

Jesus, Our High Priest



Sabbath Afternoon

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S STUDY: Hebrews 5 and 7.

MEMORY TEXT: “For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:15, 16, RSV).

KEY THOUGHT: Of all the books of the Bible, not one gives such a clear and definite explanation of the heavenly priesthood of Jesus as does the book of Hebrews.

AFTER WORLD WAR I, innkeeper Max Fladt went to the Rhine to swim. On the other side, French soldiers were practicing with pontoons. When one turned over, four soldiers fell in the torrent and fought for their lives. Only a couple days earlier the French had sentenced to death seven Germans. Should Fladt help? He cast himself in the waves and saved two Frenchmen. The next day, a French captain asked how he could reward him. Fladt responded: “Reward life with life. I am asking you to pardon the seven German men.” This is what mediation is all about.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: What role of Christ in heaven does Hebrews emphasize? In what ways does Christ's heavenly ministry parallel the work of Aaron as high priest? Why is Jesus compared to the priest-king Melchizedek?

*Please study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 2.

JESUS' PRIESTHOOD, THE UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE OF HEBREWS.

“Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens” (Heb. 8:1, NRSV).

Three words are used in Hebrews to describe Christ's ministry in heaven: *Priest*, *High Priest*, and *priesthood*. None of these specific terms is used for Christ in the rest of the New Testament. Thus, Hebrews has an emphasis found nowhere else in Scripture.

The concept of priest, or priesthood, appears numerous times in Hebrews. Although it also describes the Levitical priesthood and the priesthood of Melchizedek, the context in Hebrews is, always, the priesthood of Jesus.

Look up these texts. What are they all saying in common? What's the basic point they are making, and why is it important for us? Heb. 2:17; 3:1; 4:14; 5:6; 7:15; 7:17; 7:21; 8:1.

Hebrews talks about *both* the Messiahship and the priesthood of Jesus. In the New Testament, Psalm 110 is quoted frequently but always just the first verse. The exception is in Hebrews, which quotes Psalm 110:4 as well as verse 1. The Messiah—the One referred to in Psalm 110:1—is also appointed by God “a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek” in Psalm 110:4. Thus, both the Messiahship and priesthood of Jesus appear in Psalm 110 and in Hebrews.

The heavenly priesthood of Jesus is a key element in Hebrews: “The main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens” (Heb. 8:1, NRSV). Jesus the Messiah is Jesus the High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary.

Though the *concept* of Christ as Priest appears in other parts of the Bible (1 John 2:1, 2; 1 Tim. 2:5), nowhere are we given such a clear and distinct expression of His priesthood as in Hebrews.

What is the common understanding of the word *priest* today? Protestants emphasize the priesthood of all believers as, for instance, found in 1 Peter 2:5, 9. What does that mean, and how can we be careful not to confuse our priesthood with that of Christ?

JESUS AND THE AARONIC PRIESTHOOD (Heb. 5:1-10).

Although Jesus' priesthood is different from the Levitical priesthood, Aaron, the Levitical high priest, is compared with Jesus. Despite the clear differences between them, the similarities warrant study.

In Hebrews 5, Aaron is shown in parallel to Christ. Both are human, both are chosen by God, and both work in behalf of humankind. They offer sacrifices, and their ministry and service is "for the sins" of humanity.

What is different between the Aaronic priesthood and that of Jesus? Heb. 5:1-10; 9:6-12.

Jesus is human, but He is also the Son of God. Aaron was not, a crucial point stressed in Hebrews 5:5, 6, where a quote from Psalm 2 is followed by one from Psalm 110, which links the sonship with the priesthood. Because Jesus is the Son, God bestowed the Melchizedek priesthood on Him. Thus, another kind of priesthood (elaborated in Hebrews 7) is introduced here (see tomorrow's study).

There is also a difference with regard to sacrifices. Although both Jesus and Aaron offer sacrifices, the sacrifice of Jesus is a single sacrifice sufficient for all humankind and—because it is forever valid and effective—it cannot be replaced by any other.

Furthermore, Jesus is both Sacrifice and Priest and thus far surpasses Aaron, who was a priest alone. He could never be a sacrifice. Only Jesus could. Also, unlike Aaron and all other priests, Jesus was never tainted by sin.

The Levitical priesthood and the priesthood of Jesus are both said to deal sympathetically with the sinner. However, this is true only for the ideal Levitical priest. Biblical examples show that Levitical priests could be quite rude, uncaring, and unfaithful. Hebrews, in contrast, stresses especially this aspect of Jesus' ministry: that although being sinless Himself, He sympathizes with sinners and is merciful and faithful in dealing with them.

Further distinctions are that Aaron served on earth, whereas Jesus serves in heaven. Although the sanctuaries, namely the earthly and the heavenly, are linked to each other, Jesus serves at the heavenly temple.

Look up these texts: Leviticus 10:1; Jeremiah 20:1-6; Matthew 26:3, 4. All deal with various priests in the Levitical system. What do these texts tell us, from a purely human standpoint, about the superiority of Christ's ministry?

JESUS AND THE PRIESTHOOD OF MELCHIZEDEK (Heb. 7:11).

Humanly speaking, Jesus does not have the right to function as priest. He came from the tribe of Judah, not from Levi as did Aaron, and according to the Old Testament, all the priests were to come from the family of Aaron (Exod. 28:1, 40, 41).

However, because Jesus is the Son, the only One to share divinity and humanity at one time, and because He has lived among us and died in our place on the cross, He is the only perfect Mediator, the only One who—in the final sense—can be our true High Priest.

How can this truth be shown? The apostle has to prove from Scripture that Jesus has the right to be not only King but Priest. He points out in Psalm 110:4 that "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (NRSV); this has been fulfilled in Jesus, and in Him alone.

What do we know about Melchizedek? Some claim that he was Jesus Himself, appearing in the Old Testament. Only three passages in Scripture deal with Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18-20; Ps. 110:4; and Hebrews 5-7). What do they teach us about this mysterious figure from Old Testament history?

Hebrews 7 furnishes a brief description of Melchizedek (vss. 1-4). He is greater than Levi, because Abraham, the ancestor of Levi, paid tithe to him and blessed him (vss. 4-10). Then, after the mention of Melchizedek, the new and superior priesthood of Christ is presented. The argument is built on Psalm 110, not on Genesis 14, showing that the prediction of a Messianic priest is fulfilled in Jesus. Melchizedek's ancestry, birth, and death are unknown, and the apostle is not interested in it. Melchizedek is a type of Christ, not vice versa. The emphasis is on Jesus, not on Melchizedek.

How are Christ's priesthood and sonship related to each other in Hebrews? Heb. 3:1-6; 5:5-8; 7:28.

The topic of Sonship is crucial in Hebrews. Because Jesus is Son, He is superior to Moses (Hebrews 3) and Aaron (Hebrews 5). But He is also a Priest according to the order of Melchizedek, whom He also surpasses, also by virtue of His sonship.

Melchizedek was both a king and a priest. Jesus is also a High Priest and King. What hope does His kingship offer to us, we who are totally dependent upon divine mercy for salvation?

JESUS AS HIGH PRIEST.

What are some of the characteristics of Jesus the Priest and High Priest?

Heb. 2:17 _____

Heb. 4:14, 15 _____

Heb. 5:5, 6 _____

Heb. 7:24-26 _____

Heb. 8:1-3 _____

In Hebrews 2:17 Jesus is called merciful and faithful. These two characteristics are developed more in the book, but in reverse order. First, Jesus is shown to be faithful, as Moses was, though He surpasses Moses. Then the theme of Jesus' mercy is developed. See Hebrews 4:14-5:10.

Besides faithfulness and mercifulness, Christ's sinlessness is described in Hebrews 4:14-5:10, as well. Although emphasizing Jesus' closeness to us, His humanity and brotherhood, the author is careful to leave no doubt that Jesus was "without sin" (Heb. 4:15), "harmless," "undefiled," and in this way, "separated from sinners" (Heb. 7:26). His sinlessness was crucial not only to His earthly ministry but also to His heavenly one. Had He sinned on earth, He would be of no use to us in heaven.

What does Hebrews reveal about the time and place of Jesus' high-priestly ministry? Heb. 5:5, 6; 9:11.

In Hebrews, Christ's priesthood is dependent on His incarnation and passion. "Strictly speaking, we may not speak of Him as priest until after the Resurrection. Not uncommonly we term the petition in the Garden (John 17) as the high-priestly prayer of Christ. But that goes against the theology of Hebrews."—William G. Johnsson, *In Absolute Confidence* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1979), p. 93.

Why is the sinlessness of Christ so important for the theology of Hebrews, and what does it mean to us? What hope does it give us (1) that we can be justified by God despite our sinfulness? (2) that we can through Him live a life of obedience?

JESUS' WORK AND FUNCTION AS HIGH PRIEST.

"Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16).

Jesus' priesthood is unique. He is a Sacrifice and Mediator at the same time, attributes that do not apply to anyone else in history. Only Jesus died as our Substitute, and only Jesus is our great High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary.

Furthermore, Jesus is a unique Mediator, because no other being in the universe was both human and divine, attributes that enable Him to be the perfect bridge between heaven and earth.

The outcome of this ministry is also unique. No one can save forever besides Jesus. Only through Him is there eternal life.

Jesus' ministry as High Priest is also objective. This means that it is not dependent on how we feel or think. It exists whether we understand it, know about it, or even believe in it. Although there are subjective elements in the Christian life, the foundation of Christianity exists only in the work of Jesus.

How should we react, knowing that we have such a great High Priest ministering for us in heaven?

Heb. 4:14-16 _____

Heb. 10:22, 23 _____

Heb. 12:1, 2 _____

Summarize the above texts. What are they all saying to us?

Christians know that their High Priest is with them, even to the end of the age. Day by day, He serves them and is about to bring to a close human history in order to establish His kingdom of glory. This extremely positive outlook, this experience of the presence of the Lord, helps give meaning to our lives: We are children of God, brothers of Christ, and we live in order to serve others just as He did. Hebrews was written to encourage those who first read it. It should do the same for us, as well.

FURTHER STUDY:

Let faith pierce through the hellish shadow of Satan and center in Jesus, our high priest, who hath entered for us within the veil. Whatever clouds overcast the sky, whatever storms surge around the soul, this anchor holds firm, and we may be sure of victory.”—Ellen G. White, *In Heavenly Places*, p. 127.

“Behold the apostle preaching in the synagogue at Corinth, reasoning from the writings of Moses and the prophets, and bringing his hearers down to the advent of the promised Messiah. Listen as he makes plain the work of the Redeemer as the great high priest of mankind—the One who through the sacrifice of His own life was to make atonement for sin once for all, and was then to take up His ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. Paul’s hearers were made to understand that the Messiah for whose advent they had been longing, had already come; that His death was the antitype of all the sacrificial offerings, and that His ministry in the sanctuary in heaven was the great object that cast its shadow backward and made clear the ministry of the Jewish priesthood.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 246.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. **Hebrews, for all its richness, is essentially a book about Christ’s high-priestly ministry. A whole book of the Bible dedicated to this topic should tell us that this ministry is of great importance. Discuss the implications of His ministry, especially as it relates to our doctrine of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary.**
2. **Paul, in an attempt to encourage the Hebrews, wrote this letter emphasizing Christ’s heavenly priesthood in behalf of fallen humanity. Why would knowing about this ministry encourage people to remain faithful amid times of discouragement?**
3. **From what you’ve read and studied so far regarding the book of Hebrews, in what ways can you see the link between Christ’s death and Christ’s high-priestly ministry? Why are they essential to each other?**

SUMMARY: Hebrews informs us about Jesus’ priesthood and defines it. This superior ministry follows the order of Melchizedek and yet is not unrelated to the Levitical priesthood. Whatever the links to each priesthood, Christ’s ministry exceeds them both, infinitely so.



Answered Prayer

J. H. Zachary

Abdul is a journalist and well-known member of his community. His news stories have made his name well known to people. He is also known as a deeply spiritual man who faithfully attends prayers in the village mosque. The great burden of his life is for himself and his family to be ready for the great judgment day and the return of Jesus.

In his search for a closer walk with Allah, Abdul discovered the counsel in the Qur’an that he should study the messages of the prophets. He secured a copy of the Bible and began to study. He was amazed to find many of the same stories of the spiritual leaders he knew from the Qur’an.

His heart was touched as he read the Gospels. Jesus spent His entire life in service to His fellow men. He was deeply impressed by the way Jesus helped the sick people. The teachings he discovered in the parables also touched his heart. As the Holy Spirit spoke to his heart Abdul was drawn to Jesus.

Then tragedy struck his family. His brother’s wife became seriously ill. She grew weaker until she lost consciousness. Abdul spent hours with his brother during this time. When all hope seemed lost for his sister-in-law the family gathered around her bed and a sheet was placed over her body.

Abdul shared what he had experienced, “With tears running down my face I fell on my knees beside the bed. I prayed to God. ‘O Lord Jesus, when You were on earth in Your mighty power You healed the sick. You are the Creator. You even raised the dead. O God, hear my prayer. Save my sister-in-law from death.’ ”

Abdul and the family members remained on their knees pleading for Jesus to help them. Abdul testified, “When I pulled back the sheet, my dear sister-in-law opened her eyes and smiled at me. Jesus answered my prayer.”

The story of how Jesus saved this woman spread through the village. Many wanted to know more about Jesus. Abdul reports that 150 of his neighbors have accepted Jesus. He is sharing his new faith with scores of people.

“I have learned from the Holy Books that Jesus is the Savior of all mankind. I know that I will be ready for the judgment because Jesus has forgiven my sins and given me His righteousness.”

J. H. Zachary is coordinator of international evangelism for The Quiet Hour.

Produced by the Office of Mission
Sabbath School-Personal Ministries department of the General Conference
Email: gomission@gc.adventist.org