

Title: **Jesus: A Better High Priest**

Date written: January 6, 2013

File name: high priesthood of Jesus.docx

It's been a long, tiresome day, but finally a few moments of quiet are available in the evening. The kids are already in bed and you have a little bit of time to talk with your spouse. "Let's talk," you say. "Okay – what do you want to talk about?" You respond, "Hey, honey...how 'bout that Melchizedekian priesthood? Isn't that something?"

That's a pretty unlikely scenario! When people get together to talk or visit, it is unlikely that you will hear them discussing the relative merits of the sacrificial system of the Old Testament versus the priesthood of Melchizedek (you might hear that in some gatherings!). Even Christians sometimes skim over such discussions as being tedious, unprofitable or unnecessary.

The book of Hebrews is viewed by some as a dry book that talks a lot about the Old Testament priests and sacrifices. And yet Hebrews discusses a subject that should affect your life every day – the high priesthood of Christ.

The Role of a High Priest

In the days of Mordecai and Esther (during the Persian period of the captivity), the people of Israel needed someone to enter into the presence of the Persian king to plead on behalf of the nation (Esther 4:1-11). One of the king's ministers, out of spite, had managed to put into action a plan by which all the Jews would be pillaged and put to death.

As the book of Esther informs us, the privacy of the Persian king was zealously guarded; no one was allowed to approach him in the inner court of his palace without being invited. The penalty for entering the king's inner court unbidden was death! If the king held out his scepter to the one entering, that one was accepted and did not die.

Mordecai couldn't go into the presence of the king to intercede for his people, but Esther went into the inner court of king Ahasuerus and was accepted (Esther 5:1-2).

In a similar way, God is "unapproachable," i.e., He may not be approached by just anyone. Men in general, as sinners, are not permitted to enter freely into the presence of One absolutely holy, possessing perfect righteousness.

The tabernacle illustrated this truth in a physical way. The ark of the covenant was a gold-covered box that resided in the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle. It was covered by a lid known as the mercy seat, on which rested two cherubim with outstretched wings (all of this is described in Exodus 25:10-22; 37:1-9; 40:20-21). A veil separated the ark from the rest of the sanctuary. It was above the mercy seat, between the two cherubim whose wings covered the mercy seat, that God met with man (Exodus 25:18-22; Leviticus 16:2). According to the inspired writer of Hebrews, the presence of the veil signified that access into the Most Holy Place was not open to all (Hebrews 9:8).

In fact, access into the Most Holy Place was very limited! On only one day a year (the Day of Atonement), the high priest entered the Most Holy Place to offer blood for himself and for the people of Israel (Leviticus 16). The high priest acted as a representative for the nation, a mediator between God and His sinful people. His role was to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sin (Hebrews 5:1). The book of

Hebrews discusses the work of Jesus as the ultimate high priest. Jesus is a better high priest in several ways.

By Ordination

The author of Hebrews contrasts two priesthoods: the order of Levi and the order of Melchizedek. Jesus is a priest after the order of Melchizedek, after his likeness (7:15). Jesus is both priest and king even as Melchizedek was. As far as what is recorded by Scripture, Melchizedek has neither beginning nor end of days and thus appears to be eternal (7:1-3). Jesus, as deity in the flesh, actually is eternal (7:16 – “the power of an endless life”).

The Hebrews writer affirms that the priesthood after the order of Melchizedek is superior to the Levitical priesthood because Melchizedek was superior to Abraham, ancestor of Levi. First, Melchizedek received a tithe from Abraham (7:4) and thus, in a sense, even Levi paid tithes (7:9). Second, Melchizedek blessed Abraham, indicating his (Melchizedek’s) superiority (7:6-7).

Furthermore, the high priesthood was not a position to be assumed by just anyone; God called the high priest (5:4-6, 10). God called Aaron personally to be the first high priest, but the choice of subsequent high priests was determined by the law. Under the Mosaic Law, a man became high priest regardless of disposition or willingness to serve. The choice of high priest was determined by lineage (7:16 – “according to the law of a fleshly commandment”). Jesus, on the other hand, was made a high priest by the specific calling and oath of God (5:5-6; 7:20-22).

By Character

In the ritual of the Day of Atonement, the Old Testament high priest went into the Most Holy Place at least twice – once for himself and once for the people (Leviticus 4:3; 16:6, 11-14). Although he offered blood on behalf of the people, he had the same problem they did – sin! Jesus, however, was without sin, even though He was tempted in all points (4:15; see also 7:26).

By Sacrifice

Jesus is a better high priest because of the sacrifice He offered. The Old Testament high priest offered the blood of a calf and a goat on the annual Day of Atonement. Jesus offered His own blood, not the blood of another (9:12). In addition, the animals sacrificed for sin by the Levitical priests were amoral creatures. Jesus, like us, is a moral Being. The life that He gave is equivalent to ours, as moral creatures also. The sacrifices of animals could never take away sin (10:4), but Jesus offered the effective sacrifice, a sacrifice that needed to be offered only once (9:27; 10:10-14).

By Ministry

The covenant was the basis of the ministry of the high priest. The Levitical priesthood was associated with the Mosaic Law; another priesthood demands another law (7:11-12). Jesus has a more excellent ministry since He is the mediator of a better covenant (8:6).

By Duration

Death made each Old Testament priest a temporary priest (7:23)! Jesus, because He is eternal, continues forever with an unchangeable priesthood. He was appointed with the unchangeable oath of God (7:20-22). He ever lives to serve as our mediator (7:24; vs. 25 – “since He ever lives”).

While it may be hard for us to relate to the Old Testament system of sacrifice, it was designed to be a shadow of the sacrificial system of the New Covenant. Man was made aware of his inability to approach God because of his sin. The seriousness of sin was emphasized by the requirement of the death of an animal.

Although the Levitical high priests prefigured the priestly work of Jesus, He is literally our high priest! Jesus shed His own blood on the cross, dying as the sacrifice for sin. Later, Jesus ascended into heaven itself to appear in the presence of God on our behalf (Hebrews 9:12, 24; 10:12-13).

The gospel, of course, is the good news that man can be saved through the blood of that sacrifice. When we obey the commands of the gospel, we appropriate the benefit of that sacrifice for ourselves – Christ becomes our high priest, our mediator (Hebrews 2:17; 9:15).

As Christians, He continues to make intercession for us. Each time we pray for forgiveness, we are calling upon our Advocate (1 John 2:1-2). He is able to save us to the uttermost (Hebrews 7:25).