



Hebrews - Chapter Five

- II Hebrews 3:1-10:18 - Jesus Is Superior to the Mosaic Law (continues)
- II.c Hebrews 4:14-10:18 - The high priesthood of Jesus (continues)
- II.c.i Hebrews 4:14-5:10 - Jesus the great high priest (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Five

The writer continues the theme of Jesus as the ultimate high priest. God had long promised that he would send his people a high priest who would do perfectly and in perpetuity what the priesthood was originally established to do and yet could not; or at least, it could do only partially and imperfectly.

One fact that the writer wants the readers to understand is that Jesus remains fully human and therefore can fully empathise with the sufferings of his people; yet he is also fully God and knows intimately the requirements of the Father and therefore he is the only one capable of fulfilling this essential role.

After a résumé of the role of high priest, with its strengths and weaknesses, the writer then reflects on the calling of Jesus, with what he had to undergo in order to train for the role that God was to bestow upon him. He does so by citing psalms written by David concerning the Messiah that was to come.

The writer then provides a graphic illustration of how Jesus came to learn obedience to the Father through his prayers and supplications, most likely a reference to the Garden of Gethsemane, but no doubt a feature of Jesus' entire earthly life.

In a dramatic switch, the author suddenly rebukes his readership for their spiritual immaturity, indicating that, if they had truly embraced the message they had received, then they would have been in a far better place than their current spiritual infancy would suggest.

¹ Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; ³ and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. ⁴ And one does not presume to take this honour, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

Hebrews 5:1-4

Every high priest. Ever since God had instructed Moses to select his brother Aaron to be the first high priest, a man of his descendency was put in charge of the things pertaining to God, i.e. all the duties of the sacrificial system that recognised the sovereignty of God through the penitence of the people for their sins, as well as all other aspects of worship.

He is able to deal gently. High priests were human and understood human weakness; therefore, they presented sacrifices for sins for others as well as for themselves. They were appointed by God, as were Aaron and his lineage: <<*Then bring near to you your brother Aaron, and his sons with him, from among the Israelites, to serve me as priests – Aaron and Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar*>> (Exodus 28:1), although that had now changed: <<*Now if perfection had been attainable through the levitical priesthood – for the people received the law under this priesthood – what further need would there have been to speak of another priest arising according to the order of Melchizedek, rather than one according to the order of Aaron?*>> (Hebrews 7:11). Jesus fulfils these high priestly criteria (vv.5-10), except that he is the perfect high priest since he is without sin: <<*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin*>> (Hebrews 4:15), and therefore does not need to present a sacrifice for himself: <<*For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect for ever*>> (Hebrews 7:26-28).

The ignorant and wayward refers firstly to those who are guilty of sins committed in ignorance: <<*The priest shall take some of the blood of the sin-offering and put it on the doorposts of the temple, the four corners of the ledge of the altar, and the posts of the gate of the inner court. You shall do the same on the seventh day of the month for anyone who has sinned through error or ignorance; so you shall make atonement for the temple*>> (Ezekiel 45:19-20); and secondly to those who are living outside of God’s embrace and therefore choosing to live a life apart from God, itself a sin even if the life they are living is perfectly moral and considered to be good within their own culture. The prophet had concluded: <<*And those who err in spirit will come to understanding, and those who grumble will accept instruction*>> (Isaiah 29:24).

Offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. This was an accepted part of the office of high priests ever since it was first established: <<*Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘Draw near to the altar and sacrifice your sin-offering and your burnt-offering, and make atonement for yourself and for the people; and sacrifice the offering of the people, and make atonement for them; as the Lord has commanded’*>> (Leviticus 9:7).

Since one does not presume to take this honour, for it was only for those of the direct line of Aaron who were thus called by God to fulfil the role, the writer is making a clear statement to refute any claims that either Jesus or his followers in the early church were acting outside the law of God by proclaiming Jesus to be the high priest. That is, Jesus could only become the high priest if it is what God had ordained for him and then had called him to the office, otherwise he would have been acting outside of the law, making him a sinner, and thus eliminating him from any right to any claim of being the Son of God. In fact, God had ordained that any unauthorised person who approached his altar would be put to death: <<*But you and your sons with you shall diligently perform your priestly duties in all that concerns the altar and the area behind the curtain. I give your priesthood as a gift; any outsider who approaches shall be put to death*>> (Numbers 18:7).

For a full account of the ordination of the priests refer to Exodus 29:1-46.

Some church traditions no longer reflect on the high priesthood of Jesus as something of importance for they view it as a relic from the Jewish tradition that ceased when Christ died once for all. Other traditions have continued a form of priesthood in their own church as an office of intermediary between the people and God.

In his role as high priest, Jesus is still acting in that capacity today. He receives the offerings of a thankful people, including their praise and prayers, their thanksgiving for creation, covenant promises and daily provision, and passes them on through his own once for all sacrifice. He also performs the ultimate in pastoral care, understanding all the needs and concerns of his people and ministering to them in the most appropriate way from divine perspective, yet with human understanding of the need.

Even the best of human priests come short in this duty as they need to deal with their own sinful nature and shortcomings in the eyes of God before they can start to represent the people.

The only question a believer, or even someone seeking God, ever needs to ask themselves is, ‘Am I really ready to place the weight of all my faith and hope on Jesus?’ Once an individual comes to a place where the answer is yes, their life will change forever.

⁵ So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

‘You are my Son,
today I have begotten you’;

⁶ as he says also in another place,
‘You are a priest for ever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.’

Hebrews 5:5-6

Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest. Jesus had confirmed that he was only ever interested in the glory of the Father, yet there was one who sought it on his behalf: <<*Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is one who seeks it and he is the judge*>> (John 8:50).

God the Father appointed Jesus to be high priest (v.1 and v.4), as is shown in the Psalms quoted by the author.

Verse 5 is a quote from Psalm 2:7 and was used by the author in Hebrews 1:5. Here, it is followed by Psalm 110:4. Jesus combines the role of high priest with his status as Son of God: <<*Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession*>> (Hebrews 4:14).

The psalmist in no way implies that Jesus was created by God, for he has always existed. What it celebrates is the introduction to the world of Jesus as God incarnate, come in human form in order to learn what it was like to live in human weakness and to demonstrate the great victory that can be achieved by living a life of total obedience to the creator God.

In Psalm 110 David speaks of his ‘Lord’, who sits at the right hand of God and is a priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek, which the writer deals with more fully in Hebrews 7:1-28. This letter will go on to show that his is an order of priesthood that preceded the Aaronic priesthood, is of a higher order than that which had served the people for more than 1,200 years, and is one that is in perpetuity, whereas the former role of a solely human high priest symbolically ended on the Cross and actually ceased with the destruction of the temple by the Romans in AD70.

The elevation of Jesus’ high priesthood comes because he does not have to offer up sins for himself (v.3) before he can mediate for the sins of others, for: <<*he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth*>> (Isaiah 53:9), and secondly because the role then became perpetual rather than generational.

By linking the verses of these two psalms, the writer portrays something that was not previously considered in Jewish understanding. That is, that the Messiah would be both the Son of God and the eternal high priest in a different order from those descended from Aaron; one descended from the mysterious and ancient King of Salem.

The writer will go on to explain his thinking in the upcoming verses and chapters but it is clear that he is addressing an issue where the Jews were claiming the early church to be grabbing for themselves the ancient role and rites of the temple of God. However, by using accepted Scriptural examples,

the writer is actually showing that it is God who had devised this plan and not Jesus or his early followers.

⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

Hebrews 5:7

In the days of his flesh refers to Jesus' entire life on earth: <<*Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death*>> (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Offered up prayers. The Gospels record many prayers of Jesus, especially at Gethsemane: <<*He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, 'Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.' Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.'* Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, and he said to them, 'Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial'>> (Luke 22:39-46).

Supplications is the Greek word *hiketēria* that is a rare word in the NT and Septuagint, it indicates a submissive request, especially in prayer. Jesus did not just pray for himself but for his disciples and for all others yet to come, as seen in the great prayer recorded in John 17:1-26.

With loud cries and tears. Readers would naturally recall Jesus' agonising prayer in Gethsemane: <<*And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want'*>> (Mark 14:35-36), but the broad time reference, in the days of his flesh, suggests that Jesus' earthly prayers were constantly heartfelt, earnest and accompanied by tears.

Able to save him from death. The author, clearly aware of the reality of Jesus' death: <<*But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!*>> (Hebrews 9:11-14), and it speaks of Jesus'

resurrection as his being saved from or 'out of', Greek *ek*, death: <<**Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen**>> (Hebrews 13:20-21).

He was heard. Even as Son of God, it was appropriate that, having been made human, Jesus submitted to the Father and waited on the Father's answer: <<**And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want'**>> (Matthew 26:39).

The point that should not be missed with Jesus' anguish in Gethsemane was not the resounding 'no' to his request that the cup of suffering should pass, but his full acceptance of God's will over his human nature. Only so could Jesus discover the full meaning of sonship. Only so could he become the high priest that God had destined him to be, able to sympathise with his people in their darkest moments.

Because of his reverent, Greek *eulabeia*, submission describes a reverential regard or fear in the presence of God, according to the Septuagint version of: <<**Happy is the one who is never without fear, but one who is hard-hearted will fall into calamity**>> (Proverbs 28:14), and is used again in: <<**Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe**>> (Hebrews 12:28). Jesus' piety formed the basis for his prayers being answered; and now he stands to intercede for, and help, every Christian: <<**Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us**>> (Romans 8:34), and: <<**Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need**>> (Hebrews 4:16).

⁸ Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered;

Hebrews 5:8

Although he was a son. Jesus, clearly fully divine, was also fully human.

He learned obedience through what he suffered. Jesus was always without sin, and thus always obedient to God; nevertheless he acquired knowledge and experience by living as a human being: <<**The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him**>> (Luke 2:40), <<**And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour**>> (Luke 2:52), and he especially came to know firsthand what it cost to maintain obedience in the midst of suffering. As Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, successive temptations were no doubt more difficult to deal with: <<**Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test"'**>> (Luke 4:12), and as he obeyed his Father in the face of each temptation, i.e. he learned obedience, so that his human moral ability was strengthened.

Tom Wright gives an interesting human analogy of a son coming into his father's business. Instead of being given an immediate executive role, the father insists that the son learns the business from the ground up, working alongside other employees, knowing their hardships and challenges. He may have been the son through nature but he became the heir through nurture, and has come to know the business of creation with the same passion and love for it that the Father has had since before the dawn of time.

Jesus demonstrated that he had learned obedience by accepting the Cross according to the will of God: *<<And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross>>* (Philippians 2:7d-8), that was a decision made in the Counsels of God, which included Jesus himself before he came to earth: *<<You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know – this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power>>* (Acts 2:22-24). This account from Acts also confirms that God is: *<<the one who was able to save him from death>>* (v.7), for that is what he did when he raised him to life.

⁹ and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, ¹⁰ having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Hebrews 5:9-10

Having been made perfect. During his childhood, Jesus was not lacking in any godly character quality, but he was lacking in the full experience of having lived a perfect human life, obeying the Father in everything, i.e. living without sin. The single Greek word can actually mean 'being made complete and perfect', indicating that Jesus underwent a process of learning what it is like to be human as well as what it is like to be the God who created it all to begin with.

The lifelong perfect obedience of Jesus (v.8) provides the basis for eternal salvation: *<<It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings>>* (Hebrews 2:10), and for the ultimate perfection of those who respond in faith and obedience.

The source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. Since Jesus is exalted to be a prince to rule over those who answer his call, as well as a Saviour to deliver them, he will be a Saviour to none but to those whom he is a prince, and who are therefore willing that he should reign over them; the rest he will account his opponents, and treat them accordingly. But to those who do obey him, devoting themselves to him, denying themselves for him, and taking up their own cross in order to follow him, he will be the author, the grand cause of their salvation, and they shall own him as such forever.

According to the order of Melchizedek. Four kings came with their armies to fight against the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the others nearby. They won the battle and took away many of the valuable possessions, also taking Abraham's nephew Lot and his family captive. Abraham took his men and pursued the kings, overcoming them, rescuing his family and retrieving the valuables. When Abraham returned he was met by Melchizedek and immediately Abraham honoured him by giving him a tenth of the plunder: <<***And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. He blessed him and said, 'Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!' And Abram gave him one-tenth of everything***>> (Genesis 14:18-20).

II.c.ii Hebrews 5:11-6:12 - Pause in the argument: warning against apostasy

The author interrupts his exposition of Jesus' role as high priest, Hebrews 4:14-5:10 and Chapters 7-10, in order to challenge his readers to mature further in their faith. He rebukes them for their lack of maturity (vv.11-14), lists the basics that they should already know (Hebrews 6:1-3), and warns them about the danger of falling away from the faith (Hebrews 6:4-8). Nevertheless, he states his confidence in them (Hebrews 6:9-10), while once again encouraging their perseverance (Hebrews 6:11-12).

¹¹ About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding.

Hebrews 5:11

Although he often encourages his readers: <<***Even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation. For God is not unjust; he will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do***>> (Hebrews 6:9-10), **and:** <<***But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting***>> (Hebrews 10:32-34); here the author rebukes them.

The writer must have known his audience quite well, both to be able to make this analysis of where they were spiritually and intellectually, and to have the courage to say it straight to them. He has some more comforting things to say later on; but this remarkable rebuke bursts upon its first hearers like a sudden cold shower. He clearly wanted to wake them up with his double challenge.

Hard to explain. Although in Chapter 7 the writer does explain the reference to Melchizedek (v.6 and v.10), there are still many mysteries concerning Christ in terms of his person and his office; indeed, Christianity is the great mystery of God.

Earlier, the author had urged his readers to: <<***pay greater attention to what we have heard***>> (Hebrews 2:1). Now, he calls them dull in understanding. 'Sluggish' in Hebrews 6:1 is the same word as dull here.

¹² For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; ¹³ for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.

Hebrews 5:12-14

The author continues to rebuke the readers, since by now they should have matured enough in the faith to be able to instruct others; yet they remained unskilled in the word of righteousness, i.e. not living according to the Gospel.

The basic elements of the oracles of God are the most fundamental truths of God. The writer provides a partial list: *<<Therefore let us go on towards perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, and not laying again the foundation: repentance from dead works and faith towards God, instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgement>>* (Hebrews 6:1-2).

The NT authors often refer to the oracles, Greek *logia*, with reference to the law: *<<He is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living oracles to give to us>>* (Acts 7:38), and: *<<Much, in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God>>* (Romans 3:2).

The writer to the Hebrews is not just being critical of their lack of understanding of the Gospel message that should have so transformed their own lives so they themselves should have become teachers. He also refers to their lack of comprehension of what the OT had also said of the Messiah, that had come so obviously to fulfilment in the person of Jesus, and yet had failed to have the impact on society that it should have, especially on the Jews who were the keepers of the oracles of God, as noted in Romans 3:2.

Milk versus solid food shows the readers' immaturity in the faith; they were like infants, whereas they should have been mature adults, well-learned and well-practiced in the faith. Paul had encountered a similar problem in Corinth: *<<I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready>>* (1 Corinthians 3:2). Yet the prophet had foreseen that the people would indeed need to be fed on milk: *<<For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little>>* (Isaiah 28:10), and the apostle agrees it can even be beneficial in the right context: *<<Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation>>* (1 Peter 2:2).

Although Jesus wants his disciples to have the same level of innocent trust and faith as that seen in children: *<<But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs>>* (Mark 10:14), he also has a clear expectation that they will be sufficiently mature to live a Gospel centred life, with all that it entails, as confirmed by Paul: *<<Brothers and sisters, do*

not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults>> (1 Corinthians 14:20).

The church has always had children, young people and fathers, relative stages of maturity in the faith. There is a place for each on the journey of faith. The apostle offers his advice: *<<I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven on account of his name. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young people, because you have conquered the evil one. I write to you, children, because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young people, because you are strong and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one>> (1 John 2:12-14).* Whatever stage each individual has reached on their own journey, they still need the appropriate level of spiritual nourishment that is found in the Word, through prayer, and through commitment to the local church, in order to continue to grow and flourish.

It is not only reason and faith, but spiritual sense that will teach people to distinguish between what is pleasing and what is provoking to God; between what is helpful and what is hurtful to their own souls. Again, Paul comments on the concept of spiritual sense and wisdom: *<<Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish>> (1 Corinthians 2:6).*

Those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. The author is calling for Christian maturity that demonstrates an aptitude and appetite to proclaim the Gospel message and to tackle the issues of God's natural justice in ensuring that the hungry are fed, the needs of the poor are met, the sick are cared for, and to demonstrate there is no place for evil intent in those who would wish to enter into the Kingdom of God. The church and its individual members need to know what is appropriate and what is inappropriate in the way they conduct themselves in the world, for it is Jesus as the Christ whom they are putting on display. The prophet once again concludes: *<<He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good>> (Isaiah 7:15).*

Tom Wright concludes, 'In our churches today we need to recognise this same tendency. It's one thing for people who are genuinely young in the faith, or are genuinely tired out and need a good rest, to say 'Let's keep it simple and easy'. It's quite another thing for people who have been Christians for some time, and show every other sign of being capable of learning and growing in the faith, to say, or imply, 'We're too lazy to do that'. Let's not fool ourselves. Learning more about the Christian world-view, the large map on which we live, and more and more smaller bits of it, is a way of growing in strength in our praying, our living, our work for the Gospel in whatever we do. Holding back from such learning, perhaps with the false humility of 'I'm not good at understanding these things' when we really mean 'I can't be bothered to try', is a way of saying that we want to remain spiritual babies'.