

The Glory of Christ as Our High Priest

Call to Worship: Psalm 2

Text: Hebrews 5:1-11

Introduction

As I have been considering where to go with the preaching (when we finish working through Titus), I have been overcome with the desire to work through a brief series on the prayer life of Christ, before moving into another Book of the Bible. And as I have been gathering textual data and reading through various texts, this text in Hebrews struck me in such a profound way, reminding me, that while I may understand many truths of Scripture, and while I may be able to pull apart many texts, seeking to understand them in their context, there is a certain depth to various texts of Scripture that make me feel like an infant in my understanding of God's Word. It's not that we can't come to an understanding of what is presented in such texts, enabling us to preach them, to write commentaries on them...etc, but there is a depth of richness here, which the weakness of the flesh just hinders us from grasping with both hands. There's an Ephesians 3:18-19 reality attached to even the basic truths of the gospel, which leaves us saying that there are dimensions of glory and understanding to the Person of Christ and His atonement, which are simply beyond the reach of our understanding, leading us to continually strive to plummet further into the depths of growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Recognizing these limitations, I hope that, for the next several minutes, we can gain, at least, a little more of an appreciation for the glory of Christ, as Our High Priest.

I. The Overall Context

As many of you know, the author of this Book is seeking to exhort, warn and compel His Jewish audience to avoid turning away from Christ to head back to trusting in the Old Covenant, visible, Mosaic temple practices. In the midst of trial, and under pressure from Judaistic influences, the brethren were tempted to walk away from Christ and to revert back to all of the ceremonial laws and practices that were attached to temple worship. But, in doing so, they would, of course, be moving away from the substance, and back to the shadows, all of which

were meant to anticipate and point to the coming of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, who by His life, death and resurrection, had fulfilled the ceremonial laws in total.

And so, the author aims to give a clear picture of the far greater glory of Christ, showing Him both as the fulfillment of these laws, and as the far better substantial reality to which these shadows pointed. And in our text, he is in the midst of presenting Christ as a far better High Priest than the entire Aaronic priesthood combined, being from the perpetual, unending priesthood of Melchizedek, that mysterious King of Salem, to whom Abraham had paid tithes.

While the author spends much more time, dealing with this overall topic, we will put the magnifying glass over portions of chapter 5, with the hope of getting a taste of a bit of the glory of Christ's high priestly office displayed here.

II. Contrasting the Priesthood of Aaron with the Priesthood of Christ

And so, beginning in verses one through four, the author is going to state a few facts about the Aaronic high priesthood (the high priesthood through Aaron), and then moving into verses five and following, he is going to seek to establish the authenticity, uniqueness and glorious improvement of the far better, high priesthood of Christ. Notice then, four factors that the author states about the Aaronic priesthood:

1) Every high priest that has come from men, has been appointed through Aaron's line, for the purpose of mediating on behalf of the people, before God, by offering both gifts and sacrifices for sins to God (vs. 1).

This was the high priest's general function, and it was a critical one, because he stood between the people and God, as an appointed representative of the people, seeking to please and appease God, so that sinners could retain God's favor and blessing.

2) However, these high priests, appointed among men, were able to identify with the people and to have a particular compassion on them, because bearing the same sinful flesh, they shared the same weaknesses that the people had, being subject to ignorance and going astray. In other words, they themselves were imperfect and not without their own sins (vs. 2).

3) Therefore, there was a gaping whole in the Aaronic priesthood, which ought to have compelled the people to recognize that this high priesthood could only serve as a temporary fix; a

piece of duct tape on a widening hole that would need to be sealed by some other means. And so, in light of this, the high priest had to offer sacrifices for himself first, before he could even represent the people. In other words, he had his own sins to deal with before God, let alone trying to mediate on behalf of the people (vs. 3).

4) Finally, the author reminds his audience, that even in all of this, those who did serve as high priests, still had to be called by God, even as Aaron was. In other words, no one could simply aspire to be a high priest (or a priest of any kind for that matter), one day, simply because they had the desire (vs. 4). If you were of any other tribe than the tribe of Levi, being a priest was not even an option. And even if you were a Levite, if you were not a direct descendent of Aaron (through Eleazar or Ithamar), you could not be a high priest.

Having set forth these four points about the Aaronic priesthood, the author then moves on to establish the greater glory, authority and uniqueness of the High Priesthood of Christ. And he does so, by using his last point, given in verse 4, as a bridge. Notice, he begins verse 5 with, “So also...” making a connection with what he has just said about the divine calling that had to be set upon the Aaronic high priests, which was also set upon Christ, but through another means. And so, reading verse four into verse five, we could say it like this, “Even as no man could, himself, take on the honor of being a high priest; even as Aaron and the high priests that followed through his loins required a divine calling, so also, “Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest...” In other words, Jesus didn’t just step in from the tribe of Judah and say, “I want that role and I will aspire to it, and take it for Myself...etc.” He didn’t violate the sanctity of the office, seeking to take it upon Himself to usurp God’s divine authority in rewriting the Law, so that he could glorify Himself in securing it.

No, just as in the case of Aaron, it was ordained and promised Him by God. The calling originated with God, even before Aaron was born for that matter. Now, how do we know this? How do we find this affirmed in the Old Testament, such that it would compel the readers of Hebrews to recognize that Jesus’s high priestly calling was from God and not men? You see, if these Hebrews were going to avoid apostatizing, they needed to fully understand that Jesus’s High Priestly representation of them, was in fact legitimate and a calling which did, indeed, come from God.

And so, the author makes use of two Old Testament prophetic texts to affirm that Jesus, the Messiah, did indeed receive a divine calling unto his better High Priestly office. Notice, verses 5-6, “So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but it was He (that is, God) who said to Him: ‘You are My Son, Today I have begotten You’” (Psalm 2:7). And, “As He also says in another place: You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (Psalm 110:4).

Now, it’s interesting because the first quote, from Psalm 2, actually establishes the universal reign of Christ as the eternal king, to whom, all nations must bow, and there, God speaks of begetting His Son, upon raising Him from the dead, and giving Him victory over all of the peoples and kings who have sought to contend with God and His Messiah. They thought they had won, by putting Him to death, but in reality, it is by that very means that God has enthroned and exalted Him.

And then, in Psalm 110, we find this mysterious divine proclamation, connecting the same Messianic King [“The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool. The Lord shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion. Rule in the midst of your enemies...etc. (vs. 1-2)]; this Same Messianic king is declared by God (by divine appointment) to be “a priest forever according to *the order of Melchizedek!*” Woh! Now, wait a minute! The glorious Messianic King is also a high priest, but according to what line? A line that preceded the Aaronic line, and a line, to which Abraham himself looked for intercessory benefit, when he paid King Melchizedek (another one, within whom the offices of king and priest were merged) a tithe! You see, the author of Hebrews taps into this divine reality and says, as it were, “Look, this was not a calling which Jesus the Christ simply took. He was appointed unto it, identified with the line of an eternal priesthood, according to the order of Melchizedek, whose origin/beginning and destination/end were unknown.” Wow! Christ was planted in the soil of this eternal priesthood, from the beginning!

And then, just when you thought it couldn’t get any more wondrous and glorious, the author reveals the evidence of this glorious High Priest’s right to the office, showing how He finalized the attaining of that right. And, unlike the defiled earthly priests, He, having reached perfection, became the author of (not simply a short lived, temporal covering or pardon for sins,

but) eternal salvation! He blew the entire earthly temple and earthly priestly ministrations out of the universe, and established, by one offering, what the Old Covenant priesthood could not establish in a trillion offerings!

Notice verses 7-8, “who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered” (vs. 7-8).

What is the author talking about here? He’s speaking of a specific event that took place in the days of our Lord’s flesh; that is to say, in the days when He walked and lived upon this earth, prior to His ascension. And what event is he speaking about? When was it that the Lord had offered up “prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death?” When did our Lord agonize in prayer before the father, seeking His help and deliverance from death and the utter torment of soul that He was about to experience? Was it not in the Garden of Gethsemane, where, on a very cold day, He agonized so fervently in prayer, that He sweat thick drops, like blood? Hear again, Matthews account of that agonizing event [Matthew 26:36-46; Luke 22:39-46]. And so, it is specifically in the Garden of Gethsemane that our Lord prayed in this way. But, notice again, what else the author tells us:

“...And was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.” While He yet faced the cross, while He yet needed to die on behalf of His people, we are here told that He was heard because of His godly fear. His sincere and perfect desire to do the will of God at all times, and even there in the Garden; His unwavering commitment to obey the Father in all respects, guaranteed His audience with the Father. And while an angel did come to temporarily refresh and strengthen Him, so that He could make it to the cross, ultimately the answer to His prayers, there in the Garden, were granted at His resurrection! Death could not hold Him. He was raised from the dead, three days after He breathed His last.

And by way of His willingness to embrace the will of the Father, even though He was the eternal Son of God [He didn’t consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself...Phil. 2], through suffering, He perfected His obedience. He learned obedience through

His suffering, not in the sense that He lacked morality, (see Heb. 4:15) but rather, in that, through the testing that He experienced by His suffering, He was able to exercise a new form of obedience that had not been required of Him before. Would He be willing to submit to the will of the Father, when the shadow of the cross was finally upon Him? Three times, when He pled with the Father to remove His cup, if possible, His obedience was learned and expressed by these words, all three times, “Nevertheless, not My will, but Your will be done.” He still subjected Himself to the will of the Father, and in doing so, especially during those moments of agony, He fulfilled all obedience to the Father and was suited to be, both, the worthy High Priest and the acceptable sacrifice on behalf of sinners!

And that is why the author moves on to say in verses 9-11, “And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, called by God as High Priest “according to the order of Melchizedek,” of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.”

Having been perfected; again, not in the moral sense, but in acquiring to the full and complete necessity of obedience that would make Him a worthy High Priest and sacrifice, He then became the Author of eternal salvation, which He ultimately procured at the cross. You see, brethren, the cross only becomes a viable means of salvation for sinners, if the sacrifice offered there, and the One offering the sacrifice there, is worthy of mediating on behalf of sinners. That’s what makes Jesus a better; indeed, the only true, High Priest! Recall again those glorious words of Philippians 2:8, which parallel this reality, where Paul states there, “And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.” You see, His obedience was complete at the cross, but it was in the Garden, where the test of now “being willing to embrace the reality of the cross,” came to a head (He was betrayed by Judas right after this, getting the ball rolling. This was it, there was no turning back!). And that is why, the words, “Nevertheless, not My will, but Your will be done,” are so critical and precious. They avow the Lord’s complete subjection to the will of the Father, and that, no man ultimately took His life, but He gave it! He laid it down!

To this end then, this High Priest, according to the order of Melchizedek, infinitely surpassed the defiled and inadequate Aaronic priesthood, which could never grant salvation even

from a single sin. And that is why it was critical for the Hebrews to see how foolish it would be to turn back to the shadowy, ineffective, obsolete priesthood, away from the Great High Priest, who alone fulfilled and perfected all obedience, such that He could grant eternal salvation to all who obey Him.

Brethren, let the glory of that reality saturate and entrench your soul with great joy and with a fervent desire to love, serve, adore and worship this glorious King and High Priest, who yet, intercedes for us, on the basis of that once for all time, perfect sacrifice! Through His High Priestly work, He identifies with us and unites us to Himself, in a way that is far more real than our faith often believes. [Note: See the gross atrocity of the Roman Catholic Mass, which seeks to re-sacrifice Christ, over and over again, making that agony in the Garden, and that completed work on the cross, insufficient!]

To the unsaved, know that this eternal salvation belongs only to those who obey Christ. You cannot embrace the High Priestly office of Christ, while denying His Kingly office, in your refusal to fight against sin and to submit to His authority! To claim that one can be saved by Christ's shed blood, without repenting and submitting to Him as Lord and King, is utter heresy, and I believe that the fires of hell burn extra hot, for those who dare respond to the gospel call in that way!

Amen!!!