

## **A Priest Forever** **Hebrews 5:1-6**

For those of us who have at least a couple of decades under our belt, we've probably formulated a few observations of our own under the sun.<sup>1</sup> Maybe you've noticed, too, that longevity and honor often go hand in hand. We marvel at words like "70<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary." It's easy and almost natural to heap praise upon a couple that's been together that long. Growing up in a small town, the residents of Tiptonville, TN couldn't help but notice Mr. Buddy Bramlett. Mr. Buddy never branched out to pursue a family of his own, or any significant professional career of his own. Why? Because as a young man he decided that he would care for his paralyzed father around the clock until his father's death a few years back. That went on for a little over 40 years. It's hard to find a clearer example of one who deserves honor.

We laud the athlete who continues to perform with excellence year after year and the co-worker who has done *xyz* longer than his/her peers. To fly near the words of Solomon, longevity comes before honor. But we don't give quite the same honor to all who endure long, do we? Pride and ingratitude cheapen endurance and are hurdles to honor. But if behind the sustained career, relationship, or devotion lies a gratitude or a humility, upon that kind of longevity we heap all the more honor. Hebrews 5 will place like considerations before us this morning.

To echo Matt from last week, we're now a step or two inside of the author's central theological argument—what God has done through the Son to secure access to Himself. Drawing near to the throne of grace is no longer a deadly affair, but one that we're exhorted to do and privileged to do. There, in communion with God, brought together through a sympathetic, sinless Savior, help is ours in time of need.

But to understand the full picture, we must keep making our way through the "most Old-Testament of the New Testament books."<sup>2</sup> And nothing points to that reality more clearly than this string of texts starting last week and running through chapter ten concerning details tied to the Levitical priesthood. John Owen stated centuries ago that "the principal glory in all Jewish worship consisted in the person and office of the high priest."<sup>3</sup> One read-through of Leviticus alone and we would be hard-pressed to disagree with Owen. The priesthood indeed held a central place for the Jewish community, and it did so for the central truths that it continually reinforced. In the priesthood, we see that God's character and makeup are fundamentally other than our who and our what; we pick up on the truth that He is holy and we are not; the priesthood communicates that all have sinned by breaking God's law, that He is not indifferent or idle towards our sin, that payment for sin must be made, that the payment required is death, and that though God exacts justice, His grace is maintained and conveyed through the sacrifices, just to name a few. These seeds of the priesthood are meant to be harvested by God's people in every age. This sermon-letter will yield much in this regard.

### **I. The high priesthood that was**

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<sup>1</sup> Though none of them new and most all of them unimpressive.

<sup>2</sup> Alistair Begg, <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/jesus-the-great-high-priest/>

<sup>3</sup> John Owen, *The Works of John Owen: Vol. XVII*, 521.

I meant the previous sentence—we can grasp some basics within the priesthood without having lived in that world, but indeed, the events of our text are alien to our own context. The obscurity of it shouldn't turn us away, because in seeking to understand, the understanding of the high priest and his ministry are meant to do something more than inform our heads.

### A. *The priest's responsibilities*

**<sup>1</sup>For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins.** We catch the first glimpse of this high priest from Leviticus 21:10, described as “*the highest among his brothers.*” Beginning with Aaron, Moses' brother, a succession of priests was chosen. And though all the males of Aaron's family belonged to this priesthood, there was only one priest who carried the distinction of **high priest** with its unique responsibilities. The remainder of the priests surrounding the high priest functioned as his assistants and as a kind of nursery for a future succession.<sup>4</sup>

When Hebrews was written the priesthood had already experienced decades of corruption and abuse. In fact, long before Jesus and the penning of this letter, the office of high priest mutated into something God never sanctioned. There is good evidence to support the claim that the priesthood became a pawn in the hand of Roman political factions.<sup>5</sup> But the author is describing the priesthood under God's appointed means. If it had healthy bones, men would be chosen carefully, by God's leading, from among the community inside of the proper lineage, to fulfill these God-ordained tasks.

And we read here of those tasks. The high priest was appointed such because of human need. They needed representation before God. They needed their sins dealt with. And these are needs that have never changed. If God is who scripture describes Him to be—wholly holy; a Judge of all the earth; a living God to whom we must give an account; a God, who by no means will let the guilty go unpunished—if that is God, then my need is too great for me to meet, and that moving the needle of His favor by my own works is out of the question. What might seem like mere religious, obligatory activities to the unseeing eye, the practices of the high priest for centuries relayed God's justice, wrath, patience, love, how sin is dealt with, His righteous expectations on man, how man and God can live at peace with one another, etc. If more important realities exist, I've not found them. The priesthood was perpetually communicating these spiritual veracities **pertaining to God**, which centered on saving sinful humanity.

The Philippian jailer in Acts 16 *almost* asked the right question, “*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*” At least it was close enough that Paul and Silas understood what he was asking. At root, we all want to *do* something to contribute to our salvation. But the gospel is good news precisely because what needed to be done regarding God's just wrath has been done in love by the LORD Jesus. The gospel is closed off to human donations. It's the free gift of God to be received by faith. These are things **pertaining to God**, and the priesthood functioned as a kind of antecedent to the saving realities we see played out in the New Testament, like Acts 16.

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<sup>4</sup> John Owen, *Exposition of Hebrews: Vol. 20*, 345.

<sup>5</sup> Craig Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 658.

But notice his particular tasks—to *offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins*. Again, the regular Joe on the Israeli street had zero rights of representing himself before God. He was filthy, so he needed a clean representative before God—that’s why the high priests were commanded to wash with water in Exodus 29:4. In a similar vein, his own righteousness was as filthy rags, so he needed one representing him clothed with excellence and crowned with holiness—Exodus 29:5-6. He needed someone with majestic dignity and spiritual empowerment to represent him before God—that’s why the high priest was anointed with oil in Exodus 30:23-33. He needed his sin atoned for—that is why the high priest, reflected in Exodus 29:10-15, would lay his hand on the head of the goat, representing the transfer of the sinner’s guilt into the animal that would then be put to death instead of the guilty offerors.

These were but some of the responsibilities of the priesthood that was. But more was required of the high priest beyond his representative actions for the people. There were expectations laid on him that had to do with the state of his heart, his attitudes, his affections.

### B. *The priest’s restraint*

<sup>2</sup> *...he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness;* <sup>3</sup> *and because of it he is obligated to offer sacrifices for sins, as for the people, so also for himself.* What if every aspect of your vocation was an endless reinforcement of the sin of others? Now, some of our jobs may feel that way, but is it anything like this high priest? Seeing blood on such a large scale, hearing the bellowing cries for life as it ebbed away, being captive to the stench of burning flesh, all the senses engaged as one animal after another is offered up in death—how could this not weigh heavy on every high priest through the ages? But the reason for those gory ministries surely bore down on them as well. They were the stewards of sin. They had the lists carved in their consciences long before Paul penned 1 Corinthians 6, Galatians 5, and Ephesians 5. With every offering, some aspect was in play—idolatry, adultery, homosexuality, theft, coveting, drunkenness, sorcery, jealousy, anger, greed, repeat... idolatry, adultery, homosexuality, theft, etc. day after day after day, meeting the requirement of taking life after life so that others might live.

Couldn’t we all imagine the high priest being overwhelmed and wearied by the sins of others based on what’s been said about his responsibilities so far? Yet, the text reaches further inside of the disquiet that this profession might yield. Verse 3 indicates that they were *obligated to offer sacrifices* for *themselves* as well. They were to address their own pride, jealousy, lust, anger, and greed by watching that innocent animal die instead of them. The reason the priest could *deal gently with the ignorant and misguided* was because of his own *weakness*.

The words *deal gently* mean to moderate one’s emotions.<sup>6</sup> In fact, you might ask what emotions are being addressed here? Some scholars suggest anger, or even grief in light of the sin of others.<sup>7</sup> It would have been central to the high priest’s calling to show great patience and compassion towards others who had sinned. Otherwise, how could he approach the throne of grace with anger against the one for whom he was to pray? Or how could he follow through with what was necessary

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<sup>6</sup> Peter O’Brien, *PNTC: Hebrews*, 190.

<sup>7</sup> C.R. Koester, *The Dwelling of God*, 286.

to image forth God's kindness through the sacrifices if he's harboring anger and frustration towards the offerors?

As we try to enter the high priest's world, we might envision the high priest catching wind of Ezra the baker, who gave in to the temptation to make a little extra money by working past sundown on the Sabbath? Or for Samuel the tailor, who, showing partiality, will only offer his services to the Jewish public? The high priest, by virtue of being a part of a community, had personal knowledge of some of the sins of some of the people. And he was called to check his unbridled emotions at the temple door while remembering that he too was both susceptible to like sins and guilty of others. He was not only liable to love and serve the *ignorant and misguided*, but he knows the same descriptors by experience. In fact, since he is *beset with weakness* like those for whom he is representing, and being marked by these same descriptors, the Aaronic priesthood was never (and could never be) adequate. From day one, the priesthood begged for a new kind of administration.

Nevertheless, the priests inward heart condition was to be in concert with what his outward duties were communicating at root—God is patient and bends towards mercy. He's a God who takes no hedonistic pleasure in the death of the wicked.<sup>8</sup> Sympathetic representation was part of the job description for the high priest.

### C. *The priest's reception*

***4 And no one takes the honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God, even as Aaron was.*** The verb of verse 1, *appointed*, reflects the same idea of verse 4, *when he is called by God*. Both verbs are in the passive voice, meaning that no man had the right to appoint himself into that position. God was to call the shots on who would man the high priest post. But that was not often the case. As I hinted at earlier, leading up to the days of Jesus, and during Jesus' time on earth, the priesthood was in total disarray. Instead of maintaining the Levitical lineage, with the community of God-fearers carefully choosing from among the Levitical line, it morphed into a political playground. Men would seize the position for every other reason besides an earnestness for God's glory.

However, by implication this idea of being *called* points to the humility required from the one appointed by God.<sup>9</sup> Whoever he was through the centuries, he was not to be a man of presumption. The high priesthood was a place of honor bestowed. He received it. He didn't expect it or seize it. This was the high priesthood that was—a position afforded him by God, a position requiring compassion and humility, and a position with responsibilities reflecting no higher realities among humanity. The priesthood, for centuries, was the primary facilitator of access to God.<sup>10</sup> It marked out the way to Him, in processes and patterns, in types and shadows. The priesthood blazed the trail but was never meant to be the destination.

## II. The High Priest that is

The priesthood prefigured the great-great Priest of Hebrews. Of course, there was nothing obvious to the Jewish mind about Jesus Christ being a high priest at all. In fact, one look at his genealogy

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<sup>8</sup> Alistair Begg, <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/jesus-the-great-high-priest/>

<sup>9</sup> O'Brien, 193.

<sup>10</sup> Dr. Matt Sliger, <https://southwoodsbc.org/media/vc2ygp5/hebrews-4-14-16-the-throne-of-grace>

and heads would be shaking, “*Nope, he’s from Judah’s line. Unqualified,*” they might have said. In the Gospels we don’t see Jesus garbed with priestly vestments, nor did He frequent the temple to serve its ongoing needs. We certainly have no indication that He slayed animals. There was no one-off, public ritual showing that He was made a priest or considered that by any in the religious community. Yet, what God says goes and what Jesus went on to accomplish only furthers that Christ became the highest High Priest by appointment.

*A. Was appointed by the Father to be a better Priest*

***And no one takes the honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God, even as Aaron was. <sup>5</sup> So also Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest but He who said to Him, “YOU ARE MY SON, TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU”;***

Again, the author of Hebrews applies Psalm 2:7 to Jesus. He sets out to compare and contrast the old high priesthood with the new High Priest, and in doing so he smashes together the sonship of Jesus with His priesthood. What’s the relationship? Well, the author here is simply doing what the Psalmist does there. Psalm 2:6-7, “*As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.*” <sup>7</sup> *I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you.”* This is the One. God’s installed King who governs heaven and earth is also the Great High Priest whom John calls the Lamb of God for the sin of the world. Jesus is the King-Priest.

And He is the Priest-King who came focused on His Father’s glory and His people’s good. He ***did not glorify Himself***, but came with a humility predicted by the prophets yet nonetheless surprising and arresting. At what point will we stop exalting the lowliness of this Person? The eternal Son of God hung from a tree, pinned there by the nails of men and the wrath of heaven in our place.

See this clearly—whenever we talk of or sing of or preach of the rule of God through Jesus Christ, we’re never talking about someone who is merely up there somewhere, indifferent and aloof from life’s jams or life’s joys. That cold distinction often belongs to earth’s rulers. The King of kings was appointed Great-Great Priest because of He offered a life-giving death as payment for our access to God. Hebrews has repeated itself in that regard, and we keep echoing him with more to say about these things in the weeks ahead. Yet, through four whole chapters Hebrews has also layered the truth that His offering intends to draw us near to His heart in loving confidence. Peter Lewis, in his excellent book called *The Glory of Christ*, wrote,

We have a God who knows exactly what it is to eat a meal and take a walk, to have a toothache or a stomach ache, to rejoice at a wedding and mourn at a funeral, to be indebted to an earthly mother and her husband, to stand trial in a human court, to be flogged and cruelly executed...He is able to stand alongside us in all our troubles because He who is still human in heaven remembers what it was like to be human on earth and with perfect recall can match all our changing moments with His own experiences.”

Has not this combination of an exalted Sovereign LORD and a lowly Sin-bearing Lamb melted many a frigid hearts to warmhearted worship?<sup>11</sup> Won't the sound of angel armies and the throngs of redeemed humanity rock all of creation at His Second Coming profoundly because none are greater, and none are kinder? Jesus stands alone as Sovereign Sympathizer. And for this alone, He is the better Priest.<sup>12</sup>

*B. Was appointed by the Father to be a better Priest forever*

***6** just as He says also in another passage, “YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER ACCORDING TO THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK.”* This is our first exposure to the “mysterious and puzzling character” of Melchizedek.<sup>13</sup> We find him introduced for the first time in scripture in Genesis 14, then he reappears in Psalm 110 which is here quoted. Hebrews will unfold more about this priest-king, but to the point of verse 6, listen to what the author writes about Melchizedek in Hebrews 7:3, “*He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.*” Here's the point, the introduction of this cloudy character gives us a clear picture of the lasting nature of what God has done in Christ.

Each and every priest who came along, beginning with Aaron, was under the curse of death due to sin. When they closed their eyes for the last time, their priesthood ended. But we see in Christ a forever priest, who, after becoming a curse for us on the cross, was raised to life and *crowned with glory and honor*.<sup>14</sup> And since Christ is that, we have assurances that should animate our praise and give life to our commitment to doing the will of God. Since Christ is a Priest forever, then His redeeming work for His church stands forever. Since Christ is a Priest forever, then my sin has been overcome forever. Since Christ is a Priest forever, His love over us has no end. Since Christ is a Priest forever, our inheritance is inevitable, not tenuous. Since Christ is a Priest forever, we have no further need for mediation with God. A sinless Priest, whose loving works have no end, ended the old priesthood. To borrow language from the apostle Paul, the priesthood that *was* has now been swallowed up by the Priest that *is*. His offering to the Father was that sufficient, that perfect, and that final.

## Conclusion

Long before Bethlehem, Christ was spoken of as, “*everlasting.*”<sup>15</sup> “*Before Abraham was born, I am,*” Jesus said to the astonishment of those who heard Him.<sup>16</sup> It was a mark of John to speak of Christ's longevity—“*In the beginning was the Word...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*”<sup>17</sup> So, if longevity comes before honor, then we have such the privilege to bestow it, today and into the eternity.

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<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards: The Admiral Conjunction of Diverse Excellencies*, 740. If you don't have Edwards works, here is a link: <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/adorable.html> If you want some more significant thoughts on what glories met together in Christ's person.

<sup>12</sup> But He is a better priest for more reasons than we have time to cover, but the list on the bottom of page 2 going into the top of page 3 is worth pitching a tent over. The physical acts we find in Exodus 29-30 come to spiritual fruition in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus our Lord. Jesus was washed in baptism before entering His priestly ministry. He wore the scarlet robe before the sacrifice. He became the agent of the transfer of the sinner's guilt by becoming the landing place for what that guilt deserved. In all these things, the surface has been scratched.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *EBTC: Hebrews*, 161.

<sup>14</sup> Hebrews 2:9

<sup>15</sup> Isaiah 9:6

<sup>16</sup> John 8:58

<sup>17</sup> John 1:1, 14

