

Called Through Heritage  
December 6, 2020  
Matthew 1:1-17, Hebrews 1

With this Bible Study lesson we begin a new series that focuses on “Call.” During December and January we are focused on Jesus’s “Calling.” Then in February, our lesson book looks at other Biblical characters. When I was young, the word “call” or “calling” was pretty strictly applied to service as a full time minister or missionary. Certain people were “called” to such ministry. The rest of us chose occupations or careers based on interests, or what we seemed to be good at, or what was opportune. Perhaps there were chance circumstances, such as an inspiring teacher or a unique opportunity. Are the things we ultimately ended up doing our “Calling?” The very term “calling” begs the question, “Called by whom?” Well, as Christians, we’d say, “By God.” If we feel that we are doing good, take pleasure in so doing, and find some degree of fulfillment, we can rightfully feel we were called to that. We feel a sense of validation that we are indeed doing what God seems to call us to. If we find dissatisfaction, stress, and frustration, then maybe our calling is elsewhere. Or in other directions outside of what we might need to do for a living.

But, what about Jesus? These first several lessons consider his “Calling.” My oh my, I have not really thought so much of Jesus as “Called,” but rather as who he IS, Son of God, Savior, and so forth. All of those titles we acknowledge when we think of him. Did he make a decision to respond to God’s “Call,” or did he as God already know what to do, and did it? He was born a human baby, and later grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man (Luke

Over the last several lessons, particularly when we looked at the epistles of John, we considered the issue of Jesus’s being “both fully human and fully God.” The Gnostics denied Jesus’s humanity. He just “seemed” to be human. If we don’t think about how Jesus, too, had to experience uncertainty, and ultimately responded to God’s call, we may be denying an important part of his humanity. He did make choices. The choice to respond to God’s call must have been very early, as we see that response in the story of Jesus in the temple at age 12. Later on Jesus made other choices, for example about the kind of Messiah he would be, when tempted in the Wilderness. Still later, he prayed to God, “Take this cup from me, but Thy will, not mine, be done.”

So, I think this should be an interesting series of lessons as we look at the ways in which God’s call reached out to Jesus.

Our scripture passages come from *Matthew* and *Hebrews*. The *Matthew* passage is a genealogy of Jesus. That may seem straightforward. There are no esoteric mysteries in the list, but there are some interesting nuances. One is that Matthew mentions four of the mothers in Joseph's ancestry: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. All of them are given attention in the Hebrew scriptures, and all are interesting, important, and unusual. The other issue is that we, as people of our age, ask, "Why does Joseph's genealogy even matter since Jesus's was Mary's son by the Holy Spirit?" That's a different way of looking at things from the way it was 2000 years ago. Jesus was Joseph's son since Mary was his wife. The idea of distinct "genes" and chromosomes, "genetics" as we know it, only came to be understood in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Matthew traces the line of descent for Jesus as Messiah back to David through Joseph.

If the *Matthew* passage is straightforward, the *Hebrews* passage is anything but. *To the Hebrews* is a unique book. Even in antiquity, nobody seemed to know who the author was. The central theme of *Hebrews*, that Jesus is the perfect High Priest, is found nowhere else. The perspective of the writer seems to be Hellenist, specifically Alexandrian, Judaism. There are many similarities to the ideas in *Hebrews* and the writing of the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo. Of the named New testament characters, perhaps the most likely author would be Apollos, a contemporary of Paul mentioned in Acts and some of Paul's letters. But that's just a guess, one of many such hypotheses. In the third century A.D. the early church father Origen wrote, concerning authorship of the book known as *To the Hebrews*: "For not without reason have the ancients handed it down as Paul's. But who wrote the epistle, in truth, God knows." There was controversy over whether *Hebrews* should be part of the New Testament canon. The eastern (Greek speaking) church wanted it included, and had ascribed it to Paul. The western (Latin speaking) church tended to say, no, it's not from an apostolic source. Ultimately, because it was a much used and useful book, it was accepted. Those who insisted that all the books of the canon had to be from apostolic sources could say it was Paul's.

*Hebrews* is a masterpiece of scholarly writing. The argument is that Jesus is, at once, both the perfect High Priest, and as well, the perfect Sacrifice. This thesis is developed across 12 carefully constructed chapters, with scripture being cited at each step. Chapter 1 is an introduction stating that Jesus is the ultimate of God's revelation. He is from the very beginning, and is "an exact imprint of God's very being," and now sits "at the right hand of the Majesty on high." As such, he is superior to the prophets who came earlier (verse 1), and the angels (verses 4-14).

The lesson writer talks about how family heritage influences who we become. For Jesus, we can assume he came to know about Joseph's ancestry and considered it his own as well. But, how would a young human Jesus have extrapolated his role as a High Priest? Priests had to be from the tribe of Levi, or more specifically, descendants of Aaron. The writer of Hebrews finesses this problem in Chapter 7 by appealing to concepts from Greek philosophy. The Levitical priests are but an imperfect reflection of the heavenly and perfect High Priest Jesus, who is of the order of Melchizedek. Melchizedek is an Old Testament character who was the Priest-King of Jerusalem in the time of Abraham. That's three generations before Levi. The idea that imperfect things on earth have perfect exemplars in Heaven, or another ideal plane of existence, is Greek, most often associated with Plato. (C.S. Lewis uses this idea in his cosmology of the Narnia books.) This idea is foreign to Palestinian Jewish thought and would not likely have found traction there. But it would be of interest to Hellenistic Jews and the Gentile God-fearers. The God-fearers attended and supported the Jewish synagogues, even though not willing to become converts to Judaism. It was they, as well as some Jews, who embraced Christianity as Paul and other evangelists worked to spread the gospel.

You may recall that we said of (the book of) *James*, that James appealed to his listeners (readers) to obey the ethical teachings of the Law, without even mentioning issues related to the ceremonial law. That was consistent with the decision at the Council of Jerusalem, that Gentile Christians did not need to be troubled by the ceremonial requirements of Judaism, including most of the kosher regulations, sacrifices, circumcision, and so forth. In contrast, Hebrews focuses exactly on the ceremonial requirements of Judaism, specifically, that a sacrifice must be made to atone for sin. With Jesus, as the perfect sacrifice, our sins are removed. So, Jesus fills both the role of the ideal High Priest as well as the Sacrifice for our sins, a sacrifice so complete that no further atonement sacrifice need be made (10:18). Having said that, the author of Hebrews holds up Jesus as the fulfilment of the faith of heroes from the beginning of Genesis. So, we are to take heart in that and accept God's grace, and endure.

Jesus, by the time he was twelve, clearly had a sense that God had called him to service in a special way. That is clear in his words to his parents, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49, NRSV). Jesus, a human young man with a sense of call, still had much to learn and probably still many questions about his call. That is all that we know, until Jesus re-appears in the gospels at the Jordan River seeking baptism by John.

Reflecting on this role of Jesus as High Priest, I have not seen anything in Jesus's words as recorded in the gospels, at least that comes to mind, that describes his role this way. The closest I see to that are words in Jesus's "Farewell Discourse" in *John*, specifically, his prayer for his disciples in Chapter 17. *John* records Jesus as saying, in prayer to God, "I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do. So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed." (John 17,4-5) This is consistent with *Hebrews* (and John's gospel prologue) in mentioning Jesus's pre-existence before his earthly ministry. Jesus is praying for his disciples, a pastoral function, and he calls himself their teacher and master. Is that High Priestly?

In Jesus's day, the office of High Priest was a political matter. The High Priest had to be acceptable to the Romans. There was a high turnover. This wasn't the kind of High Priest the author of *Hebrews* has in mind. Rather, he is perhaps thinking of how the High Priest, once per year, would enter the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle (and later the Temple) and make a blood offering on behalf of the people. He understands Jesus as having brought that ceremonial process to a final conclusion.

Well, there it is, a unique understanding of the role of Jesus. Whether Jesus ever had a sense of his calling in that way is I think doubtful. But it does ring true if one thinks in terms of the sacrificial system. Hellenistic Jews, especially, might find this understanding helpful. It can help us as well even though we are more "Greek" in the way we think of things. (The title "*To the Hebrews*" does seem perhaps a bit misdirected, but that is the only name ever associated with this epistle.)

The epistle *Hebrews* is first alluded to in a letter by Clement I of Rome around 95 A.D. We know that the Church in Rome predated Paul's missionary journeys; he wrote his epistle to the Romans most likely after 50 A.D. It is interesting that in the oldest known manuscript of *Hebrews*, dated to around 200 A.D. (known as p<sup>46</sup>), the letter *To the Hebrews* immediately follows *To the Romans*. The epistle seems to be associated with Rome, and some of the context in Chapter 13 is consistent with that. So, the Church ultimately benefitted from another unique perspective on Jesus that independently traced back to the early Christian movement. Even in our day, new discoveries being made in archaeology and manuscripts continue to provide more context, understanding, and occasional new nuggets of truth for us.

So, back to calling. We can accept that Jesus, however he may have understood his calling at any particular time, was indeed the perfect Sacrifice and as the perfect High priest, chose to make that sacrifice on our behalf, cleansing us from sin if we but seek God's grace. As the church wrestled with coming to an understanding of who Jesus was and what he had accomplished in the Passion and resurrection, this gave more depth to a Truth which, in its entirety, lies beyond human understanding.

We are preparing now to celebrate the birth of this very special baby, a baby of humble birth but rich in heritage and promise. May we also look for that calling, a calling consistent with the marvelous gifts that God has given each of us, as we seek to follow Jesus the Christ in the days ahead.

*Prayer: O God who made us, and gave us identity, help us see and enjoy the significance of Jesus' heritage as fully human and fully God. Help us hear Jesus speak to us about who he is and how he wants us to view him and enable us to grow into our call to be his disciples. Amen.*

Postscript: This one was hard. I have a hard time fully "buying into" the Jewish sacrificial system, given that I grew up and have lived thinking of myself as a Child of God. As such I was liberated from serious worry about sin, by God's Grace through Jesus. I never had to concern myself with picking out that perfect lamb, or visiting the temple, or making sure I carried out all the details of Ceremonial Law. I'm too "Greek" in thought and manners, I suppose. We each come with our own heritage, as the lesson writer says. Yet, at the same time I'm a product of modern science too, and don't completely accept Platonic ideals or similar systems either. So where does that leave me? Needing faith. We just don't have all the answers. Each little new thing we learn, such as more fully understanding what the writer of *Hebrews* says, helps us a bit with understanding, appreciating other perspectives, and gives us a little more depth for our faith. Another way I see it is that God has created a universe in which there are many paths to understanding and to coming to Him. We can all give thanks for that.