Sunday Class **Notes**

The test is not a rebuke delivered for its own sake. It is a question about comfort. Are these the kinds of questions a person who has been a Christian for some time can actually adddress? Why do Paul and James not contradict each other on faith and works? How can there be a sin that does not lead to death, when the wages of sin is death? Why is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit unforgivable, when sins against the Father and the Son are not? Is there consciousness after death? The psalms can seem to say there is not. The account of Lazarus says there is. Why does Jesus, challenged on his identity as God, answer by pointing to places in the Old Testament where men are called gods? How can Ecclesiastes say that the fate of the wicked, the righteous, and the animals is the same? How does "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" prove the resurrection? A new believer may fairly not have answers. A Christian of some years who has never gone into these things is, in the letter's terms, still on milk.

Your Perfect High Priest

Hebrews 4:14–6:20 · English Standard Version

The passage opens on the far side of a warning. Chapter 4 has told the readers to be careful that they do not miss God's rest. Rest in Hebrews is more than one thing. It is salvation by grace through faith rather than by works, the end of trying to earn what cannot be earned. It is also a share in God's own rest, the rest that began when he finished creation, looked at it, and called it very good. And it is, finally, heaven, where that joy and satisfaction are complete. The warning is real. It is followed, almost at once, by assurance.

The shape of these chapters is a movement back and forth. A strong word of warning is given, and then a word of comfort. The comfort is offered, and then a rebuke, because the readers are not able to receive what the comfort depends on. The rebuke is then softened by a word of hope. The warning is not to miss the rest. The assurance is that Jesus will give all the help that is needed. The reason he can give it is that he is high priest.

A high priest is a foreign idea to most of us. We have read the word. We have not lived with the office. When the letter says that Jesus is our high priest, the claim can pass by as a title. It is not a title. It is the reason the help is sufficient.

Your Perfect Helper

The help matters because the need is real. A person who does not know that he needs help, or who thinks he needs only a little, needs more than he has reckoned. There is no reason to fail to finish,

and no reason to miss what God has prepared, because God has provided everything required in Jesus. Jesus is the perfect helper because he is the perfect high priest.

The letter has already named him apostle and high priest, the one who came from heaven and the one who went back. Now it begins to explain the office. Every high priest is taken from among men A high priest can help effectively because he is what those he helps are. He is human. He is appointed on behalf of men in the things that pertain to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. The largest problem is sin. Jesus is in heaven to deal with it. Everything required to reach the finish has been given.

Hebrews 5:1
"For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins."

Qualified by Human Experience

A man could not walk up to the temple and apply for the office. The family had to be right. The body had to be whole. A missing finger was enough to disqualify. There were laws about marriage and about household. The question of how Jesus is qualified is a fair one, and the letter answers it in three ways. The first is his human experience.

We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens. The earthly high priest passed from the outer court inward, and at last into the Most Holy Place. Jesus has passed into heaven. He is there for us. Because we have such a priest, we hold fast the confession.

Hebrews 4:15
"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin."

Sympathy here is understanding at a depth that comes from having been through the thing. I cannot understand what it is to be a Marine. I cannot understand what it is to be a woman. I can understand a life that began in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, wandered through several colleges, and has been spent preaching. Jesus can be our high priest effectively because he can sympathize. He was tempted in every respect as we are. The difference is that he never gave in. That does not make his understanding thinner. It makes it deeper. He faced the temptation of sin without yielding to it, through all the years of his life. He knows what we are in.

The conclusion is to draw near. Prayer, worship, the reading of Scripture, meditation, fellowship with God: none of these is an approach to someone who is puzzled by the failure or impatient with it. He understands. The approach is with confidence, to a throne of grace, to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. The letter piles the words because it wants the feeling to be confidence.

Hebrews 4:16
"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

The same humanity governs how he deals with us. He will not shout, or strike, or look down. He deals gently with the ignorant and the wayward. There is no one more ignorant or misguided than I am, and when I go to him in that condition he deals gently, because he himself is beset with weakness. The weakness is not past tense. He is still human. He still has a human body. He will have it forever. There is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. The real cost of his priesthood was not only the cross. It was taking on humanity, and keeping it. Paul describes the same human condition in Romans 7: the good he wants he does not do, the evil he does not want he does, and the deliverance is from God. That is the experience Jesus entered, and it is why he can help.

Hebrews 5:2
"He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness."

Qualified by Divine Appointment

No one takes the honor of the priesthood to himself. He is called by God. Jesus did not glorify himself so as to become a high priest. The one who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you," appointed him. The begetting in that line is not the birth. It is the resurrection and the exaltation. God appointed him, and the appointment is the qualification.

Hebrews 5:5
"So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you.'"

Qualified by Obedience

The third qualification is obedience. In the days of his flesh he offered prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. That is a strange thing to say of Jesus. He is God, and God is omniscient. He set some of that knowledge aside. He said that no one knows the day of his return, not the angels, not the Son, but the Father. He also learned by experience, by having what he had not had. Having been made perfect, complete for the office, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

Hebrews 5:9
"And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him."

Not of Aaron

A Jewish reader stops the argument here. Jesus cannot be a high priest. He is not of Aaron, not of Levi. The requirement was not merely to be a Levite but to be of that family. Jesus was of Judah. A man of Judah had tried the office before. Uzziah was a great and successful king, and he decided one day to burn incense in the temple. He was struck with leprosy. How, then, does a man of Judah become high priest? His priesthood is not Levitical. It is after the order of Melchizedek.

Melchizedek appears once, and strangely. Abraham goes out with a few hundred men, fights five kings, and wins. On the way back he meets this figure. Abraham gives him a tenth. Melchizedek gives Abraham a blessing. They speak, and Melchizedek is not seen again. He is mentioned in Psalm 110, and nowhere else in the story. He arrives like a figure out of an old tale and is gone. There is a great deal in him that the writer wants to open. He cannot. The readers have not learned enough to hear it.

Dull of Hearing

The writer has much to say about Melchizedek, and it is hard to explain, because the readers have become dull of hearing. They were not always so. When they first became Christians they were eager listeners, the kind of people Acts describes as devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching. They have become dull. By this time they ought to be teachers. They need someone to teach them the elementary principles again. They need milk, not solid food. Everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness.

Hebrews 5:12
"For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food."

To be accustomed to a thing is to be used to handling it, skilled at it. Some people are accustomed to tools, or to software, or to the work of their trade. If an AR-15 were handed to me with instructions to break it down, clean it, reassemble it, and fire it, I might get it apart. After that I would be finished. Others would be done with the whole task while I was still looking at the pieces. The question the passage puts to us is whether we handle the Bible with anything like the skill we bring to the other things we handle.

Skill comes by practice. The mature are those who, by practice, have their senses trained to discern good and evil. Practice means reading, studying, thinking, taking notes, outlining, working the sentences. The foundations are never abandoned. That is a rule of every kind of growth. A person does not sign up for a marathon without having run a mile. A student does not begin hard algebra without knowing the multiplication tables. The letter is not saying the basics may be discarded. It is saying the time has come to stop circling only the basics.

Hebrews 5:14
"But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil."

What He Calls Basic

What the letter calls elementary is revealing, because much of it is what we treat as difficult. Repentance from dead works. Faith toward God. Instruction about washings, and the plural is itself a question, since we tend to speak of one baptism. The laying on of hands. The resurrection of the dead. Eternal judgment. He calls these the easy things, and they are the things we struggle to handle.

The test is not a rebuke delivered for its own sake. It is a question about comfort. Are these the kinds of questions a person who has been a Christian for some time can actually work? Why do Paul and James not contradict each other on faith and works? How can there be a sin that does not lead to death, when the wages of sin is death? Why is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit unforgivable, when sins against the Father and the Son are not? Is there consciousness after death? The psalms can seem to say there is not. The account of Lazarus says there is. Why does Jesus, challenged on his identity as God, answer by pointing to places in the Old Testament where men are called gods? How can Ecclesiastes say that the fate of the wicked, the righteous, and the animals is the same? How does "I

am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" prove the resurrection? A new believer may fairly not have answers. A Christian of some years who has never gone into these things is, in the letter's terms, still on milk.

Concluding Thoughts

The final word is a warning, and then a recovery. Failure to go deeper is not a small neglect. The letter speaks of those who have experienced the things of salvation and then fallen away, and says it is impossible to renew them again to repentance. The image is ground. Ground that drinks the rain, receives the blessing of God, and bears fruit is good ground. Ground that receives the rain and bears nothing useful is near to being cursed, and its end is burning. The failure to go forward is treated as a threat to salvation itself.

The rebuke is not the last word. He calls them beloved, and says he is convinced of better things concerning them, things that belong to salvation. The motivation for doing better is that God rewards perseverance. The ground of the confidence is that God is faithful. He promised Abraham, and he swore to Abraham. By two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, there is strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope. The promise was to Abraham, and it reaches us because we inherit what was promised to him. God has sworn, and God has promised, that he will be with his people and help them finish.

> **Hebrews 6:19**
> *"We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain."*

The hope is a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul. It enters behind the curtain, which is to say it enters heaven, the presence of God. Jesus has gone there as a forerunner. A forerunner is followed. He has gone in, and those who hold fast will follow. He is there as high priest forever. The help is complete. The call is to draw near, and to grow up enough to understand the priest we are drawing near to.