

# Hebrews

Series 1

## Lesson 6

### “Hebrews Chapter 5”

**Objective:** To explore the ancient text of Hebrews in order to understand how this product of the mature early Christian movement interpreted Christological understandings. In doing this it is the aim of this study to encourage, enable and inspire people to live a more Christ-centered existence.

It is also the hope and the design of this material to provide materials for the use of small groups as well as in Sunday morning Bible classes. A new section has been added at the end that can be used either with the family or with a small group.

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**Materials:** The Bible, Commentaries, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet and other resources as may be appropriate.

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#### Procedures

1. To explore this text first as it would have been understood by its original audience, in its original context.
2. Next we will hope to understand more fully the nature of our God and in so doing comprehend his call upon our existence in order to fulfill our destiny as image-bearers.
3. We will seek to find practical guidance in these ancient words that will empower, enlighten and inspire us as we live in a twenty-first century world dominated by a focus on self and the individual. We are called as God's people to live in community as a people that unleashes His compassion in a world filled with pain and suffering. God is the only hope for a better world.
4. Provide a sheet to take home as a reminder of what has been examined and to provide additional opportunities for consideration of God's word and application in our daily living out of our eternal destiny beginning now.

Hebrews 5:1-10 now begins the third major section of this epistle (“The Nature of the Son’s High Priesthood”). The discussion of the high priesthood of Jesus will continue at verse 7 of this chapter. We have had hints, even as far back as Hebrews 1:3, regarding the high priesthood of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> It may be that for us, today, that talk of a high priest seems antiquated and perhaps even unnecessary, but I believe it is actually as crucial for us today to comprehend this as it was for the first readers of Hebrews, maybe even more crucial. The way the writer sets this out is that Jesus is like the high priest that many of them would have been familiar with in some ways, and yet radically different in others. Even as we come to verse 1 of this chapter, there is a hint that Jesus is different from what they had come to expect. The phrase “taken from among men” hints that there might be another possibility. This other option will be spoken of more fully as we go along, but even here the hint should begin to intensify our interest and challenge our perceptions.

The role of the high priest within Judaism was a crucial role. Without the high priest sins remained on the heads of the people

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<sup>1</sup> Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2004), p. 117.

and therefore their guilt remained with them. Since the guilt remained there was the expectation that the negative terms of God's covenant with Israel should be what was to be expected (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). If anyone reads through this list of curses prescribed for failure to keep the covenant one cannot help but see how crucial both obedience is, and also some form of atonement for failure. The high priest played a crucial role; particularly on the Day of Atonement when he offered sacrifices not only for his own sins, but for the sins of others. Of all the Jewish holy occasions the Day of Atonement, or *Yom Kippur* is the most solemn. The observance of this occasion is described at Leviticus 16. It is a Day of Judgment and reckoning.<sup>2</sup> This, in a sense, is like our April 15th (tax day) between God and His people when accounts were to be settled for the year. The sins committed during that previous year must be accounted for, and recompense/sacrifice was necessary.

Between New Year's Day (Rosh Hashanah) and the Day of Atonement are ten days which are called "The Ten Days of Repentance," or "The Awesome Days." Every Jew searches their

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<sup>2</sup> Victor Buksbazen, *The Gospel in the Feasts of Israel* (Fort Washington PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1990), p. 32.

heart during this period and seeks to be reconciled not only with God, but with his neighbor. On that day, as the afternoon of Yom Kippur approaches Jews throughout the world assemble near rivers, brooks, and oceans, in order to cast away their sins. This ceremony is called *TASHLIKH* (תְּשַׁלֵּיךְ) and is based upon Micah 7:19.<sup>3</sup> The term *TASHLIKH* is the Hebrew term for casting and indicates a casting away of one's sins. Since the Jews today have no temple, no high priest, nor an authorized way to sacrifice on this date, substitutes for the atoning sacrifices have been provided by the rabbis. Some of those substitutes are repentance, which includes the repentance of wrong, prayer, and fasting. Charity is considered to have atoning value. Some still sacrifice a rooster for each male and a hen for each female as an atoning sacrifice at this time. The sacrifice of chickens has no basis in Scripture, but is rather the expression of a deep sense of need to make atonement through the shedding of blood.<sup>4</sup>

The substitution of "charity" for sacrifice is something that is very important in Judaism. It seems highly significant to realize

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<sup>3</sup> **He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.** NRSV.

<sup>4</sup> Victor Buksbazen, *The Gospel in the Feasts of Israel*, pp. 32-33.

that the word for “charity” in modern Hebrew usage is the same as the word for “righteousness.” There is a connection between the two in their minds. Another form of atonement is for a person to suffer. One’s own suffering, especially because of living a righteous life is considered to be of atoning value. Some orthodox Jews, of Eastern Europe, had the custom of inflicting upon themselves 39 stripes (they flogged themselves). The study of Torah is also considered to be an additional form of atonement. In association with this study are special prayers known as SLIHOTH - prayers of forgiveness. On the Day of Atonement a complete fast is observed by every Israelite that is 13 years of age, or older. Dispensations are granted only for those who are gravely ill.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, during the time that Hebrews was written, it is highly likely that the way of atonement was as described in Leviticus 16, which in the beginning involved Aaron making atonement for his sins, and those of his house, with a bull offering, This same procedure was followed through the time of the tabernacle and when the temple in Jerusalem was standing and in service. Aaron would then take two male goats and cast lots, with

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<sup>5</sup> Victor Buksbazen, *The Gospel in the Feasts of Israel*, pp.33-34.

one lot for *Yahweh* and the other lot for *Azazel*. As one might expect there has been a considerable amount of study to ascertain the meaning of the term *Azazel* in Leviticus 16:8, 10, and 26.

There are four main interpretations of this term: (1) that it is the name of a demon, (2) that it refers to a place (cf. *Pseudo-Jonathan* Leviticus 16:10, 22<sup>6</sup>), (3) that it is an abstract noun meaning »destruction« or »entire removal« (BDB, 736), or (4) that the term is a corruption of the words אֶזְאֵל (Az Azel) meaning something like »goat that goes away« (cf. scapegoat). Of the four possibilities, the majority of scholars give preference to the idea that this term is a proper name belonging to some form of wilderness demon (cf. ASV, RSV, NRSV, JPS).<sup>7</sup>

The reasoning for favoring this explanation over the others is that in Leviticus 16:8, in the description of the drawing of lots for the two goats, it is stated that one of the goats is to be for *Yahweh* and the other goat is for *Azazel*. This would seem to

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<sup>6</sup> <sup>10</sup> The goat on which the lot for *Azazel* fell shall be set alive before the Lord to make atonement for the sinfulness of the people of the house of Israel, (and) to be sent to die in a rough and stony place which is in the desert of *Soq*, that is *Beth Haduri*. <sup>22</sup> The goat shall carry on himself all their sins to a desolate place; and the man shall let the goat go into the desert of *Soq*, and the goat shall go up on the mountains of *Beth Haduri*, and a blast of wind from before the Lord will thrust him down and he will die." Michael Maher, trans. "Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Leviticus," in *The Aramaic Bible*, Vol. 3, Project Director Martin McNamara (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1994), pp. 167, 169.

<sup>7</sup> Dominic Rudman, "A Note on the *Azazel*-goat Ritual," in *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 116:3 (2004), pp. 396-401.

imply that Azazel is a personality of some form. Secondly, the goat designated for Azazel is released into the wilderness, which was a known haunt of demons in the Old Testament (Isaiah 13:21-22; 34: 11-15; cf. Matthew 12:43). Thirdly, in the later extrabiblical literature Azazel is understood to be a demonic being (*1 Enoch* 8:1; 9:6; 10:4-8; 13:1; 54:5-6; 55:4; 69:2; *Apocalypse of Abraham* 13:6-14; 14:4-6; 20:5-7; 22:5; 23:12; 29:6-7; 31:5-7).<sup>8</sup> Anyway, this is far more detail than is likely necessary and to be sure there is considerably more. For our purposes the main thing to be aware of is that this was something that was of vital importance to the Hebrew people. This was critical to their continued covenant relationship with God and to their salvation.

For our purposes we need to be aware of the great importance of this ritual and of the role of the high priest in his role between Yahweh and His people. Verse 1 begins by providing us with information regarding the old high priest (the Aaronic High Priest), what he did in offering sacrifices for sins, and his ability to relate to those under his priesthood due to his personal weakness. To be sure, there is a positive aspect to the humanity of

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<sup>8</sup> Dominic Rudman, "A Note on the Azazel-goat Ritual," in *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 116:3 (2004), pp. 396-401.


this mortal high priest, but on the negative side, as indicated by verse 3, he must first atone for his own sins and then for those of his people. This certainly allows him to be sympathetic, but this is also seen as a weakness. The Greek word used here means he is able to moderate his anger. This characteristic (mortality) of the high priest was not a requirement, it was in fact created because of weakness on the part of the high priest. In part, these things are being brought to the attention of the readers because the writer of Hebrews intends to deal with them by way of contrast with Jesus, who is quantitatively and qualitatively different.<sup>9</sup>

At verse 4, there is final point made with regard to the high priest, he does not appoint himself, he is one called by God. This conforms to the Old Testament account of God's calling of Aaron and his descendants to serve in this role (cf. Exodus 28:1; Leviticus 8:1; Numbers 16-18). Often our focus here is upon the ancestry of the high priest, of the passing on of this role from father to son, one generation to the next. In a sense, this was certainly the case. The tribe of Levi had specific responsibility to serve as priests for Israel. Aaron's descendants were then called

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<sup>9</sup> Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 117-120.






out to serve in the role of high priest. As we read the accounts of those that served as high priest we are also reminded that there was a deeper aspect to the role of high priest, one that is often overlooked. When this system operated at its best, as God intended it to operate, the high priest was more than someone who inherited the job because of ancestry: he was also a person of integrity and sensitivity. This was a person who carried the blood of the sacrifice into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. That person knew that this was a time for him to serve his people and not himself alone. For those that were truly virtuous there was certainly the realization that they were weak and needed forgiveness as much as those that they represented.<sup>10</sup>

As high priest, he offered sacrifice not only for the sins of the people, but also for himself. No one who serves in the ministry of the church can escape the profound sense of identity connection with the priests of Israel and certainly with the weaknesses of those that served as high priest. Each and every time a minister offers advice to another, preaches a sermon, and stands before the congregation there is a profound sense of

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<sup>10</sup> Herbert W. Chilstrom, *Hebrews: A New and Better Way* (Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 30-31.



inadequacy for this role, but also such a great realization of the need and the grace of God. This passage in Hebrews 5:4 should stand in the heart of each minister, each time they serve, pray, or take a breath. They are called to this by God and as such it is an incredible calling that should be humbling and terrifying at the same time. It should also be remembered that not even Christ exalted himself to be made high priest.<sup>11</sup> Humility is a hard thing, when you truly believe you have it, you can be absolutely sure that you do not. It is elusive, and forever just beyond our reach. Only by the grace of God will any of us ever achieve it; and I suspect it will come without us knowing it, though we were to pursue it for a thousand years.

As we move into verse 5, we are told that “Christ did not glorify himself in becoming high priest,” but was appointed by God. This reminds me very much of Philippians 2 where Paul tells us that Jesus did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself. This is what the author of Hebrews is trying to convey to his audience. He then goes on in verse 6, to begin laying out another aspect of Jesus that is different

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<sup>11</sup> Herbert W. Chilstrom, *Hebrews: A New and Better Way*, pp. 30-31.

from those who have served before as high priest. Certainly the audience will have been fully aware that Jesus did not come from the tribe of Levi, much less of Aaron. How then was it possible for Him to be high priest? The author draws upon the Old Testament, and particularly the Psalms, to make his point and to substantiate his claims. First he tells us that this person who is appointed is the Son of God (Psalm 2:7), and then he ties this into a quote from Psalm 110:4. This is an indication that this priesthood is different, more ancient, and would last forever. This priesthood was different in quality, in its roots, and in its longevity.

Psalm 110:4 is quoted at 5:6, and in 7:17 and 21, while it is alluded to another eight times in chapters 5-7. There is a transition here as in the first 4 chapters of Hebrews; the focus was upon Jesus being the Son of God. This was the dominant theme. Now the primary focus has shifted to the high priesthood of Jesus while still maintaining an eye on the issue of Christ's Sonship. Verses 7-10 form what is known as a periodic sentence with two main ideas as the central focus: in verse 8, "He learned;" and in verse 9 "He became." The language of these two verses is elaborate and hymnic in style. This style will have produced a

heightened sensitivity to what is written here on the part of the audience. Verse 8 stands at the heart of the argument here: “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.” Jesus Christ is a sympathetic and compassionate high priest; this is expressed by His solidarity with humanity.<sup>12</sup>

Verse 7 helps to prepare for verse 8 by depicting the humanity of Christ, recalling what was written in 2:14 that, “since ... the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things.”<sup>13</sup> Jesus walks in the shoes and even in the skin of those He seeks to save. He does not stand far off, nor high up, He comes and shares in their humanity and in their weakness; in the sense that He empties Himself of His protection from harm and pain. He embraces the pain of humanity in order to learn how to minister and to serve better. What a challenge this should be to us still today. Jesus was willing to humble Himself in order to learn. Learners humble themselves, this is a necessary element in order to truly learn. He sought to learn sympathy and to understand what it is to be weak and to feel helpless. This “reverent submission” is a central trait of Jesus who exalts the

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<sup>12</sup> Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, pp. 120-122.

<sup>13</sup> Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, p. 122.

father and even exalts the children while all the while He is the one who is truly glorious, perfect, complete, and the source of “eternal salvation.”

As we come to this point it is important to note that, though subtle, there is an admonition for the audience here - “eternal salvation for all who obey (ὕπακούουσιν). The word used here for “obey” is a word that has at its heart the meaning of to “hear” and to “listen.” This is more than just hearing in the sense of a sound registering on our ears, this word very much carries with it the idea of hearing something, listening to that something, and that something creating an action on the part of the hearer. Hearing and doing are inexplicably connected. This same root word is behind the obedience of Christ who learned “obedience” (ὕπακοήν) through what he suffered. There is to be a correlation here between Christ and His followers. They are called to “learn” because of what they hear and to become “obedient” in the way that Christ was obedient. They are able to do this not because they now possess some super power, but based on the fact that they have this great and sympathetic high

priest that is after the order of Melchizedek standing as their advocate before God.

Melchizedek is this obscure and mysterious character in the Bible. Almost nothing is said about him and almost nothing is known. What we do know is that Abraham offered sacrifices to this person who bears a name that means “king of peace.” Since Abraham offered a tithe to Melchizedek, and the lesser person offers sacrifice to the greater the implication is that the priesthood of Melchizedek is higher than that of Aaron: who was still as yet unborn as descendent of Abraham. We will speak more of this later, but the writer of Hebrews breaks off what he wanted to say because he says his audience will find his explanation hard (5:11), since they “have become dull in understanding.” The word used here for “dull” (νωθοι) carries with it the idea of laziness and sluggishness and the word used of “understanding” is once again based on the root “to hear.” True hearing requires obedient action.

They have become lazy in their listening, their hearing, and in putting the words that they hear into action by actually being obedient. Verse 12 continues the admonition by telling them that though by this time they should have progressed to being teachers

they still find it necessary for someone to teach them the basic elements of the “words” (λογίων) of God. A comparison is then made, toward the end of verse 12, with food, it is done in such a manner as to call them babies, infants (νήπιος), those who are “unskilled,” or “inexperienced” in the “word of righteousness.” What a thing to say to people who have likely been studying the Bible since they were, in reality, infants. This must have come like a slap in the face. The admonition here is heavy and hard. These final words of chapter 5 will begin a hortatory dialogue that leads to a difficult discussion regarding the high priesthood of Christ. This first section, that actually goes from 5:11-6:3 is basically a conventional call for maturity.<sup>14</sup>

The element of warning, the admonition that was prominent in the previous chapters of this book, only intensifies here. The warning here is more detailed, more intense, more urgent, and far more derogatory. With each stage of the argument the subtlety and nuance has become less and less as the writer seems to sense an urgency for his audience. He wants them to hear his plea more than he wants them to like him. He is willing to risk their

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<sup>14</sup> Edgar Mcknight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, p. 127.

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displeasure in order to warn them of the imminent danger that they face. He is deeply concerned for their destiny. This is a book that warns of danger and challenges the audience to change and pursue the path of Jesus. The danger is real. The danger is urgent and the danger is constant. The author challenges the readers to pursue understanding in the words of righteousness and to recognize their need for a high priest, for the high priest, Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God.



# Synopsis

This chapter brings us full force into the issue of the high priest. Understanding of the crucial role of the high priest among the Jewish people is taken for granted in this discussion. It is expected that the audience will know the critical nature of this role and this understanding is pivotal in comprehending the message of this chapter, and indeed of much of the rest of the letter. In Jewish thinking, the high priest served as the mediator between God and His people. It was the role of the high priest to insure that atonement was made for sins. Without the high priest guilt remained on the heads of the people and therefore the covenant which bound them to God was in danger due to their breach of the terms of that covenant.

The most critical function of the high priest was performed on the Day of Atonement and still today many Jewish people feel the necessity of offering special atonement on this day. The procedure for the Day of Atonement is described in Leviticus 16 and involves the offering of two goats; one to Yahweh and one to Azazel. This second goat is the one that is known to us as the scapegoat. This goat carried the sins of the people into the

wilderness where they (the sins) would be separated from the people.

In this chapter, several important points are made with regard to the high priest: 1. He was able to sympathize with the people due to his own weakness. 2. He is a sinner himself and must offer a sacrifice for his own sins. 3. He is called to the task by God. 4. A weakness of the high priest is his mortality. Jesus has now become the high priest of the people of God and does not suffer from the same weaknesses as the previous high priests. He is immortal, sinless, and has been perfected through total obedience to God.

At verse 11, the author of Hebrews challenges his audience, telling them that he has much more to say, but is unable to do so due to their dull understanding and their inability to cope with what he has to say. He challenges them to grow in their maturity through the consumption of solid food rather than the milk of babies. He challenges them to grow up and to mature in their faith. He challenges them to become skilled “in the word of righteousness.”

# Questions

1. How would describe the role of a priest?
2. Why do you think people throughout history have felt the need for a priest?
3. Why do you think there is a connection between sacrifices and sin?
4. What do you think it means for a priest to be subject to weakness (verse 2)?
5. Why do you think it is considered an “honor” to be a priest?
6. How would you define “honor?”
7. In verse 5, what do you think the connection is between Christ becoming a high priest and being “begotten” by God?
8. How is it possible to learn obedience through suffering?
9. How is it possible for Jesus to be made perfect if He was sinless and the Son of God?
10. What is the difference between “hearing” and “obeying?”
11. How do you measure whether someone heard something, or not?
12. How would you describe “eternal salvation?” Why?

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13. What do you think it means for us that Jesus is appointed as high priest by God?
  14. Why do you think the author of Hebrews gives all of this information about the high priest to his audience?
  15. What are some ways that you have learned obedience in your life?
  16. What difference do you think it should make regarding the way you live your life today to know that Jesus is your high priest?
  17. What are some ways that you are able to discern “good” from “evil?”
  18. What are some ways that seek to become skilled in the “word of righteousness?”

# To Take Home

## **What is Important to know?**

It is important to know the critical role that the high priest played in the life of Israel in order to understand the message of the writer of Hebrews. The connection between the high priest and the atonement of sin is crucial in having an idea of the role that Jesus plays in the life of His followers. The writer wants the readers to be able to distinguish good from evil. How do you think people that are not religiously inclined deal with their sins?

## **Where is God in these words?**

God seeks to communicate with people; and a part of that communication has been through his appointment of priests. The priests were to convey to people the “things pertaining to God.” God allows this imperfect, and sinful human being to mediate, and facilitate the relationship between God and human beings. He calls people to this role, seeking them out, because He seeks relationship with people. What is changed in your impression of God from understanding these words?

## **What does any of this mean for how I live my life?**

A lot of what is said here comes from a time, a culture, and a mindset that is very different from what exists today. Despite this, sin is still a problem and how we cope with that sin is still an issue. Today, we still struggle with our relationship with God and we need help with this; when we are honest. This chapter gives an understanding of how, and why, I can expect that relationship with God is possible. What does it mean for you to have Jesus as a mediator with God?

## **What is the word of God calling us to do?**

In this chapter God is calling us to recognize that He seeks relationship with us, but He also expects us to be humble and respond to Him. God recognizes who, and what we are, and makes provision for those that would in humility seek to obey his words. In all of this chapter, the writer leads up to the desire for people to be able to distinguish “good” from “evil.” God is calling His followers to be skilled, mature, and able to understand more than just the basic elements of His “oracles. He wants His people not to be dull in understanding. What are some ways that you try to seek to improve your understanding of God each week?