

THAT ONCE AND FOR ALL SACRIFICE

In **Hebrews 4:12-14**, we read these words:

"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13) And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. 14) Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession."

I begin with those words this morning for two reasons: First because when we come to moments like these, when we come to this part of our assembly, when it is time for the lesson, we need that reminder that what we are about to do is something very, very special. This is the time when we open the Word of God to receive a message from Him. We have not come to be entertained. We have not come to have our ears scratched. We have not come to have our emotions worked over. We are here to receive a word from God. Jesus said, "*They shall all be taught of God, and everyone who has heard and learned comes to me,*" (John 6:45). What is important at this point, and every Lord's Day, is that we open God's Word, which the Hebrew tells us "*is living and active.*" If you will listen, and if you will let it, that Word will enter your heart through your mind, and it will be to begin its godly work in you. As we do this, over and over, and over, little by little, by degrees, and half-degrees at a time, we are being made over in the image of God.

I hope that we will always keep that in mind as we worship together, and if you will, let's begin this time together with a prayer...

For the past week and a half we have been reading and studying from the New Testament book of Hebrews, and in it we have been reminded several times about the high priesthood of Jesus. We may have some vague understanding about the Jewish system of priests, but we might be almost clueless as to why this is important to us. We might be wondering why this is something we need to know, or give much thought to. Hopefully, by the time we are finished with this lesson this morning, we won't be wondering about that anymore.

Really there are two very critical reasons why the Hebrew writer placed such an emphasis upon the high priesthood of Christ. The first reason was because of the sacrifice that He made on our behalf, and the second was because of the continuing effects of that sacrifice that is ours to enjoy because He is our high priest.

But one of the first things the Hebrew writer had to do, especially for those who were steeped in Judaism, was to convince them that Christ was lawfully their high priest. And that is what is behind all of that discussion about his being a priest in the first place, and being a high priest after the order of Melchizedek in the second place. That discussion began in 2:17, 18, and

continued on into chapter 3, where the writer urges readers to consider Jesus as “*the apostle and high priest of our confession.*”

That discussion about Christ as our high priest is picked up again in **4:14, 15** where the writer says this about him:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 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.

We have “a great high priest” the author says, and that gives us the confidence to “...*draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*” That is **4:16**.

Now, however, the writer begins to introduce the idea that Christ is a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. He recognizes that the idea of Christ as a high priest could easily be a problem for those whose roots were in the Mosaic system. Why is that? Because the law provided for priests to come from what tribe? The tribe of Levi. But from what tribe was Christ? He was from the Tribe of Judah.

So there’s a problem, but it really isn’t a problem. Why? It isn’t a problem because of Psalms 110. The writer is going to reference that passage several times, in which is referenced the promise God made to David that he was going to set one of his descendants upon his throne, and that he would be a priest forever, “*after the order of Melchizedek.*”

So, the Hebrew writer says of Jesus—**5:7-10**:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. 8) Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. 9) And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, 10) being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

Now after introducing that idea in chapter 5, the writer recognizes that many of those who read these words would not really understand what he was saying. He rebukes them just a bit suggesting that maybe like the ancient Israelites, they too were becoming dull of hearing. He then warns them, in chapter 6, to be careful about that lest it lead to their falling away from the faith. He encourages them with these words, found in **6:11 & 12**:

And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, 12) so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

He makes reference once again in 6:20, that Christ has become our high priest after the order of Melchizedek. And that is why in chapter 7, you have all of that discussion about this mysterious priest/king named Melchizedek. You see, the writer knows, and in verses 13 & 14, he clearly states that Christ is not from the tribe of Levi, from which those who serve as priests are taken.

However, not only is Christ's priesthood legitimate, in spite of the fact that he was not of the tribe of Levi, it was essential that he not be of that tribe. Why? Because perfection was not possible under that old system. That is, the sacrifices that those who were priests and high priests after the order of Levi were never able to make it possible for a worshipper to truly come into the presence of God. He will get into all of the reasons for that in chapter 9 & 10, but in chapter 7, his point is that under the old covenant, for one to be a priest, they had to be from the tribe of Levi. But God had said—in Psalms 110:4, that God was going to sit His Son upon David's throne, and he would be a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. And he also said in verse 12, when there has been a change in the priesthood, there must of necessity be also a change in the law. So not only did the Psalmist point towards a high priest after a new order—not the Levitical system—but he also pointed towards a new covenant.

Chapter 8, then underscores two things: One, Christ is that new high priest, and number two, a new covenant has been established, and that too, had been prophesied in places such as Jeremiah 31.

In **chapter 9**, the writer helps the readers to begin to grasp the significance of what Christ did for them in making the sacrifice for them that he did. He says, it is well known that in that first covenant, there were things prescribed for the worship of God and dealing with the sins of the people. But he says, all of those were simply a shadow of that which would come; the sacrifice that would be offered in the heavenly tabernacle. In **verses 11-14**, the writer says:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) 12) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. 13) For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, 14) how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

He goes on, then in the rest of that chapter to show not only that Christ made that sacrifice, but also that His death also put into effect a new covenant. And this was something He did for us, not as those priests of the Levitical system had to do, repeating the sacrifices over and over again. He did it one time, that “once and for all sacrifice of himself.” In **verse 25, (chapter 9)** he says,

"Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own. For then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself."

So, that was the plan! That was the scheme of redemption that the angels wanted to look into before the time but were not allowed. We know, from chapters 9 & 10, that clues of what was to come were available in that old system. There were shadows of it but the substance could not be seen until the time of Christ's coming. And so, beginning in **chapter 10**, the writer says,

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. 2) Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? 3) But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. 4) For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

The writer goes on to say that Christ came because he knew that those sacrifices of bulls and goats were not what God desired. So, knowing that, he knew that he was given a body and that he would use that body as the ultimate sacrifice, the only sacrifice that truly could satisfy God. And so he came to do, as he said in the garden of Gethsemane, "*not my will but thine.*" **Verses 5-7** says:

*Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,
"Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me;
6) in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.
7) Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'"*

Christ, our high priest, came to offer that once and for all sacrifice; a sacrifice of himself, not only in dying the painful and cruel death on the cross, but in leaving heaven, and taking upon himself our lowly nature, to be scorned and hated by the very people he came to save. He made that sacrifice for us. The Hebrew writer said back in **2:11**, that "*by the grace of God*" he tasted "*death for everyone.*" That is, he offered himself for me, and for you, and for every person in this room, and for every person alive in this world, or who has ever lived. That is what He did.

And in doing that, not only did he make it possible for us to be forgiven of our sins, but he also made it possible for us to come into the very presence of God himself. That is, through Him, through His blood, we are given the privilege of entering into the holy of holies ourselves. Which is what we are allowed to do, not just once a year, but each and every time we find ourselves in need. I know that people like to think of that verse—Hebrews 4:16—in connection with those times when there is some crisis in our lives, but in the context of Hebrews, that isn't really our greatest need at all. Our greatest need is for forgiveness of our sins. Like the ancient

Israelites, we too continue to sin and fall short of the glory of God, and so we too continue to need God's forgiveness. And that once and for all sacrifice of Christ has makes that continued forgiveness possible. That's the value of his being a high priest forever. As **7:24 & 25** says,

but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. 25) Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

Usually when we end our lessons, we offer an invitation, by which we simply mean to offer people the opportunity to respond in some way to God's Word. There may be some who have yet to obey the gospel and they want to do that. There may be some who have not held fast to their confession and they want to publicly acknowledge that, and have the body of Christ pray for them. But there are many other ways that each of us can and should respond to this word from God. And the Hebrew writer identifies at least three of those for us in **verses 19-25**. We will close our lesson this morning with those words, and following that, we will stand and sing our invitation song.

And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, 16) "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds," 17) then he adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." 18) Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin. 19) Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20) by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21) and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22) let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23) Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 24) And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25) not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

If there is something on your heart this morning that we can help you with, please come while we stand and sing.