

“Qualified To Be High Priest (Part 2)”—Hebrews 5:1-10

Brandon Holiski
Southern Oaks Baptist Church
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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Take your Bible or the one in the pew in front of you and meet me in Hebrews 5...

Today we are going to examine the same passage as we did last week, but focus on the verses that we did not consider. These verses have to do with the qualifications of anyone who would serve as a high priest for the people of God and they are aimed at showing that Jesus Christ both meets the qualifications and far exceeds them. The verses are transitional. They are introducing the central section of Hebrews, which unfolds the glorious truth that Jesus is the Great High Priest. This is the central focus of the book of Hebrews, but the vast majority of what we will learn about this matter we will learn from the chapters ahead. Nonetheless this text serves to whet our appetite and force some questions into our mind that the author will answer in due course.

Hopefully you have found your way to Hebrews 5. I'll begin reading at the beginning. Follow along with me in your Bible or on the screen as I read. This is the Word of God...

“For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.² He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness.³ Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people.⁴ And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.⁵ So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten you’;⁶ as he says also in another place, ‘You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.’⁷ In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.⁸ Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.⁹ And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him,¹⁰ being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.” (Hebrews 5:1-10)

I mentioned last week that these verses teach us that a high priest must be qualified for his service in at least two ways. Here was the first...

Our High Priest Must Be Human

Since the role of the High Priest is to mediate between humanity and God, he himself must be human. An angel can't be our representative. An exalted spiritual being will not do. We need someone from among us. We need a human to represent humanity. And, as we considered last week, this is why the eternal Son of God became fully human in His incarnation. He came to earth and took on human flesh and offered his human life on the cross as a sacrifice for the sins of humanity. The incarnation matters! And the fact of Christ's humanity is a great encouragement to us for at least two reasons that we examined last week.

*His Humanity Assures Us of His Solidarity
His Humanity Assures Us of His Sympathy*

Christ possesses unparalleled solidarity with us and sympathy with us because of His incarnation and sinless suffering. This is really the focus of the beginning and end of the verses we read. So, having considered the borders of the text, today I want to focus on its center, verses 4 to 6. There we see a second qualification for the high priest, namely, that...

Our High Priest Must Be Divinely Appointed

It is not enough for the high priest who represents humanity to be human himself. He must also be appointed to the office. And he cannot be appointed by just anyone. He has to be appointed by God Himself.

On the surface many people may have looked qualified to serve as high priest, but only one at a time was chosen for the office. Of course, as we all know, you can be qualified for a position without actually having the authority to hold it. And we can easily imagine some who would have aspired to the office, attracted by the dignity and honor the title of high priest would have conferred, but the office was not for sale and it was not the sort of thing you could volunteer for. You couldn't just memorize all the laws, practice the rituals on the side, and get top marks on some entrance exam. There were no elections. That's not how it worked. You had to be chosen. And you had to be chosen by God.

In the Old Testament we learn that Israel was a nation made up of several tribes named after the sons of Jacob. God chose the tribe of Levi to be the tribe from which all the priests would come, including the high priests. But it wasn't even enough to be a Levite, because God has also chosen a particular family within the Levites to be the source of the high priests, the family of Aaron. Then there was a process by which the high priest was selected from that group that didn't involve human decision. So by God's design, you had to be a man, of the nation of Israel, from the tribe of Levi, in the family of Aaron, selected by measures no human could control. In short, anyone appointed as high priest was in select company historically. They were chosen by God. And that is the point of verse 4—*“And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.”*

Now, it seems to me, there are at least two reasons why this matter of divine appointment is important from the perspective of the people of God. The first reason is that being appointed shapes the way the office is carried out. When an office is not achieved and the honor not the result of a person's grasping hold of it, then there is not room for boasting in it. You didn't take the honor yourself, but were called by God so what is there to boast in? The person who appointed you! As one writer explains,

“A true priest is not one who has acted to elevate himself in the eyes of men or of God. A true priest is motivated solely by a desire to honor God and serve men, without concern for personal advancement.”¹

None of us has ever been appointed to something on the level of high priest, but perhaps you have had the experience of being selected for some role by someone in authority. You felt the honor of the selection. And, in all likelihood, you carry out the position conscious of the one who appointed you. You would want to make that person proud. You would want to not let them down. You would want to show yourself approved. Each decision, at least initially, would take into account the perspective of the person who appointed you. “What would he or she think about this action?” That's natural. That's good. Being appointed to an office should instill in us a level of humility and shape the way we carry out the office so as to not let down the one who appointed us.

And while the office of priest from the Old Testament and the office of pastor from the New Testament are by no means equivalent, they do at least share this in common. To be sure, a pastor is one who should at

some point possess a desire to serve in that noble office (1 Timothy 3:1), but that aspiration should not arise from a lust for power, status, or self-promotion. Like a priest, he too must be called into service. It's not enough for him to be qualified. He must also be called.

This past Thursday I was gathering with a small group that I'm a part of and I came across a quote in a book we are reading together. The quote was from R. A. Torrey, an evangelist who died in the 1920s. Speaking of the seminary graduates of day, he lamented:

“We think that if a man is pious and has had a college and seminary education and comes out of it reasonably orthodox, he is now ready for our hands to be laid upon him and to be ordained to preach the gospel. But Jesus Christ said, ‘No.’ There is another preparation so essential that a man must not undertake this work until he had received it. ‘Tarry [literally ‘sit down’]...until you are endued with power from on high’ (Luke 24:49).”²

Torrey was wrestling with the same idea. It's not enough to be qualified. One must be called of God. This is true for pastors as it was for priests, though the offices certainly differ in the nature of their service and selection. But both render their service out a sense of calling. As Lewis Allen reminds the preacher,

“You're preaching for God. You're preaching because he has been pleased to call and equip you to preach, and he is pleased as you preach. If he ordains that you find the tasks of preparing and delivering your sermon enjoyable, then he gets the glory. If he makes your preaching obviously fruitful, again, it's for his name's sake. But if you preach only because you enjoy it, or even because people seem to value it, then you are in trouble. The minute those things vanish, your heart will be laid bare, and you will see yourself (maybe others will, too), for what you were all along—a preacher more taken up with his own desires than with the glory of God.”³

Again, this is why a sense of calling is so important for the preacher like it was to the priest. It's not merely qualification or externals. It's divine decision. It's discerned differently for the preacher than it was for the priest, but both are appointments and that should shape how each office is administered. We ought not be seeking our own glory, but the glory of the One who has called us. The honor of service belongs to God, not to man. It is accepted, not achieved. This was the intended pattern for all the high priests who served in Israel. From this we learn...

His Appointment Assures Us that He Acts Submissively

The high priest submits to the appointment of God and, again, that fact shaped their service. So when a high priest in the Old Testament (at least, those who were worth their salt) carried out the duties of their office, they were meant to do so humbly and selflessly. They recognized their office existed not merely for their own sake, but for the sake of those they represented, the people of God.

And if this was true for all the high priests of old, then how much more for the Great High Priest, Jesus Christ, sent by God the Father, as the ultimate fulfillment of the office of high priest, the one to whom all former high priests were meant to point? Is that not the point of verse 5? Just as the other high priests didn't take that honor for themselves, but were called of God, “*So also,*” we read, “*Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by*” God the Father, as the author shows through two biblical citations we will get to in a bit.

Jesus didn't selfishly grasp for the office and honor of being our Great High Priest. He was appointed. He submitted to the will of His Father and came to serve as our High Priest. “*Therefore,*” as the writer of

Hebrews has already told us, “*he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God*” (Hebrews 2:17). The incarnation was Him submitting to the will of the Father to serve as our High Priest. It was an act of submission “*in the service of God.*” It wasn’t an act of self-promotion and lust for power.

And that should bring a measure of assurance to us, the people He represents. Why? Because it reminds us that He’s not serving as High Priest for His own sake, but for ours. This isn’t about Him *merely* pursuing His own honor, but ours. He’s our Representative. Our Mediator. Our Advocate. Our sinless and sympathetic High Priest, seated at the Father’s right hand, who ministers that we might be made right with God and enter into His presence. He didn’t come seeking His own glory. He came setting it aside. Veiling it. He came doing the will of the Father. “*If I glorify myself,*” Jesus said, “*my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me*” (John 8:54).

“In assuming the office of savior and high priest, so far was the Son from exalting and glorifying himself that he accepted it knowing full well that it meant for him the experience of the darkest depths of humiliation, rejection, agony and death.”⁴

That submission assures us that He has our best interests at heart. Now let me put a second “so what” on the table...

His Appointment Assures Us that He Acts Successfully

One commentator and pastor, named Richard Phillips, captures why this is so important.

“The high priest must be appointed by God, not only so that he will serve selflessly, but also so that we might know that God himself has authorized his ministry in this capacity. On what basis do we believe that Christ’s death atoned for our sins? Because God appointed him to this task, and thus has accepted Christ’s work in this holy office. When Jesus entered the heavenlies, bearing his own blood as the sacrifice for our sins, why does that have any relevance for us? Certainly, he is qualified, but that is not enough. He represents us because God has appointed him as our high priest. Moreover, why should God listen to Christ’s prayers for us? Surely he loves his Son, and Christ is sympathetic. But God accepts Christ’s intercession because he appointed him to this very work; as our high priest, Christ fulfills God’s own will and appointment for our salvation.”⁵

Does that make sense? Christ’s appointment as our High Priest provides us great assurance because it was God’s idea. We can know that Christ’s high priestly ministry was both acceptable and binding because He was acting in perfect step with the One who appointed Him to offer up acceptable and binding service. He was doing the will of the Father. Why would the Father reject His work on our behalf? He wouldn’t! So His appointment is a great reassurance to us.

Perhaps then we can see why it is so important for the writer of Hebrews to establish the appointment of Christ. And how does He show the divine appointment of Christ? By means of two Old Testament citations that were spoken by God concerning His Son. The first one was from Psalm 2:7, which says, “*You are my Son, today I have begotten you*”. The second is from Psalm 110:4, “*You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.*”

What Are We to Make of These Quotations?

Yet at first glance the biblical citations introduce new questions. Like, for starters, what does the first quotation have to do with the priesthood? We have considered Psalm 2 already in our series because the author of Hebrews quoted it back in chapter 1, verse 5, so I won't belabor the point. But you might recall that the Psalm was about God's anointed king.

On the one hand, the content of the psalm was true at some level of every true king in Israel and so was considered an enthronement psalm, which meant that it was read each time a new king ascended the throne in Israel. On the other hand, it was understood as a messianic psalm because the Jews were expecting God to send the Messiah (or Christ) who would fulfill the royal aspirations of that psalm. He would be the Anointed One who would receive the nations as his inheritance and the whole earth as his possession (Psalm 2:8). We know that this is fulfilled in Christ, who has received all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18) and before whom every knee will one day bow (Philippians 2:10-11).

When the Lord says through the psalmist, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you", the Israelites understood that as God endorsing and initiating the appointment of the king and also as anticipating the day when the great messianic king would assume the throne (who, as it turns out, was the actual Son of God in a way they had not imagined).

But, in the context of Hebrews, the author is trying to demonstrate Jesus' appointment as our ultimate High Priest, so Psalm 2 seems like a curious place to build your case. Why? Because when you read Psalm 2 it doesn't speak of a priest. It speaks of a king. So if Jesus fulfills the Psalm (and He does) then that would mean He was the Messiah and He was the king, but how would that prove that He was appointed as High Priest?

In fact, at first glance, it would seem to hurt the case for Jesus' priesthood because under no circumstances were the kings of Old Covenant Israel to serve as priests. There are several stories in the Old Testament that warn against any attempt for a king (or anyone not a Levite, from the house of Aaron, called of God, for that matter) to undertake priestly duties. A few examples will suffice.

In Numbers 16 we read a story that's usually referred to as "Korah's Rebellion." A man named Korah becomes jealous of Moses and Aaron and refuses to believe that God appointed them for their leadership in Israel. Korah, who himself was a Levite, assembles 250 people from Israel to confront Moses and Aaron because they believed that they were just as qualified to serve as priests for Israel as Aaron and his family were. How do you think that worked out? Not well for Korah and his company. Long story short, when they attempted to bring incense before the Lord (something that priests would do) the ground opened up and swallowed them and closed in around them. Israel learned a big lesson that day: the priesthood is not for everyone; it's only for those whom God appoints.

In 1 Samuel 13, Israel's first king, a man by the name of Saul, was in the city that he had been crowned King, and he was waiting for the prophet Samuel to come and offer up a sacrifice. And he waited. And waited. And waited, until he felt like he could not wait any longer. In his impatience, he offered up the sacrifice himself. How do you think that ended? Not well. Samuel arrives and sees what King Saul has done. In the prophet's fury, he announces that the Lord will now strip the monarchy from King Saul and his offspring and give it to another family. The king learned an important lesson that day: the priesthood is not for everyone and it's not for the king; it's only for those God appoints.

In 2 Chronicles 26 we are told of the failure of another king in Israel by the name of Uzziah. Listen to how God's Word describes his fall...

“But when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to the LORD his God and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense. ¹⁷ But Azariah the priest went in after him, with eighty priests of the LORD who were men of valor, ¹⁸ and they withstood King Uzziah and said to him, “It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense. Go out of the sanctuary, for you have done wrong, and it will bring you no honor from the LORD God.” ¹⁹ Then Uzziah was angry. Now he had a censer in his hand to burn incense, and when he became angry with the priests, leprosy broke out on his forehead in the presence of the priests in the house of the LORD, by the altar of incense. ²⁰ And Azariah the chief priest and all the priests looked at him, and behold, he was leprous in his forehead! And they rushed him out quickly, and he himself hurried to go out, because the LORD had struck him. ²¹ And King Uzziah was a leper to the day of his death, and being a leper lived in a separate house, for he was excluded from the house of the LORD. And Jotham his son was over the king’s household, governing the people of the land.” (2 Chronicles 26:16-21)

Moral of the story? The priesthood in Israel was not up for grabs. The king was not the priest. The office was not open to the most charismatic personality or the most educated or the one with the most resources at his disposal. The defining issue was the call of God. And that call was given to the Aaron and his posterity. What does Hebrews 5:4 say? *“No one takes this honor for himself...”* Not even the king! If anything, Israel’s history has some of its harshest warnings against a king trying to assume the role of priest.

So what then are we to make of the author quoting the Psalm 2, a royal and enthronement psalm, to prove his case that Jesus was appointed as priest? That Psalm would seem to support Christ’s kingship, not priesthood, right? And if Jesus was king, then shouldn’t He steer clear of the priesthood? Is that not what Saul and Uzziah’s stories teach us? Should not the offices of priest and king be kept separate in light of Israel’s story? And furthermore, since Jesus was from the tribe of Judah—not a Levite and not of the house of Aaron—does that not disqualify Him for the priesthood? Is that not what Korah’s rebellion taught us? So the author seems to be raising more questions than he is answering. He seems to be digging himself into a logical hole. But, don’t be too hasty church... He knows what he’s doing. He’s setting us up.

It’s the second Old Testament quotation, drawn from Psalm 110, that helps us see how the author of Hebrews is going to resolve these tensions. Look at Hebrews 5:6 again. *“[The Lord] says also in another place, ‘You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.’”* This is the curveball. Yes, like Aaron, Jesus was appointed to be a high priest. But now we are told that Jesus’ priesthood is different. He is not a priest of the order of Aaron, like all of Israel’s other priests. He is *“priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.”*

There are two questions we should be asking ourselves at this point: Who is Melchizedek and what does he have to do with Jesus and His priesthood? There is no way we can answer all of that in our remaining time today. But let me at least introduce this mysterious figure to you and then in the weeks ahead we will see how the author himself explains the relationship between Jesus and Melchizedek.

If you have never heard of Melchizedek, you are not alone. He’s a seemingly random character that comes into the life of Abraham in Genesis 14 and then exits the scene as quickly as he entered. Abraham had just won a great victory over an alliance of kings who had captured his nephew Lot and several others. Then out of nowhere comes this guy named Melchizedek, whose name means “king of righteousness” and who is described simply as the *“king of Salem”* and as *“priest of God Most High.”* He brings out bread and wine and he pronounces a blessing on Abraham, who then responds by paying him a tithe (ten percent) of everything.

That's all that is said. It's just four verses and the narrative moves on. We are left scratching our head. Who was that guy? How does He know God? In what sense is he serving as a priest of God when the priesthood that God established in the Law of Moses is still hundreds of years in the future? And why does Abraham give this mysterious priest-king a tithe? It's all very bizarre.

Then several hundreds of years later, Melchizedek shows up in Psalm 110:7. That's what the writer of Hebrews quotes to show that Jesus was appointed as our high priest. This is the only other place in the Old Testament where Melchizedek is mentioned. Psalm 110 was considered a Messianic psalm. It describes the enthronement of the coming Christ. And then a few verses in it says simply that He will be "*a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek*" (Psalm 110:7). Then the David, the psalmist, goes right back to describing this messianic figure in royal terms.

Nothing else is said of Melchizedek in the entire Bible...until the book of Hebrews. And it's in the book of Hebrews that the significance of this mysterious figure begins to surface. Here in chapter 5, the author wants us to say, "Oh yeah, there was another priesthood in the Old Testament, wasn't there? There was that guy named Melchizedek, whose priesthood existed long before Aaron's did and who received an offering from our greatest forefather. And Melchizedek couldn't have been a Levite because Levi wasn't even born yet. And there was something different about that Melchizedek, wasn't there? What was it? Oh yes! Unlike the priesthood of Aaron, which never mixed with the royal office, Melchizedek was a priest-king. He brought the two offices of priest and king together in a way that God approved, so maybe it is possible for those two offices to come together in Jesus who was appointed priest not after the order of Aaron, but after the order of Melchizedek"

If that is where your mind is going, then you are on the right track. If you are sitting there thinking, "Yeah, I never would have caught that," don't worry you're not alone. But just wait! The writer of Hebrews is going to show us some pretty cool things about all this in the pages ahead that are going to deepen your appreciation for the fact that the Bible is telling one unified story, with Christ as the climactic center and the Gospel as the scarlet thread that binds together the whole. We haven't even scratched the surface of this Melchizedek stuff! Chapter 7 is a doozy. Just you wait. Or don't and just read ahead. That's allowed. Encouraged even...

But let's summarize then what we have learned about Jesus these past couple of weeks from these first ten verses of Hebrews 5. We have seen that Jesus is qualified to be our Great High Priest because He was both fully human and divinely appointed. Because of these prerequisites, we can derive much encouragement and assurance. We know that He possesses solidarity with us and unparalleled sympathy for us. And we are assured that the high priestly work has been carried out submissively and successfully on our behalf. We can rest assured that our salvation is secured not because of our own qualifications and efforts, but because of those of our Great High Priest, Jesus Christ. Our salvation rests on His work alone, not ours. So aren't you glad He was qualified to be our High Priest? Aren't you glad His priesthood is far greater than any that has come before Him? Me too!

And this should lead us to worship. That should be our response. You have a Great High Priest who has offered up His own perfect life on the cross to wash away your sins. He has substituted Himself for you and experienced judgment that you deserve so that you could receive the life that only He deserved. He is our only hope in life and death. He saves freely by His grace—despite all our sin and shame—all those who believe in Him, turning from their sin to Him alone to save. Will you trust Him? Will you trust that He alone can save and entrust yourself to His saving work? Like every text in the Bible, that's what these verses are meant to evoke in us. We are meant to see how qualified Jesus is to be our Great High Priest and Savior. And seeing and believing that, we are meant to rejoice. To that end, let me close with the following words from Joe Thorn...

“You need a priest. Why? Because you are not fit to stand before God on your own. God demands purity, and you are impure. God demands righteousness, and you are unrighteous. God is holy, and you are unholy. Who can ascend the hill of the Lord and draw near to God? Only those with clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false (Ps. 24:3-4). And this is not you. You need one to go before you. To stand between you and God. One who will make peace and intercede on your behalf, who can show you the way to God.

All of the priests in the Old Covenant were mere shadows of the Great Priest who has come, Those men were sinful and no better than you. They stood as priests to prepare God’s people for the High Priest who would actually accomplish all that they did symbolically. The priest you need is Jesus Christ.

He is a Priest who hears your confession and forgives your sin. He is a Priest who perfects the prayers that you offer to God. And he is a Priest who continues forever. His priesthood never ends. His intercession never ceases. He does not grow old, his mind never grows dull, his love never fades. And because Jesus is your Priest forever, your access to God and your intimacy with him is forever secure.

This is reason to rejoice, to sing, and to draw near to God. You *can* ascend the hill of the Lord. You can get close without fear of judgment, for you come to him through Jesus, your High Priest. He has covered your sins, consecrated you, and introduced you to the Father. The hope of your salvation is found in the priesthood of your Savior.”⁶

Let’s pray...

¹ Richard D. Phillips, *Hebrews* (REC; Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2006), 160.

² R. A. Torrey, *Power-Filled Living: How to Receive God’s Best for Your Life* (New Kensington: Whitaker House, 1998), 226, quoted in J. D. Greear, *Jesus, Continued...: Why the Spirit Inside You Is Better Than Jesus Beside You* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 225.

³ Lewis Allen, *The Preacher’s Catechism* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2018), 49-50.

⁴ Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 180.

⁵ Phillips, 160-161.

⁶ Joe Thorn, *Experiencing the Trinity: The Grace of God for the People of God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2015), 96-97.