

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

HEBREWS 5-6

A component of all religions is the “priest.” He’s the “go-between” - an intermediary between God and man.

Which reminds me of a riddle. “What do you call a sleepwalking priest?” The answer: *A roam’n Catholic.*

Hey, don’t laugh so loud you’ll disturb the neighbors!

This week I read of a Catholic priest in Maryland, *who in this time of coronavirus*, has been conducting drive-thru confessionals. He has a confessional lane in the church parking lot - and in light of social distancing guidelines - his chair is six feet from the car window.

And people are keeping him busy!... There’s a sense in every human heart that we’re not enough. **We need help to get to God!...** This was true of Israel of old. And to satisfy the need, God provided them a priest.

Yet in the next three chapters, 5-7, the writer of Hebrews describes how Jewish priests paled in comparison to the priesthood of Jesus... *It’s true, we need a priest, and for a time, God sanctioned priests from the tribe of Levi.* But now, our Savior, Jesus, is far better! Where the Levites failed, Jesus has succeeded.

The Jews trusted in a “high priest,” but to those who trust in Jesus alone, He is “**a great high priest.**”

Chapter 5, “For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins.”

Here’s the writer’s point, **priests for men are taken from men**. And yet, this isn’t a given in all religions.

Did you know in Vietnam elephants are considered sacred? Touch an elephant and it supposedly brings you good luck. Under most forms of paganism **animals** are thought to procure divine help... Some of the Jewish rabbis thought of angels in a similar way. Divine assistance was conveyed to men through angels.

But the writer of Hebrews insists **priests for men come from men**. Your dog fetches your slippers. Your guardian angel keeps your car from swerving into a ditch, but **neither animal or angel** helps us “*in things pertaining to God.*” Neither has any impact on our spiritual status or can affect our relationship with God.

Thus, a good priest has to be human *and here’s why?* Verse 2, so “**He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness.**” **An effective priest has to be compassionate and sensitive to human weakness.**

Angels never grow weak. They never tire, or hunger, or sleep. The angelic answer for weakness is to buck up! When angels see humans cave in, it baffles them.

Angels are cold-blooded do-gooders. See a puny human *sin, or give in*, and they pick up their swords to avenge God’s honor. It boggles their brain that God holds judgment at bay and shows human-kind mercy.

But in becoming a man, Jesus became acquainted with human weakness. Jesus got tired, hungry, thirsty. He cried and hurt. He grew angry and discouraged.

In his 30-plus years, Jesus ran the whole gamut of human emotions - and is now able to empathize. *He's been where you are. He understands what you need.*

Jesus can supply the solace and strength we crave.

And the second trait a priest needs is *an awareness of human sinfulness*. Verse 3, **“Because of this he is required as for the people, so also for himself, to offer sacrifices for sins.”**

Once a year, the High Priest offered a sacrifice that covered the sins of the nation, but before he made the sacrifice for Israel, he first offered a sacrifice for himself. His own sin had to be covered.

God never intended for a priest to have a holier-than-thou attitude. The fact that he sacrificed for his own sins first was a safeguard against any self-righteousness.

The only priest who never sinned was our High Priest, Jesus Christ. He was the one perfect man. And yet as a man, even our Lord bore the shame of our sin.

On the cross at Calvary, our sin was thrust upon His innocent shoulders. 1 Corinthians 5:21 tells us, **“He made Him who knew no sin, to be sin for us.”** Jesus felt the alienation caused by sin. He knows sin's many horrors. As a man, Jesus is acquainted with our neediness. It qualifies Him perfectly to be our priest.

Verse 4, “**And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was.**” A priest had to be a man, *but not just any man*. He had to be a man appointed by God. In the OT, God chose priests from the tribe of Levi and from the family of Aaron.

In fact, on occasion in the OT people self-assumed the role of priest, and God judged them severely!

In 2 Chronicles 26, King Uzziah wasn't content with being king. He also wanted to be priest. But when he usurped the priestly post, God struck him with leprosy. The point is **priests were always God-appointed.**

And this was the case with Jesus. Even God's own Son didn't assume the role of priest. He was appointed by the Father in heaven. Verse 5, “**So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but it was He who said to Him...**” And here the author quotes Psalm 2:7, “**You are My Son, today I have begotten You.**”

At first, the application of *this verse to this argument* seems strange. What does the birth of Jesus have to do with God appointing Him as His High Priest?

But when you compare Scripture with Scripture, you learn there's more to the story... In Acts 13:33, Paul applies Psalm 2:7 not to Jesus' birth in Bethlehem but to His resurrection. Jesus was “**begotten,**” or **began** a glorious new life when He rose from the dead and ascended to the Father's right hand! At that point, Jesus was appointed High Priest in the heavenly Temple.

And today, He ministers before the Father as *His chosen intermediary* interceding for you and me.

Verse 6 is also helpful, “As He also says in another place...” And here he quotes Psalm 110:4, “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek...”

Here’s a crucial point, Jesus was not a **Levitical Priest**. During His earthly ministry, Jesus never wore a priestly garment, or offered a Levitical sacrifice, or ministered as a priest in the Temple at Jerusalem.

Jesus was a priest, but not the OT kind - a priest after the order of Levi. *Jesus was a different type of priest entirely, a type of priesthood like Melchizedek.*

Levitical priests were **temporary and earthly**. Jesus was an **eternal and heavenly** priest. As Psalm 110 reads, “You are a priest forever...” Next time, Hebrews 7 will teach us more about this man, Melchizedek, his priesthood and what it means in regards to Jesus!

Back to the human requirement for being a priest, the writer recalls the earthly ministry of Jesus, “who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears...”

This harkens back to the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. The Lord prayed in such mental pain and in such spiritual anguish that His sweat had the consistency of thick droplets of blood.

Jesus prayed, “to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear...” I’ve heard people suggest that Jesus prayed in the garden to avoid the cross. “Let this cup pass from Me” - was a plea to escape. He

was asking the Father to find another way to redeem the world. *I disagree!*

Throughout Jesus' life - *from the crib to the cross* - Jesus' one aim was to die for the sins of mankind.

To suggest He got to the end of His journey and had second thoughts is insulting and ridiculous. Besides, the author of Hebrews suggests God answered His prayer.

Obviously, Jesus wasn't asking to bypass the cross. I believe His angst in the garden centered around the hurt and pain His disciples would cause Him.

He knew they'd deny and abandon Him. Jesus was being asked to die for brothers who turn traitor - to lay it all down and bear incredible pain for folks who would boast allegiance then stab Him in the back. *And God answered Jesus' prayer. He filled His heart with mercy.*

And isn't this the great challenge for His followers. *Are we willing to love the brother who does us dirty? Lay down our life for the enemy we thought was a friend?*

AW Pink writes, "Our sharpest trials often come from those in whom we have instilled the most trust and in whom we have shown the greatest kindness."

Jesus could've gotten bitter and stopped loving, but He asked God to take away the cup of resentment.

And I believe God answered His prayer! If God gave you such love, *would you use it to forgive your enemy?*

And through it all, "though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered."

This is a strange thought when we apply it to our Lord Jesus - *that the Son of God learned obedience?*

Don't misunderstand, Jesus was never disobedient. It's just that in heaven, as God's equal, He never had the opportunity to obey. You don't have to obey when you're the boss and you're always calling the shots.

But when Jesus laid aside His heavenly glory and became a man assuming the role of a servant, for the very first time, the Son of God was called on to take orders. *And Jesus learned obedience.* He experienced the rigors and consequences of obedience firsthand.

Verse 9, **“And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him...”** Jesus learned to obey so He could be a good boss.

I once read that years ago Delta Airlines required all newly-hired executives to first work in the grunt areas of the business. They would do a stint handling baggage, ticketing passengers, and cleaning airplanes.

Before they were trusted to hand down decisions from the top, they first have to learn from experience how those decisions affected the people at the bottom!

And this was Jesus. Be assured when a command comes down from Jesus it's not coming from a bigwig who's oblivious to your situation. *Before He started giving orders, Jesus learned how to take them.* Rest assured, His commands are for our good and with His help, they're always within our capacities to obey.

Verse 10 tells us again, Jesus has been, “called by God as High Priest “according to the order of Melchizedek,” of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.”

Often the problem is a *dull preacher* or a *dull sermon*. Yet here it’s not *dull preaching*, but *dull hearing*. This word “*dull*” means “*sluggish in the ears*.”

It reminds me of the man who wore a hearing aid for twenty years. Actually, it never really helped him until it was discovered that he’d been wearing the device in the wrong ear. For two decades, the hearing aid muffled the hearing in his good ear and made his situation worse.

Likewise, there’re believers with a hearing problem.

They’re selective listeners. They hear only what they want to hear, *or what applies to their spouse, or their boss, or their kids* - and never what applies to them.

A pastor was asked if his church needed a deaf ministry. He replied, “*I think our whole church needs a deaf ministry. They just don’t seem to hear what I’m saying.*” The Hebrews problem wasn’t **dull teaching**, but **dull listening**. They had critiqued the ability of the preacher when the problem was their ability to hear...

The author of Hebrews had so many wonderful truths He wanted to share. He says in verse 11, He has much to say about the priestly ministry of Jesus...

Think of it, Jesus is in heaven right now praying for us - *what an intriguing thought* - especially in the midst of a

worldwide pandemic. Jesus' priestly role piques my curiosity. I'd love to learn more about such mysteries.

But the author can't go on because his readers aren't ready. They're stuck on the basics... I wonder what insights God has *waiting for us* - but He refuses to reveal them until we listen to what He's already said!

Verse 12, "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God..." The "*first principles*," or literally it's *the ABCs of Christianity*. These believers still hadn't learned the biblical basics.

It's foolish to teach T-ballers pick-off plays when they can't put their glove on correctly. You've got to learn the basics before you can move on to deeper stuff.

Some of the Hebrews should've been teachers by this point. Their spiritual growth and maturity had not measured up to the depth of teaching they'd received.

The writer continues to mourn the immaturity of his readers, "*and you have come to need milk and not solid food.*" Milk is for babies... people with no teeth.

It may be cute to see an infant with a bottle in its mouth, but it would be disgusting to see a College Freshman walking around sucking on a baby bottle.

And it's equally disturbing to see a person who's been a Christian for years still struggling in the basics.

Verse 13, "*For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe.*"

But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.” Here’s how to move out of spiritual Babydom - from milk to meat - it takes more than adding spiritual calories or knowledge. To build muscle, you have to exercise what you know.

We grow spiritually *“by reason of use.”* Christian maturity comes by applying and using what we learn.

Several years ago I saw an NBC News article entitled, *“Big Baby Boom: Supersize Deliveries Have Doctors Worried.”* Over the last few decades, there’s been a spike in the birth of big babies.

In 2013, a Pennsylvania woman birthed a 13 pound 12-ounce little girl. A German baby weighed in at 13.5 pounds. California saw a 13 pound, 10-ounce baby girl.

A British mom delivered *“little George,”* who weighed 15 pounds, 7 ounces. They returned his infant clothes and brought him home in PJs meant for a 6-month-old.

Today, hospitals are seeing a rash of **big babies, but so are churches!** We’ve got bloated believers with lots of fat. They know a lot, but they need to apply what they know and turn it into muscle. **Don’t be a big baby!** Let’s all grow up into Christ and mature in our faith.

Chapter 6, *“Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ...”* the spiritual ABCs... The writer wants to move on to deeper *matters...*

“Let us go on to perfection (i.e. maturity), not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith

toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits.”

This is interesting, notice what the author lists as the basics of the faith. He sets them out in three pairs...

First is “repentance from dead works and of faith toward God” The first two basic truths of Christian discipleship relate to **salvation**. We become Christians when we realize that even our best efforts are as filthy rags in the eyes of God. They’re “*dead works*.”

No one comes to God by their own deeds or merit - salvation is a gift from God, by grace through faith.

Second, he speaks “of the doctrine of baptisms, (and) of laying on of hands” This second pair of basic Christian truths concern **the work of the Holy Spirit**.

Notice Paul says “*baptisms*” - plural. Realize, there are three baptisms spoken of in the New Testament...

First, there’s spiritual baptism into the Body of Christ (*our spiritual initiation and fusion into God’s family*).

Second, is water baptism. This is symbolic of what happens in us through Jesus’ death and resurrection. In Him, we die to sin and rise to new life.

And **third**, there’s the baptism, or anointing, or the point-in-time filling of the power of the Holy Spirit upon our lives... *We need to experience all three baptisms.*

Then there’s also the “laying on of hands” by church members - which also relates to the work of the Spirit.

In the early church, when a person was appointed by the Holy Spirit to *an office in the church* or a *mission of the church*, it was confirmed by the laying on of hands...

Also, when spiritual gifts were bestowed by God, they were often received by laying on of hands. **God uses the touch of holy hands.** This is one thing we miss with online church. Let's pray we can gather again soon.

Then the third pair of basic doctrines deal with the end times **"of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment."** One day, the bodies of both the righteous and wicked will be resurrected immortal - every human being will live forever... But then comes the judgment!

Every one of us will be assigned to heaven or to hell!

If you don't have a handle on these three areas of Christianity - **salvation, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and the final judgment** - then you've got some catching up to do. These are the basics. It's time for some remedial study. God has more to reveal to you, *and He will* - but first, you need to grasp the basics.

Notice again the plea in verse 1, **"Let us go on..."** We need to **"go on"** in faith. Faith is not a one-time proposition; **we continue in faith.** And the writer is concerned about those who are stuck or stunted...

He issues a warning, verse 4, **"For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance,**

since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.” The point is *don't fall away*. Continue in faith. But in making this point other questions get raised...

First, is it possible for a true Christian to fall away from the faith and forfeit or lose their salvation?

Some say “*no*.” They skirt around verses 4-5 by suggesting the descriptions don't apply to legitimate Christian conversion. “*O, when it says they were partakers of the Holy Spirit, they just flirted with Him, but never married... Or tasted the heavenly gift that means they held in their mouth but never swallowed.*”

Like Bill Clinton when he said, “*I smoked but didn't inhale.*” This interpretation denies what's clearly stated.

Commentator, Warren Wiersbe, was a staunch, once-saved-always-saved advocate, yet even he conceded, “*To suggest the phrase, “partakers of the Holy Spirit,” means they only went along with the Spirit to an extent is to ignore the meaning of the verb. It means “to become sharers.” I've concluded the people addressed were true believers, not mere professors.*”

It's also interesting that in other passages these same terms are clearly used of bonafide believers.

In Hebrews 3:1 and 3:14, the “*partakers*” there are obviously Christians. This whole letter was written to believers... There's no doubt in my mind, Hebrews 6 is a warning to Christians that if they fall away, and stop trusting in Jesus and

actually turn their back on His provision for salvation, they will no longer be saved.

Now don't misunderstand, I'm not saying a believer can lose their salvation by anything they do or don't do.

Works and performance don't earn our salvation; and neither can they cause us to lose our salvation.

Salvation is a matter of grace through faith... **but** if you don't continue in that faith it can atrophy and die.

Of course, this raises a **second** question from this text, "If Hebrews 6 teaches that a person can disavow their faith and lose your salvation; then doesn't it also teach that once it's lost it can never be retrieved?"

Reading the passage straight through it says, "For it is impossible ... if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God and put Him to an open shame."

First, remember there's a host of biblical passages that teach as long as a wayward soul has a breath, there's hope. The Prodigal Son was part of the family before he fell away, yet the Father warmly welcomed him back when he came home with a repentant heart.

Also, Romans 11:23 says of the Jews who were cut off from the vine, "They also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again." Note, "*for God is able to graft them in again.*" They had it, lost it, then get it back again. *It's possible!*

I believe the writer here is saying that if a person falls away from their faith; then while he or she is in a fallen state, it's impossible to renew them to repentance. *But the passage doesn't say what happens if they return!*

The rest of Scripture attests that if they do return, God will graciously renew them to repentance and once again they'll become a recipient of God's mercies.

Remember these Hebrew believers were being tempted to return to the religious practices of Judaism.

And they're being warned, if they renew their faith in Levitical priests, animal sacrifices, Temple ritual - they are renouncing Jesus as God's sole provision for sin.

And you can't have it both ways. **It's either/or...**

You can't trust in the blood of animals as payment for your sin and in the blood of Christ at the same time.

Think of it this way. Imagine better days. The Braves are playing baseball again. And I score tickets to the game, but I give them away... Now, **I can't go to the game.** As long as I don't have a ticket, I've got no hope of getting into the game. *You've got to have a ticket!*

But that doesn't mean I can't go back to the box office and purchase a new ticket. I can, as long as tickets are still available... ***and heaven's not full yet!***

Verse 7 tells us, **“For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God; but if it**

bears thorns and briars, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned.”

Like the rain, God’s grace falls upon all men. But it’s what we do with the rain that matters. If we bear fruit, we’ll be blessed. If we sprout thorns, we’ll be cursed. **Our destiny is shaped by our response to God’s grace.**

“But, beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you, yes, things that accompany salvation, though we speak in this manner.” He’s warning the Hebrews, but He has high hopes they’ll take heed.

And if they persevere in their faith they’ll receive a reward. **“For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister.”** Those who fall away from their faith never receive the reward they would’ve if they’d persevered.

Verse 11, **“And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”** I love this verse. *Here’s how you hold on!...*

Realize there’s always a lapse of time between the giving of a promise and the fulfillment of that promise. Thus, **it takes faith and patience to inherit a promise.**

Some folks start out with faith, but they lack patience. As a result, their faith flames out and dies.

Whereas other folks wait on God, but they never trust Him and take steps of faith. *They’re in a perpetual holding pattern.*

If they're going to land the promise, they need to exercise their faith... It's the combination of both *faith and patience* that inherits God's promises.

And he points to Abraham as an example. Verse 13, "For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, "Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you. And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise.

For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute."

God's promise to Abraham was the seed from which all salvation flowered. Since Jesus descended from Abraham, everyone saved by Jesus is blessed through the promise God made to Abram. And God was serious about this promise. He confirmed it with an oath.

In antiquity, an oath was the equivalent of signing a contract. And when you swore an oath, it was always by someone greater than yourself - *the priest or king*.

You said if I fail to keep my end of the deal; then the authority I invoke will assure my compliance. *If I swear by the king, then the king will enforce my oath...* Thus, when God took His oath to bless Abraham, since no one is greater than God, He had to swear by Himself.

Verse 17 adds, "Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability (or unchangeableness) of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath,

that by two immutable things (i.e. *His promise* and *His oath*), in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation...”

No one in all of human history has ever made a promise more secure than the promise of our salvation.

God’s willingness to bless Abraham and save us is sealed by two immutable or unalterable entities - **God’s word and God’s oath!** God cannot lie, thus His word should be enough assurance for us, but God puts *a guarantee on top of a guarantee* by adding His oath.

Abraham had a long wait for the fulfillment of the promise God made to him. His son, Isaac, was born twenty-five years after the promise was first given.

But Abraham’s wait was nothing compared to the recipients of God’s salvation. The OT Jews and the Gentiles who would believe waited 2000 years from God’s promise to Abraham until the birth of the Messiah.

God knew there would be a long pause - that’s why He wanted to bolster the faith of His people by sealing His promise with an oath. God swore by Himself!

It’s like playing cards and trumping the trick of your partner. We say, **“You double won that.”** That’s what God has done with our salvation; *it’s been double won.*

Faith is only as good as its object... and thus God gives us double-assurance - His promise and His oath.

And in verse 18, **“We who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us.** Here’s a reference to Numbers 35

and the ancient custom known as **the cities of refuge**. Unlike today, in Bible times revenge was an individual right. If you took the life of one of my family members, even by accident, it was my right, if not my duty, to take your life. It was **an eye for an eye**.

Yet God came to the defense of the innocent. If the cause of death was accidental, the person at whose hands the death occurred could flee to a safe haven.

So-called **“cities of refuge”** were set up throughout Israel. The guilty would flee to a designated city for protection. And as long as you stayed within its walls, no one could avenge their fallen family member. But if you left the city of refuge, then you were on your own.

And this was figurative of our hope in Christ. Jesus is our **city of refuge!** Continue in Him, and He protects us from the penalties of sin. But fall away from the faith - *leave town, so to speak* - and you're on your own. This is why the writer is exhorting us to hold fast to our faith!

Verse 19, **“This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever...”** One of the earliest Christian symbols was that of a boat anchor. Archeologists have found over 60 anchors carved in the walls of the catacombs in Rome.

If your faith is in Christ, then He is your anchor.

And an anchor is the object beyond the surface. It can't be seen, yet it holds what's on the water, what's visible, so it

doesn't drift... *A ship's anchor is below the water, but our anchor, Jesus, is above the heavens.*

A ship's anchor grabs onto the ocean floor. Whereas, the risen Christ soared into heaven and has hooked Himself to God's throne. He's now holding tight, and He anchors anyone on the surface who connects to Him.

This means **you have a friend in high places!**

Here on life's surface, violent storms arise: *pandemic viruses, and quarantines, and financial uncertainty.*

Yet when these storms blow, it's comforting to know that **we're anchored.** We're tied off to something greater than ourselves. Jesus has us anchored to God.

That's why we need to continue on with Jesus. No drawing back! Cut the tie-line of faith, and you'll drift.

I love how the poet puts it, "I can feel the anchor fast as I meet each sudden blast, and the cable, though unseen, bears the heavenly strain between; through the storm I safely ride, till the turning of the tide. And it holds, my anchor holds. Blow your wildest, then, O gale, on my bow so small and frail; by His grace, I shall not fail, for my anchor holds, my anchor holds."

No matter what you've been called on to endure you'll hold fast if you're anchored to Jesus. *Don't let go.*

We have a High Priest, Jesus Christ, who is better than the sons of Aaron, the earthly priests. In fact, the last verse in Chapter 6 tells us our eternal High Priest is a priest **"according to the order of Melchizedek."**

And Chapter 7 is all about the superior priesthood of this mysterious character named "*Melchizedek..*"

That's where we'll pick up next time...