

## MOVING ON TO MATURITY

*Just What We Need*

Hebrews 7:26-28

<sup>26</sup> *Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.* <sup>27</sup> *Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.* <sup>28</sup> *For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.* Hebrews 7:26-28

One of our biggest challenges in life is distinguishing between what we think we need and what we really need. Have you found that to be true in your life? Part of the process of moving on to maturity is to eliminate the chasm that often separates our felt needs from our real needs.

The vast majority of people in the world are racing through life in hot pursuit of what they *feel* they need rather than what they *really* need. The prophet Jeremiah brings this truth home in a vivid way by comparing it to a cistern. We don't use that word very much these days, but in the land of the Bible cisterns were quite common. They were basically a container for holding water in an arid climate. God, speaking through Jeremiah says,

*My people have committed two sins:  
They have forsaken me, the spring of living water,  
and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.*  
Jeremiah 2:13

God is basically saying this – “Are you thirsty? Well, I am a spring of living water and I can meet your real need. But you – in trying to meet your own felt needs – you have dug broken cisterns that can't even hold water!” After all, what we pursue in life apart from God is going to eventually powder and pass away.

Rather than so passionately pursuing his own felt needs, the maturing Christian deeply feels his real needs. And what are our real needs? The book of Hebrews talks about several:

1. **Our need of forgiveness:** For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and *that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.* Hebrews 2:17
2. **Our need for a clean conscience:** How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, *cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death,* so that we may serve the living God! Hebrews 9:14
3. **Our need for help in temptation:** Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, *he is able to help those who are being tempted.* Hebrews 2:18
4. **Our need for comfort in trials and suffering:** For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every

way, just as we are-yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Hebrews 4:15-16

5. **Our need for perseverance in the Christian life:** You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. Hebrews 10:36-37<sup>1</sup>

These are all *real* needs. And these are real needs that only Jesus, as our High Priest, can meet. Now that may sound strange to you. Most people in our society don't spend too much time thinking about their need for a priest. In fact, as we pointed out last week, our stereotypes of a priest may drive us away from the very One that we most need.

What is a priest? A priest is a "go-between," one who stands between God and man. The Bible says, "There is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). You may not realize it, but you need a priest. And not just any priest. You need a "go-between" who is sufficient to meet your deepest needs.

I can be stripped of everything else in life – my health, my family, my possession, my friends, my job...everything – but if I have God's forgiveness, a clean conscience, his help in temptation, God's comfort in suffering, and his grace to persevere – then I have all I really need! And you do too.

That's how the writer to the Hebrews sums it all up in verse 26 of chapter 7: "*Such a high priest meets our need...*" (Hebrews 7:25). Jesus Christ as our High Priest is just what we need.

But beyond what we've already said, why and how can he be just what we need? That's what the writer tells us in verses 26-28. He answers these questions by telling us something about Jesus' *person*, then something about Jesus' *work* on the cross, and finally something about the new *priesthood* that Jesus has established.

### **THE PURITY OF HIS PERSON (v.26)**

He first of all focuses, in verse 26, on the purity of Jesus' person.

*Such a high priest meets our need-one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.*

Such a high priest meets our deepest needs, for he is *holy*. Holiness characterized Jesus from the moment of his birth. When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary he said, "So the *holy* one to be born [to you] will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). The holiness of Jesus focuses more on Jesus' relation to God the Father than on his relationship to people. It means that he was entirely set apart to God the Father and his service.

Jesus was not only holy, but he was *blameless*. While holiness describes Jesus in relation to God the Father, the fact that he was blameless describes Jesus in relationship to people. The word suggests the absence of all that is bad or wrong in relationship to others, even within Jesus' hidden motives. His actions were never influenced by impure or selfish motives.

That is not the case with you and me. “*The heart is desperately wicked, who can know it?*” Jeremiah tells us (Jeremiah 17:9). And that’s why we need such a Savior. Isn’t it paradoxical that the One and only One who was absolutely innocent and blameless – even in his motives – should be arraigned and condemned as a criminal?

By the way, when your motives are misjudged or you are wrongly accused, you can take refuge in Jesus. He knows your heart. “*Consider him who endured such opposition...so that you will not grow weary or lose heart*” (Hebrews 12:2).<sup>ii</sup>

Jesus is also described here as one who is *pure*. This word describes Jesus in relationship to himself. It means that Jesus had no evil in himself. He was undefiled. And it is this quality that made Jesus an acceptable sacrifice to God. Peter describes Jesus as a “*lamb, without blemish or defect*” (1 Peter 1:9).

Of course, the Old Testament priests were also to be “pure” in a certain sense. But the strict standards they had to meet were more of a superficial nature, including things like separation from dead bodies or the lack of physical deformity in their own body.<sup>iii</sup> But on the inside, they were stained through and through by sin just like you and me.

Next, Jesus is described as *set apart from sinners*. The speaker certainly doesn’t mean that Jesus was a separatist, an isolationist when it came to his ministry on earth. In fact, just the opposite is true. Jesus sought after sinners, just like he seeks after you and me. He associated with prostitutes. He went into the homes of tax-collectors – one of the most corrupt branches of the society in that day. Because of this, he was often criticized by the religious elite. And if you and I are to be like Jesus, we are not to be separatists either. And more than that, this entire book presents Jesus as one who is “near” and who identifies with you and me in our sinfulness and neediness.

What then does this mean? I believe we have an explanation in Hebrews 4:15 – “*...but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin.*” Jesus always identified with sinners, but never participated in their sin.<sup>iv</sup>

Finally, Jesus is *exalted above the heavens*. This refers, of course, to Christ’s ascension and exaltation to the right hand of God the Father. It is there where he sits today, until all his enemies are made a footstool for his feet (Hebrews 1:13). And what is he doing? Amazingly, he’s not planning his return. Only the Father knows when the Son will return. He’s not organizing; he is agonizing. He is agonizing in intercession for you and me (Hebrews 7:25).

Holy. Blameless. Pure. Without sin. Exalted above the heavens where he intercedes for you and me today. Little wonder the anonymous hymn writer expresses his praise this way:

Fairest Lord Jesus, Ruler of all nature,  
O Thou of God and man the Son;  
Thee will I cherish, Thee will I honor,  
Thou my soul’s glory, joy and crown.

Beautiful Savior! Lord of all the nations!  
Son of God and Son of Man!  
Glory and honor, praise, adoration,  
Now and forever more be Thine.

### **THE SUFFICIENCY OF HIS WORK (v.27)**

That's the purity of his person. But notice, too, what verse 27 says about the sufficiency of his work.

*Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. Hebrews 7:27*

In contrast to the priests of the Old Testament, Jesus' sacrifice for our sin is fully sufficient for several reasons. First of all, it is a *personal* sacrifice. While the Old Testament priest offered up an impersonal sacrifice – an animal that could never take away sin – Jesus offered up himself. Verse 27 ends by saying "...he offered himself." Jesus was both priest and victim, both sacrifice and "sacrificer."<sup>v</sup>

There is a subtle connection here with what we saw in the end of chapter 6 about Jesus being our "refuge" (Hebrews 6:18). Remember that in the Old Testament there were 6 "cities of refuge" where one who had killed someone else could flee? You can read all about it in Numbers 35. There, the supposed criminal could find safety. Jesus is that "city of refuge" for us. But here's the connection with this passage. The criminal could leave that city only upon the death of the High Priest. Have you ever wondered why? What would the death of the High Priest have to do with the acquittal of the supposed criminal? The connection is this. The death of the Old Testament high priest speaks of the sacrificial death of Christ, our high priest. And this death is personal; Jesus offered himself.

Second, in contrast to the priest of the Old Testament, Jesus as high priest was *sinless*. Jesus did not need to offer sacrifices for his own sin because he was without sin. But not so with the priests and high priests of the Old Testament.

On the Day of Atonement as described in Leviticus 16, the high priest would lay his hand on the head of a young bull and symbolically transfer his own sins to that animal. Later Jewish sources tell us exactly what the high priest would say. It went like this:

*O Lord! I have done wrong. I have transgressed. I have sinned before thee, I and my house, O Lord! Forgive the wrong doings, the transgressions, the sins which I have committed before Thee, I and my house. As it is written in the Torah of Moses Thy servant: for on this day shall atonement be made.*<sup>vi</sup>

So on the Day of Atonement, the greatest of the priestly rituals began with the high priest confessing his *own* sin! Following this, he would then sacrifice the bull (Leviticus 16:11). Then he would take two goats, sacrifice one and confess the sins of the nation over the other. But the

main point is this: the priests of the Old Testament, as well as the priests of any religion for that matter, were and are *sinner*s. Not so with Jesus, our High Priest. And his sinless, blameless character is what makes his sacrifice fully sufficient.

Finally, Jesus' sacrifice is once-for-all; it is final. "*He sacrificed for their sins* [our sins, your sins] *once for all...*" While the high priest in the Old Testament offered up a burnt offering yearly on the Day of Atonement and the other levitical priests offered up sacrifices daily<sup>vii</sup>, Jesus offered up only one sacrifice for sin once for all.<sup>viii</sup>

Christ's sacrifice for you and me is sufficient because it is *final*. It is complete. It is perfect. There is absolutely nothing that you and I can add to it to make it any better. When Jesus was hanging on the cross, some of his final words were, "*It is finished.*" He cried out *tetélestai*, meaning "it is paid, the debt is paid." What was finished? The necessary sacrifice for purchasing our salvation was finished. It was never to be repeated again. It didn't need to be repeated.<sup>ix</sup>

Let's suppose a famed cabinet maker is your friend. He wants to surprise you with the greatest gift you'll ever receive. Unknown to you, he gathers all the money he has. He hunts the world over for the best wood that money can buy. Once the unfinished wood is brought into his shop, he works day and night to produce the most beautiful table the world has ever seen. Finally, the cutting, the sawing, the gluing, the fitting, the sanding are all done. He finishes this masterpiece with hours of hand polishing. Finally, the last stroke is made with the cloth. The next day he come to our door with his men holding the table draped in a cloth. You welcome him in and he unveils the priceless gift. What's your response? Let's say you run and grab a piece of sandpaper and make a dive towards the table. The expert craftsman stops you short and cries out "It is finished!"<sup>x</sup>

It's like this with salvation. God paid a priceless sum in giving Jesus on the cross for you and me. And when he died, he cried out the same, "It is finished!" We cannot add to what he has done by our good works, and we cannot detract from what he has done by our bad works. In other words, there is no sin too great that God cannot forgive. His work is finished and it is perfect.<sup>xi</sup>

## **THE SUPERIORITY OF HIS PRIESTHOOD (v.28)**

Jesus Christ as our High Priest is just what we need. His person is absolutely pure. His work is absolutely finished. And his priesthood is superior to any other.

*For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever. Hebrews 7:28*

There are three things in this verse that demonstrate the superiority of Christ's priesthood to that of the Old Testament. First, the priests of the Old Testament were appointed by "law." But Jesus Christ has been appointed a priest forever by "oath." Whose oath? The oath given by God himself in Psalm 110 and cited three times in this letter to the Hebrews (5:6; 7:17, 21). The oath means that the effectiveness of Jesus' priesthood is guaranteed.

Secondly, there is the contrast between the priests of the Old Testament who were mere men, and our high priest who is the “Son” – fully God and fully man. And lastly, there is the contrast between the Old Testament priests who are “weak” and the Son who has been “made perfect” forever.<sup>xii</sup>

What does it mean that Jesus Christ as our high priest has been “made perfect?” Wasn’t he already perfect? Yes, he was perfect in his moral character. But this verse is talking about being fully qualified to be our helper and deliverer. To be our *helper* in time of need, Jesus had to suffer in his earthly body. Hebrews 2:10 says:

*In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.*

In his suffering, Jesus was qualified to be our pioneer captain helping us through suffering. But not only is he our helper, he is also our deliverer. Hebrews 5:9 says, “*Once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.*” Only through the suffering of the cross could Jesus be our deliverer, our savior.

It is in these two senses that Jesus has been made perfect. And as we keep our eyes on him, we too are being made perfect. That is, we are being brought to completion, to maturity. But the only way to get there is to realize that Jesus Christ, our high priest, is just what we need. In fact, he is really all that we need.

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<sup>i</sup> And Jesus meets this need for perseverance, because he always lives to intercede for us and therefore is able to “save completely” (Hebrews 7:25).

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 4:1-5.

<sup>iii</sup> Leviticus 21:1ff., 16ff.

<sup>iv</sup> That this is the most likely interpretation is seen in the context of Hebrews 4. The entire verse reads: “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has *gone through the heavens*, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—*yet was without sin*” Hebrews 4:14-16. The phrase “yet was without sin” seems to correspond to “separated from sinners” in Hebrews 7:26 and the phrase “gone through the heavens” seems to correspond to the phrase “exalted above the heavens” in Hebrews 7:26

<sup>v</sup> David J. MacLeod “Christ, The Believer’s High Priest: An Exposition of Hebrews 7:26-28,” *BibliothecaSacra* 162 (July-September 2005), 341.

<sup>vi</sup> *Yoma* 4.41b; 5:53b and 6.66a-66b, in *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Mo’ed*, ed. I. Epstein, trans. Leo Jung (London: Soncino, 1938), 3:165, 196-97 as cited by David J. MacLeod “Christ, The Believer’s High Priest: An Exposition of Hebrews 7:26-28,” *BibliothecaSacra* 162 (July-September 2005), 339.

<sup>vii</sup> The writer to the Hebrews knew better than we do what took place in the Temple at that period of time. There is reason to believe that the Jewish High Priest did offer a daily sacrifice. References in Philo and Ecclesiasticus seem to imply this. He may be referring to both the annual sacrifice made by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement and to the later custom of daily sacrifices made by the High Priest (Leviticus 6:12-13)

<sup>viii</sup> The “once for all” nature of Christ’s sacrifice is an extremely important theme in this book (Hebrews 9:12; 10:10; 9:7, 26, 28).

<sup>ix</sup> “But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.” Hebrews 10:12. Just a word here about the Catholic Mass. While I lived in Europe I had many opportunities to both

fellowship with Roman Catholic believers as well as occasionally preach in their churches. I grew up hearing it often said that, in the Roman Catholic Mass, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was repeated again and again. However, this is *not* what the Roman Catholic Church officially teaches. The Mass is not a repetition of the sacrifice of Christ, but what they call a "realization" of his sacrifice in the present. The Mass, they say, helps us bridge the separation of time and brings us face to face with the reality of his once-for-all death. While this is what the Catholic Church officially teaches, this is not what is understood by the majority of Catholics. I have found that the majority of congregants and priests alike believe that each time the Mass occurs, Jesus Christ is being re-sacrificed in a very real, literal sense.

<sup>x</sup> Adapted from James Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1970), 104-5.

<sup>xi</sup> Herveus, a 12<sup>th</sup> Century Christian writer, wrote that four questions must be asked about any sacrifice: (1) What is offered? (2) To whom is it offered? (3) By whom is it offered? And (4) For whom is it offered? In this case, Jesus offered "himself," whose life is blameless and innocent. To whom is this sacrifice offered? To the one true God who alone can forgive sin. By whom is it offered? By the only eternal high priest, Jesus Christ himself. And finally, for whom is it offered? Jesus Christ offered himself for sinners like you and me. David J. MacLeod "Christ, The Believer's High Priest: An Exposition of Hebrews 7:26-28," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162 (July-September 2005), 343.

<sup>xii</sup> The high priests of the Old Testament had several weaknesses, which demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the Old Testament priesthood: First, they were *mortal*: "Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office..." (Hebrews 7:23). Second, they were *sinful*: "...he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins..." (Hebrews 7:27). And third, they were *ineffective*. Their sacrifices did not remove the stain of sin and guilt: "This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper" (Hebrews 9:9)