

The High Priest Who Died for Us

In the first two instalments, we considered the nature and status of Jesus Christ, as well as how he is portrayed across the Old and New Testaments. In this section, we consider the principles around his death as a sacrifice, and his role as High Priest.

A Representative Sacrifice

Jesus' death was representative, meaning that he did not die instead of us, as though acting as a substitute for sinners. Sinners, and that includes all of us, still die. The only hope of life after death is by resurrection when Christ returns to earth.

The idea of taking an innocent person's life so that the guilty can go free would be a difficult moral concept. Indeed, for the idea of substitution to be correct, Jesus should have remained dead for the price to be paid. His death alone would have sufficed for the salvation of mankind. His resurrection wouldn't have been necessary; nor would it have been morally valid. But he did not remain dead; he was raised to life. What's more, the Bible teaches that his resurrection is as important for our salvation as is his death.

Because Jesus Christ died for us, as our representative, the Bible stresses the extreme importance of his resurrection for our salvation and for God's plan to come to fruition. Peter taught this as he and the other followers of Jesus began their mission, shortly after his resurrection and ascension to heaven:

[Jesus] whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that he should be held by it (Acts 2:24).

Later, Peter wrote:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3).

Another writer, Paul, also emphasised this important truth:

Jesus our Lord... was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification (Romans 4:24-25).

If, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life (Romans 5:10). That is, by his resurrected life.

If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Corinthians 15:17-20).

If Jesus died as a substitute for us, the Bible would have had no need to



stress the crucial importance of his resurrection. Yet we read clearly that if Christ had not been raised from the dead, even those who believed and trusted in him would have perished without hope.

His being raised from the dead is as essential for our salvation as was his death. Christ's resurrection gives us the hope of being raised from the dead at his second coming, following the pattern of his resurrection.

Our High Priest

The background to our Lord Jesus Christ's high priesthood goes right back to Genesis and a king named Melchizedek, who was also a priest and who Abraham met in Jerusalem.

Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said: "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand" (Genesis 14:18-20).

This event is referred to in Psalm 110, which is quoted in the New Testament when explaining that Jesus is the Messiah. Indeed, Jesus himself refers to the Psalm in Matthew 22:44.

Hebrews chapters 5, 6 and 7 describe Jesus' role as our High Priest in some detail, using the words of the same Psalm:

You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 5:6).

As a priest, he is our mediator at God's right hand in heaven. We have access in our prayers to God through him. This means that we do not need any other priest or mediator. This unequivocal statement was written in the context of prayer and intercession:

For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5).

Through the work of Jesus as our High Priest, believers can approach God and be heard in prayer:

Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which he consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, his flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful (Hebrews 10:19-23).

This is a remarkable provision, made by God and carried out by Jesus. It is open to all of us if we will accept it.

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