

Our Great High Priest

In the name of him who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many, dear friends in Christ: We sometimes speak of the threefold office of our Savior Jesus Christ. He is said to be our Prophet, Priest, and King. Two of these offices we can understand quite easily. Jesus is our Prophet in that he speaks for God. He can do that because unlike all the other prophets who came before him and who only echoed what God said to them, Jesus is God. *His Word* is divine. The office of King we also understand. While we don't have a king in our system of government, we do have elected leaders appointed over us. Their job is to rule and govern, protect the nation, and see to the public good. In return we owe them honor and obedience. Jesus is King of kings. We owe him absolute honor and obedience.

It's the priestly office we have a little more trouble relating to. The reason is we don't have priests in our time. Never in the New Testament is a man who serves the Christian Church referred to as a priest. There is one passage which mentions that many former priests came to faith in Jesus and became members of the Church, but the operative word there is "former". They aren't priests anymore – except in the general sense that all Christians are called a nation of priests.

But we should ask: why don't we refer to our clergy as priests? It's because a priest by definition is someone who offers sacrifices. In our Lenten evening devotions this year we've been looking at the theology of blood and the many roles blood played in communicating God's plan of salvation to his people. I won't repeat it all here except to say that Old Testament worship was messy business. We have no idea. We come to church dressed nicely; we sit in comfortable pews, sing hymns, recite psalms, and listen to readings and to sermons that never seem to end. It's all very neat and tidy. It wasn't that way in Old Testament times. To us the Temple courts would look, sound, and smell more like a slaughterhouse than a place of worship. If I were a priest back then I wouldn't be wearing anything like this. I'd have on a simple linen tunic and a butcher's apron. I would literally be up to my elbows in blood. That's how people were absolved of their sins: through the blood of animals that were sacrificed, the goats and lambs paying the penalty of death that the people deserved.

With that in mind, imagine trying to make the transition. Put yourself in the sandals of a Jewish person living in the first century. All your life you've worshipped the Lord in the Temple under the old covenant, according to the Word of God handed down to Moses at Mount Sinai. This is the way you do it. This is the way the Lord is supposed to be worshipped. He himself said so. But then you hear about this man named Jesus. You're told that he is the long promised Savior. You learn how he fulfilled all the prophecies concerning the Christ. More than that, you learn that as the Scriptures foretold he died for sin and he rose again on the third day. Through him you have peace with God. It's great news, the best ever. And by the work and power of the Holy Spirit you believe it.

The question is: Now what? Having come to faith in Jesus, how are you to worship the Lord? Is it business as usual? Go to the Temple, bring your animals to the priests, and offer sacrifices as you have always done? And what about the annual festivals: Passover, the Feast of Booths, the Day of Atonement – all of which include the offering of various sacrifices? Do you still keep observing these prescribed holy days?

The simple answer is no. All these things are fulfilled in Jesus. They only pointed to him. Like road signs on the way to your destination, their purpose was to lead you *to* Jesus. Now that you have arrived at the destination, the place you longed to be, why would you want to go back and look at the signs?

That's the *simple* answer. And it's correct. But think about how hard it would be to make the jump. We've got this thing that's like mental and social inertia: the law that says objects at rest remain at rest and objects in motion remain in motion unless acted upon by another force. We don't like change. We want everything to stay the same. We are wedded to our time-honored customs and traditions. To try to capture what it would be like to make the transition from the old covenant to the new, think how you'd feel if next Sunday you came to church and the whole sanctuary was turned around so now the front of the church is where the back used to be. And we got entirely new hymnals. All those hymns you really like are gone. You have to learn new ones. Baptism and the Lord's Supper? We don't do those anymore. They've been replaced by fresh sacraments. Oh, and we have a new church calendar. Advent, Epiphany, Lent, the rest of those seasons are out. We have a new calendar now. And we've canceled Christmas, Easter, and the other high holy days. From here on we've got different festivals; ones you've never heard of. How would that sit with you? Not so well, I would guess.

And let me add this to the mix: You're a Jewish believer Christ; but you've got lots of family and friends who haven't come to faith in him. They're all still doing it old school. And you are excluded. When the extended family sits down to celebrate Passover, you're not invited. And they don't want to come to your Christmas party. Truth is that they'd be offended if you asked them.

Okay, if you can imagine all that, then you can begin to understand the strong temptation Jewish believers in Christ would be under to revert back to the old covenant, to maintain their cherished traditions, to be included once again in the family celebrations.

The New Testament book of Hebrews was written precisely to address people who were subject to this powerful temptation. The entire work is actually a sermon, the purpose of which is to prove that Jesus, his ministry, and his Gospel are in every way superior to the old covenant along with all of its rites, rituals, sacrifices, and festivals. The author's main point is that there is no going back. Before we had the shadows of things to come; now we have the real thing that was casting those shadows the whole time. Now that you've come into the light, why would you want to go back to the dark? You can't do it without losing what you've gained. To keep offering animal sacrifices for sin now is to say that you don't believe Jesus and his sacrifice were enough. To go back to the old covenant is to deny Christ.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. As I said before, in the course of his sermon the author of Hebrews is proving step by step to his hearers that Jesus and the new covenant in every way supersede the old. In the section that is our text, he's specifically addressing Jesus in his high priestly office. To get a handle on this, we need to understand just how pivotal a figure the high priest was in Old Testament worship. It would be impossible to overstate his importance. Under the old covenant the high priest occupied a place similar to the Pope in Roman Catholic theology – and then some. All the other priests were like worker bees who made sacrifices for the people's sins. They heard confessions, transferred the sins that were confessed to an animal, and then they slit the animal's throat, collecting the lifeblood in a bowl. The blood containing both the life and sin was then poured out upon the blazing altar. The Lord received the life the Law demanded for sin, and the sin itself was transferred to the altar – and by extension to the rest of the Temple and onto the Lord himself. The Temple functioned as a

spiritual landfill: the collection point and dumping place for the filthy sins of the people. But the flow of sins by the work of the priests was always in. Only the high priest could make the sins go out and away.

That happened once a year on the Day of Atonement. That was the one day the high priest entered the Temple and went beyond the curtain into the Holy of Holies – the place of God's presence above the Ark of the Covenant. There he would pour out upon the top of the Ark, which was called the Mercy Seat, the blood of a goat. The idea was that the Lord looking down on his Law contained in the Ark would see the blood above it. The Law that demands life for sin was satisfied. The sins of the people were atoned for. But they still needed to be carried away. For that there was the scapegoat, the bearer of sin. The high priest would come out of the Temple and lay his hands on the scapegoat. He'd confess a whole year's worth of the sins of the nation. And then the goat bearing all the people's sins would be driven out into the wilderness where presumably it would be killed by predators. But only the high priest could do that. Only he could stand before the Lord and make atonement. And only he could make the sins go away.

A little about the high priest: he had to be a direct descendant of Aaron, Moses' brother, who was the first high priest of Israel. Even then, he had to be appointed to the task. Lots of men could claim descent from Aaron, but only a handful of them were chosen to serve as high priest, and only one at a time. It was a lifelong appointment. If a man was made high priest, he served until he died. The fact that he was subject to death, though, leads to two points the author of Hebrews makes. First, that the high priest was someone who understood human weakness. Though chosen for a great honor, he was just a man – a man who knew the aches, pains, temptations, and sorrows of life. And that inclined him toward compassion. It helped him be patient and gentle with the ignorant and wayward.

Second, that he was subject to death meant that the high priest was a sinner like everyone else. That's why before he could perform his singular role in expunging the sins of the nation, he had to offer sacrifices for himself – a whole bull, as a matter of fact. He had to be absolved of sins himself before he entered the Holy of Holies, for no sinner can stand in the presence of God and live.

But in all these things, the author of Hebrews shows that Jesus is a greater high priest. The high priest was appointed by men. Jesus was appointed by God. The high priest had to be a "son of Aaron". Jesus is the Son of God. The high priest was a sinner. Jesus is sinless. The high priest offered up a goat for the people's sins. Jesus offered himself. He is the high priest who makes the sacrifice. His perfect life is the sacrifice. And he is the scapegoat who takes away sins once and for all.

And his is a greater priesthood. The Scriptures call him "a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." The high priests of Aaron's line serve for a while and die. Jesus, having risen from the dead, never dies. He serves forever as our high priest. And the order of Melchizedek predates and supersedes the order of Aaron. Melchizedek, whose name means "king of righteousness", was the king of Salem in Abraham's time. Salem means "peace". It was what later became known as Jerusalem, the foundation of peace. But Abraham, the father of the faithful, paid homage to Melchizedek. Abraham recognized his priestly authority five hundred years before Aaron was born, five hundred years before there was a high priest of Israel.

Jesus surpasses all. He is the King of Righteousness. It's in his righteousness that we stand before God. And he is the King of Peace. He's the one who gives us peace with God.

Being a direct descendant of David, he rules on David's throne forever. And he is our high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. At the same time, being fully human, he knows our human weaknesses. He's experienced all the aches, pains, temptations, and sorrows of life – and a good deal more of them than any of us will ever have to when he suffered and died for the sins of the world. Thus he is compassionate and gentle with us in our ignorance and waywardness – far more compassionate and gentle than any mere man could be.

In the Christian Church we don't have men serving as priests. And unlike Jewish believers of the first century, none of us are tempted to go back to the old system in which they did. But we do have one High Priest. His name is Jesus. He is the source of salvation to all who believe in him and trust his word of forgiveness. Therefore receiving the benefits of his perfect sacrifice on our behalf, let us now and always render all thanks, honor, and praise to him, our Prophet, *Priest*, and King. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!