

The High Priest  
Sunday, December 29, 2019 at The First Congregational Church of  
Marshalltown, Iowa

Scripture: Hebrews 2:17 "Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people."

### Introduction

We don't have formal bishops in the Congregational Church, and we don't usually use the word "priest" very often, unless it is in the context of the doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers". We know that certain branches of Christianity have people who hold positions of "priest" or even "high priest", and the priesthood played a large role in the Old Testament, but in the Congregational Church we have a High Priest, and we have only one person qualified, who made atonement, or propitiation for the sins of humanity.

### propitiation definition

The key word in the verse, I think, is propitiation, which is a strange word not used commonly. It means "to atone", "to make right", "to reconcile". At its root is the word for "cheerful", "gracious" or "merciful". A major theme of the Bible is that God is holy and sin cannot be ignored or simply "wished away". There is a price to be paid, and there is a hard, cold example of it in the Old Testament.

When there is injustice, a price must be paid

Consider 2 Samuel 22:2-4 (quoted in Hebrews 2:13a)

David spoke words of praise to the Lord because of David's deliverance from Saul, calling Him David's "rock", "deliverer", "fortress", "shield and horn of my salvation", a "stronghold and refuge". Honors that we could easily apply to the Lord Jesus, particularly because He is our High Priest. But look at the violent story before it (2 Samuel 21:1-14). The people of Gibeon, who had tricked Israel into a covenant of protection (Israel would not destroy or drive them out like the other people groups in the Promised Land and they would be servants in response) were persecuted by King Saul, and many of them were killed. Once Saul was gone, they came to David for redress. There had been famine in the land and the Lord had made clear to David that it was due to the violation of the covenant between Israel and Gibeon. So David has a

conference with representatives of Gibeon and asked them what he can do to make atonement for the crimes of Saul. They respond by saying that they do not want any money, or the deaths of Israelis chosen at random, but they do want seven men, direct descendants of Saul, to be delivered to them for execution. David ordered it to be done, with nothing written whether any of the seven were directly responsible (note: 5 of them were the five sons of Michal, ex-wife of David). As brutal as it seems, it reminds us that crimes, and sins, are very serious matters that are not easily dismissed. There is no justice if there is not a price paid. That seems to be at the core of propitiation.

He took my place.

The end of Charles Dickens' classic A Tale of Two Cities has a man who accomplished little in life trading places with a noble friend condemned to die during the French Revolution. In the Bible we have a Savior who accomplished everything who takes the place of a sinful people to die for their sins. This did not soften the heart of the Father, and so, because of the Son's sacrifice, the Father now loves us. It is because the Father loved us before we loved the Father that the Son come for this purpose.

Application: We do have a High Priest and we owe Him everything. It's not a "do this" sermon but a "know this" sermon. Everything that we celebrate on Sunday, every time we enter into prayer for someone, every time we are inspired to go beyond ourselves and reach out to another human being, is because we have a High Priest.

Conclusion

In Congregational Churches, we don't have High Priests because we need only one. In this great passage of Scripture we learn the greatness of our High Priest, and the sad injustice of the price that He paid. It does not tell us anything about what we are to do. It tells us what He did and what it meant to have Jesus as our High Priest.

