

## HEBREWS CHAPTER 5

### **[III] CHRIST QUALIFIES FOR THE HIGH PRIESTHOOD (4:14 - 5:10)**

#### **2. Every high priest must be appointed by God and be a merciful and sympathetic person (5:1-4).**

a. The first qualification: a high priest must be able to identify with the weakness of the people he represents, sympathize with them and deal gently with them (5:2-3).

**5:1.** Gifts and sacrifices are both qualified by the words “for sins”. The writer has especially in mind the yearly sacrifice presented on the Day of Atonement, when the high priest was required to discharge the sacrificial functions (cf. 9:7).

**5:2.** Able to deal gently. Since the reign of king David the high priests came from the family of Zadok. David divided the Levites into groups corresponding to the sons of Levi: Gershon, Kohath and Merari (1 Chron 23:6). Aaron was a descendent of Kohath (1 Chron 23:13). Eleazar was a descendent of Aaron (1 Chron 24:1). Zadok was a descendent of Eleazar (1 Chron 24:3). With the help of Zadok and Ahimelech king David organised the divisions of priests (1 Chron 24:3). The last high priest in the line of Zadok was Onias III, who was assassinated in 171 B.C. (2 Macc 3:34). During the 240 years from the fall of the house of Zadok to the destruction of the second temple in A.D. 70 there were very few high priests in Israel who manifested the personal qualities required by God for the fulfilment of their sacred office. The high priests came from the liberal party of the Sadducees who supported the political and cultural Hellenisation (making Greek) of Judea.

Able to deal gently means that the high priest should not be filled with indignation, irritation or exasperation against the sinners and their sin, but bear with them in sympathy and make expiation for their sins. Aaron is credited with exemplary forbearance in face of the repeated provocation and envy of those on whose behalf he served as high priest (Num 14:5; 16:22,47f; Ps 106:16).

Those who are ignorant and are going astray. This is probably a hendiadys meaning, “Those who go astray through ignorance”. The law prescribed sin-offerings for people who succumbed to the moral weaknesses that are common to mankind - for people who sinned unintentionally (Num 15:28). However, there were no sin-offerings for those who sinned defiantly and intentionally (Num 15:30-31). The high priest may sympathise with people who erred through ignorance, because he himself was prone to the same weaknesses. The high priest, Joshua son of Jehozadak, had his unfitness for the office of high priest removed by the cleansing pronouncement of God (Zech 3:3-5). Aaron was in no condition to make priestly intercession to God for the people on whom he had brought the great sin of idolatry (Ex 32:1-6). But it was Moses who went into the presence of God to make atonement for their sin and procure Gods forgiveness for them (Ex 32:11-14,31-32).

**5:3.** The high priests had to offer sacrifices for their own sins. Every high priest during the Old Testament period had to present a sin-offering for himself as well as for his people (Lev 16:6). In contrast, the High Priest of Christians was sinless and had no need to offer a preliminary sacrifice for himself (7:27).

b. The second qualification: a high priest must be appointed by God to his office; to represent people before God in matters related to God, e.g. to offer gifts and sacrifices that make atonement for their sins (5:1,4).

**5:4.** No man can set himself up as a high priest! He must be called by God! No man can hold this office validly when he is appointed by some earthly political or religious authority! After the assassination of Onias III, Jason and Menelaus were appointed to the high priesthood by the wicked king Antiochus IV (175-163 B.C.), to whom the book of Daniel refers to as “the little horn” (Daniel 7:8,20-21,24-25; 8:9-12; 11:21-45). The Hasmonean high priests were also appointed by kings. After the fall of the Hasmonean house, the high priests were appointed successively by Herod the Great (37-4 B.C.), Archelaus (4 B.C. - A.D. 6), Roman governors (A.D. 6-41), and members of the Herod family (A.D. 41-66). The last high priest, Phanni, son of Samuel, was appointed by popular ballot during the war against the Romans (A.D. 67-70). Judaism became more and more man-made and man-controlled.

Aaron, the first high priest of Israel, occupied his office by Gods appointment (Ex 28:1ff; Lev 8:1ff; Num 16:5; 17:5; 18:1ff; Ps 105:26) and so did his heirs and successors (Num 20:23ff; 25:10ff). Samuel was not of Aaronic descent, but exercised an intercessory and sacrificial ministry like that of the Aaronic priests by a direct and special call from God (1 Sam 6:3ff). Note how Moses and Samuel are identified in such a special role (Jer 15:1; Ps 99:6).

Thus, if the author of Hebrews is to maintain that Jesus Christ is the High Priest of his people, then he must produce comparable evidence that Jesus Christ had been called by God.

### **3. Christ qualifies for the high priesthood in another order (5:5-10).**

The author presents them in reverse order.

#### **a. The first qualification: Jesus Christ was appointed by God.**

**5:5.** Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. Jesus Christ did not assume the high priestly office with its dignity by his own initiative. He was called to it by God, who acclaimed him as his Son in the words of Psalm 2:7, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father." In Hebrews 1:5 it was explained that the word 'today' refers to the day of Christ's enthronement - the day when the Most High God gave public notice that he had exalted the crucified Jesus as "both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). The same God who acclaimed Jesus Christ as his Son has also acclaimed him as perpetual high priest.

**5:6.** You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4). The Qumran community made a distinction between 'the lay Messiah' (the Messiah of Israel, the prince of the house of David) and 'the priestly Messiah' (the Messiah of Aaron). The author of Hebrews argues that Jesus Christ, who was acclaimed by God as the Davidic Messiah in Psalm 2:7 was also acclaimed by God as the High Priest in Psalm 110:4. Christians acknowledge not two Messiahs, but one, and that one is both king and high priest. But if the Messiah of David's line is high priest as well as king, he cannot be a 'Messiah of Aaron', because Aaron belonged to the tribe of Levi and David belonged to the tribe of Judah (cf. 7:14). There is a Scripture that speaks of another priestly order and designates the Davidic King as High Priest of this order - the order of Melchizedek.

Melchizedek makes his appearance in Genesis 14:18 as 'king of Salem' (probably Jerusalem, cf. Ps 76:2) and 'priest of God Most High' (Hebrew: El Elyon, who is identified with JaHWeH in Gen 14:22). When centuries later Jerusalem fell into the hands of king David and became his capitol city (2 Sam 5:6ff), he and his heirs became successors to Melchizedek's kingship, and probably also (in a titular capacity) to the priesthood of God Most High.

Throughout the period of the kings, the chief priesthood in the Jerusalem temple was exercised by the Levitical priesthood (the family of Zadok), which is quite distinct from the Davidic line and never laid claim to the succession of the order of Melchizedek.

But under the Hasmoneans (166-34 B.C.), from Jonathan Maccabeeus (143 B.C.) onwards, the chief priesthood and the chief civil power in Israel were combined in one person. But also the Hasmoneans had nothing to do with Melchizedek. Many pious Jews and especially the community at Qumran refused to recognize their usurpation of the high priestly office. They hoped that one day the legitimate line of Zadok would again be invested with the high priestly office in a purified temple in a new Jerusalem. But also these Jews did not envisage a union between the anointed priest and the anointed king of the new age.

The writer to the Hebrews is the first to apply Psalm 110:4 to prove the divine call of Jesus Christ to the high priestly office.

#### **b. The second qualification: Jesus Christ was a merciful high priest.**

**5:7.** Jesus Christ had the ability to sympathise with his people. He was a merciful and faithful high priest, made like his brothers in every respect and able to sympathise with their temptations (2:17-18) and weaknesses (4:15). This qualification is now elaborated. These tests and trials befell him "in the days of his flesh" (in the days of his earthly life, Jn 1:14). This expression emphasises the condition of his human nature before his resurrection: he was like every other human being, except for sin. "In the days of his flesh" does not imply that he terminated his human nature when he was exalted into heaven. He was exalted into heaven in his glorified and Spirit controlled physical nature (Rom 1:2-4; Phil 2:21).

He offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears. Jesus probably cried more often, but the reference is here to his prayer and tears in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was there that Jesus said, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Lk 22:42). These words do not express that Jesus was unwilling to die and prayed to be delivered from death, but that his prayer was not heard! These words are further explained, when Jesus said, "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me" (Jn 18:11)? Jesus was certainly willing to die, but in his weakened human nature *he identified completely with his followers* who would also later 'drink the cup of suffering' (Mt 20:23). The point to be emphasized in the narrative of Luke 22 is no so much that the prayer of Jesus was heard, as that it needed to be heard - Jesus needed heavenly aid to drink the appointed cup. His weakened human nature needed the strengthening of his heavenly Father. His words in Gethsemane echo the words of Psalm 22. "He offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears" might well describe the supplication and complaint of the first part of Psalm 22 - when he was crucified. "He was heard" reflects the second part of Psalm 22 (vs 24) - he was resurrected. The author of

Hebrews does not go into the question of Christ's resurrection. Here he proves that Jesus was qualified to be our High Priest, because throughout his agony and suffering, prayers and tears, his trust in God the Father never failed. What gives reality to the priesthood is that it is no external office: inherited, usurped, or granted by favour, but it is an inward vocation and qualification in experience and character.

He was heard because of his 'godly fear', 'reverent or humble submission'. The fact that the cup was not removed qualifies Jesus Christ all the more to sympathise with his people when they are faced with the mystery of trials, suffering and unanswered prayer. Christians know that their High Priest was tested in the same way and did not seek a way of escape by supernatural means of a kind that they do not have at their disposal. No one may say, "Because Jesus was the Son of God it was different, easier, for him." Jesus Christ did not recourse to miraculous means to relief his hunger in the desert; to escape his trial before the Jews and Romans; or to suffer the agony and pain of being crucified. He refused that angels rescue him (Mt 26:53). 'Humble submission' (ευσεβεια) is *the attitude of recognising the path of the Father's will and following it to the end!*

**5:8.** Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered. It is the most natural thing in the world for human children to learn obedience by suffering. Human fathers 'discipline (παιδεια), rebuke (ελεγγχο) and punish (μαστιγοω)" their children in order to produce holiness and a harvest of righteousness (12:5-11). But here the author is not speaking of an ordinary human son, but the Son of God. Although he was the Son of God he was granted no exemption from the common law that *learning comes by suffering!*

In what sense did Jesus learn obedience by suffering? Ordinary human beings learn obedience by the unpleasant consequences which follow disobedience. But not so with Jesus Christ.

i) He started his life on earth by obedience (Lk 2:29).

ii) While other people confessed their sins and were baptised, he asked to be baptised with water (his first baptism) without any consciousness of sin, Instead he resolved to place himself unreservedly at God's disposal for the accomplishment of God's saving purpose. "In order to fulfil all righteousness" means to conform to all that God requires (Mt 3:15). That is why he speaks of 'drinking the cup of suffering' as 'a baptism with which would be baptised', a baptism with suffering (suffering that fell upon him, his second baptism)(Mk 10:38f; Lk 12:50). By doing so, Jesus associated himself publicly with sinners.

iii) Throughout his life Jesus associated himself publicly with sinners. Throughout his life by what he suffered he learned what obedience to God involved in practice in the conditions of human life on earth.

iv) Up to the time that "he was numbered with transgressors" (Lk 22:37) on the cross, *he did not rebel against the path of God's will and he did not flee from it!* Instead he gave himself to his torturers, who plucked out his hair and spat in his face (cf. Isa 54:4-5). The sufferings of Jesus were the necessary price of his obedience!

Jesus Christ was never imperfect in his person or character and therefore needed to be made perfect. He was always 100% God and 100% Man and 100% sinless. In his human nature he 'was made perfect' in the sense that he 'was perfectly qualified' to be the Author and Mediator of the salvation of his people.

The Christians for whom the letter to the Hebrews was written found that their faith and obedience exposed them to trials and suffering, which they could escape by renouncing their faith or by drawing less attention to it. They were faced with the question: "Should they fall back and lose everything? Or should they press on and gain perfection?" The author urges them to press on (6:1) and in spite of suffering to follow the example of Jesus Christ.

**5:9-10.** Through suffering Jesus Christ was made perfect (2:10) and became the source of eternal salvation (5:9).

His suffering made him fully qualified to be the 'Leader, Pioneer, Founder' (αρχηγον)(2:10) or 'Source, Cause, Author' (αιτιος)(5:9) of the eternal salvation of his people. His way of humiliation led to his exaltation.

*The salvation of Christians is eternal, because it is based on the sacrifice of Christ, once for all accomplished, never to be repeated, and permanently valid.*

This salvation is made available to the obedient - thus another encouragement to persevere in their loyalty to Christ, in whom alone salvation is to be found.

This Christ was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

He was appointed by God.

#### **[IV] WARNING AGAINST APOSTASY OF MAN AND ENCOURAGEMENT OF GOD (5:11 - 6:20)**

##### **1. Exhortation to pursue spiritual maturity (5:11 - 6:3).**

a. The immature and the mature.

**5:11.** We have much to say about Melchizedek. At this point he admonishes the Hebrew Christians for their lack of spiritual growth. Later he continues his exposition of Melchizedek (7:1).

Melchizedek was a subject of much speculation among later Jews and later Christian. Some Jews regarded Melchizedek as the prototype of the great priest of the age to come, but in a way that distinguished him from the Messiah of Psalm 110:1. As a result of the polemic with the Christians, Judaism tended to take a less favourable view of Melchizedek. Because he blessed Abraham before he blessed God (Gen 14:19f), God took the priesthood away from him and gave it to Abraham.

Why is the priesthood of Melchizedek so important? Because these Jewish Christians tended to slide away from the distinct Christian truths about Christ as the only high priest (prophet and king) back into distinct Jewish truths, like the emphasis on Moses and the law, the Levitical priesthood, the temple worship, the sacrifices and Israel. The only antidote against backsliding is moving forward - growing to maturity as Christians!

Hard to explain, 'difficult to interpret' (δυσερμηνευτος).

Their hearing had become 'dull', 'sluggish', 'slow' (νωθρος). The word is also used of the numb limbs of a sick lion. In Proverbs 22:29 it means 'lazy, indolent'.

**5:12. By this time you ought to be teachers.** God intends all Christians to be 'teachers' (cf. Mt 28:19; Col 3:16). Christians may distinguish between three kinds of teachers:

i) The people called to fulfil *the office of a teacher* in the Church (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11-12; Matthew 23:10; James 3:1).

ii) The people given *the spiritual gift of teaching* (Romans 12:7).

iii) Each and every Christians commanded to *teach others* (Matthew 28:19; Colossians 3:16), in the sense of sharing and passing on to others what you have learned and become convinced of, whether to an individual, to a small group or to a larger group of people.

You need someone to teach you the elementary truths, the 'ABC' of the biblical revelation or Christian faith (cf. 6:1-2). You need 'milk, not solid food'. 'Milk' is a symbol of the easy teachings of the Bible, the ABC of the Christian revelation. In contrast to milk, (1 Cor 3:2), there is 'spiritual wisdom' (1 Cor 2:6-15). And in contrast to 'milk' (Heb 5:12), there is 'solid food' (f.e. the teachings in the letter to the Hebrews!)

**5:13. Anyone who lives on milk is an infant.** He is still a Christian 'baby'. He is a Christian (cf. 1 Cor 3:1), but has not yet grown to maturity and significant changes have not taken place in his life (1 Cor 3:2-4).

He is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. In this context it refers to the teaching about Melchizedek and the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ. The Hebrew Christians avoided this topic, because if they were really convinced about this teaching, they would have to sever their ties with the Jews and Jewish thinking. They would have to believe that the Old Testament priesthood with its sacrifices and the Old Testament ceremonial law had been abolished once for all. This would bring them in conflict with the Jews and it might bring much persecution.

They are still 'unskilled', 'lacking in experience' (απειρος). They have not been tested and are still ignorant.

They lack the teaching or principle of righteousness (λογου δικαιοσυνης). Because they do not completely understand the righteousness that Christ acquired and imputes, they also do not understand the right way to live as Christians. The teaching about righteousness means that God has declared me 100% forgiven (righteous) on the basis of Christ's sacrifice of atonement, and from now on until his second coming regards and treats me as 100% forgiven (righteous) in his eyes. It means that through his Holy Spirit he is constantly making me in my personality, character and behaviour more and more what I already am in my position in Jesus Christ.

**5:14. But solid food is for the mature** (τελειος). They are Christians, who not only are spiritually mature and understand the most important teachings of the Bible, but have also accepted the adult responsibilities of Christians.

Who by constant use have been trained (των δια την εξιν τα αισθητηρια γεγυμνασμενα εχοντων).

The mature Christians have been well trained up to a point of being fit (γεγυμνασμενα)(participle perfect passive). The perfect tense emphasises that the training had produced a certain standard of fitness. By exercising or practising (δια την εξιν). They have acquired skill through exercise.

Their senses or faculties that can make moral distinctions (τα αισθητηρια). To distinguish (προς διακρισιν) between good and bad. The mature Christians have in the course of growing spiritually built up a standard of what is right and wrong in God's eyes, so that they can pass discriminating judgement on moral situations as they arise.

Some people say, "Test everything. Hold on to the good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21) gives Christians a license to test everything, including other religions, occultism, moral perversion, etc. But 1 Thessalonians 5:22 says, "Avoid every kind of evil". Thus a Christian may test only what is NOT evil, and then hold on to whatever is good!