

## HIGH PRIEST AND SACRIFICE

Text: Hebrews 2:17

Belgic Confession Art 21

Readings: Leviticus 9:1-11, 22-24; Hebrews 2:5-18

Theme: Jesus was made a man so he might serve as our High Priest and propitiate our sins.

Purpose: To assure you that Jesus has made full payment for our sins and so turned aside God's wrath.

This letter to the Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who were tempted to go back to Judaism, back to the Old Covenant pattern.

Its main theme is that the New Covenant is much better than the old one, and that Christ is much better than all of the sacrifices and ceremonies and people and practices of that Old Covenant.

Jesus Christ is the perfect fulfillment of everything and everyone in the Old Testament.

This verse expresses this very clearly as it describes Jesus as our High Priest and as the sacrifice for our sin.

In order to be both a High Priest and a sacrifice Jesus **had to be a man** (verse 17); "he had to be made like his brothers in every way."

This is the main point of most of this chapter. From verse 5 on the writer emphasises that Jesus was made a man, he was human; we are of the same family (vs 11); Jesus has called us "brothers" (vs 11); we are flesh and blood so he also became like us (vs 14); he did not come to help angels but rather Abraham's descendants, his own people (vs 16).

Articles 18 and 19 of the Belgic Confession explain that Jesus is both God and man, having a divine nature and a human nature combined in one person. Article 21 of the confession explains that as God and man Jesus became a merciful and faithful High Priest in service to God.

### 1. OUR HIGH PRIEST

#### a. His role as our High Priest

i. The comparisons and contrasts of this letter were more readily understood by the Jewish Christians living then than they are by us. Those Christians were very familiar with the sacrificial system; they had seen the High Priest go through the rituals of the Day of Atonement; they were used to seeing blood sacrifices and offerings.

We know about these things by reading about them in the Old Testament, but we have to make more effort to understand these rituals and to put ourselves back into that situation.

ii. The High Priest in the Old Covenant occupied an important office. He was a direct descendant of Aaron who was the first High Priest. He was set apart from the other priests in a solemn ceremony as he was dressed in all his robes and ordained with special rituals (Leviticus 9).

He was the only one who was allowed to enter the Most Holy Place in the temple and that only once a year.

iii. His task was to represent the people to God. He was their mediator, their go-between, and their spokesman. He prayed to God on their behalf. He offered sacrifices for them.

This is why Jesus had to become a man. If he was going to represent us as his people to God then he had to become one of us. Representation requires identification. Jesus became our mediator, our spokesman. So the writer of this letter applies this term "High Priest" to Jesus. He is the only New Testament writer to make this comparison and this is the first use of this word in this letter.

#### b. Jesus was a **merciful** High Priest.

i. The priests in the first century AD were *not* the priests God wanted them to be because they neglected their work and abused their office. The priests belonged to the party of the Sadducees and were one of the groups that opposed Jesus. They worked in closely with the Romans and were mainly interested in increasing their wealth and power. They were selfish and arrogant. Their position was merely formal and they were remote from the people.

ii. Jesus, however, was a merciful High Priest. He was sympathetic and tender-hearted; he was compassionate and gentle; he was full of love and mercy.

He proved his mercy by his willingness to come from heaven to earth. He expressed his mercy in his words and deeds, and ultimately and supremely in his suffering and death on the cross.

He came to help the weak, to lift up those who have fallen, to comfort the oppressed. He can truly represent the needs of his people because he feels our sorrow and sadness because he too has suffered. He was and is a merciful High Priest.

iii. Let's remember this in our own struggles and trials. We can "receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" because we have a high priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses because he was, and is, one of us (Heb 4:15-16).

c. And he was a **faithful** High Priest to God.

Faithful here means reliable. If you have a job you want done you will give it to someone who is reliable. You want to know it will get done, on time, and that it will be done well.

God the Father gave Jesus this task of representing his people and he did that well. He fulfilled his duties; he was obedient to his Father's will; he put his hand to the plough and did not look back.

If he had been unfaithful and failed in his task then we would be lost and the plan to rescue us would have failed.

But he was faithful, even unto death. And he is still faithful, he won't let us down, he is always there for us.

**d. He is a faithful High Priest "in service to God"**. He was a merciful and faithful high priest in all the duties of his office, in all the services God required of him.

He came to identify himself with us and so represent us to God, to be our mediator. He was merciful to us and faithful to God. He is our merciful and faithful High Priest.

The Old Testament High Priest represented the people to God by offering a sacrifice for them. Jesus went beyond that for he was both the High Priest *and* the sacrifice.

## 2. HE WAS OUR SACRIFICE

a. Jesus came into this world as a man, exactly like us, "...that he might **make atonement** for the sins of the people." (vs 17b)

If you look in the footnote of the NIV you'll see that it provides an alternative translation - "that he might **turn aside God's wrath**, taking away the sins of the people."

Both translations are true; they are trying to get across the meaning of the Greek word used here, an important and significant word.

The NASB and the ESV translate it with the word "**propitiation**" - "to make propitiation for the sins of the people." The word means that the wrath of God against sin has been satisfied.

b. To understand this we need to consider **the wrath of God**.

The Bible is very clear that God is angry about sin, but this is not a fit of anger; his anger is not irrational or uncontrolled.

Rather, it is his settled wrath against sin and against sinners. Listen to these verses:

Psalms 7:11 – “God is a righteous judge, a God who expresses his wrath every day.”

Psalms 11:5 – “The Lord examines the righteous but the wicked and those who love violence his soul hates.”

Numbers 14:18 – “The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished....”

God is angry about sin and angry with sinners because he is a holy God, he is pure and there is no sin or darkness in him at all. His wrath is not impersonal but personal; it is one of his attributes, it is an expression of his character, of who he is.

c. God’s wrath and justice must be **satisfied**. Sin must be dealt with and sinners must be punished.

We all understand this. If a man kidnaps a woman, rapes her and murders her we want that man to be brought to justice and punished.

God is a just God and he must and will punish those who commit sin. His justice requires that all of us be punished because all of us are sinners.

But God has provided a way for his wrath to be appeased, to be satisfied, so that he can save those whom he has chosen. God has offered his own Son as the sacrifice for sin; Jesus himself bore the wrath of God for our sin.

This was pictured in the sacrifices of the Old Testament. The people of Israel also had to bring an animal sacrifice for sins they committed.

At the temple there was a daily sacrifice for sin, every morning and evening.

There was also the sacrifice of a lamb at the Passover when they remembered their deliverance out of Egypt.

But the most important sacrifice was another annual sacrifice, made on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. The high priest first had to make atonement for his own sin with the sacrifice of a bull. Then he had to make atonement for the sin of the people with the sacrifice of one of the goats. He had to take the blood into the Most Holy Place and sprinkle it on the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant.

d. All of these sacrifices pointed forward to **the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus**. God’s love and justice came together at the cross. There God demonstrated his love and satisfied his justice.

There God was “reconciling the world to himself not counting men’s sins against them ... God made him who had not sin to be sin for us...” (2 Cor 5:19,21). On the cross Jesus fulfilled the demands of God’s justice. By his atoning death Jesus turned God’s anger away from us.

CS Lewis described this in his book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* in which Aslan the lion offered himself as the sacrifice for the sin of Edmund. He satisfied the requirements of the law, he paid the penalty.

All this is open to misunderstanding and we need to be careful we don’t fall into this trap.

We must not think of this as an angry God “taking it out” on Christ his Son. We must not think of this as though God is angry and Jesus is merciful.

No, the Bible teaches us that God hates sin and Jesus hates sin (Revelation 6:16 describes “the wrath of the Lamb”). God the Father is just and God the Son is just. They are not opposed to each other; rather they are working together. God the Father is full of love and Jesus is also full of love.

This means that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have worked together to make it possible for God to be reconciled to us.

In the Old Testament God pictured all this for his people with the animal sacrifices and all the offerings.

In the New Testament God has pictured this with the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, a physical and visible reminder of the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus, of his body and blood given as the payment for the sins of all who believe in him.

We will never fully understand this while we are still living on this earth.

And when we get to heaven we will spend eternity marveling at God's wonderful love and amazing grace shown to us in this work of the Lord Jesus on the cross.

But what you do need to understand and see, here and now, is that if you believe in the Lord Jesus and if you trust that he died on the cross for your sins then God's wrath has been fully satisfied.

You have been set free from punishment.

You have been freed from the fear of death.

All your sins have been forgiven – past, present and future.

All this is possible because Jesus is a merciful and faithful high priest and he has made a full atonement for the sins of his people.

Amen