

Week 4 Devotional™ Reading

## **A Daily Devotional on the Book of Hebrews**

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## Our Great High Priest

*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. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people. And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. 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”; as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.”*

*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. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. – Hebrews 5:1-10 ESV*

In the early days of Israel, the high priest was an appointed position. Aaron was the original high priest, designated so by God Himself. His command to Moses to set aside Aaron and his sons as priest is recorded in Exodus 28:1: “Then bring near to you Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests—Aaron and Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar.” God would later qualify the vital nature of their calling. “I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar. Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate to serve me as priests. I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the Lord their God” (Exodus 29:44-46 ESV). Aaron and his sons were set apart by God to serve as priests, offering sacrifices on behalf of the people. No one else could serve in this capacity. King Saul attempted to do so and lost his kingship because of it. During the days of Israel’s wilderness wandering, Korah, a Levite, incited a rebellion against Moses and Aaron, demanding that he and his brothers be made priests. But Moses told him, “would you seek the priesthood also? Therefore it is against the Lord that you and all your company have gathered. What is Aaron that you grumble against him?” (Numbers 16:10-11 ESV).

As a result of their attempt to self-appoint themselves as priests, Korah, Dothan, Abiram and all their families were literally swallowed alive by the earth. The priesthood was a serious matter to God. And so when we read of Jesus being appointed high priest “to act on behalf of men in relation to God” it should get our attention. Jesus was not a descendant of Aaron. He was a descendant of David, from the tribe of Judah. Technically, He was not qualified to be a priest, let alone the high priest. And the writer of Hebrews makes it perfectly clear that Jesus “did not exalt himself to be made high priest, but was appointed by him [God]” (Hebrews 5:5 ESV). So unlike Korah, Jesus was not guilty of trying to anoint Himself high priest. He, like Aaron, was chosen by God to serve in this capacity.

But Jesus was of a different priesthood than that of Aaron. He was “designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 5:10 ESV). Melchizedek was an obscure figure mentioned in Genesis 14. Abraham had rescued Lot and his family, who had been taken captive when the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah had been overrun by an alliance of kings. After having defeated the kings and taken back Lot, his family and all their possessions, Abraham was met by Melchizedek, king of Salem. The text tells us that Melchizedek was also a priest of God Most High. Melchizedek blessed Abraham and Abraham gave Melchizedek a tenth of all the plunder he had taken. That is the extent of the information we have about this priest-king known as Melchizedek. But the author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus was appointed by God after the order of Melchizedek. In other words, He was of a different priesthood than that of Aaron and his sons. In the chapter seven of this letter, we are given more insight into who this man was and why Jesus was appointed high priest after his order and not that of Aaron:

*He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever. – Hebrews 7:2-3 ESV*

This does not mean that Melchizedek was a divine being who was never born or died, but that we have no record of his ancestry. He appears on the scene in the book of Genesis, then disappears. He serves as a foreshadowing of the King-Priest who was to come. He was the king of righteousness and the king of peace. Interestingly enough, Salem is the city that David would later make his capital and rename Jerusalem. And one day, Jesus will return and reign from the throne of David in Jerusalem when He establishes His Kingdom on earth. Unlike Aaron and his sons who served only as priests, Jesus was the King-Priest, appointed by God, and He received both titles when he ascended back to earth after His death and resurrection.

Jesus received these two divine appointments because He was obedient, faithfully completing the assignment given to Him by God the Father. Jesus did not simply offer sacrifices on behalf of the people as Aaron and his sons had done. Jesus offered Himself. He made the ultimate sacrifice of His own life. And even though He divine, the Son of God, as the human Jesus, “he learned obedience through what he suffered” (Hebrews 5:8 ESV). And His obedience, while it led to His death, resulted in His perfection, His glorification. He was raised from the dead and restored to His rightful place at the side of God the Father. And “he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him” (Hebrews 5:9 ESV). Jesus wasn’t just a different high priest than that of Aaron. He was a better high priest who offered a better sacrifice. His sacrifice was a permanent, once-for-all sacrifice that never has to be repeated. He was the sinless high priest who offered Himself as the unblemished Lamb of God for the sins of man. And as a result, those who place their faith in His sacrifice can share in His righteousness and have peace with God. We can be justified, made right with God. He is the great high priest.

## The Message of Righteousness

*About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. – Hebrews 5:11-14 ESV*

The author of Hebrews admits that what he has been writing about is difficult to explain and just a difficult to understand. But it doesn't help that his audience has "become dull hearing." The Greek word the author used literally means "slow" and was used in the figurative sense to refer to someone as "stupid". The Hebrew believers to whom he wrote had become unaccustomed to hearing difficult doctrine and deeper truths. And the topic he has been trying to explain is the message of righteousness. All of his talk about the Jesus' sonship, deity, priesthood, suffering, sacrifice and glory have been designed to remind his readers of the righteousness that is found in Christ alone. He does not want them to fall back into their old habits of trying to gain a right standing with God through the keeping of the law. Their heritage as Hebrews, while a blessing, could become a curse, if they let it lead them back into a works-based form of righteousness. Paul made it clear that this path was futile and a waste of time.

*For no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are. – Romans 3:20 NLT*

The fear the author of Hebrews had was that his readers had regressed. He told them, "you have gone back to needing milk" (Hebrews 5:12 NET). Their lack of knowledge regarding the things about which he has been writing reveals that they were "unskilled in the word of righteousness." They were tempted to fall back on the old truths associated with Moses, the Law, temple worship, and all that was associated with their old way of life.

Their problem was that they had not moved on to solid food. They had become stuck, stagnant. And their lack of progression had led to regression. For the Christian, there really is no middle ground. You are either growing in maturity or you are going backwards. These people, who had evidently known the Lord long enough that the author believed they should have been ready to teach others, were unprepared and unequipped for the job. They were stuck on the basics and unskilled when it came to the word or message regarding the righteousness found in Christ alone. They knew the elementary truths of the faith, such as how one is saved, but they had failed to go deeper in their knowledge. Peter provided his readers with this word of encouragement: "Like newborn babies, you must crave pure spiritual milk so that you will **grow into a full experience of salvation**. Cry out for this nourishment" (1 Peter 2:2 NLT). In his second letter, Peter tells us we "must grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18 NLT). There is no place for stagnancy or complacency in the life of the believer. As we grow in Christ, we become increasingly aware of just what He has done for

us. We become more and more cognizant of our sin and just how great a salvation we have received. Spiritual growth requires spiritual food. We must develop a hunger for the deeper things of God found in His Word and explained by the help of His Spirit. We can't stay on spiritual pabulum and expect to grow in maturity. "Jesus love me this I know for the Bible tells me so" is true, but not a sufficient source of spiritual sustenance for the growing Christian.

There comes a time in all of our lives when we must become givers, not just receivers. The author told his audience "by this time you ought to be teachers" (Hebrews 5:12 ESV), but they were still having to be spoon fed themselves. They had become comfortably content with their current status as believers in Christ. But one of the non-negotiable realities regarding faith in Christ was the fact that God expects His children to grow. Again, the apostle Peter had some strong words regarding this matter:

*Supplement your faith with a generous provision of moral excellence, and moral excellence with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with patient endurance, and patient endurance with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love for everyone. The more you grow like this, the more productive and useful you will be in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But those who fail to develop in this way are shortsighted or blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their old sins. – 2 Peter 1:5-9 NLT*

Coming to faith in Christ should result in our coming to be increasingly more like Him in character. The apostle Paul told the believers in Ephesus that God had given the church leaders whose responsibility it was to equip the body of Christ so that they could build one another up. And then he told them...

*This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, **growing in every way more and more like Christ**, who is the head of his body, the church. – Ephesians 4:13-15 NLT*

Spiritual maturity is not a solo sport. It is a group activity. We grow in Christ-likeness as we share with one another, as we encourage one another, as we use our spiritual gifts on behalf of one another. As we grow in our knowledge of God's Word, we receive insight into God's will. As we share what we are learning with others, they are encouraged, and our faith is strengthened. Growth requires interaction with others. Isolation is deadly to spiritual maturity. Complacency is as well. The message of righteousness is not just that we have been made right with God through faith in Christ, but that we are being made righteous in our attitudes and actions as we grow up in our salvation and in our dependence upon the body of Christ.

## Hope Until the End

*Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits. For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.*

*Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises. – Hebrews 6:1-12 ESV*

Spiritual maturity is not the result of human effort, any more than our salvation was the result of anything we had done or deserved. When the writer tells us to “leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity,” the Greek word he uses is *pherō* and it has the idea of being carried along, like passengers in a boat. It is in the passive voice and does not convey effort as much as reliance. We are to allow the Holy Spirit of God to move us by His power into maturity. That does not alleviate us from any responsibility or effort, but it lets us know that the end result is a work of God, not man. The Holy Spirit indwells believers in order to assist them in their quest of becoming increasingly more like Christ. But clearly, there is an expectation that believers in Christ should grow up in their salvation. The recipients of this letter did not need further instructions on faith versus works or repentance from performance-based efforts to achieve a right standing with God. It was time to move on. It was time to grow up. The author refers to washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. These were all teachings or beliefs related to Judaism. They all had their counterpart in Christianity, but there was a need for the Jews to whom this letter was addressed to understand this foundational truth in a new way. Ritualistic washings, as practiced in Judaism, had been replaced by New Testament baptism – a one-time act that was symbolic in nature. The laying on of hands in Judaism was part of the sacrificial ritual, but it had new meaning in Christianity. The teachings regarding the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment had been expanded and given new meaning since the death and resurrection of Jesus. All of these doctrines, while elementary for the typical Jew, would have required additional insight and instruction for the believer. There was no room for resting on your laurels or relying on old truths.

The real issue here has to do with spiritual stagnancy, which can result in a drifting away or a regression on the part of believers. Earlier in his letter, the author warned his readers “So we must listen very carefully to the truth we have heard, or we may drift away from it.” (Hebrews 2:1 NLT). He also told them, “Be careful then, dear brothers and sisters. Make sure that your own hearts are not evil and unbelieving, turning you away from the living God” (Hebrews 3:12 NLT). He is clearly speaking to believers, those who had placed their faith in Jesus, but who ran the risk of regressing in their faith because they were not pressing on and moving forward spiritually. He knows the very real possibility of believers falling away and describes them as those who “have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come — and who then turn away from God” (Hebrews 6:4-6 NLT). He warns that “it is impossible to bring such people back to repentance; by rejecting the Son of God, they themselves are nailing him to the cross once again and holding him up to public shame” (Hebrews 6:6 NLT). It would seem that the writer of Hebrews is dealing with extreme cases of apostasy, when believers turn away from and reject Christ. He is not referring to what many of us call backsliding or periods of spiritual doubt. The seriousness of his warnings conveys the idea that he is dealing with cases of an extreme nature. His point seems to be that if you fail to grow, you will leave yourself open to apostasy. You will be vulnerable to false teaching and the possibility of turning away from the truth. This was not uncommon in the New Testament. Paul warned Timothy not to follow the example of two individuals who had wandered from the truth. “Avoid worthless, foolish talk that only leads to more godless behavior. This kind of talk spreads like cancer, as in the case of Hymenaeus and Philetus. They have left the path of truth, claiming that the resurrection of the dead has already occurred; in this way, they have turned some people away from the faith” (2 Timothy 2:16-18 NLT). Paul also warned Timothy, “Now the Holy Spirit tells us clearly that in the last times some will turn away from the true faith; they will follow deceptive spirits and teachings that come from demons. These people are hypocrites and liars, and their consciences are dead” (1 Timothy 4:1-2 NLT).

The author of Hebrews is legitimately concerned that his readers grow. Why? Because lack of spiritual growth can have dangerous consequences. He is not saying that believers can lose their salvation. But the longer a believer wanders from the truth, the more difficult it will become for them to repent. And ultimately, they will reach a point where they are living and acting as an unbeliever, and their return to Christ will appear as if His saving work was insufficient the first time. It will be like crucifying the living Lord all over again. Apostasy makes a mockery of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. That is why we are to grow. Apostasy is the very real result of complacency. Paul tells us that when the church is equipping its people and they are ministering to one another, we all grow and “we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth” (Ephesians 4:14 NLT). We are to keep on growing in Christ-likeness, allowing the Spirit of God to use the Word of God to change us from the inside out. “Then you will not become spiritually dull and indifferent. Instead, you will follow the example of those who are going to inherit God's promises because of their faith and endurance” (Hebrews 6:12 NLT).