

Chapter 9 – Inheritance through the God-Man Christ - Hebrews 5

In Hebrews 5 the author begins to set out Jesus' qualification for High Priesthood, replacing and superseding the Mosaic Law. The huge significance of this is that Jesus did not merely come to *tell* us the way to live, nor even to *show* us the way to live, but to *be* the way to live. He is the source of our life. He makes our inheritance both possible in principle and attainable in practice.

Prayer

Try using the *thanksgiving, remembrance, confidence* model of prayer as you think over what you have learnt from Hebrews chapter 4 and look forward to studying chapter 5.

Questions & Surprises

Let us start our study of chapter 5 by reading through and noting any surprises or questions. These are the surprises and questions that strike me in chapter 5.

V6 & 10 What is the "Order of Melchizedek"?

V7 What were these "loud cries and tears" of Jesus?

V9 In what way was Jesus made perfect through suffering?

V13 What is the "milk" and the "teaching about righteousness"?

V12 How are we to "distinguish good from evil"?

Background

Before proceeding we should familiarise ourselves with Ps 2 and Ps 110 which are quoted in this chapter. Additional background is found at Lev 9:7, Ex 28:1, Num 16:40, 1 Chr 23:13 and Isa 7:14-15.

Structure

My medium-brush structure for this chapter was "Christ is our Melchizedek High Priest – about which he has much to say."¹ The theme of Jesus as our High Priest follows logically from chapter 4 but it is not readily apparent how this leads into chapter 6. Looking ahead we see that his discussion of the priesthood continues for a further 4 chapters. Chapter 5 is the beginning of a lengthy argument which gets interrupted by chapter 6. So, the fine-brush structure might go as follows:

5:1-4 The high priestly role is given to men (not angels) so that in their ministry they might be compassionate with their fellow men.

5:5-6 God appointed the God-man Jesus as high priest in Melchizedek's line (not Aaron's).

5:7-9 He was qualified to obtain eternal salvation for those who obeyed Him by His own victorious struggle with the trials and temptations of human life.

5:10-14 I want to explain the significance of the new Melchizedek High Priest, but you are still immature because you are slow to learn.

Argument

The argument flows clearly enough through this chapter, as the theme of Christ's Melchizedek priesthood is introduced. In my structure above I suggest that the opening statements about the humanity of the high priest is in contrast to the angels. Although this is not explicit in the text, I

¹ See chapter 4

suspect that the author still had the supremacy of the Son over the angels in his mind. The chapter is an expansion of chapter 2:10-11,17 where supremacy over the angels was the point.

“In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers ... For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.” (Heb 2: 10-11,17)

Chapter 5 shows that Christ is the God-appointed High Priest (superseding the Levitical priesthood), and qualifies as compassionate through His human experiences of temptation and suffering.

So here is my summary of the argument in chapter 5:

Jesus, who pioneered our salvation through temptation and suffering, has been appointed by God to be our compassionate and great High Priest.

The Detail

We will now look more closely at the detail of chapter 5.

Heb 5:1-4

⁽¹⁾ “Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ⁽²⁾ He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. ⁽³⁾ This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. ⁽⁴⁾ No-one takes this honour upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was.”²

Dealing Gently

The Holy Spirit wants us to understand that Jesus deals gently and sympathetically with us concerning our sins. This is not to say that He overlooks them, but rather that He intercedes for us as a compassionate, understanding and loving High Priest. The compassion that a high priest has, through awareness of his own sin, is presented as a good quality. We are not talking of weakness and corruption, such as a judge letting a shop-lifter off because he himself has a weakness for shoplifting, but more like a judge who gives a community sentence rather than imprisonment because he recognises the weight of the mitigating circumstances. This compassion is a beautiful quality that some might think would be lacking from the Son of God who has never given in to the pressure of temptation.

Jesus’ sympathy for his people has been emphasised repeatedly already in this letter. He provided purification for their sins (1:3) and as the author of their salvation He was made perfect through suffering (2:10). Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers (2:11). Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity (2:14) and was made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest (2:17). Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted (2:18). For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin (4:15). Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.” (7:25)

² This was the Mosaic law, but since Antiochus IV the high priest had been chosen by various rulers and the office had fallen into disrepute.

Let us be in no doubt. Sin is always wrong and damaging and Jesus does not pat us on the head, saying, “There, there, it doesn’t matter.” But He does fully understand our vulnerability to temptation. He responds to our sin, not with punishment, but with understanding and help. Yes, He helps us deal with condemnation and He cleanses our conscience, but His greater concern is to help us find the faith, courage and perseverance for obedience.

Aaron’s priestly line

Aaron and Moses were both from the tribe of Levi, the tribe that was set aside for service in the tabernacle (and later the temple). Aaron was the first high priest and all the priests had to be chosen from Aaron’s descendents.³ When David brought the ark to Jerusalem he appointed some Levites to worship before the ark,⁴ but the altar was left at Gibeon where Zadok was high priest.⁵ During the years of rebellion before the exile, many Levites defiled the temple with idols and served before them. Because of this, after the return from exile, the priesthood was strictly limited to the descendents of Zadok who had remained faithful.⁶

Jesus is descended through both Mary and Joseph from David, from the tribe of Judah, and as such was not eligible for priesthood under the Old Covenant. It is interesting to note that Jesus’ genealogy through Joseph is via Jeconiah, descended from David via Solomon. God had pronounced a curse against Jeconiah saying that none of his descendents would rule in Judah again.⁷ This curse was not violated because Jesus was not a biological descendent, only an adopted one. The genealogy in Luke’s gospel is generally thought to trace Mary’s line.⁸ This bypasses Jeconiah, tracing the line through another of David’s sons, Nathan. Thus Jesus is a biological descendent of David, but not via the established kingly line through Solomon which was subject to a curse.

Heb 5:5-10

(⁵) “So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.” (⁶) And he says in another place, “You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.” (⁷) During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. (⁸) Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered (⁹) and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (¹⁰) and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

A new priesthood

Melchizedek is introduced into the argument at this point because Jesus, being from the tribe of Judah rather than Levi, could not be a priest under the Mosaic Law. Melchizedek was a priest to God long before the Levitical priesthood was introduced. The author quotes Psalm 110 where God swears to David that his descendent will be a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek. This is explained in Hebrews chapter 7, so we will not explore the matter further here.

³ Ex 6:19-20, Ex 28 and 29, Num 18:1-7.

⁴ 1 Chr 16:4-5, 37-38.

⁵ 1 Chron 16:27-39

⁶ See Ezekiel 44:10-15.

⁷ See Matt 1:12 and Jer 22:24-30

⁸ Matthew records Jacob as Joseph’s father whereas Luke has Heli. It is commonly argued that Heli was Joseph’s father-in-law, Mary’s father. Thus Matthew gives the legal line of descent through Joseph whereas Luke, the doctor, gives the physical line, through Mary.

Jesus' identity with suffering mankind

God appointed His Son to be a priest “selected from among men”(v1). This is emphasised here by several things: He experienced life as a man, He prayed with loud cries and tears as a man, He was heard by God as a man, He learned obedience through suffering as a man and having been “perfected” (trained, matured, adequately experienced) Jesus was made our high priest in the order of the man, Melchizedek. Humanity was a qualification for priesthood which Jesus obtained in full measure.

Jesus taught us how to pray

During the days of Jesus' life on earth He prayed. He knew how prayer works. Whenever I read the gospels, I try to remind myself that Jesus was living as someone who had seen the other side.⁹ He knows what goes on in the heavenly realms when a sinner goes astray and when he is restored to faith. He knows God's reaction when a widow gives her last penny, when a proud heart judges another on the basis of their social status and when a troubled mother determines to trust her heavenly Father rather than worry.

Jesus offered up prayers. Do our prayers reflect Jesus' example? If you were to give instructions on prayer to a new believer, based on the prayers you hear within your church, I wonder what they would be. My church background has modelled prayer along these lines:

1. Tell God all about the problem you are praying about.
2. Analyse the problem, explaining to God all the issues.
3. Tell God what are the solutions to each identified problem.
4. Ask God to put the required action in hand right away.
5. Get everyone to tell God the same thing.

I have been in a variety of churches so I have learnt from other models, like this:

1. Tell God all about the problem you are praying about.
2. Analyse the problem, explaining to God all the issues.
3. Raid the scriptures for promises that relate to the issues, or at least contain relevant words.
4. Boldly claim these promises, rebuking Satan and repeating the name, “Jesus.”
5. Thank God that the problem is now fixed.

Another model I have learnt from is this:

1. Sing a hymn.
2. List the things you are praying for in very general terms.
3. Tell God you are praying for them.
4. Thank God for being God.
5. Sing another hymn.

I freely admit that I have caricatured these three very different models of prayer that I have shared in. I have not done so to offend or criticise, but in order to invite some Godly self examination and consideration of Jesus' model of prayer. I suspect that many would readily recognise one of these

⁹ Jn 8:58 “I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, I am!”

Jn 13:3 “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God;”

models as the basis of much of the praying they witness at church and perhaps also in their own praying. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that our great High Priest, Jesus, the eternal Son of God, who came down from heaven having witnessed His Father deal with every prayer that had been uttered since the sixth day of Creation, this same Jesus “offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears” and “was heard because of his reverent submission.”

Jesus “offered up prayers and petitions”

Jesus didn’t simply say, “God you know everything. You know what is needed. Just do it!” He made petitions to God, that is He asked God for things. For example, Jesus prayed for Simon “that His faith would not fail”¹⁰ and John records Jesus’ prayer before he was betrayed in which He makes several specific and detailed requests for Himself, the disciples and for all who would believe in His name.¹¹ In addition, Jesus promised the disciples “You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.”¹² The *Lord’s Prayer* also includes specific requests for provision. Jesus taught us and modelled for us that we should make specific requests of God in faith, expecting Him to grant our requests.

Jesus persevered with “loud cries and tears”

But prayer is not always as simple as asking and receiving. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that Jesus prayed with “loud cries and tears.” He did this in the garden before his arrest and crucifixion. We also know He spent forty days in prayer and fasting at the start of His ministry and that He frequently withdrew from the crowds and prayed.

Jesus told a parable about a woman who prayed with loud cries and tears to assure us that God does indeed hear us and answer us.

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’ For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually wear me out with her coming!’” And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (Lk 18:1-8)

Jesus’ shock tactic

At first reading, this parable may appear to say that we should keep pestering God with our requests until He is worn down and eventually gives us what we ask. But in this parable Jesus is using a technique which He often employs; He grabs his hearers attention by illustrating something good using something usually associated with evil. Consider the “good Samaritan” – to a Jew these are mutually exclusive words. Samaritans are always the bad guy in the stories. Or the parable of the kingdom where the kingdom is likened to yeast – again, to a Jew, yeast and God’s kingdom are mutually exclusive. To Jews, yeast represented sin! Then there is the story of the shrewd manager who is commended for fiddling the books and writing off the debt owed by servants to their master! Whether this device was common in Jesus’ day, or if it was Jesus’ unique sense of humour, I do not

¹⁰ Lu 22:31-32 “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”

¹¹ Jn 17.

¹² Jn 14:14. Also Jn 16:23-24 “I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.”

know. But we should be wise to this when we read the parables. Jesus often makes His point through a shocking reversal of what we expect.

God is not like the unjust judge!

So it is in Luke 18. Jesus' point is not that God is *like* the unjust judge, but precisely the opposite! God is *not* lazy and slow and unjust in dealing with those who come to Him in prayer. This is one of the parables where Jesus appeals to the obvious fact that if men who are evil end up doing the right thing, how much more will our Father in Heaven do the right thing. But the reason Jesus told the story in this way was that *our experience* of prayer is often like the widow. We find we need to persevere. Jesus told the parable "to show them that they should always pray and not give up." We do not understand the reason for delayed answers, and so might begin to think of God as if He were indeed like the unjust judge! This would rob us of our faith, dishonour God and stop us persevering. So Jesus gave us this parable to reassure us that, though we may often find we need to persevere in prayer and wait for some time before we see the answer, God hears us immediately and answers swiftly.

Will Jesus find faith in us?

Jesus finished His story with a penetrating question: "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Will we, who have this assurance from Jesus Himself, persist in faith-filled prayer? Is our faith buoyed up by Jesus' promises that the Father Himself will answer our prayers?¹³ Does Jesus find faith in our hearts for prayer or is there discouragement and defeat?

We have a great High Priest who knows Himself what it is like to struggle with faith in prayer. It is a great comfort to me that Jesus experienced the same feelings of desperate longing for God's intervention that I have. He offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears. He is well able to sympathise with us in our weakness. But that is not all. He intercedes for us. He is able to get help from God for us. He can give us encouragement to keep us going. We have a High Priest, taken from among men, who stands on our behalf forever before God in heaven. And God hears Him. Because of Jesus, God also hears and answers us.

He was heard because of his reverent submission

We might assume that a prayer based on the exhortation to "approach the throne of grace with confidence" (or "boldness" as many translations put it),¹⁴ might be expressed in terms of claiming the promises God has given us, commanding good things to happen and generally demonstrating our faith that God will answer us by making visible the things that are as yet invisible. Certainly these are biblical expressions of faith, but it is striking that Jesus was heard "because of his reverent submission." Surely the most God honouring and faith-filled prayer of the bible is found upon the lips of Jesus. First, when he taught His disciples to pray "Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven" and then again when Jesus Himself prayed in the garden before the cross, "Not My will, but Yours be done."¹⁵ I have heard it suggested that to pray "Lord, your will be done" is a cop out for people who do not have much faith. I would not dare make such a claim. That simple prayer was how Jesus prayed "to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission." Why would we ever want to pray anything other than "your will be done"? Do we not believe that God's will is perfect and the best for us at all times. Yet Jesus did not *only* pray for God's will to be done, He first prayed "if you are willing, take this cup from me." The

¹³ Jn 16:23 "In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name."

¹⁴ Heb 4:16 and Heb 10:19

¹⁵ Matt 6:10 and Lk 22:42

model Jesus gives us is to ask for what we want, but then add that if God's will is different, we truly want His will to be done. This is reverent submission.

Jesus learned obedience from what he suffered

The writer to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus "learned obedience from what he suffered." This brings to mind another incident where Jesus prayed a "your will be done" type of prayer. He had sent out His disciples on a mission to preach in the towns and villages of Israel, giving them authority to heal the sick and cast out demons as they told the Good News of the kingdom. On their return the disciples were full of excitement at what they had been able to do. Jesus rejoiced with them but added, "However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."¹⁶ Jesus is all too aware that the purpose of mission is not to give the preachers an adrenalin rush and boost their egos but to save the lost. He had mourned with the disciples the hard-hearted refusal of the gospel that they witnessed in Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum concluding, "he who rejects you rejects me; and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me." He then prays, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure."¹⁷

Surely this last phrase conceals Jesus' anguish over the unrepentant cities. Jesus did not enjoy being rejected by the chosen people, the children of Israel. How could He rejoice that the gospel was hidden "from the wise and learned"? Jesus mourned over Jerusalem saying, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"¹⁸ So when, following the return of the disciples from their mission, He prayed concerning the unrepentant cities, "Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure," it was surely a prayer of faith that God's will is surely best, even though, sometimes, we can make no sense of it.

Through many such struggles with unbelieving Jews, faithless followers and disputing disciples Jesus suffered the rebuffs and disappointments of life amongst men. He despaired of His disciples saying, "O unbelieving and perverse generation. How long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?"¹⁹ but in it all He learnt to keep His heart fixed upon His Father's will and His ears open to His voice. And in the end He was able to say, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do."²⁰ Jesus learned obedience from what he suffered, and this too was joyfully acknowledged in His prayers.

There is much more we can learn from Jesus' prayers, but summarising the points touched on in these few verses of the letter to the Hebrews, we can suggest five aspects of a new model prayer:

1. Bring our heart-felt requests to God our Father.
2. Ask that, in answering all our requests, God's will is fully accomplished.
3. Persevere in confident prayer until we know God has answered.
4. Express our joyful trust in God, even when the answer is "No" or unknown to us.
5. Thank God for training us in trusting obedience through His loving and purposeful application of suffering to our lives.

¹⁶ Lu 10:20

¹⁷ Lu 10:16,20

¹⁸ Lu 13:34

¹⁹ Mt 17:17

²⁰ Jn 17:4

This model seems a lot more Christ-like than my earlier caricatures, though it actually encapsulates the best of each. Perhaps you would like to consider how Jesus' prayers can help shape your own prayers.

"Once made perfect..."

The author then makes the strange sounding assertion that Jesus' suffering made Him perfect. The perfection that Jesus underwent was not to rid Him of imperfection or to drive out disobedience but to better acquaint him with the personal experience of human existence in a fallen world.²¹ In other words, His becoming the "source of eternal salvation" did not flow only from His death, nor even from the perfection of His life, but it includes the experience of human struggles, of powerful temptations, fears and disappointments. These things make Jesus not more righteous but more qualified to represent men before God. It is in this sense that Jesus was made perfect. Of course the ultimate act of obedience through which he became the source of eternal salvation was to go voluntarily to the cross:

"And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name..." (Phil 2:8-9)

"... He became the source of eternal salvation..."

We noted during our study of chapter 2 that there are at least four different types of salvation referred to in scripture: salvation from danger, initial salvation, ongoing salvation and salvation on judgement day. The author makes it clear that Jesus, through His life and death, became the source of our complete salvation. It includes our initial saving faith, our ongoing sanctification and our deliverance from condemnation on the day of Judgement. He said in chapter 2 that Jesus brings "many sons to glory," then in chapter 7: "Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them." (v25), and again in chapter 9, where he says "but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption"(v12). Jesus *obtained* eternal salvation, He did not just prepare the *means* of salvation.

Some commentators have argued, from this letter and other scriptures, that it is only the *potential* and *means* of salvation that have been provided by Jesus. They say that *actual* salvation is dependant upon *ongoing* obedience and faith. They say that *eternal* salvation is only obtained on judgement day and is awarded according to a believer's perseverance in faith and obedience up to their death.²² This is not consistent with the insistence of the writer to the Hebrews that Jesus has obtained for us eternal salvation. Indeed the whole sweep of scripture reveals the glory of God's eternal, faithful, saving, love and mercy in spite of mankind's wanton rebellion and waywardness. The New Covenant does not reduce this Old Covenant hope to the salvation of a few believers who are obedient to the end, with the condemnation of the rest along with those who have never believed. On the contrary, the New Testament authors are at pains to show how God has provided His Son Jesus to bring to glorious fruition His promise to Abraham to bless the whole world through the redeeming work of Christ. Jesus is the source of eternal salvation.

"...for all who obey Him."

As noted above, some commentators say that *ongoing* obedience and faith is essential for eternal salvation. One such, remarking on Hebrews 5:9 (He became the source of eternal salvation for all

²¹ See "Jesus made perfect through suffering" in our discussion of Hebrews 2:10 (chapter 6).

²² This is the "Armenian" view. A popular presentation of this view may be found in Pawson's "Once saved, always saved?"

who obey Him), says, “This text is an absolute, unimpeachable evidence, that it is not the imputed obedience of Christ that saves any man” and that only those who “walk in conformity to the Divine will, through this Divine aid, and continue faithful unto death” will be finally saved.²³ Taken on its own, this verse might be thought to say this, but taken with all of scripture we have to conclude that this is a faulty conclusion. Even under the inferior Old Covenant, God took pains to ensure His chosen people, His adopted children, knew that they were the objects of His saving grace, not because of anything they had done, and certainly not because of their obedience, but because of His gracious initiative of unconditional love.

“Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people. Remember this and never forget how you provoked the Lord your God to anger in the desert. From the day you left Egypt until you arrived here, you have been rebellious against the Lord.” (De 9:6-7)

“It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone.” (Eze 36:22)

Even under the Old Covenant, God drew His people with love:

“I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.” (Jer 31:3)

Under the New Covenant this is again stressed by the apostles.

“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no-one can boast.” (Eph 2:4-9)

“He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,” (Tit 3:5)

Taken with other scriptures, we must understand the phrase used in Hebrews 5:9 to mean that Jesus became the source of eternal salvation for all who obeyed His command to put their trust in Him for their salvation. It is not obedience that obtains the benefit of Christ’s redemption, but faith. Yet, as James is at pains to point out, faith cannot truly be faith if obedience does not follow. What does it mean for me to say, “I believe in Jesus” if I do not believe that what He said was true and good? What does it mean to say “I trust Jesus” if I disregard His commands and continue to live as I did before? It is not saying the words, “I believe in Jesus” that saves us, but *actual* faith in Him. Thus the phrase, “for all who obey Him”, used by the writer is a very appropriate phrase for genuine saving faith. But to extend its meaning to, “for all who go on obeying Him to the end of their lives” is to extend the meaning way beyond the author’s intention.

“... and was designated by God to be high priest...”

The unique contribution of the letter to the Hebrews is the presentation of Jesus as High Priest. This designation emphasises, not only the *completed* work of Christ on the cross, but also the *preparatory* work in His life of sharing in our experience of humanity, and His *ongoing* work of intercession for us throughout our lives. These three aspects are expounded further in later chapters.

²³ Dr. Macknight, quoted by Adam Clarke in his commentary on Hebrews.

“...in the order of Melchizedek.”

The Jews knew that psalm 110 was Messianic. Jesus had applied this psalm, without dispute, to the Messiah in his discussions with the Pharisees.²⁴ By quoting from this psalm, “You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek” the author is showing that Jesus’ priesthood is not something new that has unexpectedly replaced the Mosaic priesthood. On the contrary, the Messiah’s high priestly role was planned, and indeed guaranteed, long before it became reality. The fact that this priesthood is “in the order of Melchizedek” is important, as the author goes on to argue later in the letter, because Melchizedek pre-dates Moses and is not connected with the Levitical priesthood.

Heb 5:11-14

⁽¹¹⁾ We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. ⁽¹²⁾ In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! ⁽¹³⁾ Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. ⁽¹⁴⁾ But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

A key verse

Verse 11 is a strong candidate for the key verse for the whole book. A key verse is not a summary, but a verse that unlocks, or points to the content. “We have much to say about this” points to the lengthy discussions of the issues covered. He discusses at length the supremacy of Christ over the angels, the dangers of not receiving the word of God with faith and obedience, the high-priestly qualifications of Jesus and so on. “...but it is hard to explain...” points to the detailed arguments and frequent references to scripture. “...because you are slow to learn” points to the repeated appeals for them to pay careful attention, to fix their thoughts, not to have hard hearts, to make every effort, to go on to maturity, not to be lazy and so on. Verse 11 explains much about the style of the letter.

The problem of immaturity

There is a striking similarity between verse 12 and the opening of 1Cor 3:

“Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly...”

In that chapter Paul goes on to say that our labours in this life are rewarded at the Judgement seat of Christ:

“The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labour ... his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.”

In Hebrews, the author proceeds from his remarks about their immaturity to discuss the plight of those who fall away and become unfruitful saying, “The land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.” Both passages talk about the laying of foundations and moving on from them. The first century apostles struggled to get their congregations to live their daily lives in the light of eternity. Paul says, “For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?” It is at least as hard today to keep the Judgement seat of Christ before us so that we do not degenerate into petty

²⁴ Mt 22:43-44 He said to them, “How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’? For he says, ‘The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.”’”

arguments and jealousies and living for the comforts and pleasures of this life whilst neglecting our eternal inheritance.

“... you are slow to learn.”

The difficulty that the author anticipates in expounding the High Priestly work of Christ is not because of the difficulty of the subject, but due to the slowness of his readers to learn. It is not that God has made the doctrines of salvation complex and obscure, but that the human heart is dull and stubborn. This truth is amply demonstrated in the way that Christians so often hotly defend some opinion they hold when it is questioned. It may be an opinion they have come to in their own study of scripture, but often it is simply a belief they have grown up with. We should not defend *our* beliefs, but truth. Of course, we hope that our beliefs are truth, but when a belief is challenged we should not jump to its defence, but look carefully at what is being presented. Perhaps prayerful consideration in the light of scriptures would lead us to modify our belief to bring us more in line with truth.

“...by this time you ought to be teachers...”

The fact that “by this time” the readers “ought to be teachers” clearly indicates that the author is addressing well established believers who have had good teaching and plenty of time to grow up in their faith. But sadly they are still immature.

“...you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again.”

Slowness to learn in the hearers means that the teacher must go over the material again and again. I wonder if this obvious reality is taken seriously enough in churches. The usual pattern of teaching in churches seems to be to teach something once in a brief sermon and then move on to another subject. It amazes me how many times I have heard a preacher say, “God has really spoken to me about such and such this week. I believe that this teaching is going to change your life.” Certainly it is good to believe the word of God is powerful and to remind folk they should be ready to change. But does not simple observation challenge the notion that we can have 52 life-changing sermons a year? If that were the case the churches would be full of amazingly mature and Christ-like believers. The reality is that most of us, like the Hebrew believers, are slow to learn and need to be taught the same things over and over again.

I was once teaching about freedom from slavery to sin. I taught the same material week after week for some time, going over the same scriptures again and again. From the feedback I was getting, I knew that each week more people were grasping the truth and beginning to apply it powerfully and fruitfully to their lives. After several weeks, someone said to me, “Until last week I couldn’t understand why you kept going over the same material. I kept thinking, ‘Oh no! Surely he’s not going to teach this yet again! Hasn’t he got any other sermons he can teach! How many times have we got to hear this?’ But last Sunday when you taught it yet again, it suddenly dawned on me that although each week, as I heard what you were saying, I had told myself I already knew this stuff, I did not know it in my experience. It was there in my theory, but not in my practice. Even though you had been challenging us each week over our experience of this truth, I had hardened my heart and could not hear God challenging me. Last week the light dawned and truth penetrated my heart. I have repented of the alliance I had made with sin and no longer believe I am its slave. I have seen victories in my life that I never before imagined. Thank you so much for keeping on teaching this same truth week in and week out.”

The writer to the Hebrews knew that something is not taught until it is learnt.

“Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant ...”

The basic doctrines of the faith are so important that they should be taught over and over again until they have been properly understood and their benefits enjoyed. An intelligent 18 yr old lad I was

discipling had grown up in an evangelical church in a believing family and was an active member of the church youth group. I discovered he thought that if he were a true Christian he would not sin any more, and as a consequence doubted his salvation. This was by no means the first time I discovered a poor understanding of the basic gospel truths among Christians assumed to have a sound faith.

But those who are never taught anything beyond the basic doctrines will remain infants in the faith. They cannot grow to maturity on a diet of basics; they cannot become *oaks of righteousness*²⁵ and grow into the *fullness of Christ*.²⁶ This presents a challenge to the churches. How can we ensure that the basics have been properly grasped by everyone and at the same time ensure that we are providing solid meat to grow immature believers to maturity? Some churches aim to provide “meat” in their Sunday sermons, perhaps by giving verse-by-verse exegesis or in-depth studies of Old Testament themes and characters. Others seek to be more considerate of visitors and new Christians so give more “accessible” teaching. On Sundays they stick to the basic gospel or topics relevant to modern daily life. These churches may attempt to provide “meat” for established believers through mid-week bible studies or house groups. Whatever the style of church, the issue remains: are believers *actually* growing to maturity through the meat of the gospel?

“... is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.”

Indeed, does the church understand what this meat is? What is “the teaching about righteousness?” In some circles the phrase “meaty teaching” would mean in-depth study of the fine detail of scripture such as the typology of the high priestly garments, examination of the prophecies of Obadiah and Nahum and drawing life-lessons from the stories of the judges. Is this the meat that brings maturity? Or was John Wimber right when he famously answered a critic who accused him of giving insufficient meat to his churches, saying, “The meat is on the street!” Is sharing the gospel, praying for the sick and ministering to the poor the meat that brings maturity? Is it either of these things?

If we ask this question of the New Testament authors, I think we would have to conclude that both extremes miss the point. Wimber was surely right to challenge the notion that heavy bible study was truly the meat of the gospel. We should never be fooled into thinking that understanding some previously obscure passage is the same as growing in maturity, however intellectually satisfying it may be. Such understanding may equip us to be a better teacher, it may even correct some small errors in our doctrinal beliefs, but unless it leads to growth in the obedience that comes from faith, how can we claim to have matured? Whatever meat we are chewing, its measure must be our growth in fruitful faith. In this regard, Wimber was surely right. “Doing the stuff”, as he liked to call it, demonstrably encourages growth in a believer’s faith and experience of God. But it does not necessarily deal with false beliefs that may undermine a believer’s confidence before God.

Over the years I have become convinced that a great many believers live, to varying degrees, with an almost constant sense of failure and self condemnation. What is the point of knowing who Shamgar was if you do not know who *you* are? What is the point of understanding Ben-Hadad’s role in fulfilling Elijah’s prophecy to Jehu if you do not appreciate Jesus’ role in fulfilling God’s promise to Abraham? Christians may know that Christ died for them and believe that through Him they have eternal life, but how many feel truly secure in His constant intercession and are resilient against condemnation?

The “teaching about righteousness” to which the author refers is not concerned with academic expertise in the Old Testament but with our security in Christ. But since he is writing to *Jewish*

²⁵ Isa 61:3 “They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendour.”

²⁶ Eph 4:13 “...until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

believers in Christ who are very familiar with the Old Testament the author draws heavily on those foundations to teach them about their new foundations for righteousness in the New Covenant. For those of us who are less familiar with the law of Moses and the sacrificial system his arguments may not be the most natural and may require rather more work on our part than would have been necessary for his original readers. Nevertheless, if we patiently follow his arguments we may reap the rewards he seeks for his readers – to go on to maturity.

“But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.”

“Solid food is for the mature.” The immature tend to reduce the question of good and evil to a set of rules and may even reduce Christianity to mere morality. This is hopeless legalism and misses the whole point of the New Covenant, which is to live by the Holy Spirit’s direction.

The writer has already indicated that the immature require the basics to be taught again and again until they have been learnt. Now he points out that the mature also need to practice diligent repetition. It is by constant use, not occasional hearing, that a believer gains the benefit of the meat of teaching about righteousness. For example, I have known for some thirty years that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1), but I have to put this knowledge to constant use. Indeed, I have to “pay careful attention” (Heb 2:1) to living in this truth lest I drift into condemnation. I must keep fixing my thoughts on Jesus (3:1) and keep firm hold on my confidence (3:14), making sure I mix this truth with living faith (4:2) so that I may find rest for my soul (4:11) and come to the throne of grace with confidence in every need. It is through constant practice in defending my spirit against the accusing darts of Satan and resisting my own tendency to “pick up sticks on the Sabbath”²⁷ that I learn to distinguish good from evil. The *good* is the wonderful releasing conviction of the sanctifying Spirit. The *evil* is the fruitless accusations and reminders of my sin provided by Satan and my own flesh.

By constant practice in prayerfulness, forgiveness, confession, mercy, service, listening to the Spirit, seeking God’s will, trusting in God’s care and so on, a person comes to know God and becomes familiar with His ways. They have been transformed by the renewing of their mind. They know what God’s will is (Ro 12:2). They have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.²⁸

Review

We have covered all of the surprises we noted at the start. The argument through this section is straightforward, although, as we have discovered, it touches on many important issues. Perhaps it would be helpful to restate our summary of the argument at the close of our study.

Jesus, who pioneered our salvation through temptation and suffering, has been appointed by God to be our compassionate and great High Priest.

Questions for discussion and application in Hebrews 5

- V2 Jesus deals gently with us. What opportunities or challenges do you face in being Christlike in this respect?
- How is/should discipline and mercy be combined in your own life?
- How is/should discipline and mercy be combined in your relationships with others?

²⁷ trying to earn God’s approval. See my comments on Hebrews chapter 4:11 “The significance of the Sabbath.”

²⁸ R.T.Kendall suggests PEACE as a useful acrostic for checking out our guidance. 1. Is it *Providential*? (Is it falling in to place, or are you having to push for it?) 2. Will it displease the *Enemy*? 3. Does it have biblical *Authority*? 4. Does it boost your *Confidence*? 5. Does it give you a sense of *Ease*?

- V3 What do you feel about other people confessing their faults and weaknesses?
 How important do you think it is to confess your faults to those you are wanting to be an example to?
 Many people find this difficult to do. Why do you think this is?
- V4 Does this verse mean that only recognised leaders should give “pastoral” care? What is the biblical ground for your answer?
- V7 Do you recognise the caricatures of prayer given above? How would you characterise your own prayers?
 How have you got on with Paul’s model prayer, “Thanksgiving, remembrance and confidence”?
 What specific things can you learn from Jesus’ prayers and teaching that would strengthen your faith in prayer?
 Is there anything you can do to encourage faith-filled prayer in your family, friends or church?
- V8 How has God used suffering in your life to bring growth in trust and obedience?
 In what ways does the knowledge of Christ’s humanity strengthen you in difficulties?
- V9 What aspects of obedience to Christ bring joy to you?
 What aspects of obedience to Christ do you struggle with?
 How confident are you that you are eternally saved?
- V11 Do you tend to be defensive about your beliefs or open to consider different views?
 How can you be eager to learn but also safe from erroneous teaching?
- V12 Are you teaching/being taught the basic doctrines thoroughly?
 Are there any basic doctrines you are unsure of?
 Are you encouraging/being encouraged to move on in your faith and experience of God?
- V14 Are you dependent upon rules or on other people to tell you what you should be/not be doing?
 What does it mean to you, in practice, to live by faith and walk in the Spirit?
- Is there a verse you could memorise from this chapter that would encourage you?