

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

### Jesus Is Our Great High Priest

Did you happen to see the story in the news some time ago about the completion of the *Tzitz*? *"The what?"* you may be asking. The *Tzitz* (טִּיץ). That is the Hebrew word for the golden plate that was fastened to the headpiece (the turban) worn by the high priest of Israel—the one with HOLY TO THE LORD engraved on it. The news that it was finished came from the Temple Institute in Jerusalem, an organization that has been dedicated to reproducing all the garments and vessels that were prepared for use in the tabernacle and temple, according to God's instructions in the Old Testament. They've been doing this so that everything will be ready when a new high priest appears to lead the Jews in worship in a new temple in Jerusalem.

If you don't remember seeing the story, it would be understandable. It first appeared in the news more than ten years ago—and that is pretty much the point. There isn't any need to watch and wait for a new high priest to appear—or to make garments and vessels for him to use in an earthly temple. The writer of the New Testament letter *Hebrews* makes that clear when he writes, **We have a great high priest**. Notice that he says that "we *have*," not "we *had*" and not "we *will have*." We *have* a Great High Priest.

It is this truth—that we have a Great High Priest—that will serve as the focus for our midweek Lenten services this year. Our lessons will be taken from the book of Hebrews and, God-willing, will lead us to a deeper appreciation for the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ as we follow him through his great passion. Today/Tonight we will see that **Jesus is truly our Great High Priest** who is qualified, by whom we are purified, and *with* whom we will be glorified.

#### I. He is a Great High Priest who is qualified.

Hebrews begins abruptly—there is no time spent on introductions or greetings; the author gets right to the point. We don't know much about the first recipients of this letter, but it is clear that they were Christians of Jewish background who were suffering for their faith. They were tempted by persecution to return to the old ways of Judaism that they had left behind when the Holy Spirit called them to faith in Christ. No doubt, in their troubles they became nostalgic for the familiar old forms of Jewish worship that they knew so well. Unlike the Temple Institute that looks ahead, waiting for a *new* high priest to appear, these Jewish Christians were looking back to what they had left behind in order to follow Jesus. The message of the inspired author of Hebrews to these wavering believers was simply this: *You have something better in Jesus—he is better than everything the people of Israel had in the past, as glorious as it all was.*

The author immediately begins his encouraging explanation that Jesus is better by beginning with the Old Testament prophets. He says, **In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son**. He reminds them that God had given them the Old Testament Scriptures by speaking to their ancestors" through men—great men to be sure, like Moses, David, and Isaiah—but mere men used by God to deliver the promises of a great Savior from sin. These men delivered the gospel message over many years in many ways—Old Testament prophecy was like a puzzle to which each of the prophets contributed a piece or two. None had the whole picture, but as you put the pieces of the prophetic puzzle together, the picture produced is Jesus of Nazareth—his birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection.

So the writer of Hebrews urges his readers: *Consider what you have in Jesus, God's Son. Your fathers believed the prophets—they were men of God. How much more should we stand firm in our faith because **"in these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son"**?*

He then presents Christ's credentials, his qualifications—and notice how he heaps up expressions to magnify the greatness of Christ: **"In these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word."** Christians adopted this language for our creeds. Think of the Nicene Creed ("God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God. . . . Through him all things were made") and the Athanasian Creed ("What the Father is, so is the Son"). The writer's point is clear to his wavering readers: *Do not turn a deaf ear to God as he speaks to you through his own Son. Christ is fully qualified to speak to you of heavenly things—listen to him!*

But he doesn't present Christ's impressive credentials merely to demonstrate that he is a prophet and teacher who deserves our attention. That's true, but more importantly, he does it to show that Christ is truly the *Great High Priest*! He emphasizes Jesus' high priestly work when he adds to the list of his credentials these words: **After he had provided purification for sins.** The first Jewish readers of this letter knew that it was the work of the high priest to provide purification for sins. When the Lord gave instructions for the great Day of Atonement in Leviticus, he explained the result of the elaborate rituals the high priest performed that day: **"On this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins" (16:30).** It is this work of Jesus as High Priest that is the special focus of Hebrews (chapters 4-10).

You could tell that the high priest was an important person just by looking at the way he dressed. He wore the turban with the *Tzitz* on it. But not just anybody could wear that outfit. A man had to be qualified to serve as high priest. He had to, for example, be of the tribe of Levi and the family of Aaron and had to be without physical deformity or defect. He had to be careful to marry the right kind of woman. He could not attend funerals—not even those of his own family. Tough qualifications to be sure—but consider Christ!

Jesus is God's Son, the Creator and preserver of all things, the radiance of God's glory and the mirror image of his essence. As the author of Hebrews presents the facts about who Jesus is, he is explaining what qualifies Christ to be called the Great High Priest—he is the Son of God! But Jesus is our Great High Priest not only because he is well-qualified for the title, but because we are purified by him.

## **II. He is a Great High Priest by whom we're purified.**

As you observe Jesus celebrating the Last Supper with his disciples, you might wonder whether he actually qualifies for the title Great High Priest. After all, you see the One described in such glowing terms by the writer of Hebrews on his hands and knees washing the feet of his disciples, purifying them from the day's accumulated dust and dirt. But before you dismiss the One with the basin and towel as unworthy of being called the Great High Priest, recall the great Day of Atonement. As the high priest in Israel prepared to perform the rituals by which cleansing would be made for Israel's sin, he removed the ornate garments he usually wore and put on simple linen garments. Ordinarily, the high priest wore fancy clothing that made him look like a king, but on the day he made purification for sin, the high priest looked more like a slave!

In the same way, as our Lord Jesus, the Great High Priest, prepared to provide his purification for sin, he laid aside the garments of his glory. The Passion History in the gospels tells us that Jesus, as he gathered with his disciples in the upper room to celebrate the Passover, **got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist (John 13:4)**. It was not fine clothing that our Lord laid aside as he poured water in a basin and began to wash the feet of his disciples. No, he laid aside much more! Paul describes Christ Jesus as **being in very nature God—God himself in human flesh**. But that **[he] did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant (Philippians 2:6-7)**. Jesus laid aside the full and constant use of his divine power and glory to serve us.

So we see the Son of God down on the floor washing the feet of his disciples—cleansing them of dust and dirt—but there is more here than meets the eye. In the act of washing his disciples' feet, we have a foreshadowing of another purification that Jesus would provide in just a few hours by his death on the cross. We see that in Jesus' words to Peter, who objected when the Lord wanted to wash his feet: **“Unless I wash you,” Jesus said, “you have no part with me” (John 13:8)**. Clearly Jesus wasn't talking only about washing feet; he was talking about needing to be washed clean of sin. To provide that purification, Jesus would stoop far lower than to the floor to wash feet with water and dry them with a towel. To provide purification from sin, Jesus would stoop to dying in shame on Calvary's cross. And by his death there, he would provide purification for the sins of the world—including yours and mine.

This is the great purification Jesus the Great High Priest provides—the purification from sins. What sins? Look into the upper room and don't you see your own home?! At your home, do you ever see one person (Mom? Dad?) on hands and knees doing the dirty work while the others are either sitting back and watching or—maybe even complaining about how the work is being done? What about at church? Does it happen that the grunt work is done by a few, while many sit back watching—or maybe even complaining about the way the work is being done? It is not to be that way with Jesus' followers. Jesus says, **I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you (John 13:15)**. Scripture says, **God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble (1 Peter 5:5)**. Yet how easy it is to be like the disciples and act at home like we are too good and too important to stoop down and help out with the less glamorous jobs like putting away laundry and washing dishes and making beds and working in the yard. How easy it is to act all proud and important at church, but then leave the time- and energy-consuming projects at God's house to others, giving the impression that our time and energy are so much more precious than theirs. How easy it is to be served rather than to serve. Our sins often reveal a weak servant's heart.

We need to be purified of our sinful pride and its related sins. The only one qualified to purify us from our sins is Jesus Christ our Great High Priest. He is the one who not only bowed down to wash the feet of his disciples in the upper room, but he stooped to carry a cross and to be pierced *on* it for our transgressions and crushed *under* it for our iniquities. By the blood of God's one and only Son that flowed there, we are cleansed from every sin. Yes, Jesus is our Great High Priest; he is qualified to be our High Priest; he has purified us as our High Priest; and...

### **III. He is a Great High Priest with whom we will be glorified.**

This beginning portion of praise to Christ with which Hebrews begins, closes with the author mentioning Christ's glorification. He says that after the Son had provided purification for sins, **He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven**. Christ's exaltation and glorification assure us that his work of providing purification for sins was completed successfully. On the day of Pentecost, Peter spoke of the risen and exalted Savior and said, **Let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah (Acts 2:36)**. He meant that by exalting Christ, God confirmed him to truly be the Great High Priest who completed the work of purifying every sinner from every sin.

But here is the wonder of our Lord's exaltation—the glory that awaited him beyond the cross and grave wasn't just for him! He made that clear that when he prayed in his High Priestly Prayer: **Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world (John 17:24).** Our Savior's great exaltation is intended to inspire us. God knows the weakness of our flesh—that if all we heard about the Christian life is that it requires us to follow Christ's example and humble ourselves in self-denying service to others as long as we live, we wouldn't last long; we'd get tired of that.

To inspire us to more faithful service to God and others, Jesus points us to his own glorification and promises: **Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me (John 12:26).** Think about that: **My Father will honor the one who serves me.** Is this eternal glorification in heaven a reward that we earn by humbly imitating Christ? Impossible! Look at how poorly we serve and imitate the humility of Christ! Our selfishness, our pride, and our disobedience would surely disqualify us from earning any reward. But because Jesus humbled himself so deeply and purified us from our sins by his blood, we can be assured that we will be glorified with him in due time. May our Savior's sacrifice and the glory promised to us by grace inspire us to more humble service to others where we live and work and worship!

Rejoice in Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest!

He is qualified to be our Great High Priest;  
he has purified us as our Great High Priest, and  
we will be glorified with our Great High Priest. Amen.

**Now the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.**