

The next section of the letter takes the form of an extensive exposition of Jesus as our high priest. Though many Protestants do not believe in the need for a priest of any kind, Hebrew Christians did retain their tradition that the priestly institution of the temple in Jerusalem was essential. This was so even after the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 CE.

The role of the Hebrew priests was to approach God with the prayers and offerings of the people. This occurred in the daily sacrifices of different kinds and on the great festival day of atonement, Yom Kippur. Once a year on the day, the high priest entered the holy of holies with a special sacrificial offering of the blood of a pure sacrificial victim. This act of solemn worship served to free the priests and the people alike from the bondage of their sins and bring them into a renewed relationship with God.

In this passage the author of *Hebrews* transferred the function of high priest to Jesus. But there was a subtle critique of the institution in what Jesus was able to do that the Hebrew high priest could not.

Jesus could sympathize with Christian believers whereas the high priest could not do so. Jesus had been tested “in every respect as we are yet without sin.” (4:15). Therefore we may approach God (“the throne of grace” 4:16) with boldness, knowing that we shall be helped in our time of need.

This is possibly the clearest expression in the NT of two important doctrines: the concept of Jesus as both divine and human, and that of prevenient grace extended to us despite our sinful nature.

That the high priest was a sinful mortal like everyone else but with a special role in the Hebrew tradition is further explained in 5:1-4. Human like all others, he was able to empathize with the weaknesses and struggles of everyone

else because he also shared the same human condition. Thus he was able to approach God and offered sacrifices for himself as well as for all the people. Secondly, he held the office, not of his own merit or honour, but because he had been called and appointed by God.

Jesus is a radically different high priest, the author goes on to assert. His qualification for this office is unique. Not only was he called and appointed by God, he was God’s Son (vs. 5.) Furthermore, his designation had a special quality in that it was an eternal priesthood (vs. 6).

An additional phrase “after the order of Melchizadek” is a meaningless mystery to most readers of scripture. It refers to an incident in the wanderings of Abraham who comes into contact with the priest-king of Jerusalem (Genesis 14). The actual quotation is from Psalm 110:4. Further elaboration of the phrase occurs in Hebrews 7-10, which we shall defer until later.

This whole passage rests on a theological truth that found its ultimate clarification in the 4th century doctrine of the nature of Jesus as fully human and fully divine. He is genuinely human in that he suffered. Vs. 7 refers either to his experience of suffering in Gethsemane or on Golgotha. His resurrection and ascension affirm his exalted status as divine.

Due to this personal duality, he is uniquely able to be our eternal high priest bringing our concerns and prayers to God. This is what we mean when we pray “in Jesus’ name” or “for Jesus’ sake.”

Such prayers place us in intimate relationship with Jesus in his life, his suffering and death, his resurrection and ascension. I also take it to be what Paul meant when he wrote that we are “in Christ” and “members of the Body of Christ. As Martin Luther put it: “We are to be little Christ’s to others.”

OPENING PRAYER

Jesus, for you sake we come to learn from the words of Holy Scripture. We long to be part of your life in the world more effectively than we are. Help us to be filled with your Holy Spirit that we may truly become the persons you desire us to be. Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The concept of prevenient grace is still an issue among some Christians. Does God forgive even without our repentance, confession and restitution?
2. Similarly, is divine grace operative even if we are never aware of having sinned?
3. The role of a priest is to bring our offerings and our prayers to God through Jesus Christ. What does it mean that some people are designated as priests for others?
4. Do you require such a priest other than Jesus himself?
5. Do you see clergypersons as filling this role?

CLOSING PRAYER

Go before us, O Lord, in all our ways that our doing may be begun, continued and ended in you and be to the glory of your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

6 – JESUS OUR HIGH PRIEST

Hebrews 4:14-5:10



Jesus Praying in Gethsemane