

The Book to the Hebrews

- I. The Argument of the Book: The Pre-eminence of Christ in His Person and Work, 1:1-10:18
 - A. The Superiority of Son to the Angels. 1:1-14, 2:5-18
Parenthesis I: Warning against drifting, 2:1-4
(The path to glory is the way of suffering.)
 - B. The Superiority of Christ to Moses, 3:1-6
Parenthesis II: Warning against Doubting, 3:7-4:13
(The path to rest is the way of trusting.)

Things to remember:

- 1) Hebrews has all the looks of sermon material with its applicational sections and stark, unqualified statements.
- 2) What is clear in Holy Scripture is that God's promises are irrevocable. If God promised you forgiveness through child-like faith in the accomplishments of Jesus, applied to us in the witness of the Spirit, and verified by an emotional attachment that has changed the way we prioritize things, it cannot be taken away.
- 3) The question in the scriptures is not: "Can salvation be forfeited, but "Have you come to Jesus?"
- 4) What is the evidence that one has the life of God in their inner being? Can the Spirit enter a life and exist with no evidence of His presence? Can one be changed of God inwardly without being changed outwardly? The answer is two-fold: first, and foremost, the internal witness in the redemptive experience event and, second, the fact of the change that has come to us in our priorities as evidenced in sensitivity to our actions that are incongruous with the character of God.
- 5) Since redemption does not cure the blight of human nature, a state of imperfection is a reality for all of us. The mark of a true believer's ultimate redemption is a life of confession. Struggle characterizes the normal Christian life; yet the Christian does not give into their struggles wishing and striving to do better and filled with confidence that a better "day" is ahead.
- 6) The point of Hebrews is that in difficulties, the solution is not concession, but resistance based upon the object of affection.
- 7) When the writer uses "if you continue" statements, he can only be saying one of two things: that those confessing Christ but find something more satisfying than Him is really never to have met Him, or that these people know Christ and should live for Him regardless of the circumstantial, temporal cost. I think

the emphasis in the book is clearly on the latter option, not the former.

- 8) We are all imperfect strugglers but we are not turning our backs on Christ because, deep down inside, we know that there is nothing and no one better than Jesus and that God allowed us to know Him. That is one of the reasons we meet; that is, to encourage one another.
- 9) Is rest an obtainable state or a circumstantial, temporal experience related to specific instances? Though not a plateau that any of us can reach with consistency, rest can be obtained in trying instances. We are all better at trust in some areas of our lives than others. That is why we need one another. There are instances that we all need comforting words.

C. The Superiority of Christ to the Aaronic Priesthood, 4:14-10:18

Here the writer begins his third, and final, major argument for remaining steadfast in difficult circumstances. Jesus is not only above angels and greater than Moses; he is a generous, compassionate, supreme priest, far greater than Aaron and the Kohath Levites who served to bring the needs of the people before God. The writer returns to the thought of the high priesthood of Christ (2:17-18) and after the parenthesis develop it.

1. Superior because of a better position, vv. 14-16

Christ is superior to the Aaronic priesthood because He serves from the heavenly sanctuary, not the tabernacle or temple, the place of service being vastly different.

a. The fact, v. 14

“Since” introduces an inference though the connection to the previous paragraph is abrupt. Our scholars’ debate whether the “therefore” indicates a summary of what has gone before or an inference that leads to a new subject. I think it best to see it as a deduction from the fact that the whole human race is vulnerable before an all-seeing God (v. 13). Though the race is blighted, it does not need to hide as our primal parent’s did because we have a great high priest who has provided, in the offering of Himself for us, a covering for our spiritual nakedness.

The point of the verse is that Christ labors in the “heavenly tabernacle,” in the very presence of God; Aaron entered a physical veil to the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, only a symbol of God’s presence. Jesus can bring His people into greater intimacy with God because He stands in greater proximity to God.

The verse stresses the uniqueness of Christ’s person as a priest. No Levitical priest is designated in the Hebrew Scriptures as a “great high priest.” Jesus alone is all that.

The imperative, “let us hold fast our confession,” is consistent with the writer’s assumption that right thinking should lead to right behavior.

b. The reason, v. 15

The initial negative statement suggests that the author is refuting an argument.

The reason for the command in v. 15 is that we have a compassionate, caring, sympathetic priest; He is more than an official priest assigned to a duty; He is a personal one. Jesus experienced the pain of sin’s solicitation (Matt. 4:1-11, Luke 4:1-13)) so that he knows from experience the potential of its destruction. We have a priest who has experienced everything that we do, but not our failure! There is a difference, however. His temptations came from without; ours come from without and within! Nonetheless, it is real in both cases and He did not become its victim!

c. The inference, v. 16

Since we have such a person who is so understanding, and exalted, we should take advantage of it and express to Him our needs and anxieties. The text says that He is able to help us in our most urgent time of need.

“Throne of grace” (“seat of grace) in the tabernacle/temple was the mercy seat, under the winged cherubim in the Holy of Holies. There annually a token of shed blood was spilled to cleanse the people. Now in heaven, Christ is our mercy seat, the place of sin’s appeasement forever; grace through Christ is now always available to us. I like this old poem.

Come, ye disconsolate, where’er ye languish,
Come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel.
Here bring your wounded heart; here tell your anguish,
Earth has no sorrows that heaven cannot heal!”

2. Superior because of better qualifications, 5:1-10

The paragraph is divided into two parts: first, the writer shows the qualifications of the priest and, second, that Jesus meets and exceeds those qualifications. He presents Christ’s qualifications in reverse order (inverted parallelism) of those of the ordinary priests (oneness with us, sympathy toward us, and divinely appointed).

a. The prerequisites for the priesthood, vv.1-4

1) Chosen from among men, v. 1

All priests performed their duties by appointment. God appointed Aaron through Moses (Lev. 8-9). Given the divine appointment, the priest could then stand as the people's advocate, offering gifts (meals and peace offerings) and sin (bloody) offerings (Lev. 1-6).

2) Compassionate in the task, vv. 2-3

a) The ground of compassion, v. 2

The priest is to be characterized by humility, showing neither arrogance nor callousness toward the erring, because of the common struggle they share in human weaknesses. Aaron conceded to the people's sinful desires in making a Golden Calf, becoming a great example of what a priest should not do. Aaron identified with the people's weakness in a way that did not help them. He was "beset with weakness."

b) The identification with the people, v. 3

Like the people, the earthly priest had to obtain forgiveness and purity; our priest was purity! On the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16) the high priest went into the Holy of Holies twice, once with blood to cover his own sins and then for the sins of the people, Christ but once!

3) Appointed to the task, v. 4

No high priest was self-appointed. God appointed Aaron through Moses (Exod. 16:33, 28:1; Num. 16:10-21).

b. The qualification for the priesthood of Christ, vv. 5-10

The method the writer employs is the same as used to affirm the superiority of Christ to Moses: comparison (the earthly to Christ.)

1) Chosen from among men, vv. 5-6

The writer, to prove that Jesus was called to be our true high priest, quotes two passages (Ps. 2:7, 110:4). In the first (also quoted in 1:5), His calling is affirmed in His resurrection. By it, Jesus' work is vindicated, His office of priest approved, and He now serves in a superior location (the very presence of God).

As Ps. 2:7 tells us the exalted place of his service, Ps. 110:4 indicates that and the duration of His service. His is a timeless calling; Aaron needed successors.

The writer does not exploit the connection to Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18); he will later (Heb.7). Melchizedek was "king of Salem" and a "priest of the most-high God." These two offices are combined in Jesus, so Melchizedek is a potent

illustration. He is mentioned eight times in the book.

2) Compassionate in the task, vv. 7-9

a) The ground of compassion, vv. 7-8

“Though” is stunning. He was a son, yet he suffered. The point of v. 7 is that Christ experienced pain in His time upon the earth with us, the emotional misery which sin produces (its shame, guilt, and despair). The reference to tears and prayers is poignantly illustrated in the Garden of Gethsemane, but it characterized His earthly life, such as His weeping over Jerusalem and sorrow occasioned by Lazarus’ death. He was a “Man of Sorrows.”

The reference to deliverance can be translated “from death” or “out of death.” The latter seems preferable since Christ endured physical and spiritual death, making it an unanswered prayer if taken in the former sense. He was delivered through the agony of death out of death by the resurrection.

Christ did not “learn obedience (v. 8); He learned through experience what it costs! He learned how it feels to obey when such obedience only promises further pain. *This verse is a puzzle to understand. How could an omniscience God advance in knowledge at any level? The answer has to be hidden to us in Jesus enormous condescension. See also Luke 2:52.*

b) The identification with the people, v. 9

Christ identified with His people, not in sharing their infirmities and sin, but by assuming their infirmities and sin.

3) Appointed to the task, v. 10

Jesus was appointed to the role He assumed, not as a Levitical priest, but one whose priesthood is endless like “Melchizedek’s (more of this connection later).”

Thoughts:

1. God is all-knowing, all-wise, all-sufficient. We need to pray that He would help us to translate good theory into good morals, practice. God will never prove disappointing to us, though we behave as though His ways are not as good as our fantasies.
2. Jesus has become through the resurrection the greatest of all those who would claim to have represented us, having direct access to the presence of God. This tells us that we are not alone in this impersonal world, that we have a friend (the dearest of lovers) who hears and can represent us before the very throne of God. What a privilege to know such a one! Do you choose

loneliness and go without comfort because you choose not to pray?

3. There is hardly any greater comfort for us than to know that our great advocate, our great high priest, is not so distant that he cannot hear or come to us in our need. Literally, our text reads that He is able to come to help us in our most dire straits and in our most urgent exigencies. He is the answer to our deepest needs. Do you go to him frequently? Is he a companion for life? Is He far more to you than a religious figure?
4. The offering that Jesus, our great high priest, made for us was not the offerings of animals; it was the offering of Himself. An offering did not precede it for Himself because He was without sin. He entered through the veil of His flesh once into the presence of God for us. The greatest of all persons entered as our sacrifice. The proof of the acceptance of His offering is the resurrection; He lives having conquered sin for us. Does this truth not bring you to your knees in thankful praise and gratitude?
5. Jesus found acceptance before God during His earthly years, though he was “a man of sorrow and acquainted with grief.” His grief was not His due to His own weakness, but ours due to our weaknesses. Now, He is exalted in heaven for us. There, He is our effective, eternal priest who brings us into God’s presence, not with an offering in His uplifted hands, but in His uplifted self. Have you meditated lately on the significance of your advocate in heaven? Have you thought of the security that is yours in a priest untouched with weakness and exalted in the heavens?
6. Jesus learned the cost of obedience in His earthly pursuit of the Father’s will. He learned that the path to glory is a hard road; it was the path of choices often contrary to logic and pleasure. Ultimately, it was the path of willful obedience and humble service, a life of sorrows for the plight and pain of others. His was a life of selfless service. Is that our path? Do we invest more time in serving our own perceived needs than the needs of others? If so, we have missed the point of Jesus as our great teacher.