

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.

Sunday

July 27

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?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Key Text: Hebrews 8:1, 2.

Teachers Aims:

1. To study what the book of Hebrews reveals about the role of Christ in heaven.
2. To show how Christ's role as High Priest parallels the work of Aaron as high priest.
3. To compare Christ and the priest-king Melchizedek.

Lesson Outline:

I. Christ's Ministry in Heaven.

- A. Christ's service as Messiah equips Him for His intercessory role in heaven.
- B. Christ is ordained in the heavenly priesthood.
- C. Christ serves as our Priestly King.

II. The Definition of Jesus as High Priest.

- A. Jesus is sinless.
- B. Jesus is faithful above all others.
- C. He surpasses all in mercifulness.

III. Jesus' Ministry as High Priest.

- A. He is our Sacrifice before God.
- B. He is the Mediator for us in heaven.
- C. He serves, without ceasing, as our High Priest.

Summary: The book of Hebrews not only explains the ministry of Jesus as the High Priest of humankind but also defines its importance. Further, it shows that Christ's death was the fulfillment of all the sacrificial offerings of the Jewish sanctuary service. Likewise, the ministry of the Jewish priesthood served as a shadow of Christ's ministry as High Priest in heaven.

Commentary.

Jesus has already been presented to the readers as "a merciful and faithful high priest" (Heb. 2:17, NIV), and they are now shown He is the One from whom they can receive all the power needed to maintain their confession and resist the temptation to revert to their old ways.

Jesus, the Son of God, is not disqualified by His divine origin from sharing in His people's troubles and sympathizing with their weaknesses. Jesus Himself endured every trial we are likely to go through but remained steadfast throughout, and now He has passed through the

Monday

July 28

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?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

heavens to the throne of God. Aaron's and Melchizedek's priesthoods serve only as models of Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary.

The author clearly describes Jesus' human nature: "For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15, NKJV). He has been tested every way in which a nature like ours can be tested. His testing is consonant with ours as His nature is consonant with ours. Thus, He can sympathize with us in all we endure.

Furthermore, the question is: How is it He had true humanity as we do?

Jesus' human nature was not phantasm, a deceptive illusion, as espoused by the Docetics, an early Christian sect, who believed Jesus did not appear in an actual physical body but in a spiritual one. Jesus possessed all the weaknesses of humanity: fatigue, hunger, thirst, discouragement, sadness, loneliness, and pain. What exactly that nature was has been the subject of much debate over the long centuries of the Christian church. What we can be sure of, however, is that Jesus can relate to us, and, thus, He can be an ever-present help in time of need, temptation, and trial, even though He was never induced to evil as we are. He committed no sin. He did not transgress His own law. He was sinless.

According to William G. Johnsson, "Jesus was tested 'in every way, just as we are.' The basic issue in temptation is the same today as it was two thousand years ago: Will we keep trusting God, seeking to follow His plan? Will we honor Him, putting Him and what He stands for first? . . . Jesus was truly human and shared our human experiences, so He was one with us in suffering and test."—*Hebrews* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1994), p. 105.

Having introduced the subject of Christ, our High Priest, the author takes us to the throne of grace. This throne of grace is the throne of God, where Jesus, as His people's High Priest, sits exalted at the Father's right hand. Because we have such a High Priest, the doors of the heavenly sanctuary are open to welcome us. The Greek word *proserchomai* in Hebrews 4:16 means "to come to, to approach," which gives the idea of the High Priest's entry to the throne of God in the heavenly sanctuary. He ascended to heaven that we may approach heaven with all confidence.

Christ became Priest, not on the basis of human ties but by a divine declaration. His priesthood is forever, because His life is indestructible. Jesus Christ is the only true priestly Mediator between God and the human race.

Hebrews clearly shows how Christ's work as our High Priest meshes with His role as our Sacrifice, the Lamb of God. Elsewhere in Scripture, echoes of this connection may be found that parallel the work of Jesus outlined in the book of Hebrews. Such examples are worth inspecting more closely in the illumination of the study of Jesus as our High Priest.

Tuesday

July 29

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?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Revelation, chapter 5, for example, links Jesus as Lamb to Jesus our King. John beholds, in vision, a Lamb (that looks as though it had been put to death) sitting on a throne in heaven. God's throne, as Hebrews tells us, is headquartered in the sanctuary, the seat of His government and of His intercessory work. The symbol of the once-slain Lamb on a throne, in this passage, recalls Christ's sacrifice and the blood He mediates in behalf of sinners, while the throne clearly suggests His kingship. Indeed, verses 6 and 7 of Revelation 5 refer to Jesus as the Lion of Judah, the Root of David, and the Lamb of God all at once: The Lion symbolizes His kingly authority, the Root refers not only to His royal descent from the line of David but to being rooted and grafted into the human race in order to save them, and the Lamb refers to His sacrifice and role as perfect Mediator.

Interestingly, in the Old Testament, Isaiah promises that in Paradise the lion and the lamb will coexist peacefully (Isa. 65:25). Yet, in the character of Christ, we have the fulfillment and the foretaste of such longed-for paradise when John names Him first the Lion of Judah and then the Lamb of God (Rev. 5:5, 6). Only in Jesus do both the meek lamb and the strong lion already coexist in harmony, for He is both at once.

Jesus not only mediates our sins but He mediates history, as Revelation 5 shows in reference to a sealed book that can be opened by no one but the Lamb. This book contains the future of God's people. God not only appoints Christ to be King and Mediator of our salvation but

INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

Texts for Discovery: Leviticus 16:2, 3; Psalm 110:4; Matthew 23:2, 3; John 1:3; Hebrews 7:15, 16.

1. The author of Hebrews chooses to attribute priesthood to Christ. As is the case with kingship, this brings to mind both the similarities and differences between Christ's status and that of human kings/priests. How is Christ's priesthood dramatically different from human priesthood? How is it similar? What is the function of a priest?
2. Hebrews describes Christ as Messiah and Priest. How are these two concepts linked to each other? Were the human priests described in the Old Testament in any way Messianic? If so, in what way?
3. According to Hebrews, Christ is at once Priest, Sacrifice, and God. How is it possible for Him to combine these functions? What was the author trying to say to us?
4. What does Jesus' priesthood tell us about His status in relation to the Father? Does it imply Jesus is somehow subordinate to Him? If so, does this mean His status is somehow inferior? Why, or Why not?

Wednesday

July 30

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?

TEACHERS COMMENTS

the Mediator of history, as well. By giving the book to the Lamb, God is sending a message to the world that the Lamb alone is worthy to control the events of earth's history. It is not Jesus the Lion but Jesus the Lamb who opens the seals, emphasizing His actions toward us in the affairs of the earth as both benevolent and pure. Further, it shows us that the timing of events and their very existence are in Christ's hands and unfold from the throne of heaven. Nothing on earth happens without Christ's permission, for all things are put into subjection to Him (Heb. 1:2).

What a deep assurance that the One who mediates for us is also in control of the world. Amid the intractable and often senseless happenings of life, in this age of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, incest, abuse, and cold-blooded killing, we have the assurance that, even though we may see "through a glass darkly," often failing to understand or to justify the things that happen in this world, Jesus the Lamb, enthroned in heaven as our Mediator, forever rooted to humanity by His perfect sacrifice, holds in His hands the fate of the world.

WITNESSING

Sometime after the Israelites left Egypt, they camped near Mount Sinai. God told Moses He would come down to the mountain "in the sight of all the people" (Exod. 19:11). They were to set boundaries so no one could get close to the mountain or touch it. God warned Moses that anyone who touched the mountain would be put to death.

On the morning the Lord descended upon the mountain, "there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of [a] trumpet" (vs. 16). The mountain shook and was consumed in smoke, "because the Lord descended upon it in fire" (vs. 18). And God told Moses, again, to warn the people that anyone who tried to break through to look upon the Lord would perish.

Later, the Lord gave Moses instructions to build the tabernacle.

A veil guarded the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle. Only the high priest could pass through the veil into this sacred chamber, where the presence of God rested above the mercy seat. God told Moses to tell Aaron, his brother, not to enter the Most Holy chamber at just any time, or he would die. The high priest was to enter the Most Holy Place once a year to sprinkle blood on the mercy seat to atone for the sins of the people.

When Jesus died, the veil was torn in two from top to bottom by an unseen hand. In our witnessing, we can tell those who are seeking salvation that Christ Himself is now that veil. We are on one side, and on the other side is God the Father. In His Holy presence we would surely die, if it were not for Jesus. But Christ stands as our High Priest, offering His own blood for the atonement of our sins, so that we will not perish.

Thursday

July 31

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.

TEACHERS COMMENTS

Not a hair falls from our heads through routine brushing, random baldness, or the ravages of chemotherapy that He does not know or number. While we may not understand the evil of this earth, we believe He is in control and soon we shall see Him “face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12).

LIFE-APPLICATION APPROACH

Icebreaker: It was the 1930s. John Foster came home one day to find his daughter in tears. The radio was on, and the news reporter was describing the advance of Japanese troops into Canton, China. What difference did a war on the other side of the world have to do with the girl? Why was she crying? Because she was born in Canton. She had been there. She associated a home, a school, and friends with the place. And being part of it, she felt its pain. Having been there made all the difference.

Thought Questions:

1. Like Foster’s daughter, Jesus feels the pain of this sinful earth. Having been here, there is not one single temptation or struggle He does not understand. Consider some of your worst temptations. Do you truly believe Jesus was tempted in the same way? Explain. In what way would your relationship with Jesus be different if Jesus were 100 percent God and not human at all?
2. Being both human and God,

Jesus is the perfect High Priest—He can accurately represent humanity to God and God to us. *High Priest* is not part of our everyday vocabulary. What analogies could be used from today’s culture to convey the same meaning the term *High Priest* had for the people to whom Hebrews was written?

Application Questions:

1. Psalm 23 compares Jesus to a shepherd. What would be the implications of the psalm if it were rewritten with Jesus as the High Priest? Would the rewritten psalm be just as personal as the original psalm? Explain why, or why not. What does Christ’s role as Priest do to your approach to God?
2. The church today has no priest in its organizational structure. But we do have ministers. Compare the role of ministers today with that of priests in the Old Testament. What are the similarities and the differences? Is there a need for a priest? Explain.

Friday

August 1

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.