

Jesus Is Our Great High Priest, Hebrews 1:1-3

Rev. George Ferch

Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

Tzitz is the Hebrew word for the golden plate that was fastened to the headpiece worn by the high priest of Israel. The Temple Institute in Jerusalem is an organization dedicated to producing the garments and vessels that were used in the tabernacle and temple. More than ten years ago this group finished making the *Tziz*. They are making these items in preparation for the appearance of a new high priest. He is to appear so he can lead the Jews in worship in a new temple in Jerusalem.

There is no 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 Hebrews makes that clear, “We have a great high priest.” He says “we *have*,” not “we *had*” and not “we *will have*.”

We *have* a Great High Priest. This is the focus for our midweek Lenten services. Our sermon texts will be taken from the book of Hebrews. May they lead us to a deeper appreciation for the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. From the beginning of the letter we see that truly **Jesus is our Great High Priest.** He is qualified. By him we are purified. With him we will be glorified.

The recipients of the author’s encouragement were Jewish Christians suffering for their faith. Persecution was tempting these Jewish believers to turn back to the old ways of Judaism they had left behind when the Holy Spirit called them to faith in Christ.

The message to these wavering believers was simply this: You have something better. Jesus is better than everything you had in the past, as glorious as that all was. To begin with, Jesus is better than the Old Testament prophets. “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.”

God spoke to “[their] ancestors” through great men like Isaiah and Daniel, but men none the less. God used the prophets to deliver the promises of a great Savior from sin to come. These men preached the gospel over many years in many ways. Each Old Testament prophecy was a piece of the puzzle. As you put the pieces of the prophetic puzzle together, the picture of Jesus of Nazareth appeared; his birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection. The hymn writer put it well, “What the fathers most desired, what the prophets’ heart inspired, what they longed for many a year stands fulfilled in glory here” (CW 28:2).

The author of Hebrews urged his readers, “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’?’”

Jesus is our Great High Priest. He is qualified because he is the eternal Son of God. The writer presents Christ’s credentials: “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.” Christ is fully qualified to speak to you of heavenly things. Listen to him!

Christ’s credentials show that he is the Great High Priest in his high priestly work. “After he had provided purification for sins.” The first readers of Hebrews knew this purification was the work of the high priest on the Day of Atonement. We read in Leviticus 16, “On this day

atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins” (vs. 30)

A man had to be qualified to serve as high priest; of the tribe of Levi and the family of Aaron, without physical deformity or defect, careful to marry the right kind of woman. He could not attend funerals even those of his own family members. Tough qualifications.

But consider Jesus Christ’s qualifications: God’s Son, the heir to and the Creator and preserver of all things, the radiance of God’s glory, the mirror image of his essence. They qualified Jesus to do the purifying work as our Great High Priest!

Go back with me to the Day of Atonement. As the high priest prepared to perform the rituals for purification, he removed the fancy garments he usually wore and put on simple linen garments. Ordinarily, he looked like a king. On the day he made purification for sin, he looked more like a slave.

Think of Jesus with a towel around his waist washing his disciples’ feet. Jesus did not walk around during his earthly ministry dressed in fine, expensive clothing. It was not kingly garments our Lord laid aside as he poured water in a basin and began to wash the feet of his disciples.

Jesus laid aside much more. Our Lord Jesus the Great High Priest prepared to provide his one great purification for sin by laying aside the garments of his glory. Although “being in very nature God,” Jesus laid aside the full and constant use of his divine power and glory to serve us. Luther says it well in his hymn: “No garb of pomp or pow’r he wore; a servant’s form like mine he bore to lead the devil captive” (CW 377:6).

The Son of God washing the disciples’ feet was a foreshadowing of another purification Jesus would provide in a few hours by his death on the cross. When Jesus’ said to Simon Peter, who objected, “Unless I wash you,” Jesus said, “you have no part with me” (Jn 13:8), clearly Jesus wasn’t talking about washing feet. He was talking about the need to be washed clean of sin. To provide purification from sin for the entire world, Jesus would stoop to dying in shame on Calvary’s cross.

Jesus the Great High Priest provides the purification from sins. What sins? You know your sins against God’s will. You experience your guilt for the lack of love shown God and your neighbors. So we plead as King David did for God to “wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin” (Ps 51:2). “Wash me and I will be whiter than snow” (Ps 51:7).

The author closes this portion of his letter with Christ’s glorification. “He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.” A hymn says it well: “The head that once was crowned with thorns is crowned with glory now” (CW 217:1).

Jesus had 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” (vs. 24). With him we will be glorified.

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” (Jn 12:26). Because Jesus humbled himself so deeply and purified us from our sins by his blood, we will be glorified with Jesus.

May the person, work and glory of Jesus Christ our Great High Priest inspire us to genuine repentance for sin, and more humble service to others where we live and work and worship. Amen. <SDG>