

**In the Days of His Flesh**  
**Hebrews 5:7-10**  
**December 3, 2023**

In quite the twist, not too long ago a Division–1 college basketball coach started recruiting a high school player based on my recommendation. Maybe you say, “I wasn’t aware you were qualified to be a scout.” Well, I’m not. Though I do like basketball—both watching and playing—I wouldn’t say I excel at it. Nor have I ever coached it. Frankly I’m far from qualified to be informing college basketball coaches of anything.

But I do know a guy. He’s 6’7. When he was in high school, he started on a team that won the State Championship. He then went on to play college ball. He knows quite a few college coaches around the country, including some at major programs. And, of course, he’s coached a good bit himself. In short, *he*—in contrast to *me*—is eminently qualified to both evaluate and recommend basketball players.

So, for the brief version of the story, I saw a high schooler that I thought was quite good. Knowing my friend had connections, and significant credibility, I sent him some highlights and maybe some hyperbole, hoping that he’d pass the info along.

He ended up making the case to some coaches. And here’s what’s significant: they listened. Now, if *I’d* sent that info, would they have cared? Not a chance. Why would they? But did they listen to him? Immediately. Why? Because he has the experience and the knowledge. If the job was to recognize athletic ability on a court, he’s qualified.

I read this week that something around 70% of job applicants are *unqualified* for the post they apply for. HR folks end up throwing away half the resumé’s. That doesn’t mean those hiring always get it right. Maybe you say, “I know someone that works a job they’re unqualified for.” Maybe you’ve *had* a job like that before.

The importance of being qualified for this or that job depends somewhat on what the job is. If you’ve never cleaned up leaves in your life, that wouldn’t keep me from handing you a rake. No experience necessary. But when the mechanic is deciding when to replace brakes, the financial advisor deciding where you invest, or the physician is making his or her rounds, we care about knowledge, about experience, about qualifications. Can I trust this person? Does this person have the qualifications to accomplish the job required?

As we enter this section in Hebrews on Jesus being our high priest, we should be reminded that the priesthood was a vocation.<sup>1</sup> And for this vocation there were qualifications, character–istics that made someone fit to serve.

There are qualifications to serve as a basketball scout. We insist on certain qualifications for our surgeons. As we consider Hebrews 5, we might ask what qualifies one to mediate on behalf of a sinful humanity before a holy God, and to do so forever?<sup>2</sup>

Today’s passage will consider *where* qualifications like this might be seen: in the days of His flesh.

**1. The days of His flesh were full of prayer (v. 7)**

**Verse 7: In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears.**

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<sup>1</sup> As Chris showed us last week, it’s an appointed vocation: <https://subspla.sh/yxh26r9>

<sup>2</sup> Calvin wrote this, “the role of Mediator was no ordinary one, in the sense that His task was to so restore us to God’s grace as to make us, the children of men, children of God,” in Jonathan Gibson, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, 51.

The first question to answer is, “What are **the days of His flesh?**” Does this merely refer to a particular season in Christ’s life? It’s more likely a broader idea, covering every day from His birth to His teenage years to the days of His ministry leading all the way up to His death. It encompasses the entirety of His earthly life.<sup>3</sup> Those are the days of His flesh.

And in those days, verse 7 says He **offered up** something. If “offering up” brings to mind priests offering sacrifices, then you’re reading and thinking rightly. Verse 7 uses the same verb used back in verses 1 and 3 to describe that very thing.<sup>4</sup> Every high priest offers sacrifices for sins (v. 1; v. 3). What did this Priest offer up? In this verse, He offers up prayers and supplications.

And it then describes those prayers and supplications as being done **with loud crying and tears**. I’m guessing that many of us immediately think of Gethsemane, that Thursday night when the image of the invisible God walked into a garden and Luke described Christ’s intercession with these words: **being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground** (Lk. 22:44).

That’s the scene most of us consider first when we hear **loud crying and tears**. And it *should* be brought to mind. But is that *all* the author’s referring to? Is that the *only* time Jesus prayed with affection, with tears?

Again, the phrase “in the days of His flesh” points to something broad. We know that He wept in other passages, whether looking over Jerusalem or hearing about Lazarus. And we know from quite a few passages that He devoted Himself to prayer. So, while we point to Gethsemane as *one* example of this kind of fervent intercession, we shouldn’t limit it to that moment *alone*.<sup>5</sup>

In the *days*—plural—of His flesh, **He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears**. This kind of repeated offering marked His life. I found helpful one commentator who noted that the language of this verse corresponds closely to the Jewish ideal for prayer. That is, they believed the righteous person ought to pray a certain way. Where did the Hebrew people get that ideal? From the Psalms.<sup>6</sup>

We noted this when we studied the Psalms. While many consider them to be *merely* a compendium on human emotions, they’re much more than that; they’re actually instruction *for* expression.<sup>7</sup> Because we believe the Bible is authoritative, we believe it doesn’t just *describe* affections, it gives direction to them. So, if there were a standard, a proper way to relate to God as a human, the Psalms give it. There’s an ideal. Jesus came and lived it.

This prayer, marked by tears, was offered. It was offered *up*, directed to a certain Person. To whom? Verse 7 answers: **to the One able to save Him from death**. Again, consider the Psalms. Those prayers were directed. Psalm 22, for example, **But You, O Lord, be not far off; O You my help, hasten to my assistance. Deliver my soul** (Ps. 22:19–20). The Psalmist prayed to a particular Person. Further the One to whom He prayed was able to do what He asked. Psalm 18: **The cords of Sheol surrounded me; the snares of death confronted me. In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried to my God for help; He heard my voice out of His temple, and my cry for help before him came into His ears** (Ps. 18:5–6).

If the Psalms give instruction for our praying, how we’re to relate to God, what are we seeing in this description of Jesus’s **days in the flesh?** Fulfillment. Flawless dependence. In the days of His flesh, He offered up supplication repeatedly, unceasingly, fervently, depending on God to

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<sup>3</sup> Peter O’Brien, *God Has Spoken in His Son*, NSBT, 67.

<sup>4</sup> Harold Attridge, *Hebrews*, 149.

<sup>5</sup> Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 244.

<sup>6</sup> Attridge, 148.

<sup>7</sup> See Sidney Griedanus, *Preaching Christ from the Psalms*, 3.

meet His needs and trusting Him to sustain Him at all times.<sup>8</sup> The days of His flesh were full of prayer.

We ought to be reminded as well of the *context* in which He prayed. Why did He so often *need* to pray with loud cries and tears?

## 2. The days of His flesh were full of suffering (v. 8)

Verse 8: **Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered.**

Some would say this verse is the heart of the section.<sup>9</sup> We could also say it's the heart of the confusion. While I'd imagine no one has a problem with saying that Jesus prayed, that He prayed a lot, and that His prayers were perfect, but how comfortable are we with saying that He **learned obedience**?

As a first step to grasping what this means, it's important that we not separate verse 8 from the dependent life of prayer we just noted in verse 7. Why did Jesus pray with loud cries and tears? Because the days of His flesh were full of suffering.

As a second step to grasping what this means, I should point out the wordplay the author uses here. In English, the words "learned" and "suffering" don't rhyme. Because of that we can miss part of what the author is doing. Because in Greek the words for "learned" and "suffering" are *emathen* and *epathen*.<sup>10</sup> Linking the two was a common Greek wordplay.<sup>11</sup> It's not unlike if I asked you to finish this phrase, "No pain, no \_\_\_\_\_" you could.<sup>12</sup> The idea—a widespread wordplay in their day—was that suffering is the context in which we learn.

As a third step to grasping what this means, we must assert that this learning was *not* pointing to some inadequacy on Christ's part that needed to be overcome.<sup>13</sup> So, with all that in mind, what happened **in the days of His flesh**? Though He'd never been *anything* less than in perfect union with the Father, during His earthly life He learned what it meant to be obedient to God *in the midst* of suffering.<sup>14</sup> Over and over again, as Jesus faced this situation and then a different one, His faithfulness to God was challenged. Over and over again, He learned what it meant to obey.

In Matthew 4, will He turn those stones into bread? In Matthew 16, in Matthew 22, in Luke 11, and Luke 20, would He fear the religious leaders' questions? Would He hedge? Would He massage the truth? In Luke 14, would He heal the lame man on the Sabbath? In Luke 22, would He turn aside after Judas betrayed Him? Would He in Gethsemane, *knowing* what was in the cup He was to drink? When the mob came with clubs, would He call on twelve legions of angels to rescue Him (Mt. 26:53). On the cross, would He succumb to the rulers' sneers? Would He save Himself?

Philippians 2 answers: **Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself (how) by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross** (Phil. 2:8). He learned obedience from the things which He suffered.

Like us, each second was an opportunity to obey God or to suppress the truth. Yet, *unlike* us, He's **One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin** (4:15). And as that passage in Hebrews 4 reminded us, this makes Him able to sympathize with us. Because He entered in, He's able to faithfully and mercifully intercede for us as priest.

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<sup>8</sup> Albert Mohler, *Hebrews*, 74.

<sup>9</sup> Attridge, 152.

<sup>10</sup> εμαθεν and επαθεν

<sup>11</sup> Attridge, 152.

<sup>12</sup> Dana Harris makes this comparison in *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 122.

<sup>13</sup> Attridge, 152.

<sup>14</sup> O'Brien, 68.

But, also, *because* He's done it, He's a model for us in our attempts to obey. Again, what's the context of Hebrews? Believers encountering suffering are being tempted to turn back. Like the wilderness generation, they're tempted to disobey. They're in danger of drifting (2:1). If we want to learn obedience, we pay much closer attention to what we've heard, (2:1) *even when* the other voices are loud. We obey even when it seems to cost us. We learn obedience in each and every circumstance. New seasons come. We have more to learn.

How might we do that? If we want to learn obedience, we look to the One that did it for us. We're to be like Moses, **considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt** (Heb. 11:26). The One we're considering learned obedience, in the midst of suffering, so that we might too.

The days of His flesh were full of prayer. The days of His flesh were full of suffering. Note, third:

### 3. The days of His flesh were for the purpose of salvation (vv. 7–10)

That's what verse 9 describes: **And having been made perfect.** This is the second time the book of Hebrews has used this kind of language to describe Christ. The first time was in chapter 2, where it was also connected to sufferings. 2:10: **For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings.**

Hebrews 2 said that the author of their salvation was perfected through sufferings. That's what Hebrews 5 argues as well, v. 8, **although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect.** In both cases—Hebrews 2 and 5—the word for “perfect” doesn't imply an existing imperfection,<sup>15</sup> but instead speaks of something brought to its intended goal.

That's one reason why we started this sermon talking about qualifications. What might qualify someone to mediate on behalf of sinful humanity before a holy God, forever? He'd have to, first, be made like his brethren in all things (Heb. 2:17). He couldn't be “sort-of” human, human in this chapter but not in the next. He must be *truly* so. And, then, clothed with humanity, truly, He'd have to live every moment—in suffering or in celebration—in complete and utter dependence upon the Father. No second of mishap. Otherwise, He's not qualified. And there's no salvation. The Heidelberg catechism asks: “Why must the mediator be a true and righteous man? Because God's justice requires that human nature, which has sinned, must pay for its sin. But a sinner could never pay for others.”<sup>16</sup>

The perfection verse 9 speaks of is best understood in vocational terms. It's the process by which Christ was made complete and equipped for the office of high priest.<sup>17</sup> And it's a process that was brought to its goal during **the days of His flesh.** His learning obedience in the midst of suffering made Him qualified to serve as high priest on behalf of a sinful people.<sup>18</sup> The impediment to the goal wasn't *His* imperfection, but ours.

But verse 9 goes on to describe what His “perfection” accomplished: **having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation.** What Christ did in the flesh is not about subtraction. He didn't become less. It's addition, God plus man. We saw this same kind of addition in Philippians 2 when He, **in the form of God** was **made in the likeness**

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<sup>15</sup> Harris, 55; 122.

<sup>16</sup> Gibson, 75.

<sup>17</sup> O'Brien, 69.

<sup>18</sup> Mohler, 76.

**of man** (Phil. 2:6–8). In Hebrews 5, He *became*. He who **was a Son** *became* **the source of eternal salvation**. And how will we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? (Heb. 2:3).

Don't miss its eternal nature. Hebrews 9:12 will speak of eternal redemption. Hebrews 9:15 will speak of eternal inheritance. Hebrews 13:20 will speak of an eternal covenant. This high priest secured it all. How can we be sure of all these *eternal* realities? Because this high priest, verse 10 writes, was **designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek**. We'll look at Melchizedek more closely when we get to chapter 7, but for now I'll reiterate some of what Chris said last week. In the Old Testament, every priest was under the curse of death. So was their vocation. When they died, their priesthood ended and a new priest appointed. He would eventually die too. Then a new priest.

But this order of priesthood is altogether different. It's of a different *kind*, **according to the order of Melchizedek**.<sup>19</sup> Before we get to him in Hebrews 7, I encourage you to go and read his introduction in Genesis 14. As you know, so many of the characters in Genesis are described as coming from the line of this person or that person. Genealogy mattered. However, if you read Genesis 14, you'll see it's as if Melchizedek comes out of nowhere. Some would say he doesn't even fit in that particular narrative. But, more central to Hebrews' point, neither his father nor his mother is mentioned. It's as if he's *always* existed, and he always will. This order of priesthood, this *kind* of priesthood, is unlike that which dominated the Old Testament. This high priest endures forever.

How is that possible? How is He qualified to do so? Because, verse 7: He cried out **to the One able to save Him from death**. Does that mean He asked *not* to die? That doesn't square with the Gospels, does it? He knew what He'd been appointed to do. He set His face like flint toward Jerusalem to do so. This phrase in verse 7 doesn't mean He asked to be spared. Instead, it means He asked to be saved "out of the realm (or state of) death."<sup>20</sup> In the days of His flesh He cried out to the One able to save Him.

And the One able to did so. Why? The end of verse 7 answers: **And He was heard because of His piety**. This points to His reverent awe, His humble submission, His unyielding devotion, and perfect obedience.<sup>21</sup> Because of His piety, His perfection, the Father delivered Him out of the realm of death, saving Him *and others* through resurrection.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

What qualifies Christ to be our high priest? His being made like us in all things. His perfect obedience on our behalf. In the midst of suffering, His ceaseless dependence upon His Father. This is all done in our place, and placed in our account, as if we'd done it ourselves.

And then this high priest, having been made perfect—qualified—offered up that which was necessary to save a people: Himself.

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<sup>19</sup> Harris, 120.

<sup>20</sup> O'Brien, 68; Attridge, 150.

<sup>21</sup> Mohler, 75; Attridge, 121.

<sup>22</sup> O'Brien, 68.