

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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The Greatness of the Lord Jesus: A Great High Priest

My wife's father was a funeral director. He died suddenly, aged 54. Shortly afterwards, my mother in law met a neighbour in the street, who said to her that she would be able to cope with her bereavement because she regularly encountered such circumstances through the family business! Such words were hardly sympathy and were of no comfort to mother in law. Had the neighbour stated that, because she was a Christian believer, she would have the Lord's help through this difficult period in her life, that would have been different. Yes, it's really true that believers are helped in all experiences of life because we've a Great High Priest. Hebrews 4:14-16 (English Standard Version) exhorts us: "*Since...we have a Great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have 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.*" These wonderful words have a very practical impact upon our everyday life upon earth. They readily comfort and console us and, in that respect, need little explanation.

The idea of Jesus being our Great High Priest is well-known to Christians through the singing of CL Bancroft's (1841-1892) popular hymn:

*Before the throne of God above
I have a strong, a perfect plea;
A Great High Priest, whose name is Love,
Who ever lives and pleads for me.*

*My name is graven on His hands,
My name is written on His heart;
I know that while in heaven He stands
No tongue can bid me thence depart.*

But have we grasped the issues involved in this office of our Saviour? Hebrews 3:1 further exhorts: "*You who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession*" (English Standard Version). As the apostle, Jesus was sent from God to bring His message of salvation to mankind. Hebrews 5:1-8:2 is the main section of teaching about our Great High Priest but there are other verses that I'll refer to in this talk.

Let's consider the greatness of Jesus our high priest using six headings:

1. The Picture;
2. The Person;
3. The Propitiation;
4. The Place;
5. The Position; and
6. The Purpose

1. The Picture

Israel's national history commenced when God separated them from Egypt to serve Him. They worshipped the LORD in the Tabernacle, built for Him to dwell among them. Aaron, the high priest, and his sons were responsible for offering the prescribed worship. Aaron wore special holy garments when he ministered in the holy place within the first veil of the Tabernacle. They were: a breastplate and an ephod, made from intertwined coloured threads; a blue robe; and a coat with sash and a turban, each made from fine linen. The names of the tribes of Israel were engraved on sets of stones: two sets of six were on the shoulder pieces of the ephod and another set of twelve were on the breastplate. They symbolised the strength and love of Aaron's high priestly ministry. Exodus 28:2 states that the garments were for glory and for beauty. They shewed the exalted status of the high priest's office. Hebrews 8:5 teaches that the Tabernacle system was a pattern of the heavenly system of worship. Hence, we can picture the spiritual realities of present day worship. Specifically, we learn what it means for Jesus to be our high priest by comparing Him to Aaron.

2. The Person

Hebrews 1:1-2:18 introduce the Person who is our Great High Priest. Hebrews 1 lists many of His glories as the Son. Hebrews 2 presents Him as the Son of Man. Whereas we can compare Christ to Aaron in terms of the functions of His high priestly office, these two chapters teach that He's altogether superior to Aaron. In fact, Hebrews states that Jesus is unique - greater than angels, Moses, Joshua, Melchizedek and all the Old Testament saints! In Hebrews 2:9, the writer emphasises that believers now see Jesus as the true Man: *"But we see [Jesus] who for a little while was made lower than the angels ... crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone"* (English Standard Version). The words *"glory and honour"* echo *"for glory and for beauty"* used to describe Aaron's garments in Exodus 28:2.

The Christian's High Priest is both God and Man. His unique Person confers excellence to His office. To illustrate this point let me tell you about a preaching experience I once had in Edinburgh. I attempted to explain the statement I've just made by referring to the residing city Lord Provost who had an ordinary name, Mr. Smith I think it was. I said that he was only important because of the exalted office he was occupying whereas the Lord Jesus is great because of who He is; and that His high priestly office takes character from Him. Unfortunately, I used the English equivalence to Lord Provost, Lord Mayor, which didn't go down very well with my Scottish audience!

Another point concerning Christ's personal greatness: His order, or rank, of priesthood also takes character from who He is. Hebrews 5:5-6 state: *"Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'; as he says also in another place, 'You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek'"* (English Standard Version). Christ is High Priest by virtue of His personal glory and His official glory. In Psalm 2:7, God acknowledged Messiah as His Son in manhood at His birth. But Psalm 110:1 and Psalm 110:4 show that Messiah was sworn into priestly office by God at His ascension. Hebrews 7:3 states that Melchizedek mysteriously appeared to Abraham in such a manner as to resemble the Son of God in His eternal priesthood. Unlike Aaron, Melchizedek was a blessing priest and the remainder of Hebrews 7 considers how great he was to highlight the greatness of the Lord Jesus. I suggest that you read these verses after the broadcast. But, Hebrews 7:24-25 conclude that Jesus is able to save us completely because He has a permanent priesthood. His exalted rank of priesthood is based on the power of His indestructible life as Man risen from among the dead (Hebrews 7:16).

A final point about the Man Jesus. Hebrews 2:14-18 teach that He deliberately took on our nature (of flesh and blood) to become our merciful and faithful high priest in things relating to God. Although eternally great as the Son of God, He became Man so that He could take us by the hand, so to speak, as adults would do with children to help them along. Hebrews 2:6 quotes Psalm 8:4, *"What is [frail man] ...that you care for him?"* We can answer that the Lord cared so much that He became a man like everyone of us in order to assist us along life's journey. He also became man so that He could die to save each of us, which brings us to our next heading.

3. The Propitiation

According to Hebrews 5:1, part of a high priest's responsibilities was to offer sacrifices for sins on behalf of his fellow Israelites. Hebrews 10:11 highlights the inadequacies of their worship system: *"Every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins"* (English Standard Version). The day of atonement was a special national feast for Israel on the tenth day of the seventh month of every year. Atonement means a covering and the nation was told: *"On this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the LORD from all your sins"* (Leviticus 16:30, English Standard Version). The ritual described in Leviticus 16 produced only a temporary solution for their sins. But Hebrews 2:17 explains that Jesus has made propitiation for the sins of His people. He suffered the wrath of God against all our sins when He died upon the Cross. His resurrection is proof that His work in dealing with sin was completed to God's righteous satisfaction. *"When Christ had offered for [ever] a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God"* (Hebrews 10:12, English Standard Version). The contrast between Hebrews 10:10-11 couldn't be more pronounced: *"every priest stands"* versus *"he sat down"*! Moreover, sin (the root cause of sins) has been put entirely. *"He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself"* (Hebrews 9:26, English Standard Version). *"Put away"* is tantamount to saying *"propitiated"*. *"Once for all"* means forever through a single sacrifice. That was only possible because of the intrinsic value of the blood of Christ. *"When Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption"* (Hebrews 9:11-12, English Standard Version).

Furthermore, the word for *"mercy seat"* in Hebrews 9:5 is translated as *"propitiation"* in Romans 3:25: *"[God put forward Christ Jesus] as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith"* (English Standard Version). The mercy seat was the place within the holy of holies in the Tabernacle where God could righteously meet with man because of

the shed blood of the sin offering made on the day of atonement. The Gospel declares that God has set forth Jesus himself to be the spiritual mercy seat. God's wrath is turned away for anyone who has faith in Jesus' shed blood.

Hence the greatness of the sacrifice of Jesus our high priest can be summarised in the superiority of the heavenly reality over the earthly type:

- Propitiation rather than temporal atonement.
- One single efficacious sacrifice versus numerous daily sacrifices.
- Christ's own blood versus ineffective animal blood.
- Jesus is now seated at God's right hand whereas Israel's priests continued to stand because their sacrificial work was never finished.

4. The Place

Jesus is also a Great High Priest because of the place where His priestly service is carried out. He's in the very presence of God - heaven itself! *"For Christ has entered, not into holy places [within the Tabernacle] made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf"* (Hebrews 9:24, English Standard Version).

"Heaven itself" is the third heaven, which He entered on His ascension, as Hebrews 4:14 states, by passing through the heavens, that is, the first and second heavens.

"The Most Holy Place" in the Tabernacle is the physical representation of *"heaven itself."* It was vital that Aaron took the blood of the animal sacrifices into that holy of holies on the day of atonement so that Israel's sin was covered for another year. But for Christians, the blood of Christ avails forever. Hence, Hebrews 7:25-26 state that it's proper for us to have a Great High Priest there in heaven not to atone, but to make intercession, for us. We require such a One who's not only holy, innocent, unstained and separated from sinners but who's also exalted above the heavens; and who's in heaven so that we can access God through Him.

A final thought on the place where our High Priest is. Using the figurative language of the Tabernacle system, Hebrews 6:19-20 teach that the Christian's hope is in Jesus who's within the inner place behind the veil. He's in *"the Presence"* (New King James Version) as our forerunner and therefore heaven is our destiny, too!

5. The Position

It's not just that Jesus is in heaven itself, but it's also His position there that makes Him so great. God has set Him down at His own right hand. Yes, Jesus, as Man, shares the very throne of God with His Father! This message is repeated throughout the Book of Hebrews:

- *"After making purification for sins, he sat [himself] down at the right hand of the Majesty on high"* (Hebrews 1:3, English Standard Version).
- *"But of the Son [God] says, 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the sceptre of uprightness is the sceptre of your kingdom ... Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'"* (Hebrews 1:8 and Hebrews 11:13, English Standard Version).
- *"We have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven"* (Hebrews 8:1).
- *"When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet"* (Hebrews 10:12-13, English Standard Version).
- *"Looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God"* (Hebrews 12:2, English Standard Version).
- God's right hand is the ultimate or highest position of power, authority and rule and His throne conveys the idea of His absolute sovereignty. Jesus has that position as our Great High Priest and the status of His priesthood is associated with it. In Psalm 110:1, God commands Jesus to sit at His right hand. But continues in Psalm 110:4, *"You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek."* This quotation is used twice in Hebrews: Hebrews 5:6 and Hebrews 7:17 and the phrase *"after the order of Melchizedek"* another three times (Hebrews 5:10, Hebrews 6:20 and Hebrews 7:11).

6. The Purpose

I quote Hebrews 8:1-2 to summarise. *“Now the 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 heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man”* (English Standard Version). We’ve considered:

- the greatness of the Person who is our high priest;
- the greatness of His sacrifice in making propitiation for sins;
- the greatness of the place and position He’s now in.

To continue, let’s consider the fourfold purpose of Jesus being our Great High Priest. He provides:

- i. support;
- ii. sympathy;
- iii. salvation; and
- iv. service.

i. Support

First, the vital support He provides. *“Because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted”* (Hebrews 2:18, English Standard Version). Like the children of Israel in the wilderness as they journeyed to the Promised Land, life for us is full of difficulties and dangers and temptations to sin. We face many tests of our faith in God. But our Great High Priest is with us to help us along life’s journey. Each and every day, He comes to our aid by taking hold of our hands (see 2:16, JN Darby Translation) to deliver us from temptations and to assist us through difficult experiences.

ii. Sympathy

Second, there’s His sympathy. *“We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin”* (Hebrews 4:15, English Standard Version). Notice the emphasis on His ability to sympathise by the use of a double negative: *“do not have ... who is unable”*. There’s a warmth in the King James Version: *“an high priest ... touched with the feeling of our infirmities...”*

- Touched - He’s been there and has gone through the same experiences as we do.
- Feeling - He enters into everything and in like manner to us but apart from sin.
- Frailty - And He does understand human frailty. He’s been to every extreme of suffering himself. *“Jesus during his earthly life offered up prayers and entreaties, crying aloud and weeping as He pleaded with Him who was able to bring Him in safety out of death, and He was delivered from the terror from which He shrank”* (Hebrews 5:7, Weymouth New Testament).

So, whatever you’re going through just now: health issues, bereavement, difficult circumstances, depression, breakdown in relationships, false accusations, etc. He knows, He feels, He cares, He draws near, and He supports!

iii. Salvation

Third, His salvation. Not salvation from our sins because His blood has secured an eternal redemption for us. But that aspect of salvation that brings every believer, without fail, through everything safely to their heavenly home. *“He holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them”* (Hebrews 7:24-25, English Standard Version). He’s always in God’s presence representing us. Like Aaron, He has us on His all-powerful shoulders and next to His tender-loving heart!

iv. Service

Fourth, His service. As our great priest over the house of God, He sustains us in the worship of God. Hebrews 10:19-22 state that we have confidence to enter God’s presence *“by the blood of Jesus, who is the new and living way”* into the holy of holies. We’re exhorted to *“draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water”* (Hebrews 10:22, English Standard Version).

A Plea and a Prayer

In Hebrews 2:16, the writer pleads with his readers: *“Since then we have a Great High Priest ... let us with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”* From Jesus on the throne of grace flows timely help and His grace is sufficient for all your needs! There’s not a day, an hour, a minute or a moment when we don’t require this tailored help from our Great High Priest. In 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, Paul pleaded with the Lord to be rid of the *“thorn in the flesh”*, some kind of terrible affliction. But he received this reply: *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”* (2 Corinthians 12:9). Yes, whatever your problem the Lord will take you through it by supply of His abundant, all varied grace! So, let’s be bold at His throne of grace.

As a prayer, I finish with Isaac Watt’s (1674-1748) hymn:

*With joy we meditate the grace
Of God's High Priest above;
His heart is filled with tenderness,
His very name is Love.*

*Touched with a sympathy within,
He knows our feeble frame;
He knows what sore temptations mean
For He has felt the same.*

*But spotless, undefiled and pure,
The great Redeemer stood;
While Satan's fiery darts He bore
And did resist to blood.*

*He, in the days of sorrowing flesh,
Poured out His cries and tears,
And, though ascended, feels afresh
What every member bears.*

*Then boldly let our faith address
The throne of grace and power:
We shall obtain delivering grace
In every needed hour.*

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