

Jesus Is Our Perfect High Priest

Hebrews 5:7-9 (NIV)

⁷ During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸ Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered ⁹ and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him

Is it possible to be too good? Can someone be too great? A while back, the news reported that a girls' basketball team in Minnesota was kicked out of its league because it was too good. The action was taken because the other teams in the league refused to play the team that was deemed "too talented." What about Jesus? Is it possible that he might be "too great" to be the Great High Priest that the writer of Hebrews proclaims him to be? After all, the high priest was supposed to be able to relate to the people he served. Chapter 5 of Hebrews begins this way: "Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness" (vs. 1,2). A week ago, we read the opening verses of Hebrews and heard a majestic description of Christ. In those verses, he was declared to be the Son of God—Creator, preserver, and heir of all things; the radiance of God's glory; and the mirror image of God's essence. Is Jesus great? No question about it. But is he too great? Is Jesus too great to relate to the sinners he is supposed to represent? The high priests of Israel were human beings, just like the people they served; as sinners, they were able to sympathize with those who sinned. How could someone as great as God's Son possibly relate to sinners? That was a question the first readers of Hebrews would have had on their minds. The writer knew it, and he responded in the verses we just read. He assured his readers that Jesus is not only the Great High Priest, but **he is also the perfect High Priest.**

I. Jesus was perfect already in the way he prayed.

It seems strange to read this little section of Hebrews 5 and hear the author say that Jesus was "made perfect," doesn't it? The phrase conjures up the image of someone who is not perfect to begin with but who gradually progresses—perhaps by trial and error—from imperfection to perfection. That doesn't seem to be the right way to talk about Jesus, does it? In fact, that is not what the writer of Hebrews is saying. To see that, let's start at the beginning of our reading. The author begins by talking about Jesus (literally translated) "in the days of [Jesus'] flesh." Obviously, he is referring to Jesus as a true human being. When our writer talks about how Jesus "offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death," he is taking us back to the incident in the Garden of Gethsemane we heard about in the reading of the Passion History a moment ago. Surely there we see Jesus as a true human being—with a body and soul. He says, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." And with his human voice, he instructs his disciples and prays to his heavenly Father. From his human lips come cries, from his eyes come tears, and from his face sweat falls like drops of blood. What we confess in Luther's words is true: Jesus Christ is "true man, born of the virgin Mary."

But the writer has not lost sight of what he wrote at the beginning of this book. Remember the opening words of Hebrews: "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (1:1). Then the writer goes on to proclaim the greatness of God's Son. Here, the writer proclaims the same truth—that Jesus of Nazareth is the true and eternal Son of God. He writes, "Son though he was." Since in the previous verses the writer has twice referred to Christ as the Son of God, it seems clear that the writer wants to make the same point here: the true human being Jesus of Nazareth is also the true Son of God.

We see that tonight in the garden, don't we? Think of what squeezed from our Lord's lips—the cries we hear in the garden; from his eyes—the tears that stained his cheeks; and from his face—the sweat that dropped like blood into the dirt. Jesus knew exactly what lay ahead of him. There in the garden, the hour had come for the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world. What a burden the Father laid when he laid the guilt of the world's sin on his Son! Think of the crushing burden of guilt and shame the knowledge of just one sin can lay on a soul. We see criminals in the news covering their faces, hiding from the cameras and the crowds. Think of the countless men and women for whom that burden of guilt and shame proved to be too heavy and who tried to silence that voice by suicide. But the Savior, driven into the dust by the guilt of every sin, the haunting voice of a million consciences, and above all the horrible prospect of enduring the white hot anger of a holy God while hanging on a shameful cross—he rose from the ground in the garden, carrying that burden, and walked out to meet his betrayer and the mob the betrayer led. Truly, Jesus in his human flesh and blood is the Son of God.

So Jesus is the perfect High Priest—the God-man who is perfectly able to represent mankind before God. We know how that happened from the Scriptures. In Luke 1 we are told that a young woman named Mary was informed by an angel of God that she, though a virgin, would be with child and give birth to a Son. Remember the words the angel spoke to Mary: “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (Lk 1:35) “The holy one to be born” of you . . . Clearly, there is no room for progress from imperfect to perfection to take place in the life of Jesus. At his baptism and again on the Mount of Transfiguration, God the Father proclaimed Jesus to be his Son and added, “With him I am well pleased.” St. John says of God’s Son, “You know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin” (1 Jn 3:5). Jesus is indeed the perfect High Priest—perfect already in the way he prayed.

But if that’s true, you ask—that Jesus is the true God in human flesh—how is it possible for Christ to plead with his heavenly Father, the one who could save him from death, to take from Christ’s lips the cup of punishment and suffering that was pressed there so he would not have to drink it? How can the Son of God not know that there was no other way for a sinful world to be set free from a well-deserved eternity in hell? And while we are at it, how can the writer of Hebrews talk about the One who is declared to be the Son of God as someone who learned obedience? How can the One who knows all things possibly learn? The answer is not simply that the Son of God became the Son of Man. That same Son of Man predicted in advance all that would happen to him and bore the unbearable burden of humanity’s sin to the cross. No, the answer to the question, how could Christ not see the absolute necessity of the cross and learn obedience even though he is the Son of God, is that *he humbled himself*. In that humble state, which extended from his conception in Mary’s womb to his burial in Joseph’s new tomb, Jesus willingly gave up the full and constant use of his divine power and glory. Our writer calls the state of Christ’s humiliation the “days of [Christ’s] flesh.” Truly, Jesus humbled himself to the point where he—the One who created the angels—is strengthened by them to bear his struggle. It is this Jesus, God’s Son in his humble humanity, who is our perfect High Priest.

Look at him, offering up “prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death.” And yet he never rebelled. Looking into the cup of suffering and woe that was assigned for him to drink, he found its contents revolting, just as a child might recoil from taking some icky-tasting medicine. Though the child may rebel and push the spoon away, spilling its contents and making a mess, Jesus did not rebel; in reverent submission he obeyed his heavenly Father. Not a hint of resistance, not a whisper of complaint—as he prayed, he ended each prayer the same way: “Not my will but yours be done.” And so he was heard. As we follow the Savior who prayed so fervently and see that the path led to cruel scourging and a cruel cross, we might assume the opposite—that the Savior was not heard. But he was. In reverent submission, he was willing to carry out the will of God to save sinful humankind, and strengthened by angels, he did the Father’s will and drank the cruel cup—and three days later, he was saved from death as God raised him back to life in glorious victory over the grave.

Glory be to Jesus for being our perfect High Priest! Why? Because he prayed in reverent submission for us sinners, who do not always live in reverent submission to God’s will. We don’t always say and pray, “Father, your will be done.” Like the sheep the prophet Isaiah talked about, we sinners go astray and we turn to our own way. We do it with our time and money and energy: we spend the blessings God gives us not in God’s way to his glory and to serve God and others, but we use our gifts in our own selfish, self-serving way. How hard it is to live in our time in reverent submission to God. If things go wrong in life—if there is pain or loss, sickness or cross—we easily give in to grumbling and complaining. It’s easy to say, “Your will be done,” but hard to pray, “Your will be done.” All around, God’s will for sex and marriage is mocked and ignored; his claim on his creatures’ time, money, abilities, and bodies is rejected; the world says, “My will; my way, my body, my business.” How hard it is even for us to say, “Father, your will be done.” Thus our Great High Priest prayed, “Your will be done.” Yes, Jesus was our perfect High Priest already when he prayed, but as our reading says,

II. Jesus was made perfect by the way he obeyed.

If it’s hard to say to God, “Your will be done,” imagine how hard it is to actually do God’s will. That’s the point the writer is making when he says, “He learned obedience from what he suffered.” The writer is pointing us from the Garden of Gethsemane where the Savior says, “Your will be done,” to Calvary where God’s will was done. There, Jesus was led like a lamb to the slaughter and, as a sheep before the shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In that way, he learned obedience: obedience went from a theoretical thing in Jesus’ mind to a very practical thing that involved thorns and scourge; spikes and scorn; crucifixion, death and the grave. To use an imperfect illustration: it’s like the couple being asked on their wedding day if they will love and honor each other in marriage and they answer with a hearty and happy “I will.” Then the husband finds out that this means telling his buddies to go on the annual guys-only fishing trip without him because his wife doesn’t want him to spend money that is needed to pay bills. Or the wife finds out that this means telling her girlfriends to do lunch by themselves because her husband needs her help at home. That’s when you learn what obedience is—through painful self-denial and sacrifice. Sadly and honestly, though, we don’t always put our promises into practice—we say “I will,” but don’t always do God’s will—whether it’s a promise made to parents, a confirmation vow, or a wedding pledge to love and cherish. Though we often promise to obey God, we don’t always do it.

But Christ did. He said, “I will” and he did. He went to the cross and paid for our broken promises to God plus the heartache and tears we’ve caused those we love by failing to follow the right words with the right works. He endured the cross, scorning its shame. That’s what it means when we read of Jesus, “*And, once made perfect*, he became the source of eternal salvation.” Or as another translation says more clearly, “After he had finished his work.” Does that ring a bell? Think ahead to Jesus’ triumphant cry from the cross: “It is finished.” The word translated as “perfect” in the phrase “made perfect” comes from the same root in Greek as the word “finished,” which Jesus shouted from the cross when he fulfilled his heavenly Father’s will and completed his rescue mission. If Jesus had only prayed perfectly in our place but failed to obey perfectly in our place—or to say it another way, if Jesus had lived perfectly but refused to suffer and die for sinners—he would not have been the perfect Savior. His rescue mission would not have been complete—he would not have finished his work. Our sins would still be crying out to the just judge in heaven for punishment. But Jesus finished the work, and our perfected High Priest became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

That last phrase sort of jumps out at you too, doesn’t it? Jesus became the source of eternal salvation “*to all who obey him.*” That doesn’t sound quite right, does it? You may be asking yourself, “What happened to being saved by God’s grace through faith? When did our obedience become part of the equation when it comes to salvation?” Our writer, however, is speaking in terms that are completely consistent with salvation by grace. Here is the thing—faith is obedience to God. So earnestly and seriously God wants us to be saved that he doesn’t only invite us to believe in Jesus—he commands it. St. John says, “This is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us” (1 Jn 3:23). So our Lord commands us to believe in Jesus, and his words are the Spirit and life that create the faith they command. The result is that we despair of saving ourselves; we quit trying to earn eternal life and cling instead to Jesus by faith for our salvation. He is the perfect Savior; he lived perfectly to provide us with the righteousness we need to withstand the unblinking gaze of God’s all-seeing eye. He died in shame to remove every trace of sin and guilt from our souls. As we hear his kind invitation, “Come to me . . . and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28), and with believing hearts find rest for our souls in Jesus, we find the joy and peace of eternal salvation. That is salvation by grace through faith. That is the “obedience” our author is talking about. And his words serve also to remind us that the obedience of faith will show itself in a life of obedience. From the heart filled with joyful faith in Jesus the Savior and God our loving Father will flow a life of love that will show itself in love for God and for other people.

Yes, Jesus is our Great High Priest and he is our perfect High Priest. He was perfect already in the way he prayed. He finished his work and was “made perfect” by the way he obeyed his heavenly Father, even to the point of death. May we render to our perfect High Priest the obedience he has earned: the obedience of confident faith, which shows itself in love! Amen.