

**Exegetical Brief:
How has the Son of God been “made perfect”? (Hebrews 2:9-11; 5:9; 7:28)**

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When the people of God are pressed down and persecuted; when a congregation is tempted to settle its hopes outside the camp of Christ; when the faithful appear to drifting away from the gospel they have heard; when the saints need encouragement, then it is time to hear from the epistle to the Hebrews. Pastors have long recognized this letter as a treasure trove of material for the pulpit. With moving imagery and magnificent structure, the inspired writer points to the Christ who is superior to the prophets, to the angels, to Moses, to all the high priests -- even to the covenant, sanctuary, and sacrificial system so important for Old Testament believers. “Get to church,” he urges. “Pay attention to what you are hearing, and use that word of Christ to spur one another on to love and good deeds.”

The editors of our lectionaries wisely have proposed frequent use of this epistle in corporate worship. The recently published *Christian Worship Supplement* lectionary includes lessons from Hebrews on twenty occasions, while the more familiar *Christian Worship* lectionary includes no less than twenty-two lessons from this epistle. Several such lessons are coming up soon on the liturgical calendar. In view of a possible misunderstanding of the verb *τελειόω*, each of them merits a closer look.

Hebrews 2:9-11 is the Second Lesson for Pentecost 20 during this Year B. The first of five *lectio continua* lessons, this text explains Psalm 8, where David testifies that God has subjected *τὰ πάντα* to man, that there is nothing that is not subject to him. Because of the problem of sin, of course, we don't see that at first glance. “But we are taking full note of the One who for a little while was made lower than the angels, Jesus. He has been crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death in order that by the grace of God he might taste death in place of everyone” (Heb 2:9, my translation). The Son of Man tasted bitter death for the redemption of the world. But that gracious work is done. Now everything is subject to the Son of Man.

For the writer's Jewish readers the humiliation of Christ, especially his death on a cross, was a stumbling block. So he goes on. The NIV translation: “In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering” (Heb 2:10). Jesus' passion was entirely in accord with the will of the almighty Creator. The heavenly Father is bringing *many* sons (not just the One!) to glory, and he has appointed *τὸν ἀρχηγὸν τῆς σωτηρίας αὐτῶν* for that task. The noun *ἀρχηγός* has the idea of “initiator,” of “one who makes a beginning.” In light of this letter's emphasis on the course the saints will follow, several have suggested “pioneer” or “trailblazer.” Yes, the Son of God suffered, but when he did so, he blazed the trail of salvation for many sons.

But how could Jesus be “made perfect”? Was he at one time unsound, flawed, less than excellent? Did the Father have to straighten him out? The writer to the Hebrews later points out that Christ is “without sin” (4:15), “separated from sinners” (7:26), and “blameless” (9:14). Yet it is not that his Father ever had to “make (him) perfect” in the sense that the Father made him what he otherwise was not.

Since the English expression “make perfect” almost always implies correcting or improving that which was once *imperfect*, the pastor-teacher does well to bring the writer's infinitive *τελειῶσαι* to light. This is one of nineteen times in which he uses a form cognate to the noun

τέλος, that is, “end, goal, completion, result.” In keeping with a prevailing theme in the epistle to the Hebrews, that is no surprise. The Son of God followed the path the Father laid out for him. The One who always has been and continues to be the radiance (ἀπαύγασμα) that illuminates the Father’s glory (Heb 1:3) was conceived of the virgin, born in a cattle stall, and raised in lowly Nazareth. “He suffered when he was tempted” (2:18) in the wilderness yet held to his blameless course. “He suffered when he was tempted” again in dark Gethsemane. Yet his Father sustained him all the way to the finish line -- to full obedience to all the holy commandments, to death in the place of sinners, to resurrection, and especially to his seat “at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven” (1:3; 8:1; 12:2) where he intercedes for us. Ultimately it was the Father’s will “to bring him to his goal through sufferings” (διὰ παθημάτων τελειῶσαι), as Heb 2:10 announces, so that now he can provide ongoing service as our great High Priest.

This Second Lesson for Pentecost 20 concludes with astonishing news: Seemingly ordinary people are now his brothers! Those justified because of his death all come from one Source. For Jesus’ sake the Father now has “many sons” (2:10), and the eternal Son of God “is not ashamed to call them brothers” (2:11).

The work of the Son of God is also the work of the heavenly Father. The writer to the Hebrews makes that point also at the start of Chapter Five¹. Jesus’ priestly service on our behalf, he asserts, took place already in Gethsemane when “he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears” (Heb 5:7) on our behalf. But it didn’t end there. Instead the Father chose not to “save him from death.” Time and again Israel’s high priests shed the blood of animals and passed through the Holy Place and the tabernacle’s curtain. Likewise Jesus’ blood was shed so he could pass through the heavens to the merciful presence of the Father. Now his ongoing work as our High Priest is sympathetic, gracious, and effective -- exactly what we sinners need.

In most English translations this text too includes that confusing expression. The NIV renders Heb 5:9 as follows: “And, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” The aorist passive participle at the start of the verse is τελειωθεῖς. Here too the exegete can return to the root sense of the word, to “having been brought to his goal” or “brought to completion.” “When he had finished his mission” or “when he had accomplished his task” smoothes out the translation. Yet in view of Heb 2:10 this was not the mission of Christ alone. It was also the will of the Father that his Son be made responsible for the eternal salvation of all who believe in his name.

One more passage in Hebrews states that the Son of God has been “made perfect.”² Chapter Seven examines Psalm 110 and contends that Christ is the superior High Priest because he alone is in the order of Melchizedek. With one compelling point after another the holy writer presents his case. Christ’s priesthood, he observes, has no beginning and no end; does not depend on his genealogy; results in an endless benediction; fully accomplished with one sacrifice what the other priests’ many sacrifices could not do. The Mosaic Law appointed priests who themselves were weak, but God’s oath in David’s Psalm 110 came after the law and supplanted the law. More to the point, God’s oath “appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever” (Heb 7:28).

¹ In the *Christian Worship* lectionary the Second Lesson for Good Friday is Heb 4:14-16; 5:7-9. In addition, *CW* and *CW Supplement* have designated the latter portion, 5:7-9[10], as the Second Lesson for Lent 5 in Year B.

² *Christian Worship Supplement* proposes Heb 7:26-28 as the Second Lesson for Good Friday.

“Made perfect”? Is not “brought to his goal” more fitting in the context? Here again a passive participle (τετελειωμένον) indicates that the heavenly Father completed his merciful plan through his Son. Here again the participle is cognate to τέλος, announcing that a goal has been reached, a conclusion has been effected. The participle is in the perfect tense, indicating that while this action occurred in the past, its results continue. And it concurs with what the Son of God shouted from his cross, “It is finished” (τετέλεσται). Indeed the Father brought the course of his marvelous plan to the finish line when our Priest and Lamb “bowed his head and gave up his spirit” (John 19:30)³ and then rose from the grave and “sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2).

The Mosaic law specified that Israel’s priests were officially readied for service when they were washed with water, anointed with oil, and dressed in the sacred garments God specified. Bulls, rams, and lambs were sacrificed, their blood sprinkled against God’s altar. Interestingly enough, the Septuagint translators used the verb τελειόω exclusively for priests prepared by these rites.⁴ Perhaps the writer to the Hebrews had the LXX use of that “priestly” word on his mind. After all, it was the sum total of the rites God commanded that brought priests to the goal of being able to offer sacrifices and prayers on behalf of the people. Jesus Christ has certainly been “made complete” (τετελειωμένον⁵) for his priestly service. Baptized with water and anointed with the Spirit at the Jordan; clothed all his life with pure thoughts, words, and deeds; offered once-for-all on the altar of the cross; raised from the grave and lifted high, he has been brought to the Father’s goal. Having finished that entire course of events, Christ’s ordination as our great High Priest has become an accomplished fact with everlasting results. “Therefore he is able to save completely (εἰς τὸ παντελές, all the way to the goal) those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (Heb 7:24b-25).

Exegetes of the epistle to the Hebrews will urge the saints to press on to their heavenly rest with the Father. They will encourage the faithful to keep their eyes on his Son Jesus, “the Trailblazer (ἀρχηγόν) and Finisher (τελειωτής) of the faith” (Heb 12:2, my translation). They will assure them that the merciful Father has blessing after blessing in mind for his many sons because he has brought his one-and-only Son to the marvelous goal of being their great High Priest.

God bless your preaching!

³ The Holy Gospel for Good Friday is John 19:17-30.

⁴ Ex 29:9,29,33,35; Lev 4:5; 8:33; 16:32; 21:10; Num 3:3.

⁵ The verb πληρόω, so prominent in Paul’s epistles, is never used in the epistle to the Hebrews.