

CHRIST AS THE FULFILLMENT OF THE COVENANT OF WORKS:
A STUDY OF HEBREWS 5:7-10

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In modern culture, the humanity of Jesus is generally accepted and rarely challenged. Those who reject the basic tenets of Christianity are often more than willing to accept Jesus as a man who actually lived in the early 1st century who radically opposed the ruling powers of his day and advocated for a moral code characterized by love of neighbor. Modern secularists are willing to lift up Jesus as a great moral teacher but reject his claims to be the Son of God who took on humanity to die for the sins of his people.

For Christians who hold to the divinity of Jesus, there is great scriptural witness to this status; John 1:1, John 10:30, Luke 22:70, and Colossians 1:15 are just a handful of explicit references to the divinity of Christ. The book of Hebrews as a whole serves as a Christological treatise, presenting Jesus Christ as superior to and the fulfillment of the Old Testament structures and promises. However, Hebrews 5:7-10 is a challenging passage of scripture that seems to call into question the high Christology presented throughout the rest of the book. In the face of modern secularists who wish to strip Jesus of his divinity, this pericope seems to provide fodder for their argument. What does it mean for Jesus to “learn obedience” (ἐμαθεν… τὴν ὑπακοήν – v.8)? Why would the divine Son of God need to “be made perfect” (τελειωθεὶς – v.9)? Wouldn’t a divine Jesus already be perfectly obedient to the Father?

It is this pericope with which we will concern ourselves in this study. By focusing on these verses, we will see the necessity of Christ’s learning obedience and being made perfect as a reference to his qualifications as High Priest. It is in this role that Christ fulfills not only the Mosaic Covenant but also the earlier Adamic Covenant of Works as a representative of the people, who shows perfect obedience amidst suffering in a period of testing, ultimately securing the reward of eternal life for those whom he has come to represent.

THE COVENANT OF WORKS – A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Before we turn to the text of Hebrews 5:7-10, we must take a brief look at the covenantal framework presented in the Bible. The book of Hebrews focuses largely on Christ’s superiority to representatives of the Mosaic Covenant. He is the great High Priest whose once-for-all sacrifice proves efficacious in a way that the Levitical priesthood was not designed to and could not possibly achieve. The priesthood of Christ is of another order altogether; one that not only fulfills all the conditions of the Mosaic Covenant but also satisfies the requirements of God’s first covenant with man. This earlier covenant is not as explicitly in view in the book of Hebrews but, as Christ is the

fulfillment of all OT covenants, so also is he the fulfillment of God's first covenant with man, the Adamic Covenant of Works.

Scripture sets forth a bi-covenantal framework where God relates to man either through the Covenant of Works or the Covenant of Grace. Though it is an OT covenant, the Mosaic Covenant is an early revelation of the Covenant of Grace which unfolds throughout redemptive history, receiving its ultimate revelation in the atoning sacrifice of the Son of God as the source of salvation for God's people through faith apart from works. This Covenant of Grace is not a covenant made with all men as it is only applicable to those who have been saved by grace through their faith in Jesus Christ. Those not included in the Covenant of Grace are still in covenant with God through the Covenant of Works and it is this primal covenant with which we will concern ourselves in this study.

At creation, God entered into his first covenant with man through Adam in the Covenant of Works by which man receives eternal life as a result of the work of perfect obedience to God's commands. As all men are born into Adam, all men are born into the Covenant of Works. It is only when man comes to faith in the saving work of Christ that he moves from the Covenant of Works into the Covenant of Grace. But what of the Covenant of Works? Is it abrogated by the Covenant of Grace? We are still bound by the Covenant of Works in that, even for those under grace, there must be perfect obedience to God's law in order to achieve eternal life. However, as a result of the Fall, man is wholly incapable of such obedience and we are in need of a mediator and intercessor between man and God who can keep the requirements of the Covenant in our place.

In order to understand how Christ is the fulfillment of this Adamic Covenant, we must look at the requirements of the Covenant of Works.¹ In his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Geerhardus Vos presents what he refers to as the "federal theory," the basis of which is the Covenant of Works. Vos argues that, by his creaturely nature, Adam was obliged to obey God with no expectation of reward, yet, in addition to this natural Creator-creature relationship, God enters into covenant with Adam.² This covenant is characterized by three "positive elements":

¹ There is debate in scholarly circles of whether or not there was a covenant in view in Genesis 2. For more information on this debate, see Herman Bavinck, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend Reformed Dogmatics (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 2:568-571; Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Overland Park, KS: Two Age Press, 2000), 14-21.

² It should not be assumed here that there was a time in which Adam did not relate to God under the Covenant of Works. Vos explicitly rejects this assumption saying, "we in no way intend to assert that Adam existed even for a single moment outside of the covenant of works. He was apparently created destined to be under it, and the garden in which he was placed was created to be a stage for his probation." [Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*:

1. An element of representation. Adam stood not just for himself but, by virtue of a legal ordering of God, for all his posterity.
2. An element of probation with limited duration. While previously or otherwise Adam's period of testing could have lasted forever with a constant possibility of a sinful choice, so now a fixed period of perseverance would have led to a condition of immutable virtue.
3. An element of reward, *ex pacto* [by covenant]. By the free ordination of God, Adam received a right to eternal life if he fulfilled the conditions of the covenant of works.³

We see these same three elements in WCF 7.2 on the Covenant of Works: "The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience." The elements of representation, probation and reward are seen in that the promise is made to Adam and his posterity, contingent upon the condition of perfect, personal obedience, to the end of the reward of eternal life. Meredith Kline describes the Covenant of Works in similar categories: "According to the terms stipulated by the Creator it would be on the ground of man's faithful completion of the work of probation that he would be entitled to enter the Sabbath rest."⁴ This period of probation and testing was necessary due to Adam's temporary condition in which, as he was not yet fully conformed to the image of God, he was liable to sin. However, Adam could not remain in this temporary state and "either had to pass on to higher glory or to sin and death...As yet he did not have this reward of eternal life but still had to acquire it; he could still err, sin, fall, and die."⁵ Adam's inability to pass through this probationary period and receive the reward of obedience would have implications as representative for the entirety of humanity. When we turn to Hebrews 5:7-10, we will see that these same three elements of representation, probation and reward are present in reference to Christ's work as our High Priest.

What were the commands and conditions of the Covenant of Works that Adam was to fulfill through perfect obedience? We find this in Gen. 2:15-16 where God places Adam in the Garden of Eden to "work it and take care of it" (NIV) and commands him not to eat the fruit of

Anthropology, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), locations 603-605, Kindle.] So also Kline would agree, seeing the covenantal commitments as foundational to the Creator-creature distinction and man's creation in God's likeness. See Kline, 92.

³ Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, loc. 594-600.

⁴ Kline, 107.

⁵ Bavinck, 2:565. For a further discussion of the probationary period in Eden, see Kline, 103-107.

the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The two verbs in view in v. 15, **עבד** and **שמר**, often translated “to work” and “to guard, keep”, respectively, are used elsewhere in scripture to refer to the work of the Levitical priests. In his commentary on Genesis, Wehnam notes that **עבד** is “commonly used in a religious sense of serving God, and in priestly texts, especially of the tabernacle duties of the Levites.”⁶ So also **שמר** is used for the “Levitical responsibility for guarding the tabernacle from intruders.”⁷ In this view, we come to understand that the dual responsibilities to **עבד** and **שמר** given to Adam signify that he served a priestly role in Eden as the first earthly temple in which God dwelled. G.K. Beale develops the idea of Eden as a temple, seeing it as the archetypal temple, upon which all subsequent temple structures in Israel were based.⁸ He presents eight features of Eden that find parallel in the later OT accounts of the temple in Israel including Eden as the “unique place of God’s presence” in which Adam was placed to serve as the first priest through his duties to **עבד** and **שמר**. Kline agrees with Eden as the first temple, noting that “the sabbatical temple is constructed according to the original divine pattern revealed on the mountain of God in Eden.”⁹ He also sees the priesthood as man’s primary office and Adam as the first priest, given the “priestly charge to guard the sanctity of that garden-sanctuary in the hour of satanic encroachment, the critical probationary task.”¹⁰ After the Fall and Adam’s subsequent banishment from Eden, we see further evidence of its status as the temple of God as cherubim are placed there to guard the way to the tree of life (Gen. 3:24) and bar human entrance, much as the Holy of Holies was forbidden to all Israel except the High Priest.

It is in Adam’s failure to guard the holy temple of Eden by allowing the serpent to enter in and tempt him and Eve into sin that he is removed from priestly office. Adam still serves as representative of all mankind; however, he is no longer able to serve as intercessor and mediator between God and man as a result of his sin. All men are born into the sin of Adam and are likewise incapable of fulfilling the Covenant of Works. We are not released from the Covenant of Works due to Adam’s sin as the Creator-creature relationship in its very nature demands our obedience. Because of the sin imputed to us through Adam, as well as our innate inability to show perfect

⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 1, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 67.

⁷ Wenham, 67.

⁸ See Gregory K. Beale, “Eden, the Temple, and the Church’s Mission in the New Creation,” *JETS* 48, no. 1 (March 2005): 5-31.

⁹ Kline, 93.

¹⁰ Kline, 87

obedience, we are in need of a new High Priest who can intercede on our behalf. The sacrificial system codified in the OT provides for the work of the High Priest who temporarily and repeatedly makes intercession for the people of Israel. But this work is not sufficient and is a mere shadow of the great High Priest, Jesus Christ, who offers sacrifice once for all and secures the reward of eternal life for all those in him. We find the revelation of Christ as High Priest throughout the book of Hebrews but particularly in Hebrews 5:7-10, we see how Christ as our High Priest fulfills the Covenant of Works on our behalf as Adam was unable to accomplish.

THE CONTEXT AND STRUCTURE OF HEBREWS 5:7-10

The book of Hebrews provides some of the greatest examples of the NT use of the OT through many quotations and allusions. According to F.F. Bruce, the purpose of the author's use of the OT is "to establish the finality of the gospel by contrast with all that went before it...as the way of perfection, the way which alone leads people to God without any barrier or interruption of access...by establishing the supremacy of Christ, in his person and work."¹¹ The author of Hebrews begins his argument by presenting Christ as superior to the angels (1:1-2:18) and Moses (3:1-4:13) before turning to present Christ as superior to Aaron and the Levitical priesthood in chapters 4-10. It is in this section of Christ as superior to the OT priesthood that we find our passage.

Attridge sees Hebrews 5:1-10 as an "important hinge pericope" and "transition in the Christology of Hebrews" where the author "now begins in earnest the reinterpretation of the confession of Jesus as Son, humiliated and exalted, in terms of his status and function as High Priest."¹² After a brief introduction to Jesus as High Priest in the closing verses of Hebrews 4, the author turns to focus on the qualifications for the office of High Priest and subsequently Jesus' fulfillment of these qualifications. This can be seen in the chiastic structure of Hebrews 5:1-10:

- A – High Priest represents man to God through offering sacrifice for sin (v. 1)
- B – High Priest can sympathize with the people (v. 2-3)
- C – High Priest must be appointed by God (v. 4)
- C' – Christ was appointed by God to be High Priest (v. 5-6)
- B' – Christ can sympathize with the people (v. 7-8)

¹¹ F F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary On the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 29.

¹² Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: a Commentary On the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. Helmut Koester, Hermeneia, a Critical and Historical Commentary On the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 138.

A' – Christ represents man to God as a sacrifice for sin (v. 9-10)¹³

Our passage is located in the recapitulation of the chiasm in which Christ is presented as the fulfillment of the requirements of High Priest, shown to be worthy to serve as the intercessor and mediator of the Covenant of Grace. But how does he also fulfill the requirements of the Covenant of Works? We see this by looking more closely at the passage at hand through the following logical progression:

7 δός ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ
δεήσεις τε καὶ ἵκετηρίας
πρὸς τὸν δυνάμενον
σώζειν αὐτὸν ἐκ θανάτου
μετὰ κραυγῆς ἴσχυρᾶς καὶ δακρύων
προσενέγκας
καὶ εἰσακουσθεὶς
ἀπὸ τῆς εὐλαβείας,
8 καίπερ ὡν νιός,
ἔμαθεν
ἀφ' ὧν ἔπαθεν
τὴν ὑπακοήν,
καὶ τελειωθεὶς
9 ἐγένετο
πᾶσιν τοῖς ὑπακούουσιν αὐτῷ
αἴτιος σωτηρίας αἰωνίου,
10 προσαγορευθεὶς ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ ἀρχιερεὺς
κατὰ τὴν τάξιν Μελχισεδέκ.

The important points revealed in this logical progression outlines the ways in which Christ's work represents the positive elements of Covenant of Works through representation, testing and reward. This logical progression is drawn from the work of Ellingworth, who sees extended subordinate clauses surrounding a basic grammatical structure.¹⁴ However, Ellingworth strips out important points of the passage which have been added back in to the logical progression above as essential to its interpretation. If the initial relative pronoun, ὃς, can be understood as referring to Christ, the basic outline of the pericope is presented as “Christ, in the days of his

¹³ This chiasm is based on that outlined by Ellingworth and Lane. See Paul Ellingworth and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook On the Letter to the Hebrews*, Helps for Translators Series (London: United Bible Societies, 1983), 93, and William L. Lane, *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 47a, *Hebrews 1-8* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1991), 111.

¹⁴ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: a Commentary On the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1993), 284.

flesh...learned...obedience, and being made perfect, became...the source of eternal life." We see in this outline the themes of representation as Christ takes on human flesh, testing as he learns obedience, and reward as the source of eternal life. It is these three categories with which we will concern ourselves for the remainder of this study.

CHRIST AS REPRESENTATIVE

In order for Christ to serve as our High Priest and thereby fulfill the Covenant of Works, he must first become man so that he may represent man before God. According to Vos, "if he is to express in his own person the nearness of men to God, then he must obviously partake of human nature, since otherwise no direct contact between God and man could be established. A priest who was not man would make a separation between the two parties in the covenant."¹⁵ It is in order to serve as High Priest and representative of mankind before God that Christ was incarnate as the priestly office cannot be filled "by one who stands outside of the circle in whose interests he serves."¹⁶ We see this earlier in chapter 2 of Hebrews: "For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people." (Heb 2:17, NIV)

We see the humanity of Christ in our passage in v. 7 which speaks of "the days of his flesh." This points clearly to the work of Christ during his earthly life as essential to the fulfillment of his role of High Priest. In order for Christ to serve as a representative of human beings in his fulfillment of the Covenant of Works, he must be subject to all the sufferings and temptations inherent in human nature. He must sympathize "with those on whose behalf he acts, and he cannot sympathize with them unless he can enter into their experiences and share them for himself."¹⁷ The NT often uses σάρξ to refer to the earthly life of Jesus in terms of human weakness and temptation to sin and, particularly in Hebrews, to refer to the "provisional earthly sphere under threat of death."¹⁸ The author of Hebrews also uses σάρξ in Heb 2:14 to refer to the flesh and blood that Christ assumed in order to defeat the power of death. This term is used throughout Hebrews to connote "the sphere of weakness and suffering to which Christ was subject."¹⁹ We see in verse

¹⁵ Geerhardus Vos, "The Priesthood of Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Princeton Theological Review* 5, no. 3 (1907): 445.

¹⁶ Ibid., 434.

¹⁷ Bruce, 81

¹⁸ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "σάρξ," *TDNT (Abridged)*, 1006.

¹⁹ Attridge, 149.

7 the extent of Jesus' suffering as he shared in full human nature by offering "prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death." It is in his becoming subject to sin and death that Christ is able to serve as representative for mankind as his sharing in our weaknesses and temptations qualifies him for his work as High Priest (Heb. 4:15).

The author of Hebrews seeks to show that Christ serves as High Priest and representative before his earthly work is completed and consummated in his death and resurrection. As it is the work of a priest to bring offerings to God on behalf of the people, we see Jesus offering "prayers and petitions" in verse 7. Kistemaker notes that "Jesus did not become a priest after his ascension, but that already during his life on earth the Lord offered up prayers and petitions."²⁰ We see other examples of Christ's priestly work during his earthly life in the High Priestly Prayer of John 17. The verb used of Jesus' offering of these prayers and petitions, προσενέγκας, is used throughout both the NT and the LXX as a sacrificial term referring to offerings and sacrifices in the liturgical sense.²¹ The author of Hebrews' use of this verb clearly points to the priestly work of Christ, not only in the offering of prayers and petitions but also in his ultimate sacrifice as his prayers are connected to his impending death. This mediatorial work of Christ "must be understood to connote sacrificial activity" where Jesus functions as priest "on behalf of sinners, whose sins he had taken upon himself" as he prayed to God.²² The content of these prayers and petitions are a point of scholarly discussion but, the more noteworthy feature of these prayers is their nature.²³ Here we see Jesus in his full humanity, completely susceptible to suffering and temptation to be released from such suffering. It is in this suffering that we see Jesus sympathizing with the temptation and suffering of those he has come to represent, a necessary experience in order for him to fulfill the Covenant of Works on our behalf.

²⁰ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Book House, 1984), 136.

²¹ "φέρω" *TDNT (Abridged)*, 1252-1258.

²² Kistemaker, 136.

²³ Many scholars speculate whether the prayers and petitions of v. 7 refer to Christ's prayers at Gethsemane or Calvary and the significations of being saved ἐκ θανάτου. As such a discussion is outside the scope of this study, see Attridge, 150; Ellingworth, NIGTC, 288; Alan C. Mitchell and Daniel J. Harrington, *Sacra Pagina Series*, vol. 13, *Hebrews* (Collegeville, MN.: Liturgical Press, 2007), 110-111; Reuben E. Omarr, "The Saving of the Savior: Exegesis and Christology in Hebrews 5:7-10," *Interpretation* 12, no. 1 (Jan 1958): 39-51. Another subject of scholarly debate in this passage is in what sense Jesus was heard ἀπὸ τῆς εὐλαβείας. For further study on this subject, see Attridge, 151; Kistemaker, 138-141; David Peterson, *Monograph Series (Society for New Testament Studies)*, vol. 47, *Hebrews and Perfection: an Examination of the Concept of Perfection in The* (Cambridge Cambridgeshire: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 89ff.

As the Son of God, Jesus was not subject to the Covenant of Works but, in taking on human nature, he willingly subjects himself to this covenant which he must fulfill in order to serve as our perfect representative. Paul's letter to the Galatians bears witness to this fact, saying "But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law" (Gal 4:4, NIV). Calvin notes that "Christ was a Son, whom his own dignity exempted from the common lot of men, and yet he subjected himself to that lot for our sakes."²⁴ Because the Covenant of Grace does not abrogate the Covenant of Works, the requirements of perfect obedience under the Covenant of Works must be fulfilled in order to attain the reward of eternal life. Christ, as Son of God, already had eternal life but "this life he voluntarily relinquished. He submitted himself to the law of the Covenant of Works as the way to eternal life for himself and his own."²⁵ Kline understands the Covenant of Works as the foundation of the Covenant of Grace, noting that, if Jesus did not fulfill the Covenant of Works as our representative and the Second Adam, "there would be no meritorious achievement to be imputed to his people."²⁶

CHRIST'S PROBATIONARY PERIOD

A major feature of the Covenant of Works established in Eden was the probationary period in which Adam, while still sinless, was susceptible to sin. This period was provisional and temporary and, should Adam prove wholly obedient to God's commands, he would pass on to a state in which he would no longer be capable of sin and inherit eternal life. As already stated above, Adam failed in this probationary period by failing to keep and guard the Garden from the wicked influence of the serpent, and disobeyed God's explicit command not to eat the fruit of the tree. As we have just seen, Christ takes on humanity and is "sent forth as another Adam, to be the obedient covenant servant that the first Adam failed to be."²⁷ As such, Christ was also subject to a period of testing in which he must prove himself to be the obedient covenant servant.

The author of Hebrews indicated this period of testing in v. 8-9. These verses begin with the statement "Although he was Son...". The absence of an article, either definite or indefinite, in this clause is noteworthy, serving to emphasize that Jesus was not any human son but that he is the

²⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary On Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.), 103.

²⁵ Herman Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend Reformed Dogmatics (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 3:379.

²⁶ Kline, 109.

²⁷ Kline, 139.

eternal preexistent Son of God.²⁸ It is this “contraexpectation”, according to Guthrie, that shows that “the dynamics in the situation are not what you would expect.”²⁹ The author of Hebrews, having just expounded on Jesus’ human experience in v. 7 does not want his readers to forget that the human nature of Jesus is bound up in the divine. The concessive clause, καίπερ ὡν νιός, is meant to stand in contrast with what follows, that he learned obedience through suffering.³⁰ The contrast introduced in v. 8 is “not between *Son* and *obedience*...but rather between *Sonship* and having to learn obedience *through* suffering, which was unnatural for one who was a Son.”³¹ As the Second Person of the Trinity, there is no need for the Son to learn obedience. But, in his human nature, in order to serve as the Great High Priest whose sacrifice serves to atone for the sins of his people once-for-all, Jesus must prove himself obedient in the face of the same temptations faced by all other humans.

Christ’s learning obedience (ἔμαθεν...τὴν ὑπακοήν) is an essential part of his ability to sympathize with and serve as a representative for his people. We find similar language of normal human growth of Jesus in Luke 2:52 where he “grew in wisdom and stature, in favor with God and man.” The progressive aspect of this learning is a feature of the finitude of Jesus’ human nature, which he shares with his people, not only “in the sense of having to learn, but also in the sense of submitting himself to the dominant covenant partner.”³² Jesus’ expression of obedience in the face of suffering was the means by which he would assent to God’s will for his life.³³ The word used by the author of Hebrews to refer to Christ’s learning, μανθανω, carries the meaning of “not merely the appropriation of knowledge, but rather the surrendering of our autonomy” in submission to the will of God.³⁴

It must not be assumed that, in order for Jesus to learn obedience that there was a period in his earthly life in which he was disobedient. The necessity of Christ’s learning obedience is not the result of any moral deficiency, as it is in the rest of humankind, but a requirement of his fulfilling the Covenant of Works on our behalf through proving himself to be perfectly obedient.

²⁸ See Attridge, 152; Kistemaker, 142; Peterson, 93.

²⁹ George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 190.

³⁰ Kistemaker, 138-139.

³¹ Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), 104.

³² Robert Jewett, *Letter to Pilgrims: a Commentary On the Epistle to the Hebrews* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981), 89.

³³ Peterson, 94.

³⁴ Moisés Silva, “μανθανω,” *NIDNTTE* 3:223.

The learning of obedience is required of Jesus' human nature as he submits to the will of God in face of temptation, an obedience which he exhibited at all times throughout his life. Kistemaker notes that Jesus did not need to learn by unlearning the way that men do as they turn from disobedience to obedience.³⁵ So also, Vos states in reference to v. 8 that “learning” is not here equivalent to acquiring what was not previously there in principle, far less to acquiring that of which the opposite was previously there.”³⁶ There was never a time in which Christ was not obedient to God’s will as it is “a fundamental affirmation of Hebrews is that Jesus was obedient to God’s will from the start of his earthly career” and that he learns obedience “only in the sense that he comes to appreciate fully what conformity to God’s will means.”³⁷ It is only when he has exhibited himself to be obedient to the point of death that Christ’s earthly work is complete.

It is the completion of his earthly work and his perfection to serve as the representative High Priest that is in view in v. 9. The verb *τελειόω* is used frequently by the author of Hebrews to refer, not to his moral perfection as the divine Son of God, but to the perfect completion of the qualifications to become High Priest. In the LXX as well as the NT, *τελειόω* carries “OT cultic overtones” and as such means “‘to make perfect’ in the sense of (priestly) consecration.”³⁸ The verb *τελειόω* has in view a vocational aspect, “referring to the adaptation of Christ for his intercessory office through his educative suffering” but also points to “Christ’s exaltation to the realm of God’s presence that is the source and goal of the salvific process.”³⁹ Thus it is again essential for those who hold to a high view of Christology to understand that Christ’s learning obedience and being perfected does not have in view any moral deficiency, as those with a low Christology may wish to imply through this text. Rather, that which is in view in terms of learning obedience and being made perfect is Christ’s role as High Priest and fitness to serve as a representative of the people. Though there is a moral aspect to Christ’s obedience, as he is an example to which we look for perfect obedience in the midst of suffering and perfection, “the perfection attained was not moral perfection, but a perfect fitness for his office.”⁴⁰ It is not only that which is often referred to his passive obedience in his atoning death, but also his active

³⁵ Kistemaker, 139.

³⁶ Geerhardus Vos, “The Priesthood of Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews: Second Article,” *Princeton Theological Review* 5, no. 4 (1907): 585.

³⁷ Attridge, 153.

³⁸ Silva, “τέλος,” NIDNTTE 4:477. See also Mitchell, 111.

³⁹ Attridge, 153

⁴⁰ Vos, *Hebrews*, 104.

obedience throughout his earthly life that makes Christ qualified to serve as the representative High Priest. It is this perfect, active obedience that must be evidenced in the life of Christ in order for him to fulfill the Covenant of Works. According to Kline, Christ fulfills the covenant as the “second man [who] was obedient and his obedience under this Covenant of Works is the foundation of the gospel order.”⁴¹ It is because of Christ’s learning obedience and exhibiting the qualifications necessary to serve as our High Priest that we can have hope in God’s covenant promises. Murray explains,

It was through this course of obedience and of learning obedience that he was made perfect as Saviour, that is to say, became fully equipped so as to be constituted a perfect Saviour. It was the equipment forged through all the experiences of trial, temptation, and suffering that provided the resources requisite for the climactic requirement of his commission. It was that obedience, brought to its consummate fruition on the cross, that constituted him an all-sufficient and perfect Saviour.⁴²

THE REWARD OF OBEDIENCE

The final element of the Covenant of Works which is seen in Hebrews 5:9 is the gift of eternal life received as a reward for perfect obedience. Salvation and eternal life in return for perfect obedience are closely tied to the role of representatives and federal headship. As God entered into covenant first with Adam, he was to serve as the federal head of all those born in him. Had Adam succeeded in his period of probation, he would have received this reward and passed it on to those whom he represented. Kline agrees saying,

Because God was pleased to constitute both the first and second Adams as federal representatives of a corporate humanity, the obedient performance of the obligations of the covenant of works administered to each of them would have the result that all whom they represented would receive with them the proposed grant of God’s kingdom-glory.⁴³

Just as Adam serves as the federal head of all in him, so also Christ serves as the federal head of those whom he came to save. Paul expounds on this in Romans 5:17-19 where the disobedience of Adam leads to the death of many but the obedience of Christ leads to righteousness of many.

⁴¹ Kline, 138.

⁴² John Murray, *Redemption, Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1955), 23.

⁴³ Kline, 141.

The result of the perfection and completion of Christ's work of obedience is the reward of eternal life, not only for himself, but for all those whom he represents. We see in v. 9 as, upon the completion of his task and the result of his being perfected for the office of High Priest, Christ becomes the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (ἐγένετο πᾶσιν τοῖς ὑπακούουσιν αὐτῷ αἴτιος σωτηρίας αἰωνίου).

The relationship between Savior and those whom he saves is seen in the use of both the noun and the verb forms of ὑπακούω in reference to the obedience which Christ learns in v. 8 and the obedience shown to Christ by those who will receive salvation. Here the author of Hebrews, according to Mitchell, draws an additional “connection between the suffering/learning experience of Christ and what his readers must undergo.”⁴⁴ The verb ὑπακούω is almost always used to refer to obedience “in the sense of submitting one’s will, understanding, conduct, or allegiance to the will of another” and is used here to show that “just as Jesus persevered...so Christians are called to total abandonment to the divine will.”⁴⁵ Such a connection is also seen by Lane who notes that, “as the one who experienced the meaning of obedience in the suffering of death in response to the will of God, Jesus recognizes obedience in his followers and on their behalf carries out his priestly ministry of intercession.”⁴⁶ Ellingworth refers to this connection as “‘reciprocal solidarity’ by which Christ, having shared human sufferings, makes salvation available to those who share his obedience.”⁴⁷

The final verse of our pericope shows God’s confirmation on Jesus’ perfection for the office of High Priest. Here he is “affirmed to have been made high priest after...being made perfect [through] learning obedience by the things which he suffered.”⁴⁸ The verb used for this affirmation, προσαγορευθεὶς, “contains the idea of a formal and solemn ascription of an honorific title.”⁴⁹ Here, God affirms Christ’s completion of the probationary period and his appointment to the office of High Priest in the order of Melchizedek. Up until this point, the Levitical priesthood has largely been in view for the author of Hebrews but v. 10 serves as a pivot point as he turns to focus on what it means to be a priest in the order of Melchizedek.

⁴⁴ Mitchell, 111.

⁴⁵ Guthrie, 191.

⁴⁶ Lane, 122.

⁴⁷ Ellingworth, *NIGTC*, 293

⁴⁸ Vos, *Hebrews*, 109.

⁴⁹ Lane, 110.

While an in-depth study of the Melchizedekian priesthood is outside the scope of this study, one feature of this parallel to the priesthood of Christ is its eternal nature. The Genesis account of Melchizedek does not include a genealogy nor does it refer to his death, resulting in a mysterious, eternal quality to the OT figure. Christ priesthood in the order of Melchizedek shares this eternal quality as his victory over death allows him to eternally intercede on our behalf. The inclusion of *αιωνίου* in v. 9 in reference to the salvation earned by Christ's obedience is noteworthy. As Vos points out, the author of Hebrews uses *αιωνίος* as "a predicate of quality as well as duration."⁵⁰ The salvation that Jesus secures is eternal, "not simply because it extends beyond time but because it is true, heavenly, and not human-made."⁵¹ Such a salvation could only be secured by God himself. As we see throughout the book of Hebrews, Christ is presented as greater than all that which was found in the Old Covenant. The systems and offices of the Old Covenant were only mere shadows of the true source of salvation found in Christ. The intercession made by the OT priesthood was imperfect and earthly and, as such, it had to be repeated and High Priests had to be replaced after they themselves succumbed to death. Christ's intercession is heavenly and eternal and was performed once-for-all. The eternal life given to Christ as the reward for his obedience is that which allows him to continue as our eternal intercessor and High Priest. We will never have need of another Savior as Christ fulfilled the Covenant of Works on our behalf through his perfect obedience. We no longer need to look to works for our merit and standing before God, which are only filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). Through faith in Christ, we have moved out from under the Covenant of Works and into the Covenant of Grace whereby Christ fulfills the requirement of perfect obedience on our behalf.

CONCLUSION

As we have observed, the elements of representation, probation and reward as set forth in the Covenant of Works come to be fulfilled in the obedient life and sacrifice of our great High Priest, Jesus Christ. He placed himself under the Covenant of Works by becoming man, he endured suffering, and learned the true meaning of obedience, which he displayed perfectly. Through his perfect obedience, he secured eternal life for himself and, as representative and federal head, for those who believe in him. It was solely for this purpose that Christ was incarnate – to live the

⁵⁰ Vos, *PTR* vol. 5, no. 4, 594.

⁵¹ Lane, 122.

perfect life that we who are in Adam could never achieve and to intercede on our behalf before a holy and righteous God. Because he was obedient, we are seen as obedient through the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us. Through Christ's obedience, entrance to the Holy of Holies, the center of Eden, the place where God dwells from which we had been banished in the Fall, has been granted to us. Christ has entered the heavenly Holy of Holies on our behalf as our great High Priest and at his death, the curtain was torn so that we may gain access to the Father through him. He has represented us before the Father and we have been welcomed into his presence on the basis of the obedience of Christ.

While Hebrews 5:7-10 refers to the reward which Christ has earned for his obedience as eternal life for those who obey him, we see another analogy of the picture of this eternal life in Hebrews 4:1-10. Here, the author of Hebrews elaborates on the "rest" of God, for which man has been striving since Creation. Since the Fall, man's work has been marked with toil and labor. For the Israelites, rest was to be found upon entering into the land of Canaan. However, as we see in the OT, rest did not come to Israel when they entered into Canaan; the nation fell to the rule of immoral judges and kings, ultimately leading to exile from the land that was to be their rest. We have been striving for all of history to find rest and peace with God. We will not find this rest and peace apart from Jesus Christ, as he is the only source of eternal life and rest. Because he has fulfilled the Covenant of Works on our behalf, we can end our striving and rest in him. We can set aside our desire to save and justify ourselves before God by admitting our sin and inability to do any good in his sight apart from Christ. When we allow Christ to serve as our High Priest, to intercede on our behalf before God, and acknowledge the atoning work of his sacrificial death, then we share in the promise of eternal life and enter into his rest. Because of the work that Christ has accomplished, we can, as heard in the wise words of James Proctor's hymn, "Cast your deadly "doing" down, Down at Jesus' feet. Stand in him, in him alone, Gloriously complete."

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