

HE WAS HEARD

SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

Hebrews 5:1-10
 Twelfth Message
 Bernard Bell
 August 27, 2023

“I cried to the LORD, and he heard my voice.” We read these words many times in Scripture, especially in the Psalms. We heard them in our call to worship, Psalm 18, attributed to David:

**In my distress I called to the LORD;
 I cried to my God for help.
 From his temple he heard my voice;
 my cry came before him, into his ears...
 He brought me out into a spacious place;
 he rescued me because he delighted in me.
 The LORD has dealt with me according to my righteousness;
 according to the cleanness of my hands he has rewarded
 me...
 To the faithful you show yourself faithful.**

(Ps 18:6, 19-20, 25a NIV)

This is the sort of psalm we like to read. The psalmist has remained faithful to the Lord throughout all his adversities. He has cried out to the Lord in faith. The Lord has heard, and rewarded the psalmist's faithfulness by delivering him. To the faithful he has shown himself faithful.

Jonah borrowed extensively from this psalm when he cried out to the Lord from the belly of the fish:

**In my distress I called to the LORD,
 and he answered me.
 From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help,
 and you listened to my cry. (Jonah 2:2)**

Jonah was heard and the Lord delivered him from the fish. To the faithful... But Jonah wasn't faithful: he was running away from God. Nevertheless, despite his unfaithfulness, the Lord heard his cry and delivered him.

Women also cried out to the Lord in their distress: Hagar, Hannah, Elizabeth. They too were heard. God answered their cries.

But God doesn't always save people from death, even those who have been faithful to him. Take Abel for example. The Lord said to Cain after he had killed his brother, “Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground” (Gen 4:10). It's a bit late by then! Why had God not saved faithful Abel from death? Abel alive never cried out. In fact, Abel alive never speaks. He was born, kept flocks, brought an offering which the Lord accepted, and was killed by his brother. That is the sum total of his life. We are told the meaning of Cain's name, but not Abel's. The story itself gives the meaning of his name. Abel is the same word translated in Ecclesiastes as vanity, futility, or meaninglessness. It means a puff of wind, something that is next to nothingness. Here one moment, gone the next. Alive Abel didn't speak, but dead his blood spoke, as indeed Hebrews states (12: 24). The cry of Abel's spilt blood was heard by God. His was the first death in the Bible. He was the first martyr, the first person killed while and for being faithful. His was the first innocent blood to be shed. Blood that cried out to be heard, blood that cried out for justice. But what could God do? To the faithful he proves himself

faithful. But how could he be faithful to Abel's shed blood?

Turning to the other end of the Bible, at the opening of the fifth seal in Revelation, John saw the martyrs under the altar. They cried out in a loud voice, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (Rev 6:10). They were told to rest awhile, to chill until the full number of martyrs had been killed. Some comfort that! More martyrs, more innocent blood. God heard but what could he do? How could he be faithful to the innocent shed blood of the martyrs?

The Book of Hebrews is awash in blood. The word *blood* is mentioned far more frequently than in any other NT book. It is awash in blood because the ministry of priests is awash in blood. Priesthood is central to Hebrews, especially the ministry of the risen and exalted Jesus as our high priest. Last week we covered the introduction to the great central section of the Book of Hebrews (4:14-10:25), about Jesus as our great high priest. The invitation to draw near to God with bold confidence suggests the superiority of the high-priestly ministry of Jesus.

The preacher next shows this superiority by comparing the two high-priesthoods of old and new covenants (5:1-10). The passage is in two main sections: the high priesthood of Aaron and his descendants under the old covenant (5:1-4), and the high priesthood of Christ under the new covenant (5:5-10).

1. Levitical High Priest (5:1-4)

The preacher first describes the high priesthood under the old covenant:

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. This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. And no one takes this honor on himself, but he receives it when called by God, just as Aaron was. (Heb 5:1-4)

Verse 1 briefly describes the office of high priest. He was of the people, but appointed by God. He represented the people before God. He mediated the interface between God and his people by offering sacrifices for sins, so that a sinful people could live with a holy God in their midst.

After this brief summary, the ministry of the high priest is detailed in vv. 2-3. “He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray.” Israel was a sinful people, but the Lord provided a sacrificial system whereby sins could be dealt with. This provision applied to unintentional sins, to straying from God's law unknowingly. There was no provision for high-handed sins; the penalty for these was generally death. The only remedy was God's mercy and forgiveness. So David cried out after his high-handed sins were found out:

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions. (Ps 51:1)

Such forgiveness was beyond the remit of the high priest. He mediated cleansing for unintentional sins. He thus dealt gently with the people. Literally he moderated his passion, his anger, at their unintentional failings. Why was he able to do this? Because he himself was subject to the same weakness—literally, he was clothed in weakness. The high priest wore resplendent garments. When I preached a series on the Tabernacle (Exod 25–40; 2016–19) we had up here on the stage a mannequin dressed in a beautiful set of high-priestly garments made by Robin Haney. But in reality the high priest was clothed in weakness, the same weakness as the people—the weakness of being prone to sin.

Therefore he had “to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people.” This he did on the Day of Atonement, when he passed through the inner curtain into the Most Holy Place. He took with him the blood of two animals, one for his own sins, the other for the sins of the people. The effectiveness of the high priest was limited because he was sinful like the people and had to offer sacrifices for his own sin.

Finally, the high priest did not appoint himself to office (4). Instead he was called by God, just as Aaron. When Israel was at Mt Sinai, God designated Aaron and his four sons to be the priests as a hereditary office, with the the high-priesthood passing from Aaron through the eldest son.

In summary, the office of high priest was established by God to interface on behalf of the people with God by offering sacrifices for sins. But the high priest was limited in his efficacy, being sinful himself. Nevertheless, Aaron was called by God to this office, this calling passing to his descendants. The high-priesthood was a gift from God, but it was limited in its scope.

2. Christ as High Priest (5:5-10)

Beginning with “In the same way,” the preacher now describes Christ as high priest. He works his way through the points made about “every high priest” but in reverse order. Verses 5-6 are the counterpart to v. 4:

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.”

And he says in another place,

“You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.” (5:5-6)

Aaron did not take the honor of high-priesthood on himself, but was called by God. Likewise, Jesus did not take the glory on himself—honor and glory here serving as a word pair. He too was called by God, and the preacher goes back into Israel’s Scriptures to show how.

He quotes two psalms, each beginning, “You are...” He takes these as addressing Christ. The first is Psalm 2:7, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.” He has already used this verse in chapter 1. There he quoted seven passages to show the superiority of the Son to angels. The first is Psalm 2:7. The last is Psalm 110:1, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your

feet?” These two verses are also used elsewhere in the NT to understand the status of the risen and exalted Jesus as the true Davidic king.

Now the preacher reaches further into Psalm 110, quoting v. 4: “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.” He draws the connection between *You are my Son*, and *You are a priest forever*. Indeed he is *the* priest, the high priest. His priesthood is connected to, indeed based upon, his status as enthroned Son. The book’s opening sentence had already connected priesthood and enthronement as Son: “After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (1:3).

But how is this possible since Jesus is not of the tribe of Levi, from which came Aaron and his priestly line? There is a more ancient order of priesthood than the Levitical priesthood in Aaron: the order of Melchizedek. This Melchizedek, whom we read about in Genesis 14, was both king and priest. Furthermore, he was associated with Abraham—Father Abraham, with whom God made the covenant to start calling out for himself a people. We will hear much more about Melchizedek in chapter 7.

In vv. 7-9 the preacher contrasts Christ’s high-priestly ministry with that of “every high priest” in vv. 2-3. He addresses the same issues, but in reverse order. Every high priest offers sacrifices for the sins of both himself and the people (3). Christ also presented an offering:

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. (5:7)

Christ’s offering was not sacrificial blood for sins. He offered “prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears.” Since he offered them “to the one who could save him from death,” it is easy to assume he was asking to be spared from death. That he was like the psalmist or Jonah: “In my distress I called to the Lord, and he heard me,” and was delivered.

Many connect these prayers and petitions to the Garden of Gethsemane. We heard Matthew’s account as our Scripture reading (Matt 26:36-46). We call this the Agony in the Garden, agony meaning struggle. We see Jesus three times going aside to pray to his Father, as he struggles to submit his will to the Father’s will. Was he heard? The text is silent. The Father is silent. But Jesus heard that silence and correctly understood it to mean that there was no change of plan.

The silence told him that it was indeed the Father’s plan that he drink the cup. We see this acceptance in the progression of his prayers. His first prayer: “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me” (26:39). Silence. His second prayer: “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it” (26:42). Silence. But heard in that silence was his Father’s will. And so he ended his first prayer, “Yet not as I will, but as you will.” And he ended his second prayer, “may your will be done.”

Jesus spoke and he was heard. The Father spoke silence and he was heard. Jesus did not interpret the Father’s silence as silent treatment, but as a call to continue in faithful perseverance in obedient submission to his Father’s will.

Does God really hear our prayers? We may offer up our “prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears,” but to no avail. We hear silence. When the prophets of Baal got no response to their fervent prayers, Elijah mocked them: “Shout louder!...Surely he is a god!

Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened" (1 Kgs 18:27).

Do we feel that God is too busy to hear and respond to our prayers? Or that we are not important enough? Or not worthy of his attention? Or that we have done something wrong and he is giving us the silent treatment? Or that we haven't prayed with enough faith? There are so many reasons that we can think our prayers are not working, that they are met with silence. We become discouraged, disillusioned, angry, let down. We may give up.

Was Jesus heard? Yes, he was. How did God reply? With silence. How did Jesus hear this silence? As a call to continued faithfulness, persevering in obedience. He carried on, confident that God saw him, even if he heard no tangible answer from him. This is what we are called to do in this life of faith, during the days of our earthly pilgrimage.

The three prayers of Jesus were enough. He heard his Father's will in his silence. He woke his disciples and said, "Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!" (Matt 26:45-46).

God did not save him. Jesus allowed himself to be betrayed and handed over. He allowed himself to be put on trial and condemned. He allowed himself to be crucified, the most shameful and painful death ever conceived. Through all this mistreatment Jesus was silent. "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth... as a sheep before its shearers is silent" (Isa 53:7). God heard this silence and himself stayed silent.

Finally Jesus broke his silence: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). To the malefactor on the cross next to him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). He spoke to his mother and to the beloved disciple, entrusting the one into the care of the other. He spoke tender words of caring love.

The end drew nigh. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). We call this the cry of dereliction, and refer to Jesus as the derelict on the cross. Forsaken by all, even by God. We so easily assume that this means that God turned his face away. But I don't think that is right. Jesus was quoting Psalm 22:1. But I am sure that Jesus had the entire psalm in mind, including v. 24:

**For he has not despised or scorned
the suffering of the afflicted one;
he has not hidden his face from him
but has listened to his cry for help. (Ps 22:24)**

Psalm 22 is yet another psalm in this category of "I cried to the Lord, and he heard my voice." Still God did not save him from death. But I am sure that the Father was looking with deep love as Jesus said his last words. "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). Here he quotes Psalm 31:5, yet another psalm of "I cried to the Lord, and he heard my voice." Then the final, climactic, triumphal cry, "It is finished!" (John 19:30). Jesus handed over his spirit.

God did not save him from death. But Jesus had "offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death." Why had God not done so? Furthermore, we next read that "he was heard." In all the psalms of distress that means deliverance. But God had not delivered. It was Jesus who had delivered, as he handed over his spirit. How do we make sense of this verse?

Jesus was heard! "He was heard because of his reverent submission" (NIV), his devout behavior (NAS2020). The idea here is godly fear, what we used to call the fear of the Lord. This doesn't mean that we are terrified of God, but that we live in reverence to God. We orient our lives onto God in devotion to him and in submission to his will.

Right to the very end this is how Jesus lived his life, oriented onto God his Father. The language of "prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears" is stock language that is used elsewhere of those who cried out in distress and the Lord heard their voice. It is used of the righteous sufferers, of godly saints who remained loyal to God in the face of suffering, even when facing martyrdom. God did not necessarily hear their cries to be saved from death. But he heard their reverent submission in the face of death. The same was true for Jesus.

We are called to this same reverent submission to God. It doesn't necessarily mean doing great things for God. It does mean being faithful and obedient. The Lord, "unto whom all hearts be open," knows our hearts. He sees the heart that is oriented onto him in loving and loyal devotion, the heart that has within it the fear of the Lord. He hears those who are devoted to him, however weak they may be.

When Jesus died on the cross, he was the first human who had been completely faithful and obedient all the way to death. "It is finished!" he cried. A cry of triumph! He had remained faithful to the end. He had shown reverent devotion to God all the way to the end.

The old order of high priests offered up sacrifices for their sins and the sins of the people (3). But Jesus offered up himself as a life fully devoted to God. And he was heard.

He was laid in the tomb on Friday. Saturday was a day of silence, the most in-between of all days. On Sunday came the answer: resurrection! Jesus offered himself "to the one who could save him from death." But this last phrase is better translated "out of death"; the preposition is quite clear. This is what God did. Innocent blood had cried out to be heard. It had cried out for justice. True restorative justice was given in resurrection.

In his resurrection lay justice also for Abel's spilt blood that had been crying out since the beginning of the Bible. And justice is provided proleptically, in advance, for the martyrs under the altar at the other end of the Bible. John sees that they have been given a judgment (Rev 20:4). This is not the authority to judge, but a judicial ruling. The judge rules in their favor: "They came to life." This was possible because Jesus, the supreme martyr, was dead but is now alive.

At his exaltation Jesus took his own blood into the true sanctuary, where he provided purification for sins. There his "sprinkled blood ... speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" (12:24). We will hear a lot more about this as we move further into Hebrews.

So that is the first contrast between the Old Covenant priest, and Jesus our great high priest. The former priest had to offer up sacrifices for his own sin. Jesus has offered up his own self as the perfectly-devoted one.

The second contrast between the two high-priesthoods is given in v. 8:

Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered. (5:8)

The Son was schooled in obedience. This doesn't mean that he was disobedient and had to be taught how to be obedient. No, he was

always obedient, because he always lived in reverent submission to his Father. But he had to work out that obedience in all the circumstances of life. It is relatively easy to be obedient when life is going well and it is to our short-term advantage. But Jesus was schooled in obedience by suffering.

There is a wordplay in Greek that cannot be translated into English: he learned (*emathen*) from what he suffered (*epathen*). This was a familiar saying in the ancient Greek world: *emathein epathein*, *To learn is to suffer*, and vice versa. Perhaps the nearest we have to this is “No pain, no gain.” But here in Silicon Valley and elsewhere there is wide acceptance that one learns from failure not from success. A few years ago we watched SpaceX repeatedly trying to land its booster rockets back on land. Failure after failure. Until at last they started succeeding. Now it is routine. SpaceX is no longer learning from landing boosters. It has moved on to attempting much greater things. We learn when we are tested. We learn through suffering.

High priests of the old order were clothed in weakness as they kept sinning, even if unintentionally (2b). But Jesus our great high priest learned obedience. He “has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (4:15). He is tried and tested, and proven to be without the weakness of sin.

The third contrast with the old order is given in v. 9:

and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. (5:9)

Learning through suffering, Jesus was made perfect. But wasn't Jesus perfect all the time? Was there a time when he was not perfect? Here there is confusion over what we mean by perfect and not perfect. Grammatically, a perfect form of a verb views action as complete; an imperfect form as incomplete. Jesus was brought to the point of completion through suffering. He finished complete because he was obedient all the way. There was never a time when he was sinful or disobedient. But he needed to be tested in all respects to be perfected.

Having reached the *telos*, the goal, Jesus is now the source of eternal salvation. He is therefore far more effective than the old high priest, who was only able to “deal gently” with his fellow Israelites, because he was as encumbered by sin as they were. They were in the same boat together. He could only provide temporary cleansing. But Jesus provides eternal salvation.

Who can access this salvation? Those who are obedient to him. Jesus was obedient to his Father, an obedience that was tried and tested. An obedience that flowed from a life of reverent, submissive devotion to his Father in all things. Now it is our turn to obey, to live

our lives in reverent, submissive devotion. But herein lies our true freedom—freedom to be who God has created human beings to be, to worship and serve him in loving, loyal, obedient faithfulness.

So, in vv. 7-9 we have three strong contrasts between the two orders of high-priesthood, showing the great superiority of Jesus. The old high priest offered repeated sacrifices for sins, both his and the people's; Jesus has offered his own obedient, devoted self. The old was clothed in the weakness of sinfulness; Jesus has learned obedience through suffering and is proven faithful. The old could do no more than deal gently with fellow sinners; Jesus is the source of eternal salvation.

The preacher concludes with a final comparison between the two orders:

and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek. (5:10)

The old high-priesthood was appointed by God. It was inadequate but it was a divine gift. Likewise, Jesus has been designated by God to the office of high priest, but in the more ancient order of Melchizedek, the king-priest. We have such a great high priest! The preacher will go on to describe the person and ministry of this great high priest in much more detail in the coming chapters.

As many of you know, there is a wordplay between hearing and obedience. Any of us who have spent much time in the Scriptures knows this. But even in the secular world this is understood. Truly hearing a command implies executing the command. Hearing and obedience go together.

He was heard. Jesus was heard because of his reverent submission. Because of his obedience which he had mastered through all his sufferings, notably the temptation in the wilderness at the start of his ministry and his Passion (suffering) at the end, running all the way from the Agony in the Garden to his death on the cross. Jesus was obedient because he heard His Master's Voice. We now hear the voice of Jesus and obey him, finding in him the source of eternal salvation. We look to Jesus, who says, “Come, follow me.” We follow the voice of our Pioneer and Forerunner. He has already entered into God's presence. We follow him until we too enter that presence. We follow him in faithful, persevering obedience. This is not a set of rules but a life of devotion to our Lord Jesus with whom we have been united in relationship.

“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” Do we hear his voice? Then let us follow him.

© 2023 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino