

TO LEARN OBEDIENCE

HEBREWS 5



T. M. Moore

A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe

To Learn Obedience: Hebrews 5
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Hebrews 5: Introduction

The problem with the first readers of the book of Hebrews is that, because they failed to shed their infant clothes, and put on the garments of maturity, they became susceptible to drifting from Christ when pressure from their Jewish friends and kin began to rise.

Rather than learn obedience through their suffering, as Jesus did, they learned disobedience, and were turning away from Christ to the safety of former ways. They should have been teaching one another and their neighbors the sweet truths of the Gospel. Instead, they were cowering within the unsatisfying and unfruitful traditions and ways from which Christ had delivered them.

They needed to move on from the milk of Christian infancy to the solid food of confident maturity in the Lord. Chapter 5 presents a strong rebuke from the writer, a confrontation his readers needed to help them get back on track with the Lord and His rest.

We're pleased to make this resource available for personal or group study at no charge, and we hope you will find this series helpful in realizing more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom of God.

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1 Appointed for Men

Introduction

The focal point of Jewish religion at the time of the book of Hebrews was the work of the priests. Through their work of sacrifice and intercession, they could bring a form of rest to worshipers. They were appointed to bring God's people into a right relationship with Him, and to help them remain there. This was a high calling, indeed, but the priests of Israel were as weak and fallible as those who turned to them for rest.

Read Leviticus 9.1-22.

Read Hebrews 5.1, 2.

Think it through.

1. The priests of the Jewish religion were, after all, men like everyone else (v. 1). They were taken "from among men" and appointed by God "for men in things *pertaining* to God." What things? What did priests do, and how was this beneficial for those they served? At the time of this writing, the priests were probably still functioning this way in Jerusalem. All that would change in 70 AD, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. What became of the work of priests at that time? And when that work ceased, what happened to the "rest" people found from the work of those priests?

2. The best priests of ancient Israel were men of learning and compassion. They knew God and they loved the people they served. They longed to help God's people abide in Him. Undoubtedly, there were still many good and compassionate priests at the time the book of Hebrews was written. But they were nevertheless "subject to weakness" like all men. What kinds of weakness? How could that affect the "rest" people sought from them? Meditate on 1 Peter 2.9. What does it mean that you are part of a "royal priesthood"? How does that oblige you in relation to God? To the people God calls you to serve?

Meditate.

"...here also he opens out the other path of the priesthood, showing its superiority from the things which happened before. And as, in the matter of punishment, he brings before them not hell alone, but also what happened to their ancestors, so now here also, he first establishes this position from things present. For it were right indeed that earthly things should be proved from heavenly, but when the hearers are weak, the opposite course is taken." *John Chrysostom (344-407 AD)*

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light... 1 Peter 2.9

You have appointed me as a priest to You, O Lord, for the sake of my neighbors. I understand that this means I must...

Pray Psalm 132.13-18.

Pray that the Lord might "clothe" you "with salvation" today, so that you might fulfill your calling as one of His royal priests.

Psalm 132.13-18 (*Finlandia: Be Still, My Soul*)

God dwells among us, and He will forever,
To meet our needs and clothe us with His grace.
He has to us sent Jesus Christ, our Savior,
And made us His eternal resting-place.
His foes are banished from His presence ever,

But we shall reign with Him before His face.

2 Which High Priest?

Introduction

The writer's excursus into the subject of the priesthood may seem a bit tedious to 21st century readers. But it is absolutely crucial to his argument, as he intends to show that the office of priesthood to which Jesus has been appointed far exceeds the office of the Levitical priesthood. And at any rate, why would we want to return to seek the intercession of this temporary office, since it was only ever filled by weak and fallible men?

Meditate on Zechariah 3.1-5.

Read Hebrews 5.3-5.

Think it through.

1. Certain Hebrew Christians were drawing back from their confidence in Christ and returning to the fold of their Jewish families and friends. Jewish religion was presided over by priests, which meant that, in effect, the readers of this epistle were seeking *rest* in men, rather than in God, just as their ancient forebears had sought *rest* in the wilderness, rather than in the land of promise. They needed to remember that their priests were no different from them in certain respects. Such as (v. 3)? Why should remembering this cause them to think twice about forsaking Christ for their Jewish priests (Heb. 2.14, 15)? Whenever we draw back from our confession of Christ because of the fear of men, we're doing the same thing the first readers of this book were doing. How should the message to them instruct us?

2. It was one of the great sins of Jeroboam I to allow men to become priests from every tribe in Israel, rather than from the descendants of Aaron alone (1 Kgs. 12.25-33). Those priests clearly could not please God; instead, they led the nation of Israel into all manner of idolatry and rebellion against the Lord. Priests could only be appointed by God from the descendants of Aaron. That made the priesthood a very exclusive calling. Christ was also called "to become High Priest." But what was different about *His* priesthood from that of the Aaronic priests? The priests to whom the first readers of the book of Hebrews were returning were sons of Aaron. What about Christ? The writer has already made this point (Heb. 1.5). Why is he making it again?

Meditate.

"The one receiving appointment from God is the lawful high priest; this was the way Aaron, the first high priest, received the honor. The divine apostle said this, of course, not intending to inform us now of the norms for high priesthood, but to lay the groundwork for a treatment of the Lord's high priesthood."

Theodoret of Cyr (393-466 AD)

*"You are worthy to take the scroll,
And to open its seals;
For You were slain,
And have redeemed us to God by Your blood
Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation,
And have made us kings and priests to our God;
And we shall reign on the earth."* Revelation 5.9, 10

Lord Jesus, my great High Priest, I need You to intercede for me today so that...

Pray Psalm 132.8-18.

God will not turn His face away from His Anointed King and High Priest. Thank the Lord that Jesus has fulfilled His covenant and testimony, and has exalted us to reign as kings and priests and saints with Him

forever!

Psalm 132.8-10, 13-18 (*Finlandia: Be Still, My Soul*)

Arise, O Lord, come to Your resting place;
Your holy presence meet with us in might.
Clothe us with righteousness in Jesus' grace,
And we will shout to Your divine delight!
For David's sake, turn not away Your face,
But look upon us in Your holy light.

God dwells among us, and He will forever,
To meet our needs and clothe us with His grace.
He has to us sent Jesus Christ, our Savior,
And made us His eternal resting-place.
His foes are banished from His presence ever,
But we shall reign with Him before His face.

3 An Eternal Priest

Introduction

Now the writer fuses two lines of his argument thus far: Christ, Who is greater than angels because He is the Son of God, is also greater than Jewish high priests because He was appointed by God to an *eternal* priesthood. Christ did not seek this exalted status; rather, He was appointed to it by God, so that by His suffering and example, we might know what is required to enter God's rest.

Read and meditate on Psalm 88.

Read Hebrews 5.5-8.

Think it through.

1. The mention of Psalm 2 (v. 5) refers back to the argument proffered in chapter 1, namely, that Christ is greater than the angels because He is the Son of God. The use of "Today" is symbolic and should not be understood as referring to some specific point in time. The generation of Christ as Son of the Father is an *eternal* generation; He is *eternally* the Son of God. He did not *become* the Son of God due to some merit on His part (a view called Arianism, which was conclusively rejected by the Church in the fourth century). But, according to Psalm 110, Christ was only appointed a priest when, having ascended in glory, He took His seat at the Father's right hand. And then, He was not appointed an *Aaronic* priest. What kind of priest was He appointed to be (v. 6)? Who was Melchizedek (Gen. 14.18-20)? Why could Christ *only* have been appointed an eternal priest? Why was this important for those first readers?

2. Jesus demonstrated during "the days of His flesh" that He was well qualified to be appointed an eternal priest. How? To what does this refer (cf. Matt. 26.36-43)? Why did the Father hear His prayer? The writer says Jesus "learned obedience by the things which He suffered." Is this the same as saying He learned *to obey* by His sufferings? Or is it more like He learned *what obedience entails* by His suffering? Explain. According to Psalm 88, how intense was that suffering? In suffering because He obeyed God and not the priests of the Jews – because by His "godly fear" He overcame any fear of man He might have felt – Jesus set an example for us, and for those first readers of this epistle. What was the writer saying to them? To us?

Meditate.

"It was not while bare and not participating in the limits of his emptying that God the Word became our model, but 'in the days of his flesh.' Then, quite legitimately, he could employ human limits and pray insistently and shed tears and even appear somehow to need a savior and learn obedience, though a Son. The inspired author is, so to speak, stupefied by the mystery that the Son, existing by nature truly and endowed with the glories of divinity, should so abase himself that he endured the low estate of our impoverished humanity. But this was for us, as I have said, a fine and useful example." *Cyril of Alexandria (375-444 AD)*

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.
Philippians 2.5-8

Lord Jesus, let me learn from Your sufferings, and from the joy and exaltation that followed them, how to bear up under daily trials so that...

Pray Psalm 132.1-12.

In the midst of his afflictions, David swore and vowed to serve God in building a temple for Him. God calls

us to follow this example in keeping covenant with Him. As you pray, listen as the Lord brings to mind what He requires of you in the way of obedience today.

Psalm 132.1-12 (*Finlandia: Be Still, My Soul*)

Remember, Lord, we pray, in David's favor
The hardships he endured, the oath he swore,
The vow he made to Jacob's mighty Savior:
"I shall not enter through my palace door;
I shall not sleep, nor slumber my eyes favor,
Until I make a dwelling for the Lord!"

The word throughout the chosen nation spread,
To Ephrata, and in the fields of Jaar:
"Now let us go," the faithful people said,
"And worship where our Savior's dwellings are!
Around His footstool let our worship spread;
Come, gather to Him, all from near and far!"

Arise, O Lord, come to Your resting place;
Your holy presence meet with us in might.
Clothe us with righteousness in Jesus' grace,
And we will shout to Your divine delight!
For David's sake, turn not away Your face,
But look upon us in Your holy light.

Remember, Lord, the oath You swore to David;
Do not turn back, do not deny Your Word:
"One of your sons, with your throne I will favor,
And He shall keep My cov'nant evermore,
And walk within My testimonies ever,
Thus He shall ever rule as Israel's Lord."

4 The Order of Melchizedek

Introduction

The mention of Melchizedek introduces a brief side-excision, essential to the writer's argument, but painful to bear. One reason these first readers were drifting from the Lord in the face of persecution is that they were not pressing on to maturity. There is no standing still in the life of faith. Mature people would understand the importance of Melchizedek. And these readers would hear about him soon enough (chapter 7). But for now, the mention of Melchizedek allows the writer to inject a much-needed rebuke.

Read Genesis 14.18-20.

Read Hebrews 5.9-11.

Think it through.

1. The Greek word translated *author* in verse 9 is *αὐτοῦ* and means *source* or *reason*. In what sense is Jesus the *source* or *reason* for salvation? To whom is that salvation available? Jesus *obeyed* through suffering to become the *source* of our salvation (v. 8); we must *obey Him* to gain the salvation of which He is the source. What obedience is required of those who would be saved (cf. Acts 2.36-39; Acts 17.30, 31)? In what sense was Jesus *perfected* (v. 9)? What is the significance of this for us (1 Jn. 3.2, 3)? Having been perfected and become the *source* of salvation, Jesus was then appointed High Priest, but not according to the order of Aaron. Why not? Why does He need to be High Priest at all?

2. Looking at the account of Melchizedek in Genesis 14.18-20, we see that he fulfilled two roles. What were they? *Melchizedek* means *king of righteousness*. He was also the King of Salem, or *king of peace*. How would you describe this man's relationship to Abram? It is *hard to explain* the role Melchizedek plays in the divine economy and the plan of redemption, but in chapter 7 the writer will have a go at it. First, however, the writer addresses his readers with a rebuke. He says they are *dull of hearing*. This phrase literally means *lazy in the ears*. What does this imply? How does such laziness contribute to drifting from our great salvation? Is it possible to know when we're becoming lazy in the ears? Explain.

Meditate.

“He became the source of our eternal salvation’ by replacing Adam, who had been the source of our death through his disobedience. But as Adam’s death did not reign in those who did not sin, so life reigns in those who do not need to be absolved. Even though he is a liberal giver of life, life is given to those who obey, not to those who fall away from him.” *Ephrem the Syrian (306-373 AD)*

But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. Romans 6.17

Lord, Your Gospel calls for obedience every day, and today this means...

Pray Psalm 132.6-9

Look carefully at the verbs that follow “we heard” and “we found” in these verses. Meditate on each. Here is what obedience to the Gospel requires. Ask the Lord to show you what they require of you today.

Psalm 132.6-10 (*Finlandia: Be Still, My Soul*)

The word throughout the chosen nation spread,
To Ephrata, and in the fields of Jaar:

“Now let us go,” the faithful people said,
“And worship where our Savior’s dwellings are!
Around His footstool let our worship spread;
Come, gather to Him, all from near and far!”

Arise, O Lord, come to Your resting place;
Your holy presence meet with us in might.
Clothe us with righteousness in Jesus’ grace,
And we will shout to Your divine delight!
For David’s sake, turn not away Your face,
But look upon us in Your holy light.

5 You Ought to Be Teachers!

Introduction

Just when everything was going along so patiently and pleasantly – BAM! The writer gets in their faces, chides their spiritual surliness, and brings to the surface the real reason for their drifting from Christ. Sort of like Nathan with David. Sometimes confrontation is a necessary step toward restoration.

Read 2 Samuel 12.1-13.

Read Hebrews 5.12.

Think it through.

1. What does the writer mean by saying his readers “ought to be teachers”? Teaching whom? Teaching what? Is this true of *all* Christians? Are we *all* called to be teachers? Explain. Note the phrase *by this time*. Apparently, these readers had been believers for a while, long enough that they should have been active in *promoting* the faith, rather than drifting away from it. How does one get to the place of being able to teach others the things pertaining to our great salvation? How long does that take? How long did it take Philip to teach his friend Nathaniel what he had learned (Jn. 1.43-45)?

2. What does he mean by *milk*? What’s the difference between *milk* and *solid food*? Give some examples of the “first principles of the oracles of God.” These are important, but are they sufficient to enable us to fulfill our calling as teachers and witnesses? Explain. Are you more inclined to feed your soul on milk or solid food? Explain. Can we be effective teachers without being consistent learners? Explain.

Meditate.

“I am afraid that this might fitly be said to you also, that ‘though by this time you ought to be teachers,’ you do not hold fast to the rank of learners. Ever hearing the same things on the same subjects, you remain still in the same condition as if you heard no one. If any person should question you, no one will be able to answer, except a very few who may soon be counted.” *John Chrysostom (344-407 AD)*

This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But you have not so learned Christ... Ephesians 4.17-20

Feed me on the solid food of Your Word, Lord Jesus, so that I might teach others to...

Pray Psalm 132.8-18.

As you pray, ask the Lord to clothe you more fully with His salvation and to give you something to “shout aloud for joy” about with someone today.

Psalm 132.8-10, 13-18 (*Finlandia: Be Still, My Soul*)

Arise, O Lord, come to Your resting place;
Your holy presence meet with us in might.
Clothe us with righteousness in Jesus’ grace,
And we will shout to Your divine delight!
For David’s sake, turn not away Your face,
But look upon us in Your holy light.

God dwells among us, and He will forever,

To meet our needs and clothe us with His grace.
He has to us sent Jesus Christ, our Savior,
And made us His eternal resting-place.
His foes are banished from His presence ever,
But we shall reign with Him before His face.

6 Of Milk and Solid Food

Introduction

The writer launches into an “if the shoe fits, wear it” excursus on the differences between those who feed on solid food and those who sip only on the milk of the Word. If you’re a milk-sipper, you mustn’t be content to stay there. You’ll never reach maturity on that diet alone. You need solid food, and if solid food is not to your liking, then there may be a problem. He’ll discuss the implications of that in chapter 6. The writer wants us to have the attitude of Job and Jeremiah toward the Word. Do you?

Meditate on Job 23.12 and Jeremiah 15.15, 16.

Read Hebrews 5.13, 14.

Think it through.

1. The writer says that those who only sip on the milk of the Word are “unskilled in the word of righteousness.” The Greek word ἄπειρος (*unskilled*) means “pertaining to the lack of knowledge or capacity to do something – inexperienced in, unacquainted with” (Louw & Nida). What does it mean to be “unskilled” in Scripture? Is this a desirable place to be? Why does it make sense to describe such a person as a “babe”? Why does he refer to Scripture as “the word of righteousness”? What does it mean to be “skilled” in that Word?

2. Mature people, on the other hand, feed on solid food. He mentions two identifying marks of those who feed on solid food and are thus mature. (1) What does “reason of use” suggest? How does this relate to our diet of the Word of God? (2) And what does it mean “to discern both good and evil”? Why is this important? How does this work in a mature person’s life?

Meditate.

“Search and hold fast with great precision and faith the things that are said, so that, understanding the will of God accurately from the divine Scriptures, you may be able without stumbling to distinguish the noble from the inferior, and not obey every spirit, nor be carried about by harmful thoughts. Be fully convinced, my brothers, that there is nothing so prone to save us as closely following the divine commands of our Savior.”
Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022 AD)

...that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ... Ephesians 4.14, 15

Show me, Lord, those areas of life in which I need to become more mature, and help me to...

Pray Psalm 132.1-18.

What benchmarks of maturity can you identify as you pray this psalm? Ask God to make them more real and evident in your life.

Psalm 132.1-18 (*Finlandia: Be Still, My Soul*)

Remember, Lord, we pray, in David’s favor
The hardships he endured, the oath he swore,
The vow he made to Jacob’s mighty Savior:
“I shall not enter through my palace door;
I shall not sleep, nor slumber my eyes favor,

Until I make a dwelling for the Lord!”

The word throughout the chosen nation spread,
To Ephrata, and in the fields of Jaar:
“Now let us go,” the faithful people said,
“And worship where our Savior’s dwellings are!
Around His footstool let our worship spread;
Come, gather to Him, all from near and far!”

Arise, O Lord, come to Your resting place;
Your holy presence meet with us in might.
Clothe us with righteousness in Jesus’ grace,
And we will shout to Your divine delight!
For David’s sake, turn not away Your face,
But look upon us in Your holy light.

Remember, Lord, the oath You swore to David;
Do not turn back, do not deny Your Word:
“One of your sons, with your throne I will favor,
And He shall keep My cov’nant evermore,
And walk within My testimonies ever,
Thus He shall ever rule as Israel’s Lord.”

God dwells among us, and He will forever,
To meet our needs and clothe us with His grace.
He has to us sent Jesus Christ, our Savior,
And made us His eternal resting-place.
His foes are banished from His presence ever,
But we shall reign with Him before His face.

7 The Spur of Suffering

Introduction

Chapter 5 provides a run-up to chapter 6, in which the writer will urge his readers neither to be stalled nor deterred in their obedience to Christ, but to bring their salvation to full maturity by persevering in love and good works. It also introduces a topic that will be more fully fleshed out in chapter 7, that of Melchizedek. The writer's point in this chapter is to show us that even Jesus had to "learn obedience" through suffering. His faithfulness led to His being appointed an eternal High Priest. We should follow His example, teaching and encouraging one another to greater maturity in the Lord, not cringing, withdrawing, and drifting from our convictions.

Read Psalm 132.

Read and Meditate on Hebrews 5.

Think it through.

1. The writer reminds his readers that Jesus suffered, and He suffered because He was determined to obey God. If we are reluctant to suffer, or if we're trying to avoid suffering, are we following in the footsteps of Jesus? Explain. Weak and ignorant people go astray (v. 2), but Jesus understands and meets us at the point of our weakness as our eternal High Priest. How should that encourage us? Suffering helps to perfect our faith (v. 9). How so?

2. Believers have a responsibility to teach and encourage one another. Can we fulfill this calling if we allow ourselves to drift from Jesus? Or if we're only ever partaking of the milk of Christian instruction? When we're feeding regularly on the solid food of God's Word, we will be more likely to become skilled in using that Word to persevere in our calling as followers of Christ. How will that help us when we're tempted to avoid suffering for Jesus or to draw back from our commitment to Him? How can we know when we are becoming *mature* in Christ?

Meditate.

"But how do our 'faculties' become 'trained'? By continual hearing and by experience of the Scriptures. For when we set forth the error of those heretics and you hear today and tomorrow and prove that it is not right, you have learned the whole, you have known the whole; and even if you should not comprehend today, you will comprehend tomorrow. 'Who have,' he says, their 'faculties trained.' You see that it is needful to exercise our hearing by divine studies, so that they may not sound strangely. 'Trained,' says he, 'to distinguish,' that is, to be skilled." *Photius (820-891 AD)*

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. Colossians 3:16

Keep me grounded in Your Word, Lord Jesus, and when the spur of suffering comes, help me to...

Pray Psalm 132:1-18.

Thank God that He is your resting place, that He is clothing you with His salvation, and that He can give you courage and perseverance in the face of all your enemies.

Psalm 132:1-18 (*Finlandia: Be Still, My Soul*)

Remember, Lord, we pray, in David's favor
The hardships he endured, the oath he swore,
The vow he made to Jacob's mighty Savior:

“I shall not enter through my palace door;
I shall not sleep, nor slumber my eyes favor,
Until I make a dwelling for the Lord!”

The word throughout the chosen nation spread,
To Ephrata, and in the fields of Jaar:
“Now let us go,” the faithful people said,
“And worship where our Savior’s dwellings are!
Around His footstool let our worship spread;
Come, gather to Him, all from near and far!”

Arise, O Lord, come to Your resting place;
Your holy presence meet with us in might.
Clothe us with righteousness in Jesus’ grace,
And we will shout to Your divine delight!
For David’s sake, turn not away Your face,
But look upon us in Your holy light.

Remember, Lord, the oath You swore to David;
Do not turn back, do not deny Your Word:
“One of your sons, with your throne I will favor,
And He shall keep My cov’nant evermore,
And walk within My testimonies ever,
Thus He shall ever rule as Israel’s Lord.”

God dwells among us, and He will forever,
To meet our needs and clothe us with His grace.
He has to us sent Jesus Christ, our Savior,
And made us His eternal resting-place.
His foes are banished from His presence ever,
But we shall reign with Him before His face.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What are some characteristics of weak and ignorant Christians?
2. Why do we need always to remember that Jesus is our High Priest, and that He knows what we face in the way temptations and trials?
3. All believers are called to be teachers. To whom has God sent you to teach? What should you teach them?
4. What are we doing when we're only sipping the milk of God's Word? What are we doing when we're feeding on solid food? How does feeding on solid food help us?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.