

Did you happen to see the story in the news a while back about the completion of the *Tzitz*? “The what?” you may be asking. The *Tzitz*. *Tzitz* is the Hebrew word for the golden plate that was fastened to the headpiece worn by the high priest of Israel. Why does it matter? You see, the people of Israel are trying to get everything ready for when their Great High Priest comes to lead them as God promised. If you don’t remember seeing the story, it would be understandable. It first appeared in the news more than ten years ago. They are still waiting for their Great High Priest to come, but they don’t have to. The writer of Hebrews makes that clear when he writes in the 4th chapter, the 14th verse, “***We have a great high priest.***” Notice that he says that “we *have*,” not “we *had*” and not “we *will have*.” *We have* a Great High Priest. Today we will see that **Jesus is truly our Great High Priest** who is qualified, by whom we’re purified, and with whom we will be glorified.

Hebrews begins abruptly—there is no time spent on introductions or greetings; the author gets right to the point. While there is much we don’t know about the first readers of Hebrews, from the author’s encouragement, we can determine that they were Christians of Jewish background who were suffering for their faith. No doubt, in their troubles they became nostalgic for the familiar old forms of Judaism that they knew so well from growing up with the religious rituals of the temple in Jerusalem. Unlike the Jews today that look ahead, waiting for a new high priest to appear, these Jewish Christians were looking back to what they had left behind to follow Jesus. The message of the inspired author of Hebrews to these wavering believers was simply this: You have something better in Jesus—he is better than everything the people of Israel had in the past, as glorious as it all was.

With the first two verses of his word of encouragement, the author begins to carry out his theme that Jesus is better—beginning with the Old Testament prophets. He says, “***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.***” The writer directs his readers back to the Old Testament, to their Jewish ancestors in Israel, and reminds them that God spoke to “[their] ancestors” through men—great men to be sure, like Moses, David, and Isaiah—but mere men used by God to deliver the promises of a great Savior from sin to come. These men delivered the gospel message over many years in many ways—Old Testament prophecy was like a puzzle to which each of the prophets contributed a piece or two. None had the whole picture, but as you put the pieces of the prophetic puzzle together, the picture produced is Jesus of Nazareth—his birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection.

So, the author of Hebrews urges his readers: Consider what you have in Christ. 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 the true and eternal Son of God. Listen as the writer of Hebrews presents Christ’s credentials, his qualifications: “***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.***” Notice that the author heaps up expressions to magnify the greatness of Christ. The writer’s point is clear to his wavering readers: Do not turn a deaf ear to God as he speaks to you through his own Son. Christ is fully qualified to speak to you of heavenly things—listen to him!

But it is not only—or especially—to demonstrate that Christ is a prophet and teacher who deserves our attention that the writer of Hebrews presents Christ’s impressive credentials. It is, above all, to show that Christ is truly the *Great High Priest*. The author speaks of Christ’s high priestly work when he adds to the list of Christ’s credentials these words: “***After he had provided purification for sins.***” The first readers of Hebrews, raised during the time of the Old Testament Scriptures, knew that it was the work of the high priest to provide purification for sins.

The high priest was an important person; you could tell that just by looking at the way he dressed. He wore the *Tzitz*. An entire chapter of the Bible (Exodus 28) is devoted to describing what the high priest was to wear as he performed his duties and how those garments were to be made. But not just anybody could wear that outfit. A man had to be qualified to serve as high priest. He had to, for example, be of the tribe of Levi and the family of Aaron and had to be without physical deformity or defect. He had to be careful to marry the right kind of woman. He could not attend funerals—not even those of his own family members. Tough qualifications to be sure—but consider Christ! Jesus is God’s Son, the heir to and the Creator and preserver of all things, the radiance of God’s glory and the mirror image of his essence. As the author of Hebrews presents the facts about who Jesus is, he is explaining what qualifies Christ to be called the Great High Priest—he is the Son of God! But Jesus is our Great High Priest not only because he is well-qualified for the title, but because we’re purified by him.

As you observe Jesus celebrating the Last Supper with his disciples, you might wonder whether he actually qualifies for the title Great High Priest. After all, you see the One described in such glowing terms by the writer of Hebrews not looking the part during his earthly ministry and especially during Holy Week. So, you might be tempted to doubt him. But before you dismiss him by how he looks let’s review the actions of the O.T. High priest. As the high priest in Israel prepared to perform the rituals by which cleansing would be made for Israel’s sin, he removed the splendid garments he usually wore and put on simple linen garments. Ordinarily, the high priest wore fancy garments that made him look like a king, but when he made purification for sin, the high priest looked more like a slave than a king.

In the same way, as our Lord Jesus the Great High Priest prepared to provide his one great purification for sin, he laid aside the garments of his glory. Now, it is true that Jesus did not walk about during his earthly ministry dressed in fine, expensive clothing. It was not fine clothing that our Lord laid aside. No, he laid aside much more. St. Paul describes Christ Jesus as ***“being in very nature God,”*** worthy of appearing and behaving like the One he truly was—God himself in our human flesh. But, Paul continues, ***“[he] did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant”*** (Php 2:6,7). Jesus laid aside the full and constant use of his divine power and glory to serve us.

So, we see the Son of God stoop down and not use his glory during his ministry. But, the non-use of his glory wasn't just for when he lived. To provide purification from sin, Jesus would stoop to dying in shame on Calvary's cross, and by his death there, he would provide purification for the sins of the world—yours and mine.

This is the great purification Jesus the Great High Priest provides—the purification from sins. What sins? Our sins. The sins that make us unworthy to stand before God. The sins that make us unworthy of receiving any blessing. The sins that leads us farther and farther away from God.

Sins that put us first because at times we can only think of ourselves and not God or our neighbor first. Sins that cause other's pain because every sin hurts more than just us no matter what we do or say. Sins that cause God's Word to be silent when it should be proclaimed loudly for all to hear.

We need to be purified of our sinful pride and the sins that result from it. The only one qualified to purify us from our sins is Jesus Christ our Great High Priest. He is the one who not only bowed down to conceal his glory for a time, but he stooped to carry a cross and to be pierced on it for our transgressions and crushed under it for our iniquities. By the blood that flowed there, by the blood of God's one and only Son—the radiance of his glory and exact representation of his being, through whom the universe was made and by whose powerful Word it is still sustained—by the blood of Jesus applied to our hearts and mouths and hands and feet by faith, we are cleansed from every sin. Therefore, let us plead as King David did for God—for Jesus' sake—to ***“wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin”*** (Ps 51:2). ***“Wash me,”*** we say with King David, ***“and I will be whiter than snow”*** (Ps 51:7). Yes, Jesus is our Great High Priest; he is qualified to be our High Priest; he has purified us as our High Priest.

The hymn of praise to Christ with which Hebrews begins closes with the author mentioning Christ's glorification. He says that after the Son had provided purification for sins, ***“He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”*** On the day of Pentecost, St. Peter spoke of the risen and exalted Savior and said, ***“Let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah”*** (Ac 2:36). He meant that by exalting Christ, God confirmed him to truly be the Great High Priest who completed the work of purifying every sinner from every sin. It was this coming glory that inspired the Savior as he suffered to purify us from sin. Later in Hebrews, we read that it was ***“for the joy set before him”*** that Jesus ***“endured the cross, scorning its shame”*** (12:2).

But here is the wonder of our Lord's exaltation—it was not for him alone. Jesus made it clear that the glory that awaited him beyond the cross and grave was not for him alone when he prayed in his High Priestly Prayer in John 17: ***“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). Our Savior's great exaltation is intended to inspire us. God knows the weakness of our flesh—that if all we heard about the Christian life is that it requires us to follow Christ's example and humble ourselves in self-denying service to others as long as we live, we would soon tire of such a way of life. To inspire us to more faithful service to God and others, 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).

Think about that: “My Father will honor the one who serves me.” Is this glorification a reward that we earn by humbly imitating Christ? No, that could never be. Look at how poorly we serve and imitate the humility of Christ! Our selfishness, our pride, and our disobedience would surely disqualify us from earning any reward. But because Jesus humbled himself so deeply and purified us from our sins by his blood, we can be assured that we will be glorified with him in due time. “God shows favor to the humble.” Let us serve with our Savior remembering his sacrifice—and his promise. May the glory promised to us by grace inspire us to more humble service to others where we live and work and worship!

Rejoice in Jesus Christ, our Great High Priest. He is qualified to be our Great High Priest; he has purified us as our Great High Priest, and we will be glorified with our Great High Priest. Amen.