

More than a Relatable Priest

Hebrews 5:1-10 (NIV)

¹ 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. ² He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. ³ This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. ⁴ And no one takes this honor on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was. ⁵ In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.” ⁶ And he says in another place, “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.” 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 ¹⁰ and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

The Word of God works. It works because the Holy Spirit works through his Word to change hearts and minds, not the person who stands up before you on a Sunday morning and preaches. The preacher is just a tool, an instrument used by God. While fully trusting in the Holy Spirit, we have to acknowledge this human element involved.

As the author of this letter to the Hebrew Christians states: “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.” (verse 1) A human is called by God to serve as the one who proclaims God’s Word. “And no one takes this honor on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was.” (verse 4) God set up the ministry of his Word very purposefully with a human element so that the human would represent the people before God and God to the people. Why? Because the human is “able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.” (verse 2)

You sit down and talk with a priest or a pastor, and they can relate to you. They may not have gone through the exact same situations as you have, but often they have gone through something similar. A human high priest knows what it’s like to be tempted by sin. He knows what it’s like to be someone ignorant of God’s Word because he himself was at one time. He knows what it’s like to go astray because at some point in his life he has gone astray. They can commiserate because they, like you, have fallen to sin.

A priest, a pastor – they are relatable to us because they are weak like us, flawed and imperfect. But that also means that a priest and a pastor fail us. They aren’t there for you all the time. They don’t give you as much time as you want because their time is limited. They don’t know everything going on in your life (unless you tell them). They don’t know exactly how you feel. They can say the wrong thing, give bad advice. They don’t remember everything about you. Your pastor sins and sometimes, sadly, he sins against you. The high priest of the Old Testament was the same. “This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people.” (verse 3) We need a better pastor, a better high priest. But where do we find a better one?

Jesus Christ is our better, superior high priest. He “did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest.” (verse 5a) No, God called him to this position, like he called every high priest to their position, much like how God calls pastors to their position. But Christ’s calling was very different. He was not called solely as a high priest from among the people; he was called the Son of God. This is a relationship not shared by anyone else. Jesus is God’s Son, equal to God because he is God. No human high priest or pastor could ever claim this same relationship. Priests and pastors are sinful men born of sinful people. We are not God, but Jesus is. As God, Jesus was not called to be a priest from the Levite tribe of Israel like all the other high priests. God said of Jesus, “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.” (verse 6)

Who is Melchizedek? He’s only mentioned in the whole Old Testament of the Bible in just two places: here with this quote of King David’s Psalm 110 and from our first Bible reading today. As we heard from Genesis 14, Melchizedek was titled “king of Salem,” which means “King of Peace.” His name itself was another kingly title meaning, “King of righteousness.” This Melchizedek is someone who is right with God, has peace from God, and gives that peace to other people because he is also “priest of God Most High.” This king and priest worshiped with Abraham. He blessed Abraham with God’s peace, and Abraham gave a tithe to Melchizedek in thankfulness to their God Most High, the Creator of heaven and earth.

We don't know where Melchizedek came from. We don't know his parents, his birth, his death. We never hear of Abraham encountering him again. But he was a real person. So, like everyone else, he had a birth and a death, but the author to the letter to the Hebrew Christians uses Melchizedek as a foreshadowing of a better high priest, a superior high priest, since it's as if he appeared out of nowhere and has no beginning and no end, like God who truly has no beginning and no end and instead has always existed – immortal and everlasting. All the high priests from the tribe of Levi - a priesthood that would be established about 600 years after this encounter with Melchizedek – all died because they all sinned. They could not be high priests forever. They failed because they sinned. But, kind of like Melchizedek has no beginning and no end recorded in the Bible, Jesus is a priest forever with no beginning and no end because he is God. This means Jesus is our priest now and always.

Because Jesus is a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek, he always lives to intercede for us. "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." (verse 7) We have many examples of Jesus praying during his life on earth, but probably the pre-eminent example would be his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before he sacrifices his life on the cross. He took his disciples with him and told them that his soul was overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. He prayed and prayed: "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." (Matthew 26:39) He prayed so hard that "his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground." (Luke 22:44)

Jesus knew that God the Father could save him from death. That's why he prayed to him, trusted him. At the same time, he resolved to carry out God's will, including all the suffering. While being the one true God along with the Father and the Holy Spirit, Jesus still submitted to undergoing the final suffering and payment required to take our sin away, to be the perfect sacrifice for our sins. He willingly did this so that God would not hold our sins against us, but that his blood would cover over all our sins, making atonement for us. He was the perfect sacrifice because he was tempted in every way that we are – yet he did not sin because he is God and man. This is why we call him our Prince of Peace, our Lord of lords, the Lord our Righteousness, much like the titles given to Melchizedek.

Priests, pastors know what it's like to be tempted to sin, but we know that they are weak because they have fallen to temptation like all of us. A priest, a pastor selected from among the people will not save you, no matter how relatable they are and no matter how much they can commiserate with you on the struggles of temptation. Jesus, however, is the superior high priest. He was tempted in every way that we are. So, he knows firsthand the struggle you go through because he went through it. He not only can relate to you in regards to being tempted, but he is also the solution to our temptation because he did not sin. He resisted where we did not. He overcame where we were defeated. We are weak, but he is strong. Once he completed this, once he lived his life perfectly for us and then sacrificed it on the cross once for all, "he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." (verse 9)

Jesus is a better priest than there ever was in the Old Testament. He is a better pastor than any pastor who will ever be up here sharing God's Word to you. Your pastors will fail you and have failed you because they are weak, imperfect, sinful. Your pastors forget to pray. They run out of time to call on people. They can give bad counsel. But not Jesus. Jesus did not fail. He was tempted and did not sin. He always has time for you. He knows you through and through and never forgets anything about you. He always intercedes for you, prays for you. He never gives you bad advice or counsel. He never fails because he is God. His perfect obedience and his perfect sacrifice covers you. He is our perfect priest forever.

You have more than a relatable priest with Jesus. He is the best priest, the perfect priest because he overcame temptation for you. As your high priest, he always lives to pray for you, to pray for exactly what you need to get through or to get away from the temptations you experience. He saves us completely. May we always rush to our great high priest, Jesus Christ, and never exchange him for anyone else. Amen.