

HEBREWS: ANCIENT ENCOURAGEMENT FOR BELIEVERS TODAY

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We know little about the original setting of the Book of Hebrews. We do not know its author, audience or the location of either. We cannot say when it was written or exactly why. We do know that it was written to professing believers who were experiencing a crisis of faith. Their crisis had several possible causes, including persecution, weariness, temptation, boredom and lack of knowledge (10:32-34; 3:12-13; 5:12-14; 6:11-12; 10:32-34; 12:3). With second thoughts about their commitment to Jesus, they were thinking longingly about a comfortable and familiar past. We do not know if the first readers were Jews, Gentiles or a mixed audience. It really does not matter.

A MESSAGE OF ENCOURAGEMENT

What does matter is our author's response, through his self-styled "message of encouragement" that we call Hebrews. His message is really a story, told in four parts:

- * The Son of God became a man, to make his human sisters and brothers the children of God.
- * That man, Jesus, pleased the Father every "today" of his life.
- * He offered his faithful life to the Father in his body on the cross as the ultimate sacrifice for sin.
- * God rescued Jesus out from death and honored him at his right hand in heaven. In his glorified humanity, Jesus now intercedes as high priest for his people.

A SERMON BUILT ON FOUR PSALMS

As superstructure for his story, our author borrows and interprets language from four Psalms (8, 95, 40 and 110). After each major discussion, he sprinkles in a variety of warnings, exhortations and assurances (2:1-4; 3:12-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:14-29). In the process, he shows us how the early church could always be talking and thinking and preaching and studying about Jesus, with the Old Testament as its Bible. In Hebrews, the focus is clearly on Jesus. We see Jesus, the prototype of human destiny (2:9). We consider Jesus, and the faithfulness that took him there (3:1). Finally we fix our eyes on Jesus, forming a permanent vision to sustain us for the rest of our pilgrim lives (12:2).

The Son of God became a man (Psalm 8).

As the book of Hebrews opens, we peer into the most holy place of heaven itself. While we gaze at the Son-of-God-made-man, now exalted at God's right hand, our author announces that God has spoken again in this Son (1:1-4). He borrows seven scripture snippets to demonstrate how far Jesus outranks the angels (1:5-14), and ends this introduction with his first word of warning (2:1-5).

Our author now quotes from his first major Psalm. God created humankind scarcely lower than angels, he notes from Psalm 8:5-6, and named them rulers over all creation. If we look around, that scene seems nowhere in sight (2:5-8). But one man does fit that description. He is Jesus, whom we "see" at God's right hand. In him, humankind has attained its destiny, for he is exalted and he is man! In becoming a man, the Son of God became for a little while lower than angels. As a man, Jesus destroyed death, disabled the devil, and became high priest for all his people. Next we consider Jesus (3:1), asking ourselves how he came to that position.

Jesus was faithful every 'today' (Psalm 95).

Turning to his second Psalm, our author contrasts the faithless Israelite generation described in Psalm 95:7-11 and the faithfulness of Jesus Christ (3:1-11). The unbelieving Israelites perished in the desert. Instead of hearing God's voice, they hardened their hearts. However, Moses was God's faithful servant. Jesus also was faithful – as a Son over God's house.

The psalmist reminds us that there is only one day for being faithful – today. Jesus was faithful every today of his life. Separated from each other by 1,000 years, psalmist and author of Hebrews each urge their audiences to avoid such an evil unbelieving heart (3:12-19). Privilege does not inoculate one from this danger. The Israelites whose bones parched in the wilderness had been rescued from Egyptian slavery by God's stupendous works of power.

It is not enough to hear the gospel and to attach oneself to the believing community (4:1-13). Good news only benefits those who internalize and assimilate it by faith. But whoever does that enjoys God's rest -- in two senses and two stages. Upon trusting in Christ, the believer enters the "rest" of a finished salvation. And she or he can anticipate the eternal "rest" awaiting true believers at the end. God's living word penetrates and inspects the most private depths of the heart.

Hebrews opened with the scene of Jesus, the Son-of-God-made-man, at God's right hand in glory. Our author has suggested how Jesus got there (his faithfulness to the Father). He now says a word about what Jesus is doing at God's right hand. Jesus is his people's high priest, representing their interests before the Father. Sharing his people's humanity, Jesus also has suffered and been tempted. He sympathizes with their trials and provides them with mercy and grace (4:14-16). But before he ascended to heaven, Jesus offered the perfect sacrifice for sin. To tell this part of the story, our author opens his third great psalm.

Jesus gave the Father what he always wanted (Psalm 40).

Before he explains Jesus' sacrifice for sin (chap. 10), our author comments on God's choice of Jesus as high priest and the readers' need for maturity to understand what he is about to say (ch. 5). He warns and exhorts (ch. 6), unfolds the significance of Jesus' priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek (ch. 7), comments on God's promise through Jeremiah to make a new covenant (ch. 8), and contrasts the heavenly and earthly sanctuaries (ch.9). But to keep the Jesus story in order, we move next to chapter ten, in which our author sets out the meaning of Jesus' sacrifice and the reason it was effective.

Animal sacrifices not desired. Levitical sacrifices did not erase consciousness of sins. Indeed, the great Yom Kippur sacrifice for the people each Day of Atonement was an annual reminder of that reality (10:1-4). Because animals are amoral creatures, no animal could ever give God what he had always wanted most — the “living sacrifice” embodied in a life of faithful, loving human obedience.

Foreseeing that no Israelite would fulfill his greatest desire, God mercifully instituted animal sacrifices as a means for expressing repentance and receiving forgiveness. It is significant that the sacrificial animal could not be blemished. The animal's physical perfection both symbolized and substituted for the morally spotless life which no Israelite could ever bring.

Because the animal's “life” was represented by its blood (Leviticus 16:11-12), giving God that life required that the life first be taken. When the animal had been slaughtered, the priest sprinkled, poured or smeared its blood inside the Holy Place and in the courtyard. (On the Day of Atonement, the high priest sprinkled blood of the sin offerings inside the Most Holy Place. This prefigured Jesus' sprinkling of the heavenly sanctuary with his own blood.)

The Old Testament repeatedly states that when the people and priests made the prescribed atonement, God forgave them (4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:10, 16, 18; 6:7; 16:30). Scripture nowhere says that sins were “rolled forward.” However, that statement is suggestive of the larger truth that when God forgave sins in ancient Israel, he did so with Jesus' future sacrifice clearly in mind (Rom. 3:21-26; Heb. 9:15; 1 Pet. 1:18-21). To accomplish his sacrifice, the Son of God became a man in the person of Jesus Christ (10:5-10). Using the dramatic device of a one-sided conversation, our author has us listen to Jesus speaking to the Father about the Incarnation, in words borrowed from Psalm 40:6-8.

Jesus did God's will in a human body. Jesus begins: “Sacrifice and offering you have not desired” The Law of Moses provided many kinds of sacrifices, but not one of them ranked first on the wish-list of things God wanted from his people. God's first choice was for his people to live each day in perfect fellowship with him, in a life that fully matched God's desires for human beings. Throughout Israel's history, God said this time and time again (Deuteronomy 10:12-13; 1 Samuel 15:22; Psalm 51:16-17; Micah 6:6-8; Jeremiah 7:21-23). But only a human being with a human body could give God such loving human obedience. And so the Son of God continues: “Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come— in the scroll of the book it is written of me— to do your will, O God.’”

Jesus mentions two subjects here, our author points out. First he refers to the animal sacrifices of the levitical priesthood. Then he speaks about his own coming to do the will of God. So, our author concludes, Jesus took away the first thing he spoke about, animal sacrifices, to establish the second thing he mentioned -- his personal human commitment to do everything that God desired.

Jesus was true to his word. Every “today” that he lived, he fully embodied God’s will by doing exactly what God desired. We can visualize God’s performed wishes (or “will”) as a present from Jesus, contained in the gift-wrapping of his own human body. Jesus gave that present to the Father by offering his body on the cross.

God was thoroughly pleased with Jesus’ present, which was exactly what he had always wanted. Because Jesus had given God his first choice, the gift of a faithful and loving life in unbroken fellowship with God, there would never be the need again of that second choice—that remedial business involving slaughtered animals and ceremonial blood (7:27; 9:12; 6:4; 9:7, 26-28; 10:2 and 12:26-27). And, because this sacrifice/offering represented a human life perfectly in accord with God’s wishes, God forgave his people’s sins forever and promised never to remember them again (also fulfilling God’s promises concerning the new covenant/basis of relationship discussed in 8:6-13).

Our author therefore boldly announces that by this will (God’s wishes), we have been “sanctified” (made holy) and “perfected” forever (10:10, 14). These are priestly terms taken from the consecration of Aaron and his sons. By the offering of Jesus’ body we also have been consecrated as priests, to bring offerings of praise and good works (Hebrews 13:15-16).

When Jesus had made his sacrifice of atonement, God raised him from the dead and seated him at his own right hand in heaven. This imagery comes from Psalm 110, which is the fourth Psalm our author uses to tell the story of Jesus.

Jesus is now our royal priest at God’s right hand in heaven (Psalm 110:1, 4).

Like a double picture frame, Psalm 110 brings together the two messianic images of Jesus Christ as king and priest (Psalm 110:1, 4; see Zechariah 6:11-13). The first image shows him enthroned at God’s right hand in heaven (Psalm 110:1). The second image presents Jesus as our priest after the order of Melchizedek (Psalm 110:4).

Our author told us early that we live in the Last Days (Hebrews 1:2). The End has begun, but it has not yet reached its conclusion. We live our lives between the “Already” and the “Not Yet.” Jesus’ roles as king and priest both bear witness to this reality. Although Jesus is enthroned, all things are not yet visibly beneath his feet (1 Corinthians 15:24-26). Although Jesus is priest, the time has not yet come for him to exit the heavenly sanctuary and rejoin his people in person (Hebrews 9:28). For now, Jesus remains seated in heaven’s Most Holy Place in the presence of God.

Psalm 110:1 is the most-referenced Old Testament passage in the New Testament (Matthew 22:41-45; 26:64; Mark 12:36; 14:62; Luke 20:41-44; 22:69; Acts 2:34-35; 5:31; 7:55; Romans 8:34; 1 Corinthians 15:25-28; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22; and Revelation 3:4). Outside Hebrews and other than Romans 8:34, these New Testament references all focus on Jesus' sovereignty or authority. However, the author of Hebrews uses Psalm 110:1 to place Jesus in heaven, but he is more interested in Psalm 110:4, which says: "The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind. 'You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.'" This fact is so important to our author that, in the course of his book, he parses the words of Psalm 110:4 phrase by phrase.

'The LORD.' The Jews learned early that no one arbitrarily claimed the office of high priest. God himself appointed Aaron as Israel's first high priest (Exodus 28:1). When a group led by Korah, Dathan and Abiram challenged Aaron's exclusive privilege, God destroyed the rebels with fire and earthquake (Numbers 16:1-3, 31-35). God then confirmed Aaron's priesthood by bringing life out of death, making Aaron's shepherd's staff sprout buds, grow blossoms and yield almonds (Numbers 17). Jesus Christ did not appoint himself high priest, but was chosen by God. God confirmed that appointment by raising Jesus from the dead -- for which our author appeals to Psalm 2:7 and Psalm 110:4 (Hebrews 1:5, 13).

'Has sworn and will not change his mind.' An oath serves two purposes: it ends dispute and it formally confirms (Hebrews 6:16-18). God ratified Jesus' priestly appointment by swearing on his own honor. In this way also, Jesus' priesthood surpassed the Levitical priesthood in dignity and intensity (Hebrews 7:21-22).

God will never change his mind about Jesus' priesthood based on afterthought or remorse. This assurance is important because God once reversed his gift of a permanent priesthood, in the case of Eli and his wicked sons (1 Samuel 2:27-36). Eli's sons were priests by accident of birth without regard for personal character. Jesus was selected as priest precisely because of his personal character. His priesthood is grounded in his life-record of faithful, loving obedience.

'You are a priest forever.' There were many Levitical priests because they all died and had to be replaced. Josephus says that 83 high priests officiated from Aaron to the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. By contrast, Jesus continues forever and holds his priesthood permanently. For this reason Jesus is able to save "forever" (translating a Greek phrase that also means "completely"). Those who draw near to God through him are undergirded by the perfect obedience, vicarious death, mighty resurrection and glorious ascension of Jesus their high priest. Until he returns to bring salvation, Jesus represents his people in heaven, wearing their names over his heart (Exodus 28:29-30).

'According to the order of Melchizedek.' This ancient and mysterious priest-king is memorialized forever in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Much discussed in Jewish literature, Melchizedek appears but three places in Scripture, each separated by 1,000 years (Genesis 14:18-20; Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 5-7). Non-biblical sources portray Melchizedek variously as the founder of temple worship in Jerusalem (Josephus), an exemplar of reason and virtue

(Philo), or Noah's son Shem who transmitted the priesthood to Abraham (rabbinical literature and 2 Enoch). One Dead Sea Scroll presents him as an End-Time figure who proclaims God's year of Jubilee. If our author was familiar with any of these traditions, he does not follow them in his own discussion.

Genesis narrates what appears to be a chance encounter between Melchizedek and Abraham, in terms somewhat reminiscent of a worship service in a liturgical church. Melchizedek produces bread and wine; he pronounces a blessing over Abraham, who responds by giving Melchizedek a tithe. Psalm 110 reports God's installment to someone in a priesthood which is "according to the order of Melchizedek." The author of Hebrews identifies that person as Jesus Christ and explains its significance.

Both Jesus and Melchizedek occupy the dual role of king/priest, but our author focuses on their qualification to be appointed priest. Appointment to the Levitical priesthood required bloodline (Nehemiah 7:63-64), birth date (Numbers 4:46-47) and a flawless body (Leviticus 21:16-20). Melchizedek had no priestly father, mother or genealogy (Hebrews 7:3). His priesthood was not term limited by beginning or end but was rather perpetual (Hebrews 7:3). The only basis for Melchizedek's priesthood was his own character.

In the same way, Jesus' priesthood does not depend on family tree or legal term, but rather on his holy character and obedient life. His qualification for appointment as priest was not a perfect body ("a law of physical requirement") but a sinless life (Hebrews 7:16). Because Jesus was completely free of sin, death could not hold him. His priesthood is energized and sustained by the inherent dynamic of an indestructible life. For the same reason, God could swear that Jesus would be priest forever and know that he would never change his mind.

As high priest Jesus made one perfect offering for sin forever -- the gift of his own faithful life in his body on the cross. Jesus perfected that sacrifice in his living, performed it in his dying, and presented it in his resurrection and exaltation — all on behalf of his people and as their representative. Jesus' presence in heaven now guarantees his people full access to God through him. Jesus is just the high priest we need: "holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens" (Hebrews 7:26).

Since this is true, the author of Hebrews urges his readers (and, let us say it, he urges us) to draw near to God with confidence, to hold fast our confession of faith, to encourage each other to persevere in love and good deeds, finding in Jesus the grace and mercy appropriate to every occasion of need (Hebrews 4:14-16; 10:19-25; 12:1-3).

BENEDICTION

"Now may the God of peace, who brought up from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, equip you with everything good to do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen" (Hebrews 13:20-21, The Common

Version).

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