

# The High Priest and His Brothers

Hebrews 2:11 says:

For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters<sup>1</sup>...

and continues:

Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. (Heb. 2:17)

Christ sanctifies the people, and he is not ashamed to call those whom he has sanctified 'brothers'. Within the Old Testament, sanctification is something that people do in order to be ready for a special event, such as preparation for receiving the Law at Sinai (Ex. 19:10, 22), or it relates to setting certain people and 'things' apart for special purposes (Ex. 28:3, 38, 41), but it also specifies that God has set all Israel, as well as certain people and things within the nation, apart for himself (Ex. 29:44; 33:13; see also Gen. 2:1-3 for the sanctifying of the sabbath of creation).

Both Jeremiah 31:31-34 and the letter to the Hebrews insist, though, that a deeper work of sanctification is required. Quite simply, the focal point of Israel's sanctification, the sacrificial system, while making it possible for Israel to continue as the people of God and to participate in the worship which God had given, could not, of itself, deal with the matter of guilt in the conscience. Certainly there was a rich understanding of forgiveness within Israel, as in Psalm 32:1, 5 – 'Blessed are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. ... you forgave the guilt of my sin' – but the whole people did not share that joy and, what is more, the means to such forgiveness, the sacrifices, had to be continually repeated.

Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach. <sup>2</sup>Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered, since the worshipers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin? <sup>3</sup>But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year. <sup>4</sup>For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. (Heb. 10:1-4)

So when Hebrews specifies that Jesus as high priest sanctifies (cf. Heb. 10:10), what is in mind is the great and complete work of atonement or, as some versions have it, he makes propitiation for the sins of the people. That means that his action of atonement, 'at-one-ment'<sup>2</sup>, removes the cause of division between men and women and God (cf. Isa. 59:1-2), human sin and the wrath of God which must follow it. This he did: 'he ... appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the offering of himself' (Heb. 10:26). Consequently, Hebrews 9:13-14 says:

For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, <sup>14</sup>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 worship the living God!

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<sup>1</sup> The Greek has 'brothers', as has the Hebrew of Ps. 22:23, from which the quote of Heb. 2:12 is taken.

<sup>2</sup> The word 'atonement' first appeared in the early 16th century to describe the act which restored 'onement'.

The word λατρεύειν (*latreuein*) translated here as ‘worship’, sometimes also translated as ‘serve’, commonly means to serve the deity, in a religious context. That would mean, then, that those whose consciences have been cleansed by the blood of Christ are now set to do the work of worship. Their sanctification means that they are now made fit to be priests serving our God and Father. They have been made the priestly community. They are brothers of Christ in the family of the new humanity, but they are also his brothers, as priestly brothers of the high priest. It is this restored role which is described in Revelation 1:5b-6.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, <sup>6</sup>and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

The picture is expanded in Revelation 5:9-10.

They sing a new song: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; <sup>10</sup>you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.”

The community of priests, that is, the community of worshippers, is now drawn from a group far wider than Israel. Indeed, as such they are the fulfilment of Israel’s purpose because they are the fulfilment of Adam’s purpose. A similar view is in Ephesians 2:17-18.

So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; <sup>18</sup>for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

This language of ‘access’ is reminiscent of the way that the majority of Israel was excluded from the centre of worship, whereas the priests alone could enter the holy place while only the high priest could enter the holy of holies. Hebrews, again, recognises this when it says:

We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, <sup>20</sup>where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. (Heb. 6:19-20)

The priestly community does not *see* what it is. It has the word of Christ to declare what it is, but for the present it has a *hope* that enters the inner shrine. Of course the reality of what is hoped for is there to be known, but known only to faith. God has said it and when that word is accepted then what is hoped for is ‘substantial’, not meaning ‘big’ but that it has a recognisable existence, it is real, and what is as yet unseen is evident (Heb. 11:1). Further, the faith itself, God’s gift (Eph. 2:8-9), is a real expression of the fulness to come. That is why Peter, who knows that we are a royal priesthood, says that faith is the vehicle by which we are brought to the goal and by which the goal is brought to us.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup>and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, <sup>5</sup>who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. <sup>6</sup>In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, <sup>7</sup>so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. <sup>8</sup>Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, <sup>9</sup>for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:3-9)

Some of the elements of this quote must especially be noted. From verse 5, we are being kept for the inheritance and the means by which we are kept is faith. Verses 6-7 indicate that faith is not a passive acceptance but an active participation which embraces the action of God and engages in it. As such, faith is constantly tested to reveal its true nature. Were it not tested, there could be no confidence that it is real and that it is the gift of God. Of course, the tempter will suggest the opposite, that the testing indicates some *uncertainty*. But the promise is that the testing, though painful, is necessary. And it is, if for no other reason than it was required of Christ: ‘Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ (Luke 24:26), and Peter’s statement in 1 Peter 1:11 confirms it: the Spirit of Christ in the prophets of old ‘testified in advance to the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory’. Geoff Bingham once put it that ‘suffering is not the *cost* of glory but the *way* to glory’. That is, we are not rewarded with glory because we suffer, we suffer because we are destined for glory.

This aspect is consistent with all that we know of Satan and the demonic powers. The word of God came to Adam priest in the sanctuary of Eden and the serpent responded with the clear intention to steal and to kill and to destroy. He attempted to repeat that, following the baptism of Jesus, by deflecting the Messiah from his God given role, that of asking the Father for the nations and ruling them, and of being a light to and bringing justice to the nations (Matt. 3:17; cf. Psalm 2 and Isa. 42:1-6). Revelation 12 is further reminder of the nature of the suffering we experience and we will examine this later. But first we must continue with the elements of 1 Peter 1. Verses 8 and 9 indicate that a great work of God has taken place. Neither the original readers nor we have ever seen Jesus, yet they, and we, love him.

Without wanting to sound ‘matter of fact’ about such a statement, there is an aspect of this which is to be expected. If humanity is created to love the Lord with all of heart, mind, soul and strength and if through of Christ the guilt of sin has been removed and the love of Christ has been flooded into the human heart, then what else would be expected? But as I said, this is not to be taken as a mere ‘matter of fact’, since there has taken place a miracle of grace of such immense and overwhelming proportions that the human mind can only know it by revelation. Thus 1 Cor. 2:9-10.

But, as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who *love* him” – <sup>10</sup>these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

Furthermore, we can only go on knowing as we go on living in that revelation. That is the moral demand of faith. Indeed, the suffering referred to is essentially moral, that is it concerns whether or not we will continue to trust the word of God, both as promise and command. The *form* of the suffering, then, need not be the same for all, though the *content* was and is, even as it was for Christ.

Peter adds that the readers not only love Christ but believe in him and rejoice with indescribable and glorious joy. The words ‘glorious joy’ might be also translated (less smoothly) as ‘a having been glorified joy’. There is a reason for that observation, and that is that the joy that is known is actually the salvation to come breaking in upon us now. Thus verse 9: ‘you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls’.

Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, was faithful to him who appointed him (Heb. 3:1-2) and his experience of the suffering of death was for those whom he now calls his brothers. He is the pioneer of our salvation, since through him God is bringing many sons to glory (Heb. 2:10).

We might note the similar emphasis in Romans 5–8. There is access to grace and a boast in hope of the glory of God, accompanied by suffering which is received with gladness because we see its purpose of reinforcing hope, all driven by the powerful infusion of the love of Christ revealed in the cross (Rom. 5:1-8). At the same time there is the longing for final sight, since at present what is seen is only what was once called ‘remaining sin’ (Rom. 7:14-25).

But the cry evoked by the Spirit through whom the love of Christ was brought to us, ‘Abba Father’ is indicative that we are indeed children of God (Rom. 8:16), sons of God (Rom. 8:14), and so heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – provided we suffer with him in order that we participate in his ultimate glorification (Rom. 8:17).

Suffering is not to be avoided but is to be seen in perspective. The glory to be revealed makes the suffering appear in its true light. Actually, not only do we, but the whole creation also experiences the tension of waiting for the revealing of the glory of the children of God (Rom. 8:18-21). Nevertheless, as those guarded through tested faith

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup>For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. <sup>30</sup>And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Romans 8:28-30)

‘Foreknew’, ‘predestined’, ‘called’, ‘justified’ and ‘glorified’ are all verbs indicating completed action<sup>3</sup>, not so much because they are past as because they have been accomplished in Christ. That is why all things are now working together for good for those who now love God (cf. 1 Pet. 1:8).

When John saw into the heavenly sanctuary he said:

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. <sup>10</sup>They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

<sup>11</sup>And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, <sup>12</sup>singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

<sup>13</sup>Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” <sup>14</sup>I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

<sup>15</sup>For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. (Revelation 7:9-15)

Here is the great worship in the sanctuary, in the temple of God. The worshippers, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, are present in spotless robes and with ceaseless adoration. They are those for whom the sufferings of this present time have had their effect. They have come out of the great ordeal (or perhaps ‘are coming out’<sup>4</sup>) and that because their robes have been washed (they have washed them) white in the blood of the Lamb. Their high priest’s work has been received.

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<sup>3</sup> They are all Greek aorist tense.

<sup>4</sup> Aune suggests that ‘are coming out’ is grammatically improbable, but he really only adduces theological reasons why that should be so (*Revelation 6-16*, p. 473). Given another theological view, ‘are coming out’ would be a great encouragement to those who are now suffering.