

A PRIMER ON PRIESTS FOR 21st CENTURY PROTESTANTS (Hebrews 5:1-10)

This year, 2022, is an election year. It is not a presidential election year, but it is an election year. This year in Oklahoma we will be voting for a Governor, oddly two Senators, and of course a US Representative.

You and I have the privilege of living in a representative democracy. That means, we elect people to represent us. We elect people to vote for us. Most voters want to elect people who are like them, who understand them. I think that rarely happens. It seems to me, the people we send to Washington are not like me at all. They have a whole lot more money than I have. Their paycheck is whole lot bigger than mine. They hob-knob with people I have never met. They eat/vacation at places I have never visited. I can only hope they understand me and my concerns, but I doubt it.

The Bible teaches that Jesus became one of us, and through the help of His Spirit, we can become more and more like Him. Also, it teaches that Jesus understand us. He knows about our temptations and concerns and hurts, and because of that, He is able to represent us well.

In NT letter of Hebrews, Jesus is referred to as our High Priest. Honestly, the idea of a priest is not something that 21st Century protestants know much about because we lack the personal experience of having a priest.

In order to help you understand what a priest is, let's play pretend for a few minutes. Let's pretend that it is not the year 2022. Let's pretend that you know nothing about the New Testament; you have never read the writings of the apostle Paul or the gospel accounts. In fact, you have never heard of Jesus because He hasn't been born yet. Let's pretend that you are living in a small town in Israel during the reign of King Solomon. That would be a little less than 3,000 years ago, and it would be a good time in which to live.

It would be a time of peace because Solomon's father, King David, was used by God to conquer Israel's enemies. There was peace and rest in the land. Peace is good for business, the economy. Unemployment was low with all of the building projects that King Solomon had going on throughout the land. So, in addition to it being a time of peace, it was also a time of prosperity.

The temple in Jerusalem was built during King Solomon's reign. It was a magnificent structure. Israel was at its zenith militarily, economically, and maybe even spiritually.

As a Jew living in that day, you are aware of the true God, the God who created the heavens and the earth. You know that He has given to His people the Holy Scriptures, what we would call the first five books of the OT. You know that God expects you to live by His law. You know what God wants, but you also know that you have not lived up to His commandments. You realize you have obeyed Him only partially, and partial obedience is, really, disobedience.

This keen awareness of your disobedience is a source of fear because you also know that God is holy and just, and He must punish you. But you also know that God is gracious, and He has provided a way for you to be forgiven. He has said that through the

sacrifice of a lamb or goat, that He will see the blood of that sacrifice, and you can be forgiven. That slain animal will be your substitute. But you also know that you can't make the sacrifice yourself because your hands are dirty. If you made that sacrifice yourself, it would not be accepted. You need someone to make that sacrifice for you, on your behalf.

That would be the job and the role of the priests. The OT tells us that God has chosen certain men to serve as priests. The priests serve as a go-between. They represent man to God and God to man. They are to bring a holy God together with sinful men by making the needed sacrifices to atone for the sin of those who have disobeyed and dishonored God.

Let's pretend it is 950 B.C. You know you are sinful, and you know you need the services of a priest.

Now, let's return to our day—2022. What has changed? God has not changed. He is the same today, yesterday, and forever the Scriptures assure us. Human nature has not changed. The human race is as sinful today as it ever was.

One thing that has changed is that we no longer recognize our sinfulness. It appears that sin is no longer a category that people use to identify certain actions, attitudes, and thoughts. Do you ever hear the word *sin* used on prime-time television? Do the characters that populate movies ever say, "I must not do that, I must not think that, I must not say that because that would be sin"? We no longer find the idea of sin anywhere in popular culture.

It was almost 50 years ago. It was in 1973 that psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote a book entitled, *Whatever Became of Sin?* That is a great question.

Because sin is no longer viewed as something one needs to be rescued from, there is little need for a priest. Instead, we have substitute priests who go by different names. We know something is wrong with us, but since sin is no longer seen as the problem, we have redefined what the problem is. There is something blocking us from reaching our full potential. There is something that stands in the way of us realizing our dreams and goals. The new priests are doctors, counselors, or maybe the authors of self-help book that will solve all of our health problems, financial dilemmas, and relationship woes. It is those people who will stand in the gap and connect us with what we really want out of life.

We need to realize, however, that it is quite possible for someone to die of a disease or condition that he refuses to admit he has. So it is with sin. You can ignore or deny it, but that doesn't make it go away.

We need a priest. Later, we will reveal the identity of the priest we really need, but let's start with the fact that you and I need a priest to connect us with God.

With that as background, let's turn to our text—Hebrews 5:1-10. Hebrews is the most Jewish book of the NT. It was written by a Jew to Jews who had initially embraced Jesus, but because of persecution, they were in danger of returning to their Jewish faith. The author of Hebrews puts up his hand and says, "Stop! Don't do that! Can't you see that Jesus is superior to and the fulfillment of everything your faith offers? Stick with Jesus."

So far in Hebrews, we have seen that Jesus is superior to angels. He is superior to Moses. Now, we see that Jesus is greater than the High Priest of the Jewish faith.

By the way, let me just throw this in at this point. The Jewish faith today is much different from the Jewish faith you find in both the Old and New Testaments. The Jewish faith today no longer has any priests including the High Priest. In fact, there has not been a High Priest nor priests since AD 70. That was the year that the Roman army invaded Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. If you were to go to Jerusalem today, you could visit the temple mount where the temple used to be, but there is no Jewish temple there. It was utterly destroyed, and it was never rebuilt. At the point that it was destroyed, animal sacrifices were no longer made, and the need for priests disappeared. Now, followers of the Jewish faith have rabbis but no priests. The letter of Hebrews was written prior to AD 70; so, the temple was still standing, and the priests, including the High Priest, still had a job.

There are two things I want to you to get from the first ten verses of Hebrews 5.

Consider the Priests We Sinners Need

Whether we wish to admit it or not, you and I, on our own, are unrighteous. We have no standing with God. We need a priest. In the first four verses, we see the kind of priest we need. I want to use four verbs and four prepositions to describe the kind of priest we need.

1. We Need One Who Is Chosen From.

Look again at v. 1. The priest you and I need must be one of us. An angel would not do. We need someone to represent us who is one of us.

Between December 2nd of last year and March 10th of this year, there was a lockout that existed in Major League Baseball. The agreement that existed between Major League Baseball and the MLB Player's Association had expired, and the two had not come to an agreement with one another. The owners said, "You can't come to work." And the players said, "That's fine with us."

During the lockout, numerous meetings were held between the owners and the player's association. At no time, however, did major league baseball players ask the NFL Players Association to represent them nor would the owners have agreed to meet with the NFL Player's Association. The MLB players had to have those who were chosen from among them to represent them.

Likewise, we must have one of us represent us. The difference, however, is that we don't get to choose who will represent us. That choice is made by God. He is the One who does the choosing. Ministry is not a career that you choose. It is something you are chosen for. You don't take an aptitude test, weigh your options, and say to yourself, "I think I'll try ministry." That is not the way it works.

No church has the authority to choose who will go into the ministry. When my home church licensed me to preach and later ordained me as a minister of the gospel, they did not choose me for ministry. What they did was to say, "We recognize that God has called you to ministry. Likewise, when a church chooses a pastor, what they are really saying is,

“We believe God has called you to be our pastor.”

2. *We Need One Who Is Appointed Between.*

Look further at what v. 1 tells us: a high priest “is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God.” A God-called priest is appointed to stand between God and man and do his best to represent both parties.

I like the way v. 1 reads in the NLT, “Now a high priest is a man chosen to represent other people in their dealings with God. He presents their gifts to God and offers sacrifices for their sins.”

On our own, we have no standing with God. We are unrighteous. We need a go-between, a mediator, someone who can seek to reconcile us with a holy God. That is what we need, and I include myself in that number because on my own, I am as unrighteous as you are.

3. *We Need One Who Lives Under.*

That latter part of v. 2 describes the high priest chosen from among us as being “beset with weakness.” In other words, he is a fellow partaker in the human condition. The word *weakness* likely refers to moral weakness, i.e., sin. It could also refer to other weaknesses such as physical weakness . . . mental weakness . . . emotional weakness.

Being a participant in the human struggle and human condition, however, has beneficial results. That brings us to the fourth description of the kind of priest we need.

4. *We Need One Who Sympathizes With*

Look at the first part of v. 2. When a priest rightly realizes that he is both sinful and weak, he is enabled to deal gently with those he represents.

Any minister who is harsh, judgmental, or overly critical is someone who has lost touch with his own failings and his own humanity.

The famous evangelist D.L. Moody once said, “I have more trouble with D.L. Moody than any other man I know.”

When we honestly assess our lives and become keenly aware of the trouble we bring upon ourselves, we will be far less likely to blame others for the trouble they cause.

We need priests in our lives who are patient with us because they know themselves so well.

Who do you need to represent you? You need someone who is chosen from, appointed between, living under, and able to sympathize with you. While the first four verses of Hebrews 5 show us the priest we sinners need, it is the second truth found in vv. 6-10 that I most want you to see.

Consider the Priest We Christians Have

Everything we need from a priest, Jesus possesses in Himself and provides to those

who are His.

- Jesus did not claim the position of priest for Himself. God appointed Him to that position.
- Jesus was chosen from among us because He became one of us at His incarnation.
- He was appointed to stand in the gap between sinful men and a holy God. We read in 1 Timothy 1:5, “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”
- Jesus knew what it was to be human. While He did not become sinful, He did suffer. Just imagine what it was like for Jesus to trade the strength of deity for the weakness of humanity. Again, it was Paul who wrote that Jesus “emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:7-8).
- Having identified with us by becoming one of us, Jesus is able to sympathize with us.

He knows **the hardships we endure.**

He knows **the pains we feel.**

He knows **the struggles we face.**

Aren't you glad you have a go-between who knows how difficult it is to walk the road you walk?

Last week I closed the sermon with a story told by the Methodist minister, William Willimon. The story came from a sermon he preached entitled, “You Need a Good Priest.” Here is another story from that same sermon. Willimon recalled a time that a young man came to speak to him. The student was thinking of going to seminary. The fellow wondered if he had what it took to be a pastor. He said, “You see, Dr. Willimon, I like to have a good time. I enjoy being with people. I love to party. My question is, can you be a pastor and still like to have a good time?”

I answered, “No, son, if you're going to be a pastor, you've got to be sober and serious and dignified, like me.”

Jesus is far better at sympathizing with people than many pastors have proved to be. In his message, Willimon went on to offer the following encouragement:

Are you alone? Forsaken by people? You remind Him of Gethsemane. Are you tried? Tested? Tempted? You remind Him of His forty days in the wilderness. Are you in pain and anguish? You remind Him of Golgotha. He is able to sympathize with us in our weakness. You can tell Him whatever is on your heart. Don't hold back your prayer.

Here is a great High Priest whose idea of holiness has absolutely nothing to do with distance, aloofness, or unspotted, pure detachment. His holiness is precisely in His daring to be so close. They named Him “God with us” when He was born. “God with us” enables us to be with God—Emmanuel.

There are several other great and deep truths that are found in vv. 5-10, but let me focus on one. Verse 6 contains a quotation from Psalm 110:4. Then, in v. 10, the author alludes to that verse again. Psalm 110 is a psalm of David. Verse 4 of that psalm reads, “The LORD has sworn and will not change His mind. ‘You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.’”

If this were the only two times that we were to find this reference, I would spend more time on this than I am going to. The truth of the matter is that the author of Hebrews uses the name “Melchizedek” no less than 8 times. He quotes Psalm 110:4 a total of three times. He will return to Melchizedek once in chapter 6 and five times in chapter 7.

We need to take a moment to look at this mysterious Old Testament character and see what he teaches us about the priesthood of Jesus. Other than his inclusion in Psalm 110, Melchizedek is mentioned by name only one other time in the entire OT. Look with me at Genesis 14. In this chapter we learn that a number of kings fought against one another. In the battle, it was four kings against five, and the combined forces of the four kings overpower the forces of the five kings. Although there is no evidence he was in the battle, Lot, the nephew of Abraham was taken captive along with some of those of his household and much of his possessions. When Abraham, Lot’s uncle, heard of what happened, he decided, “This will not stand.” Look at vv. 14-16. Abraham and his men rescued not only Lot and all that Lot had, they also captured the possessions of the five kings that had been taken. At the end of the chapter, we see that Abraham returns everything to their right owners and keeps nothing for himself.

In the midst of all of this activity, we find an odd verse. Look at v. 18. We have not met Melchizedek before, and we will not encounter him again. He was not one of the kings that participated in the battle. Melchizedek is said to be both a king and a priest. He is said to be a priest of God Most High.

This happened long before Moses, long before the first five books of the Bible had been written, long before told His people how priests were to be selected. As far as we can tell, Melchizedek had no predecessor, and he had not successor. He did not get the priesthood from anybody else nor did he pass it on to anyone else. In that sense, the priesthood of Melchizedek was forever because no one came before him, and no one came after him.

The author of Hebrews says that is the kind of priesthood Jesus has. His priesthood will not end. Like Melchizedek, Jesus is both King and Priest. He is the Ruler of God’s people, and He is the one who enables us to enter into the family of God.

Let me close with the story of Father Damien. He was a priest in the latter half of the 19th century. He was a priest who served lepers in the village of Kalawao which is on the island of Molokai, in Hawaii. He lived in that leper colony for 16 years. He learned to speak their language. He bandaged their wounds, embraced the bodies no one else would touch, preached to hearts that would otherwise have been left alone. He organized schools, bands, and choirs. He built homes so that the lepers could have shelter. He built 2,000 coffins by hand so that, when they died, they could be buried with dignity. Slowly, it was said, Kalawao became a place to live rather than a place to die because Father Damien offered the people hope and gave them love.

Father Damien was not one to socially distance himself. He did nothing to separate himself from his people, and for that reason, the people loved him. Then one day, he stood to preach to the people, and he began his sermon with two dramatic words: “We lepers . . .” Now, he wasn’t just helping them. Now, he was one of them.

One day, long ago, God came to Earth through His Son Jesus. Jesus became our priest. When He stood to preach, he began his message by saying, in effect: “We lepers . . .” Jesus didn’t come to just help us. He entered this world as one of us. Because He understand us, we can trust Him.