

JESUS, OUR MERCIFUL AND FAITHFUL HIGH PRIEST

Hebrews 2:17-18

Scripture Reading: John 1:1-18

Intro: Since we are at that season of the year when we especially remember the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, into the world, I have spent the last two Sunday mornings on the verses in Hebrews 2 which speak of the incarnation of the Son of God. His God-given Name was Jesus. Consistent with the meaning of His Name, the angel of the Lord explained to Joseph that the child which Mary was going to have had been conceived by the Holy Spirit, and that He was to be named “Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). And it was for that purpose, the salvation of His people, that we learn in verse 9 of Hebrews 2 (as well as in many other places in Scripture) that our Lord came to “taste death for every man.” He came to die for sinners. This was His mission on earth. And verse 10 explains for us that those He died for were the many sons He was bringing to glory. He died for those chosen of God, taking their sins upon Himself, offering Himself to God as their Sacrifice, thus securing their eternal salvation. And the Bible makes it very clear that this is the one and only way for sinners to be saved.

Secondly, we learned last Sunday that a part of that redemptive work was the defeat of Satan, which He also did on the Cross, delivering His redeemed ones from the bondage they were under because of the fear of death. Those of us who are saved have been delivered from both the penalty of sin, and from the power of sin. We can still sin, and unfortunately we all do sin, but we are not in bondage to sin. The Devil and sin had enslaved us; the Lord Jesus Christ by His death and resurrection has set us free, free from the tyranny of Satan and free from the slavery of sin. We have this great truth in verses 14 through 16 of this great second chapter of Hebrews.

But we come to another great truth relative to the incarnation of the Son of God in the last two verses of our chapter. This truth is actually a part of the first two references that the writer of Hebrews has already made in this chapter, and what is just as important for us to know is, that the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ was the ministry of a priest. And yet it was not just the ministry of an ordinary priest. His was the ministry of the high priest, the highest of all priests, the priesthood toward which all other priesthood in Scripture pointed and find their fulfillment.

What is the ministry of a priest according to Scripture? We read in the OT that Aaron was appointed as the first high priest. Just what was his responsibility as a priest?

I think it is best understood by comparing it with the ministry of a prophet. Anyone who read the Bible is acquainted with prophets. A prophet was one who received his message from the Lord, and delivered it to the people. And so his was a ministry from God to man. Isaiah received the message we read in the book which bears his name, and then He delivered it to the people of Judah. He was both a writing and a preaching prophet. There were other prophets like Elijah and Elisha who never wrote a book of the Bible, but they received their message from the Lord and delivered it to the people for whom it was intended. John the Baptist was a preaching prophet, but not a writing prophet. Nor did he ever perform a single miracle.

God does not speak to men today like He did in the days when the Bible was being written. The Bible is complete now, and the pastor or teacher of the Word today is limited to what is written. Any person who claims to be receiving special messages from God which are not in the Bible, is a deceiver and is greatly deceived. Don't pay any attention to him. In fact, stay just as far away from him, or her, as you can get. I trust that I get my messages from the Lord, but they have to be messages in which I am seeking to explain what God has given us in the Bible. But remember that the prophet receives his message from the Lord, and delivers it to the people.

The ministry of a priest is in exactly the opposite. The priest always ministers from man to God. In OT times the priest received sacrifices which the people brought to him, and offered them to God. The priest was a mediator between God and man. It was the priest's responsibility to be concerned about the relationship of the people to God. And we read here in verse 17 of our text that our Lord was "a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation (or better, propitiation) for the sins of the people." You see, our Lord came into this world as a Man to minister on our behalf to God. The whole OT anticipated His coming; the NT reveals it and explains what His coming means to us.

The book of Hebrews was written under the direction of the Holy Spirit to explain to us what it means that He is our great high priest. There would

be no better way for any of us to spend at least a part of this Christmas season than to sit down by ourselves, or with our family, and read through the entire book of Hebrews at one sitting. Our hearts and minds need to be saturated with the truth of this book of Hebrews. It will bring the greatest peace and joy to our hearts, a relief from all of the pressures and difficulties which we all experience as we live from day to day. And if you read it through once, slowly and prayerfully, I am sure that you will want to do it again, and again, and again. And especially if your soul is being tested, reading Hebrews will be just what you need – and what I need as well.

I am sure that these days leading up to Christmas have been incredibly busy for most of you, probably all of you. And as you sit there today you are probably thinking of all of the things that you still have to do. Life is terribly busy, isn't it? When I see all of the traffic every day, I wonder where everyone is going, and what they are doing. The "busy-ness" of life, and the trials that we face, make it even more apparent how much we need the Lord, and I don't know any better way to find Him than to spend time reading the Word, large sections of it, not hurriedly, but thoughtfully and by constantly looking to the Spirit of God to open our eyes and hearts to see and understand the very truths that we need to know. The Bible is God's book, and it is about God, and about Christ, and about the Holy Spirit, and about me and about you. And when we bring all of this together, there is certain to be peace and joy which makes every burden lighter. And I don't know of any truth that is more quieting to a troubled soul, a hurried and a harried soul, than the truth of the priesthood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now let us look at verses 17 and 18 of Hebrews 2.

You will notice that verse 17 begins with the word, "wherefore."

Bishop Westcott who has written a very wonderful commentary on the book of Hebrews, had this to say about the word "wherefore." It is used several times in Hebrews. You will see it again in chapter 3, verse 1. He said this: "It marks a result which flows naturally (so to speak) from what has gone before" (p. 56). So we have reached a point early in the epistle toward which the writer has been aiming. I think you can see a real connection between all that we have been considering, beginning with verse 9. "But we see Jesus" gets us looking in a particular direction, a different direction, a better direction. And verse 10 tells us what the Lord had to

do to accomplish what He came to do. And then when you get down to verse 14 we see another word which ties this passage together like the links in a chain: “Forasmuch . . .” So we take the second step in this passage as the writer leads us further to think about the sufferings of our Lord – here, as they apply to our Archenemy, the Devil. But then it all leads down to the “wherefore” in verse 17. Step one led to step 2, and these all lead to step 3 which the Spirit of God asks us now to take with Him. This is the place toward which we have been led in chapter 2. The word “behooved” is similar in its emphasis to the word “became” back in verse 9. They mean that if the Lord Jesus were to accomplish the work which the Father sent Him to do, there were certain things that He could not escape. And that one thing that is before us in all three parts that He could not escape was that He had to become a Man. This was a necessity that was laid upon Him.

Now that might not sound like much to us who are men, and by that I mean *human beings*. *When the Lord Jesus was conceived in the virgin Mary, and born in a barn in Bethlehem, the most amazing thing that had ever happened, was in the process of taking place. The holy Son of God, the Creator of the heavens and earth and all that is in them, was taking on the form of a creature, and He appeared on earth the same way you and I were born! We talk a lot about the birth of our Lord, and about His humanity, but I confess to you that I have more trouble understanding the humanity of the Lord Jesus than I do His Deity.*

In leading us through the study of Philippians, Pastor Will took us through that passage in Philippians 2 where we are told that the Lord emptied Himself

7b and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:

8 And being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross

(Phil. 2:7-8).

You can understand, can't you, why the Jews wanted to kill Him because He, a mere man as far as they could see, said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God. See John 5:18. And they not only thought that He was only a man, but they were convinced that He was a sinner just like everyone else. What humiliation the Lord experienced in becoming a Man. No one ever has come from a higher place to suffer such humiliation, but this is what He was willing, and even eager, to endure in order to become our Savior. Can you understand that? It goes

beyond our ability to understand, doesn't it? And what does this tell us about the awfulness of our sin if the Son of God had to go through what He experienced even before He got to the Cross? He was never the object of mistaken identify among angels or even he demons of hell. It was just before men whom He came to redeem – and the Apostle Paul had been among those who were most mistaken about our Lord.

And then our verse tells us that He was “made like unto his brethren.” He had to become like those He came to redeem – with one exception: He was “without sin.” See Hebrews 4:15. He “did no sin” (1 Pet. 2:22). He “knew no sin” (2 Cor. 5:21). In Him there was no sin, as we read in 1 John 3:5. He had a human mother, the virgin Mary, but He had no human Father. He had been conceived by the Holy Spirit. The greatest mysteries surround the Person of the incarnate Christ. We believe it all because of the teaching of Scripture, but not because we can explain it.

But the object of the incarnation was twofold according to verse 17:

- 1) “That He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God.”
- 2) And this made it possible for Him “to make, lit., propitiation, “for the sins of the people.”

The word “be” before “a merciful and faithful high priest” is the Greek word, *to become*. Here is another aspect of our Lord's work that defies a sufficient explanation. How could the Lord become what He always had been, both merciful and faithful? These are attributes of the Godhead. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, have always been merciful and faithful, infinitely so! How are we to understand these words of holy Scripture?

It is probably impossible for us to fully understand this great truth, but I remind you again that we can believe what we may not be able to explain. Who can really explain the work of salvation where God actually makes us a new creation when we are saved. He creates life, eternal life, within us.

We can be totally sure that no one would react to human life, and especially to human sin, like our Lord would. We get accustomed to sin. We don't see its real nature, nor its power to defile us and to ruin our lives. But while our Lord never partook of our sin, yet “He was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin.” Sin was an offense to God beyond what we can imagine. He experienced hunger, and weakness, and the

power of temptation, without ever yielding to temptation. In the Garden of Gethsemane where our Lord sweat great drops of blood we can see the effect that becoming sin for us had upon His physical body. But seeing sin from the inside, so to speak, never changed His merciful attitude nor His faithfulness toward the people He loved.

Some try to make a distinction between mercy and faithfulness saying that mercy applies to men while faithfulness has to do with God. But I believe that Bishop Westcott is right when He says that in this passage both have to do with the people of God. It would have been reasonable to think that the Lord's humanity would have made Him disgusted and irreconcilable toward man, but, if anything, it emphasized the Lord's sympathy with us and His faithfulness to us in spite of our sin. Who of us has not been amazed at both the mercy and faithfulness of the Lord toward us even when we continue to sin? The Lord does not excuse our sin, but He is working to make us holy as He is holy.

What has the Lord done about our sin? What did He accomplish for us as our High Priest? He has made propitiation for the sins of the people. What does propitiation mean? It means that all that God in His holiness for the forgiveness, the removal of the penalty of our sins, our Lord has accomplished for us by His death on the Cross. There is nothing more for us to do. The Lord has done a complete work. Our salvation is secure. But nothing short of what the Lord has done would be sufficient for our salvation.

However, we have one more verse to go: verse 18.

Now only has Jesus as our High Priest completely satisfied God regarding our sins, removing all charges against us in the court of heaven, but since He has suffered temptation just like we face, but He never failed like we do, He stands ready "to succour them that are tempted."

Probably most of us never used that word "succour" until we came upon it in our Bibles. And it may be that even now you are not sure what it means. Well, the verb which the writer of Hebrews used here lit. means *to run to the cry of another*. *The Spirit of God wants us to know that the same High Priest Who offered Himself as a sufficient Sacrifice for our sins, always stands ready and hears when through sin we get into trouble and cry out for help*. What could be comforting than this? We as the Lord's people are sensitive about sin, and grieved when we sin? Why are

we still bothered with temptation? Why does God allow us to be tempted?

Archbishop Trench says in his *Synonyms of the New Testament*, that temptation show us “what of good or evil, of power or weakness” is in us. For us as Christians temptations cause us to know ourselves, how undependable we are, how we are inclined to sin, but all of this is designed to make us as Archbishop Trench said, “holier, humbler, stronger” (p. 280)

Concl: But we need to learn to call out in prayer, “Help!” Most of us are too confident in ourselves. But it doesn’t take much of a testing to show us how weak we are.

Let me close by calling your attention to what we read in Hebrews 3:1 – where we have “wherefore” again, and we are called upon as “partakers of the heavenly calling,” to “consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession,” or confession, and the best MSS do not say Christ Jesus, but simply “Jesus.”

What does it mean to “consider . . . Jesus”? It means that we need to pay attention to Him, to keep our eyes on Him, to make sure that there is nothing that we are missing that we need to know about Him. It means that we need to consider that our relationship to Him is the most important relationship that we have, and so we must seek to get better acquainted with Him and to remember how He loves us and cares for us and wants us to walk with Him, but Who will always respond when we find ourselves in trouble, and cry out to Him for help. We can never make it without Him.