

Jesus Our Great High Priest: Hebrews 5: 5-10

Introduction: It is becoming obvious that our society is becoming increasingly hostile to Christianity and what it stands for. The recent plebiscite and attacks on school scripture are signs of this. In other words, the problems that the early Christians faced from their contemporaries are starting to become our problems too.

The letter to the Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who were thinking of returning to Judaism to escape persecution. The theme of the letter is that at every point, Jesus is superior to every element of Judaism because he *fulfils* everything that the Old Testament promised.

More generally, Christians of every age struggle with the pressures of life and need help to stand strong against ‘fightings within and fears without.’

The passage we are looking at today points us to how God helps us in these struggles by comparing what Jesus does for us as ‘our high priest’ to the inherent weakness of the Jewish priesthood that the readers were thinking of returning to.

This passage describes Jesus as being like ‘a high priest,’ so that just as Jewish priests represented the people in making animal sacrifices and prayers in the temple in Jerusalem, so Jesus, Hebrews 5:7, ‘offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears ...’ on our behalf.

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Furthermore, just before this passage, at Hebrews 4:15, it says that ‘we do not have a high priest (like those in Jerusalem) who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet without sin.’ This is Jesus.

Because we have him, it says at verse 16, ‘we can approach the throne of grace [prayer] with confidence and so find grace to help in our time of need.’

Unlike Jewish priests, who were sinners like us, Jesus was without any sin and therefore could offer himself to God on the cross as a perfect sacrifice. So as a priest, Jesus is in a different class to them.

What kind of priest was he? Hebrews 5:10 says that ‘God designated him as a high priest *after the order of Melchizedek.*’

This is one of the most puzzling sections in the Bible. Who is this fellow Melchizedek and in what way is Jesus, as a priest, like him?

To find this out we have to go back to Genesis 14 and Psalm 110.

Genesis 14:17-20 says:

After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied to him, the King of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is the King’s Valley).

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Then Melchizedek King of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying; 'blessed be Abram by God Most high, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High who delivered your enemies into your hand.'

Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

That is literally all we know about Melchizedek. Yet there is something about him that caused the writer to the Hebrews to say that *he* is a model of priesthood that Jesus fulfills.

The only other reference to Melchizedek is in Psalm 110 where David foresees the Messiah as being a priest like Melchizedek. So, in what way is Jesus like Melchizedek?

First, Melchizedek was a *king* not just a priest. In fact his name literally means 'King of Righteousness.' That is a fundamental truth about Jesus. He is 'King of kings and Lord of lords' and he is righteousness personified.

Second, he is said to be a 'priest *forever*.' He is not like the priests of the temple who died and had to be replaced. As our 'high priest', having ascended to the right hand of God, Jesus, 'ever-lives to make intercession for us in the presence of God the Father.

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Third, Melchizedek is described as 'King of Salem' that is 'King of Peace.' It is Jesus who through his death brings peace with God. This peace is for all who trust in him and shows itself by his presence within us by his Holy Spirit. Jesus is called the 'Prince of Peace.'

Fourth, Jewish priests had to be Levites descended from Aaron. That was why they alone were allowed to be priests in the temple. Jesus, in his earthly life, was descended from King David and through him, Judah and back to Abraham, which meant he could never be a priest in the temple even if he wanted to.

But Melchizedek was even more senior than Abraham. This is illustrated by the fact that *he* gave a blessing to Abraham and Abraham paid a tenth of his war booty to him. So, just as Melchizedek was superior to the Jewish priesthood *and* Abraham, so Jesus, being like Melchizedek, is superior to those priests as well. The point of this for the original readers of Hebrews is that *they* should not give up following Jesus by going back to Judaism?

This is a strange and complicated way to make a point, but if you were Jewish Christians thinking of giving up their faith in Jesus it would have been quite persuasive, especially since David in Psalm 110 said that the Messiah would in fact be like Melchizedek.

The application of this passage to us is simple; not only did Jesus accept the penalty for our sins on the cross but now as 'our high priest' he is in heaven now looking after our interests; he ever-lives to make intercessions for us.

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Further, by his Spirit within us, he will help us in times of trouble.

When we pray to God, he gives us his peace. When we reflect on his promises, such as in this passage, we are strengthened to hold firm and not give in to outside pressures or inner temptations. We are not alone!