

## SESSION FOURTEEN

### GOD'S SOLUTION: A MERCIFUL HIGH PRIEST

#### *Heb 4:14–5:10*

#### I. INTRODUCTION

The note of “fear” (4:1) and expectation of absolute scrutiny by the Word of God should prompt us to turn to Jesus as our High Priest in order to find mercy and grace that will enable us to gain God’s ultimate “rest.”

These notes will primarily focus on Heb 5:7-10 and the interpretation of Christ as the source of eternal salvation. However, the overall structure of the passage is:

- A. An exhortation for New Covenant believers to hold fast their confession of Jesus as Messiah and to avail themselves of God's grace through Jesus their high priest (Heb 4:14-16).

If we are to arrive safely at God's *ultimate rest*, we will need to draw near to God through the priestly ministry of Jesus Christ. We must not abandon our confession (recall 3:1—the confession of faith in Jesus). For those who resort to Him, they will find the grace and mercy to help them (cf. 2:18). He is sympathetic, after all, for He knows what it is like to be tempted (though He Himself did not sin—which would have disqualified Him to be our high priest). Between 2:17-18 and 4:14-16 stands the lesson about Israel's failure in the wilderness. This lesson suggests that the particular weakness (and temptation) is that of succumbing to unbelief and rebelling against God.

- B. The qualification of Jesus to serve as high priest of the New Covenant (Heb 5:1-6)

This is now the third time that the author has referred to Jesus as high priest. So, he will pause for a moment to substantiate Jesus' qualification to be high priest, since this role is so crucial to our success in attaining to God's rest.

Verses 1-4 point out several characteristics about high priests under the Levitical system: (1) they were taken from among men; (2) no one was self-appointed; and (3) since every priest was a sinner himself (as evidenced by the fact that he even had to offer a sacrifice—Lev 16:6, 11, 15-17; cf. *m. Yoma* 4:2—5:7), he could be compassionate with those whom he represented.

In vv 5-6, there is both continuity and discontinuity with Christ. In the Old Testament, priests were not self-appointed. Divine appointment to this role was essential. The same is true with Jesus Christ. The author quotes Ps 2:7 and Ps 110:4 (two well-known Messianic texts) to point out to the readers that the Messiah was not only appointed to a royal position as the Davidic Son-king but also to a priestly ministry.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, this priestly ministry

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<sup>1</sup>Lane observes, "The divine oracles quoted in 5:5-6 are Ps 2:7 and Ps 110:4, whereas in 1:5-14 the initial quotation is drawn from Ps 2:7 and the final quotation from Ps 110:1. The general similarity of 5:5-10 and 1:3-13 is

was not according to the Levitical order. That would have made Jesus' priestly ministry no better than the Old Covenant ministry. Because He brings in a better covenant (i.e., the New Covenant), it is important that His priesthood be distinct from the Levitical priesthood. This is exactly what Ps 110 foretold: He would be a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. The author will return in chapter 7 to elaborate on why this priesthood is superior to that of the Levitical order (an important issue for him in his quest to show the superiority of the New Covenant), but for now it is enough to demonstrate that Jesus as Messiah does have a divinely appointed ministry as priest. The author will develop Jesus' priestly ministry in chapters 7–10.

- C. The perfecting of Jesus Christ as high priest (Heb 5:7-10)

The remainder of the notes will focus on these verses (see Section II).

## II. THE PERFECTING OF JESUS CHRIST AS HIGH PRIEST (5:7-10)

The author will now show the relationship between the sufferings and endurance of Jesus in His earthly experience and the help that He is able to give to His believers today.

- A. The sufferings and endurance of Jesus' earthly ministry (5:7-8)

The audience of the book of Hebrews are not the only ones who have had to face difficulties and trials for their faith in their earthly pilgrimage. Even the Son Himself went through a very trying ordeal. So how did Jesus succeed? The answer: by crying out to the Father . . . "to the One able to save him from death." Even the eternal Son of God, the Creator and the One who is to be heir and have dominion over everything, learned to call upon God for help. This is where His priestly ministry began, not by offering up animal sacrifices, but by offering up entreaties and supplications (which probably looks at His agonizing experience on the cross). Note how the word "offered up" (προσενέγκας) in the phrase "offered up a loud cry with tears" is used in 5:1,3 in regard to the sacrifices of the Levitical priests.

Yet to Jesus, the Father was the "one able to save him from death." The word used for "save" is the Greek word σώζω, which obviously does not have a soteriological nuance in this verse. It is used here in the very common meaning of "deliver." Jesus cried out to be *delivered* from death, and He was "heard." This probably does not mean physical death, because that is the very reason He came into this world (He certainly wasn't delivered from physical death). To say that He was "heard" is to say that God answered in a favorable way. The fulfillment, then, was *resurrection* (He was led out of the realm of the dead through resurrection) and/or *glorification* (He was exalted and seated at the Father's right hand).

From His experiences of sufferings (the climax of which was His death at Calvary), the Son *learned obedience*. He did not need to learn *how* to be obedient, for He was never disobedient. Rather, this means that He learned firsthand all that obedience entails,

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sufficient to imply that the writer understood Jesus to have been acclaimed as divine Son and priest concurrently at his ascension" (1:118).

especially the fact that doing the will of God often brings sufferings. Hughes comments that He

"was entirely free from sin, the essence of which is disobedience and therefore in no need of learning obedience by the discipline of painful correction. Yet, as the incarnate Son who fully shares our humanity, it was essential to his work as a mediator and redeemer that he should accumulate the perfection of obedience, through his undeviating conquest of temptation, preparatory to the culminating act of his obedience on the cross, where he offered himself to the Father as a sacrifice for sinful and disobedient mankind (2:14ff.)" (187).

B. The source of eternal salvation (5:9-10)

Yet the experience that Christ had with sufferings has implications for us: "and having been made perfect, He became to all who obey Him the source of eternal salvation."

What does the author mean by Christ as "the source of eternal salvation"? Having spoken of Christ's sufferings, the epitome of which was His death at Calvary, one might think that the author has *personal salvation* in mind, i.e., the salvation which comes from believing the gospel. After all, the suffering of Christ on the cross did make salvation from sin possible. This is precisely the conclusion that many have come to. Hughes, for example, equates *salvation* with redemption from sin. He states,

"He, and no one else, is the cause of man's redemption: it is from him that it flows to us. His bearing of our imperfection, the punishment of which he endured and exhausted, made available his perfection for the rehabilitation of mankind—with the qualification, however, that the eternal salvation of which he is the source is a reality in the experience only of those *who obey him*. As Westcott observes, 'continuous active obedience is the sign of real faith'; and this applies quite pointedly to the recipients of this letter whose obedience shows signs that this great salvation belongs only to those who persevere in obedience to Christ." (Hughes, 188).

Notice, however, that Hughes is not simply equating salvation with redemption from sin. He is *also* contending that salvation is only for those who are obedient (thus, the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints). Though it might seem plausible to understand salvation here as redemption from sin (since it does have this meaning in other parts of the NT), it is very unlikely to have that meaning in these verses.

The following reasons argue against the view that "eternal salvation" means redemption from sin based on Christ's atonement:

- (1) First of all, we should take note of the way that "salvation" is used in the Book of Hebrews. Of seven occurrences (1:14; 2:3, 10; 5:9; 6:9, 9:28; 11:7), not once does it clearly mean *salvation from sin*. Furthermore, there are several instances in which it clearly means something else (see 1:14; 9:28; 11:7). Hence, we should be careful not to make hasty assumptions about the word "salvation."
- (2) Christ's experience in 5:7-8 is meant to be a parallel for believers. He suffered, He cried out to the Father for help, and He was "saved." The salvation of Heb

5:9 cannot overlook Christ's own salvation just mentioned in 5:7! His salvation was one of rescue through resurrection to share in glory.

- (3) Contextually, the author has not been talking about the sinner's need for salvation from sin. Notice that 4:14–5:10 is a unit (which begins and ends with the assertion of Christ as high priest). This unit began with the exhortation for believers to *hold fast their confession* (not to reexamine their confession) and to turn to the throne of grace for help in dealing with their weaknesses.
- (4) The obedience mentioned in vs 9 must be seen in the light of vs 8. In vs 9, we have the verb form of ὑπακούω ("to obey"), while in vs 8 we had the noun form of ὑπακοή ("obedience"). Thus, the *believer's obedience* in vs 9 is meant to be seen in comparison with *Christ's obedience* in vs 8. This is not obedience in general, but obedience *connected with sufferings* in the course of being faithful to God!
- (5) Hebrews 5:9 must be seen in the light of the similarity of thought with Hebrews 2:10.

2:10 "it was fitting . . . to perfect (τελειῶσαι) the author of their salvation (σωτηρίας) through sufferings."

5:9 "having been perfected (τελειωθεὶς), He became to all who obey Him the responsible cause<sup>2</sup> of eternal salvation (σωτηρίας).

The reference to being "perfected" has nothing to do with Christ's eternal sinless nature. This is looking at the process He went through involving sufferings, so that He might fully experience the true meaning of obedience. He fully experienced such obedience and successfully passed the test, such that He was prepared for His role as high priest.

The context of Heb 2:10 was dealing with man's original right to exercise dominion over God's creation and how this right has been regained for man by Christ. This right to dominion is not presently experienced by man (2:8), but it will be for those who participate with Christ in the future salvation in the "world to come" (2:5). Thus, we understand the reference in Heb 1:14 about "inheriting salvation" to refer to a future eschatological experience of sharing in Christ's inheritance and exercising dominion under His kingly rule.

#### A More Plausible Interpretation

In light of the above factors, the point of verse nine is not about salvation from the penalty of sin. Rather, the author is saying that Christ was perfected for His role by obedience through

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<sup>2</sup>The Greek word translated "source" (αἴτιος) is used 5 times in the NT, and can mean either guilt (Lk 23:4, 14, 22) or the responsible cause for something (Acts 19:40 - a *cause* for a riot). The nuance of "cause" is also attested in the LXX in 2 Macc 4:47; 13:4; and Bel and the Dragon 42.

sufferings (from which he experienced a "salvation"). Now he is in a position to help "His brethren" (believers who have already been justified) . . . those who are being brought to "glory" (2:10). We can attain this "eternal salvation" (an eschatological salvation in which we share in Christ's inheritance and exercise of dominion), but only if we obey Him. He can cause us to gain this future salvation . . . one that is worthwhile because it is an "eternal salvation" (it will not be taken away from us; cf. "eternal inheritance" in Heb 9:15). This implies that forsaking our confession (the epitome of disobedience) will jeopardize this eschatological salvation. The call to "obey Him" for this salvation is immediately followed in Heb 5:10 with the reminder that He is available as our high priest. In other words, this obedience is possible through reliance upon Him as high priest (cf. 7:25). If we must suffer in the process (as He did!), we should remember that "the High Priest understands it, sympathizes, and makes available the 'mercy' and 'grace' which are needed to endure it successfully" (Hodges, 792).