

EVERYDAY ATONEMENT

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Hebrews 10:14-5:10

“Is this person qualified? Can they do the job?” These are the basic questions an employer asks themselves when they are considering someone for employment. Above everything else, do they have the qualifications?

With every job hire, you usually have to take a few things into consideration. Each person is unique and it is often necessary to overlook a few eccentricities. However, there are dealbreakers—those red flags that indicate that maybe this person maybe isn’t really the best match for you. I found some examples in a recent article about job interviewing. For example, there was the candidate who answered the question, “What is your biggest weakness?” by saying, “That would be waking up on time and coming to work. I like to sleep in.” They didn’t get the job. Or the person who kept rescheduling their interview just minutes before they were supposed to meet. After two weeks of this, they were told not to bother. Or the person who answered their cell phone during the interview. (Don’t do that.) Or the person who handed over their list of references and then pointed at the first one and said, “But don’t call this guy,” and then pointed the second and said, “You’d better not call this one either.” Or the candidate at an advertising agency when asked “What would you like to be doing in five years?” answered, “Full-time magician.” The interviewer asked if they could make themselves disappear.

The book of Hebrews, which we find in our New Testament, is something of a job interview. In it, the author attempts to convince the members of the Hebrew congregation that they should “hire” Jesus as their savior. The situation is that this particular congregation in Rome had flatlined spiritually. People had left the group and others were on the verge of giving up. The author creates this book that we call The Letter to the Hebrews. In this book, the author attempts to convince the congregation on the importance of Jesus’ role in God’s plan for salvation. The writer argues that Jesus is their great high priest. He asks if Jesus is qualified for the job of high priest and then spends the rest of the book saying yes and telling us why.

One thing that I find surprising about the book of Hebrews is the clear and obvious reverence the writer has for the position of the high priest. Given that the writer is addressing a congregation of Jews who have converted to Christianity, one might assume that the writer would feel comfortable, if not expected, taking a few jabs at the Jewish hierarchy. But he doesn’t. He discusses the position of the high priest with a surprising earnestness.

The book of Hebrews is known officially as The Letter to the Hebrews, but as I have mentioned before, it is not properly a letter. It is more likely an essay or a

sermon, written for this congregation in Rome—a congregation of Jewish converts. Since the founding of this congregation, their zeal for their faith had diminished. Some have abandoned the group and others are considering leaving. The future of the church is in question.

In ancient Judaism, the high priest is, unsurprisingly, the priest who rules over the other priests, like a bishop. In society, the high priest would hold civil authority in addition to his religious authority. He was a person of great power. The high priest is viewed as the one with the most direct contact to God.

The high priest is, of course, mortal. They are merely humans. Each high priest is chosen for the task of offering gifts and sacrifices to God for the sins of the people. Hebrews points out that while close to God, the high priest has their own suitcase full of personal sins they must deal with. When the priest offers those sacrifices in the temple for the sins of the people, his own sins are included there. Because of his own sins, the high priest is able *to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward*. In other words, because the high priest is just a person, they are able to relate to all other people, including the *ignorant and wayward*. Although *ignorant and wayward* sounds harsh, it is not meant that way. It refers to those who don't always fully understand God as well as those who wander from God's path. It is, in fact, every person, including the high priest.

The honor of being the high priest is not one that a person can claim for themselves. It is a calling. One must be called by God. The writer uses the priest Aaron as an example. Aaron was the brother of Moses. When Moses claimed that he was unfit for the calling that God had given him, God appointed Aaron to assist Moses. Aaron was the first high priest of the Israelites.

The writer of Hebrews identifies Jesus as being a high priest. This was not a role Jesus took upon himself. As the writer puts it, he *did not glory himself* to become high priest but was appointed by God to the task. Hebrews quotes God with these words from Psalm 2: *You are my Son, today I have begotten you*. Hebrews also quotes God with the words from Psalm 110 when he adds, *You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek*.

It would be good to a priest in the order of Aaron, but Jesus, however, doesn't meet one important qualification. Aaron, along with all other priests, is from the tribe of Levi. Jesus isn't. As job qualifications go, for the Jews this would be a dealbreaker. However, Hebrews argues that Melchizedek comes from an older and more prestigious order of priests.

Melchizedek is something of a shadowy figure from the depths of the Old Testament. The Jews in the Hebrew congregation would know him better than we do. His story is told only once in scripture, in the book of Genesis. In Genesis, Abram (who later becomes Abraham) has just won a great military victory. When

he returns home, he is greeted by King Melchizedek. Melchizedek is not just a king but he is described as being *a priest of God Most High* (Gen. 14:18). Melchizedek brings bread and wine to Abram and says to him, *Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth*. Then Abram gives Melchizedek one-tenth of everything he has gained in battle.

As Christians, we (as well as the people of Hebrews) are bound to take notice when we hear this story. So much of it sounds oddly familiar. We have a king and a priest, bread and wine, even tithing. This king, Melchizedek, his name means “king of righteousness.” Furthermore, he is the king of Salem. The word salem means peace, so this makes Melchizedek the king of peace and righteousness. If Hebrews want to identify Jesus with the first high priest and hero, Aaron, that is fine. But if he really wants to impress the people with the special nature of Jesus, it does not hurt to link him with Melchizedek, to say, *You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek*.

The next thing that the writer of Hebrews does is to more closely associate Jesus with the job of the high priest. The job of the high priest was not a quiet one. In worship, the high priest had a role to play—he was communicating with God. It was not unusual for the high priest to do so with loud crying and wailing. Tears would be shed. The people needed to know that the priest was working for them. The priest needed to put in some effort. It wasn’t easy talking with God.

In the same way, Hebrews points out, when Jesus was in the flesh and with us in this world, he also offered up *prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears*. He too was calling on God. We think of the prayers Jesus made on the night when he knew he was going to be arrested, when he prayed, *Abba, Father... remove this cup from me* (Mark 14:36). God heard Jesus’ prayer. It is because of this *reverent submission* that God hears all the prayers of his Son, who is our high priest. God also listened because Jesus was perfect. God had made him that way. But he also suffered. It was through this suffering that Jesus learned obedience to God. It was also through this suffering that he has become *the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him*. He is the high priest designated by God. We should accept him in this job and celebrate his work on our behalf.

Jesus is not just the high priest making the sacrifice; he is also the sacrifice itself. That is what sets him apart. His suffering is his sacrifice. His very life atones for our sins.

In the temple, the high priest would need to make sacrifices every day to atone for the sins of the people—sacrificing lambs and birds and more. Jesus’ ultimate sacrifice of his life changed that. That sacrifice for us has been made. It doesn’t need to be made again and again. The members of the Hebrew congregation would have expected a high priest to sacrifice daily for them. With Jesus as priest and savior, that is no longer necessary.

In the book of Hebrews, the writer is seeking to educate the members of a foundering congregation of the great role that Jesus plays in their lives, a role they may not fully understand. He also wants to show them ministry is a calling and God calls even those who are vulnerable, those who have suffered, because they can serve as Christ.

Amen.