

Foundations of Our Faith: Sacrifice

OK. I know exactly what you're thinking: finally, a sermon on Melchizedek! You're thinking, "This guy's been our preacher for 13 years and this is our first sermon we ever get to hear on Melchizedek." I'm not sure that that's really true but it is true about today. Not that you're going to learn about Melchizedek but that you're not going to get a sermon about Melchizedek today. I'm sorry. (If you do want to learn about Melchizedek, well you can tune in on Wednesday to our Bible study or watch it later. We'll cover Melchizedek in great detail. Which makes me think, now that I've have said, that perhaps I've just caused all of my students to suddenly recall that they have something else going on Wednesday night at 6:30.) Regardless, my point is that you are not getting a sermon about Melchizedek today, no matter how much you have come here in anticipation of that.

What you are getting a sermon about today is what Melchizedek as high priest is about. This sermon is about a High Priest. And it is about the sacrifice that a High Priest brings to God. And it is about Jesus. Jesus the High Priest. Jesus the Sacrifice. But it is also about you, and how the High Priest and the Sacrifice are for

you and because that is true, you are called to be a living sacrifice too, not just like Jesus, but because of Jesus' work as our High Priest.

We teach that the way to understand Jesus is through seeing him as holding three offices (or roles): Prophet, Priest and King. Today I want to explore with you this idea of what Jesus does in his role as our Priest, the Mediator who intervenes in our behalf with God, the one who brings sacrifices to God in our behalf. But before we get to the question of what a priest does, what Jesus does in his role as priest, we want to understand how this, last in our five foundations of faith, pulls together all of the threads of faith we have covered: (slides) baptism, faith, cross, grace.

Baptism is a sign that you belong to God and that you belong to Christ's Church, and that you are empowered by the Spirit, sent to live a life that is both a witness to God's grace and a proclamation of God's love.

Faith is believing God's promise that God will raise all who believe to new life 'solely by Christ's merit.'

The Cross is an instrument of death which, in God's plan, is a source of life for all who believe in its saving power through Christ, the Crucified One.

“Saved by grace” describes God’s act of accepting his children ‘as is’ so that we can dwell with Christ Jesus and do God’s good works.

Today, what ties all of it together, what underlies the entire foundation is this idea of sacrifice, made once and for all by the great high priest, the last high priest, the only high priest we need, Jesus Christ. Without the sacrifice offered by our High Priest the foundation of our faith crumbles under its own weight.

The document which we call Hebrews is really a long sermon which was preached to the early Jewish Christians who were trying to gain an understanding of exactly who Messiah was, how he fit into the Old Testament prophecies about Messiah, who would come to redeem God's people, God's chosen people. In this part of the sermon, we are looking in detail at how Jesus Christ becomes the perfect high priest.

The first characteristic which we need to understand about Jesus is that he comes from among the people, as every good high priest must. (SLIDE: Hebrews 5:1,5) You might compare this to the requirement that a U.S. President must be born in the United States. He or she needs to be ‘one of us.’ This is important for us to understand in the context of Jesus incarnation, which we review every Advent and Christmas. Jesus is human and God, both at the same time. This

qualifies Jesus, that is, his humanity qualifies Jesus to be a high priest, to be our high priest. Jesus is one of the people. He is one of us.

The 2nd characteristic that defines a high priest is that the high priest doesn't get to choose to be ordained, appointed, anointed as God's high priest. (SLIDE Hebrews 5:1,9) Rather, the high priest must be chosen by God, must be appointed by God. You might compare this idea to our own practice of calling people to be ordained as Ministers, Elders and Deacons. It is God's work of calling, not a matter of our volunteering. The 'Church' must issue a 'call' before anyone can be ordained.

In the language of our catechism the Bible the high priest is anointed with oil as a sign that God has ordained someone for this task of being the leader, the spiritual leader of God's people.

Q. 31: Why is he called "Christ," meaning "anointed"?

A. Because he has been ordained by God the Father and has been anointed with the Holy Spirit to be...our only high priest who has delivered us by the one sacrifice of his body, and who continually pleads our cause with the Father...

As one commentator puts it,

“Christ’s way from first to last was the cross.... He came to die. This was the supreme purpose of the incarnation. The cross was the fulfillment of his mission.”

(Hughes)

Jesus, the Son, was chosen by God the Father to not only offer the sacrifice but to be the sacrifice, the Lamb of God, whose very purpose, the reason he was set aside as God and Man, was to set us free from God’s judgment on the Cross.

As another writer explains, Jesus ‘is not lifting up a turtledove or an unblemished lamb. He is not offering up bread or wine. He is not even offering up the sins of the people for atonement. He offers himself.’ (K. Pershey)

The mediator intercedes to ‘reconcile creation one and for all. The priest becomes the living, dying sacrifice that has the power to grant eternal salvation....’

To put this entire series into a sentence, our baptism is our sign that we have been brought by grace alone through faith along into the salvation which Christ alone could offer to God as an act of sacrifice on the Cross, the source of life.

So, how does that translate for us in this life we live now? I mean, it is wonderful to know that we have life eternal, a reservation at the mansion, a place

card holding our seat at the Great Banquet Table, but what about in this life, how does the High Priest benefit us as we walk this long pilgrim journey home? The answer comes in the final characteristic of our High Priest.



The final characteristic that the preacher of Hebrews indicates as necessary for a high priest is that the high priest must have a genuine sympathy for the people whom the high priest represents. The high priest must understand, have sympathy for, the very people whom the high priest represents before God.

So it is that we see Jesus Christ as our High Priest, one who comes from the people, one who was appointed by God and one who understands our every need. How do we know that Jesus Christ is sympathetic to our troubles and tribulations? The preacher of Hebrews tells us this in the context of Jesus suffering in the garden of Gethsemane. Listen to how he describes his prayers.

(SLIDE Hebrews 5:2,7) As Barclay teaches, the words for 'crying out' is the sense of the guttural sound that involuntarily escapes in our times of deepest sorrow or pain. You have done this or have heard it done. But what is the cause of Jesus' great anguish? As Calvin teaches, it was not that he would suffer a horrendous death, but that he would suffer the judgment of God, not for his sin, but for the sins of the whole world. He would have placed on him the entire weight of God's

damnation of sins so that we would not. Hughes captures it perfectly, “At Gethsemane and at Calvary we see him enduring our hell so that we might be free to enter into his heaven.”

Or, as Hendricksen puts it,

“Because of Christ's atoning work and victory over death and the grave, we shall never know the weight of sin, the severity of the curse, the penalty of judgment, or the meaning of eternal death and hell. We have been acquitted and set free because of Jesus, our high priest.”

Jesus understands spiritual suffering and physical suffering. Jesus understands the feeling of abandonment. Jesus understands the weight of guilt and shame, though he was without guilt or shame himself. He, as High Priest knows our suffering. So it is that our High Priest is one who kneels beside us in our suffering, and then he extends his loving, scarred hands to raise us up again.

(SLIDE, HC #32) **Q&A 32Q** But why are you called a Christian?

A. Because by faith I am a member of Christ and so I share in his anointing. I am anointed to confess his name, to present myself to him as a living sacrifice of thanks...

As Timothy George explains in an excellent summary of the teaching about Priesthood of All Believers, and quoting Calvin,

“All believers ... should seek to bring others into the church, and should strive to lead the wanderers back to the road, should stretch forth a hand to the fallen and should win over the outsiders.” In other words, George continues, “the priesthood of believers is not a prerogative on which we can rest; it is a commission which sends us forth into the world to exercise a priestly ministry not for ourselves, but for others—“the outsiders”—not instead of Christ, to be sure, but for the sake of Christ and at his behest.”

Big Idea: Jesus was anointed by God to become the perfect sacrifice, the source of our eternal life in Christ, and the reason we offer ourselves as living sacrifices of thanks.

May this be the call we hear as we seek to serve alongside our Great High Priest, offering our sacrifices of praise and service in gratitude for the once and for all perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the source of our salvation who kneels beside us.

Amen.