv14-17). Melchizadek was the king of Salem (Genesis 14vv18-20). His name means *«King of Righteousness»* and Salem is a shortened form of Jerusalem which means *«foundation of peace»*. We see how wonderfully he prefigures Jesus - the true *«King of Righteousness»* and the sole *«foundation for peace»* between God and men.

What is certainly established by these quotations is that Jesus is a priest-king. That he has been chosen and appointed to this rôle by God and that he sits at God's right hand in heaven exercising this ministry on behalf of men.

(vv7-10) Jesus' capacity for compassion.

Having established Jesus' appointment by God, the author now moves on to the second qualification for High Priesthood - an intense relation to mankind, enabling compassion.

The phrase translated as *«during the days of Jesus' life on earth»* is more literally rendered *«in the days of his flesh»*. This more literal translation emphasises the weakness that characterises human life. A weakness fully entered into by Jesus in the incarnation. A weakness that Jesus clearly felt and summarized in his statement about the necessity of strengthening prayer for, *«The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak»* (Matthew 26v41).

Whilst all of Jesus' earthly life is in view, the passion of Christ in Gethsemane is highlighted as the supreme example of Jesus' suffering the worst of the human condition. The reference to *«a loud cry and with tears»* appears in no other biblical account of the passion story - although Jesus' emotional distress is recorded in other terms. There is therefore the possibility that the author quotes a record of the passion event that is now lost to us.

He offered up prayers and petitions - Jesus is shown to be exercising his priestly rôle. The first act of the priesthood of Jesus is to offer up his own will as a sacrifice to God (c.f. Hebrews 10v9).

With loud cries and tears - There is a rabbinic saying;

«There are three kinds of prayers, each loftier than the preceding: prayer, crying and tears. Prayer is made in silence: crying with raised voice; but tears overcome all things ('there is no door through which tears do not pass')».

To the One who could save him from death - Although Jesus did pray that *«This cup might be taken away»*, he finished his prayer in the same attitude that he had first undertaken the Father's assignment, *«Yet not what I will, but what you will»* (Mark 14v36).

He was heard - Jesus' prayer that the will of the Father might be done was answered, as the passion accounts of the gospels clearly indicate. The prayer for God's will to be done must always precede and take priority over any of our requests. The Lord's Prayer clearly shows this. The first three petitions solely concern the Father and his glory and will. Only after praying these do we move on to the four petitions that concern us and the key practical and spiritual needs in our lives.

The Father did actually 'save Jesus from death', but only in the resurrection. As St Peter reminded the Jews *«His soul was not left in Hell, neither did his flesh see corruption»* (Acts 2v31). But it was essential to his mission and the redemption of mankind that Jesus pass through the agony of suffering and dying on the cross. Jesus was strengthened however to do the will of the Father (Luke 22v43).

Here, as elsewhere in Hebrews *«saving»* or *«salvation»* always has a deeper dimension than simple human existence. It involves a sharing in God's own life. Thus Jesus did not escape death, but rather transcended it through his resurrection and exaltation to God's right hand.

Because of his reverent submission - It is Jesus' piety or devoutness that caused him to be heard by God (c.f. James 5v16, Ezekiel 32vv18-20 for examples of the power of the prayers of the righteous).

Perfected through obedience - Verses 8 to 10 focus in on the fact that Jesus was perfected through what he suffered and his suffering was rooted in his obedience to God. Hebrews 2v10 has introduced the idea that Jesus was perfected through the painful and difficult experiences of his life on earth. But all other references to Jesus up to this point have emphasised his exaltation and glorification. Thus a powerful contrast has been set up. The Son who created and who holds the universe in existence is going to be shown to have suffered pain and hardship and to have been perfected by it.

He learned from what he suffered - The Greeks had a saying *«to suffer is to learn»*. It was rooted in the practical observation that all learning and development involves some degree of pain. An athlete or gymnast has to suffer to perfect his/her body, or to learn new movements and skills. Similarly a student has to suffer to learn new concepts and ideas.

[Discussion - An athlete has to cause himself pain in order to cause his muscles to grow. Hard physical effort produces micro-tears in the muscle fibres but they self-repair and grow back stronger and bigger. A student has to allow his old understanding of things to be torn down in order to build a new understanding that includes new

concept and ideas. In week 1 of primary school we learn that numbers go from 1 to 10. In week two this understanding of numbers is shown to be incomplete - they actually go up to 20! Now the child has to give up his previous understanding of numbers in order to be able to include the new data and to have a deeper knowledge of the subject. The old understanding has to be torn apart and rebuilt, this time including the new knowledge.

Suffering is a response to pain and pain is caused by imbalance. In itself pain can be positive or negative. The growing pains of an adolescent or the pains of a pregnant woman are signs of an increase in life or vitality, not of a threat to life. Also even negative pain can have positive consequences. Emotional pain such as romantic heartbreak or bereavement is a terrible experience, but it allows us into a deeper dimension of understanding of our fellow man, it births in us a greater capacity for feeling. Very few people choose the only alternative, which is to avoid the risk of emotional pain through refusing all emotional attachment. We instinctively know that this would be to deny a vital element of our humanity.]

There is an aspect of spiritual growth that can only come as we allow ourselves to suffer in being drawn beyond the boundaries of what we know into new areas of obedience to the will of God.

In Hebrews faith is always more than just belief, more than just hope for the future, more than just perseverance. Faith in Hebrews is a response to God that involves obedience. As such it is rooted in the choosing God's will over our own. Thus we see the passion as Jesus' ultimate test of faith. Could his faith overcome the most powerful of all human instincts - that of self preservation?

All obedience to others involves suffering. I cannot respond to a call for help from my wife or my child without giving up whatever I am involved in doing at present. My will has to be displaced in order for me to be free to respond to another. The pain in responding to another is determined by how far we have to modify our activity and plans in order to respond. If I am asked to open a jam jar, it is not a great pain for me to do it. If I am asked to give up my career in order to nurse my sick wife it is a much greater pain.

In responding to God the same principles apply. The pain involved is always centred on the displacing of my will in order to do God's. The amount of pain is determined by how much I need to change in order to respond.

We cannot move into God's will in a single moment of choice, for God's call is new every day and so has to be responded to as it is revealed. Also we can only be obedient moment by moment. We cannot say 'yes' for tomorrow, only for today. Thus the suffering involved in the obedience of faith is chronic rather than acute. It is a constant companion to those who live by faith.

We can see now how Jesus can be said to have been 'perfected' by his suffering. His obedience cost him and it cost him daily. Like us he could only say 'yes' to God as God revealed day by day what he wanted Jesus to do (John 5v19-20). Like us he could only respond one day at a time. Jesus was not like us in that he did not have to move from disobedience to obedience. He did however, have to actually choose to obey God's call when it came to him. There is a qualitative difference that comes from actually obeying, rather than simply being prepared to obey. We can see this qualitative difference illustrated in virtue as opposed to innocence. Innocence is simply the state of untaintedness, virtue is the hard-won preservation of that untaintedness.

Jesus did not move from imperfection to perfection. Rather there was a new quality to his perfection. He was no longer perfect in being willing to suffer, he was perfect in having suffered.

Jesus' death was his ultimate 'yes' to God. To choosing God's will over his own. To opening himself up completely to the presence of God. It was therefore this act that led to his exaltation and enthronement in glory. In Hebrews Jesus is always seen as the model, forerunner and pioneer for all Christians. Thus our path to perfection can only be the same as his. We will see more clearly in Hebrews 12v7 that it is the fate of sons to suffer. It is in fact the evidence of their sonship.

We have previously seen the O.T. exodus generation condemned for their rebellion, hard-heartedness and not understanding God's ways - all summarised as faithlessness and sin. By contrast Jesus is presented as the very opposite - faithful and obedient.

He became the source of eternal salvation - There was a change brought about in Jesus through his suffering. A change that enabled him to become the source of man's salvation. Whilst the passion and death of Christ is the primary focus, we must also see the suffering that accompanied the whole of his human life as being

involved - rumours of an illegitimate birth, his childhood experience of exile in Egypt, the death of his father while he was still young, a life of poverty, his family's lack of comprehension of his ministry, the rejection of the Jewish people, the opposition of the religious authorities etc. All of this suffering transformed Jesus and made it possible for him to become our Saviour.

For all who obey him - Those who receive salvation genuinely, evidence it in their obedience to the one they call Lord. As Jesus is exalted as our king and priest we are not simply encouraged to try to copy his example, we are commanded to obey his instructions. We have seen how Jesus' obedience in suffering made him the source of salvation for mankind, our obedience in suffering shows us to be those who have received it.

Verse 10 repeats Jesus' divine appointment to his High Priesthood. God appointed him to this priest-king rôle as the fulfilment of the sign of Melchizedek - the mysterious O.T. priest-king. The priesthood of Aaron was earthly and focussed upon atonement for sin. The priesthood of Christ in the order of Melchizedek is heavenly, opening up not just forgiveness for sins but access into the very presence of God.

(vv11-14) Spiritual stagnation, refusing to grow up in God.

The author gives the Hebrew Christians a severe rebuke for their spiritual lethargy and immaturity. He dramatically changes subject from a consideration of Christ to the state of mind and heart of his hearers.

He says he has much that he wishes to teach them about Christ but he cannot. The problem is rooted not in the difficulty of the subject but in the disposition of the listeners. It is likely that he wants to speak more to them about this radical change, undertaken in Christ, where the Aaronic priesthood has been replaced by the Melchizedekian - a subject of serious import for them in their current situation of possibly being tempted to return to Judaism.

They are *«slow to learn»* literally *«have become»* lethargic or careless. There has come over them a dullness, or even a reluctance to listen. The contrast is being made between Jesus - who we have just seen was a responsive listener to God, and these Hebrew Christians who are reluctant listeners.

We have seen that obedience is a form of responsive hearing. It may be that the Hebrew Christians were aware that obedience to God was going to mean walking in the path of suffering. Thus it may not be mental laziness but rather spiritual resistance that is the difficulty.

Another contrast is made between what they should be - teachers, the ones who do the speaking, and what they are - learners, the ones who do the listening.

They are not new converts (Hebrews 2vv1-4), so some understanding and maturity can be reasonably expected of them. Maturity is marked by the progression from student to teacher. In the Christian life it is not time passed but progress made that counts and they are making very little. All Christians are expected to move from learning to teaching.

They are still stumbling over the basics, the *«elementary truths»*. Literally this phrase can refer to the letters of the alphabet - they are therefore still learning their A, B, C's. They are still at the beginning of the beginning! What are the basics? - the elementary truths of God's word i.e. Scripture. They have not grasped the real significance of God's revelation to man in Christ. It seems they were under pressure from those Jews who rejected Christ and that they are trying to find some way to remain faithful to the old ways and still be Christian at the same time. They can only do this by undermining the doctrine of Christ as the final High Priest and the end of the old Aaronic priesthood.

The charge of spiritual immaturity is repeated using the contrast of infants and the mature and the food appropriate to each. The tense of the Greek verb is literally *«you have become»* ones needing milk. The implication is that not only have they not advanced, rather they have gone backwards. This condemnation will be continued in the next chapter where not moving forward is shown to be the same as falling backward (Hebrews 6vv6-8).

Solid food suits only those whose constitution can cope with it. Beginners need simpler food. Our spiritual dietary needs change as we grow. That which helps and strengthens young Christians is not suited to the more advanced and vice-versa. There is therefore a discernment required in church leaders and pastors in

order to provide appropriate spiritual food at the appropriate stage of development. They must also promote the progression from learner to teacher of all Christians.

St Paul also used the metaphor of maturity and immaturity (1 Corinthians 3vv1-2). In the Corinthians' case their spiritual immaturity was evidenced by attitudes of rivalry and envy. The Hebrew Christians' immaturity is shown by their resisting God's call to faithful endurance.

Trained themselves - Their immaturity is in terms of their moral capacity (distinguishing good from evil). A faculty which is developed by habit and training. The image is taken from the gymnasium where bodies are trained. They have failed to work out in the gymnasium of righteousness. They have failed to put into practice the knowledge they have learned. It is experience that brings development and growth. Experience in the school of hard knocks. Experience obtained by practically seeking to do God's will day by day. Those who have the scars to prove their battle-worn experience are the mature and the adult (Galatians 6v17 - the marks left on his body by his stonings, beatings and illnesses are stated by St Paul as the evidence that he is a servant of Christ). It is in the active experience of the Church - prayer, fasting, divine worship, giving etc. that enables us to move on to maturity.

The failure of the Hebrew Christians to put into practice their faith means their capacity to discern good from bad is undeveloped and child-like. Adults don't go wrong as easily as babies do. Maturity is always evidenced by moral transformation. They are therefore not the people they should be.

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