

Sermon 26, Your Priestly Task, Pt. 1, Hebrews 5:7-10

Proposition: Your Melchizedekian high priest prayed and learned through suffering — and in Him, you need to pray and learn through suffering.

- I. Priests Pray, v. 7
 - A. Jesus Prayed for Resurrection
 - B. You should Pray for Resurrection
- II. Priests Learn Obedience through Suffering, v. 8
 - A. Jesus Suffered
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 - 1. Suffering Teaches Obedience, v. 8
 - 2. Suffering Is God's Fatherly Discipline, 12:3-11
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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we took a detour to Romans 6 last week to see that baptism mystically unites us to the death of Christ, such that His death is credited to us and frees us from sin. That doctrine of the mystical union is one of the most prominent features of the New Testament. To prove this assertion, I need only mention Paul's constant refrain "In Christ." The great apostles uses this phrase over a hundred times, if memory serves. Why? Because it is the core of the Christian faith. We are Christians because we are united to Christ and transformed by that union so that we will be like Him.

You know all this, of course. But today I want to apply the truth of your union with Christ to another doctrine that you probably know. This doctrine is called "the priesthood of all believers." In its most basic form, it states that all believers are priests. Now, as we have talked about recently, most of us have only a very foggy idea of what a priest is and does. Let me remind you that I have described a priest as a services professional whose job it is to repair and maintain your relationship with God.

Right away I hope your mind is raising the obvious difficulty. If a priest's job is to repair and maintain people's relationships with God, and if you are priest, then it is your job to repair and maintain both your own and others' relationship with God. How on earth are you supposed to go about that? Two weeks ago I talked at length about praying for one another. If you are a priest like Jesus — and you are — then you need to pray like Him for your fellow Christians. But what about the other things that our text this morning ascribes to Christ as our priest? He not only prayed; He also learned, suffered, obeyed, was perfected, and became the source of salvation. Are we as priests called to do all of those things too?

Brothers and sisters, the answer is yes. With God's help I will show you this morning that Scripture ascribes all of the priestly tasks (including self-sacrifice) not only to Jesus, but to all believers — to all those who are united to Him by faith, anointed with His Spirit, and therefore

rightly called “Christians” or little Christs. Your high priest prayed, learned, suffered, obeyed, and became the source of eternal salvation, and you should do all of these things as well in union with Him.

I. Priests Pray, v. 7

I’m not going to spend a lot of time on this one because we talked about it at length two Sundays ago.

A. Jesus Prayed for Resurrection

We saw that Jesus prayed to be resurrected from the dead, and He was. His Father heard and answered that prayer.

B. You should Pray for Resurrection

As a priest, you should pray that God would deliver you from death. I would suggest that you go home and read Psalm 119, circling all of the times that the psalmist says “resurrect me!” He doesn’t use that exact word, of course. He says “Quicken me” and “revive me”, and he says them all the time. We need new life; we need life after this life. Your prayers should address your future state and ask for God’s restoring, reviving grace.

But you should also pray for resurrection for your fellow saints, and for the nonbelievers in your life. After all, is there anything more pressing to pray for than for deliverance from death? Death is the worst enemy of the human race. Even if we overcome poverty, sickness, and our broken earthly relationships, we still have to reckon with death.

So pray for God’s resurrection power in your own life and in the lives of your fellow saints — and especially pray for it for those who don’t seem to have experienced it. You are a king and a priest to God, and so you need to imitate your priest who prayed for you to be resurrected and dwell with Him in heaven. “Father, I desire that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am, in order that they may behold My glory, which Thou hast given Me; for Thou didst love Me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24).

Pray because God loves to hear your prayers, and loves to answer them. He loved His Son before the foundation of the world. In Christ, you share in that love. He wants you to pray, not just because you are His child and He wants to hear from you but also because He has anointed you to do the work of priestly intercession. The one who can save you from death will hear when you pray. He has made resurrection possible by answering His Son’s prayer for it; do you think He will say no to all of your prayers for quickening, for revitalizing, for raising up your own flagging strength and restoring the lives of those around you?

II. Priests Learn Obedience through Suffering, v. 8

Well, there is far more to say about prayer, but the best thing to do is to pray. Prayer is hard. But we move now to the harder part of priestly work — suffering.

A. Jesus Suffered

Jesus suffered things. He suffered under Pontius Pilate. He knew the taste of abuse by the crowd— “We were not born of sexual immorality!” He tasted death for every man. He was scourged, despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him. He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.

To the pain of physical injury and social rejection add the pain of family separation. He was stricken, smitten by God His Father, and afflicted. God credited all our sins to Him. Jesus wept.

The Bible never speaks of Jesus attending an entertainment event, never tells us that He laughed or joked, capered or rode a swing. But it documents pain in plenty for Him.

He underwent all of this suffering as our merciful and faithful high priest. His suffering was a key part of making Him fit to offer eternal salvation.

Well, you are a priest too.

B. You Will Suffer

What that means is that you will suffer. God loves you and has a wonderful, painful plan for your life. Don't be surprised by the fiery trial as if it is some strange thing. For one thing, suffering is part of the human condition. The rich, the poor, the old, the young — we all experience pain and suffering. But God specifically promises that His servants will undergo His fatherly discipline.

1. Suffering Teaches Obedience, v. 8

Jesus learned what obedience was through what He suffered. We talked about this two weeks ago; at the time, I told you that Jesus learned what it was to have a second will, a human will that could and, in a certain sense, did want something different than what His Father wanted for Him. He learned obedience in the sense that He learned what it is to say "Not my will, but thine."

Clearly there is more to say here. I said almost nothing about the mechanism the apostle mentions. What taught Jesus obedience? Suffering did. How did suffering teach Jesus to obey?

2. Suffering Is God's Fatherly Discipline, 12:3-11

The answer, I believe, is further on in the book of Hebrews. By the way, even before we talk about this passage in ch. 12, let me just note that the concept of "gentle parenting" rejects in principle the idea that a human person, child or adult, should learn obedience through suffering. The intentional infliction of suffering has no place in good parenting. That's the contention of the gentle parenting movement. But Hebrews and Proverbs and really, the rest of the Bible beg to differ.

Turn with me to Heb. 12. We read this passage a few moments ago as part of our morning worship. It quotes from Proverbs 3, but whereas Proverbs speaks mainly of rebuke and correction in a verbal-moral sense, Hebrews undoubtedly adds the element of physical pain. Every father disciplines the son he loves. I think our gentle-parenting friends would not disagree with that statement. But the definition of discipline advanced by Hebrews puts physical pain at the heart of it. Yes, God disciplines through verbal rebuke. But He also disciplines with a whip. He "scourges every son whom he receives." God's discipline takes the form of physical pain and chastising. Surely the author's mind, in adding the phrase about scourging sons, went right back to the great priestly cross-work of Jesus Christ the Son. He was scourged — same word here in Heb. 12:6 as in John 19:1 to describe the pain that Jesus endured.

Why do you and I experience physical pain, from the minor paper cuts of life all the way up to car wrecks and bone cancer and third-degree burns over ninety percent of our bodies? Part of the answer is that this pain and suffering is a sign of God's love. Suffering, rightly received —

we could even say “Received with a priestly mindset” — is how we learn obedience. It’s how Jesus learned obedience.

Remember how I defined obedience two weeks ago as “Doing what you wouldn’t have done on your own”? Obedience, by definition, includes the element of overcoming your own contrary will that does not want to follow the command your authority has issued. How can your authority help you overcome that internal reluctance? The answer is through the infliction of pain.

You see, God loves you. He loves you as a son. And that means that He wants you to look and act like a son. You’re not a bastard and He doesn’t want you behaving like one. The reason bastards are the way they are is that they don’t have fathers inflicting the necessary pain to help them do what they’re told. The undisciplined begetter of a bastard hates his son and does not correct or discipline him. Rebuke hurts. Spankings hurt. But they hurt less than the pain of having no discipline.

3. Suffering Produces Holiness, 12:10-11

That’s how the writer wraps up his discussion of suffering and discipline: “He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Heb 12:10b-11).

The writer identifies two things that discipline creates: holiness and righteousness. God’s purpose is to bring us to share His holiness. The fruit of discipline is righteousness (which, he adds, is peaceful). It’s grievous to have your father inflict pain on you, but the outcome is well worth it, for suffering produces the two things you need as a Christian — holiness, which teaches you to live for God, and righteousness, which is living in accordance with right. Holiness refers to your purpose, while righteousness refers to your status. Your purpose is to glorify God, and your status is “right with God.”

How does suffering do this? Well, it does it only for those who accept it as discipline. Discipline is the training that makes punishment unnecessary. The well-disciplined child of God is one who accepts the pain as the sign of His Father’s love and responds with repentance and endeavor after new obedience. He shows love to the Father who has so graciously loved him.

Do you see that? Just going through terrible pain does not make people better — any more, in fact, than receiving other acts of love makes people better. If a billionaire picked a man to love, adopted him as his child, and left all his billions to him, would that by itself have a salutary effect on the man’s character? How many times have you found yourself receiving love with a bad attitude because it did not measure up to what you envisioned or thought you wanted?

In other words, though pain is the operative mechanism by which the love expressed in discipline gets your attention, pain is not the point. Love that transforms the beloved, that loves him into perfection, is behind the pain of discipline. Whom the Lord loves, He chastens! He does it because we are called to live a disciplined, wise, mature lifestyle in righteousness and holiness before Him all our days. Jesus Christ endured this painful discipline, even though He was

already morally perfect. Is there some reason that you should be spared it? Are you going to be perfected more easily than the Son of God?

Brothers and sisters, this changes our whole attitude toward suffering. Pain, sickness, broken bones and broken relationships, psychological and social slights, betrayal, lost love, stubbed toes and dislocated ribs — whatever the source of your suffering, Hebrews pulls back the curtain and says in unmistakable terms, “Your pain is your Father’s expression of love.”

If you can’t see that, pain will leave you an embittered wreck.

But if you can embrace it, if you wrap your mind around the connection between love and suffering, suffering as a major expression of your Father’s love, then you will share His holiness and grow the peaceable fruit of righteousness.

Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.¹

Which is it going to be? You are a priest to God through the one who washed you from your sins with His own blood. Part of your job as priest is to suffer the Lord’s discipline that alters your purpose and your moral character. Instead of existing for yourself, as a disciplined child of God you exist for Him. Instead of having a compromised and pathologically sinful moral character, you will look like Jesus, who learned obedience. Love is the name of the God who set up the world this way. We live in a culture that regards almost all suffering and self-denial as pathological; only such a culture could have invented “gentle parenting.” But our culture is wrong on this point. The gospel tells us that to be a priest to God means suffering.

After all, priests handle holy things. But how can you handle holy things if you aren’t holy? That is part of why suffering is a key part of priesthood. We will come back next week and talk more about this, including the incredible privilege that we have of building a connection between our suffering and the salvation of our fellow men. How is that possible? Only in union with Christ.

This sermon, I trust, has been inspiration, not condemnation. I am not the priest I should be. I have a hard time recognizing my Father’s love in the pain and trials that come into my life. I know many of you do too. But take heart: you are not saved by being a good priest. You are saved by the good priest, the great priest, whose name is Jesus. In Him, you are holy and righteous. So walk it out. If I have two words of application, they are these: suffer and pray. Let your sufferings turbocharge your prayers, and your prayers sweeten your sufferings.

¹ T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding” from *Four Quartets*.

You don't have to wear the turban and the ephod; you don't need a gold plate on your head that says "Holy to Yahweh." But you do need to live like a priest, a suffering, praying priest. Through Jesus, you can do so — and will. Amen.