

JESUS, OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST

Hebrews 2:17-18

Intro: Hebrews, chapter 2, gives us three reasons for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to earth as a Man. The first we find in verse 9, “that He by the grace of God should taste death for every man,” or, as the Greek text has it, *for all*. And we learn from verse 10 that the writer of Hebrews was speaking about *all of the sons (and daughters) that He was bringing to glory*. The second reason is given in verses 14 and 15

14 . . . that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is the devil;

15 And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.

Today we come to the third reason found in verse 17:

. . . that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

This does not exhaust the reasons given to us in Scripture for the birth and life and death and resurrection of the Son of God, but these are the three that relate to the purpose of the book of Hebrews.

All three of these reasons are absolutely essential for the salvation of sinners. Our penalty had to be paid, our enemy had to be defeated, and we have, as we all should know, a desperate and continuing need for a High Priest just like the Lord Jesus Christ was, still is, and always will be.

This is certainly the time and the place for us to make sure that we understand what the work of the priest is.

In the OT there were three main offices, or positions, which were held by the leaders of Israel. The highest office was that of the King, but he was accompanied by the priests and the prophets. The King, of course, was responsible to govern and lead the people according to the will of God which was revealed to all of the people in the Word of God. Very few were faithful in doing this, but this was their responsibility nevertheless.

The priests were men who were to represent the people to God. So the ministry of the priests was *Godward*. The prophets, on the other hand, were those who ministered from God to the people. They got their messages from God, and delivered their messages to the people. And so

we can say that their ministry was , that is, from God to man. Over and over again in the OT we find the prophets saying, “Thus saith the LORD.”

So when we speak of Jesus as *our Great High Priest*, as He is called in Heb. 4:14, we mean that He is our representative before God, our Advocate, our Mediator. It is through Jesus Christ that our sins have been purged, and we are given a place of perfect and eternal acceptance with God. Because we are sinners, we are under the judgment of God. We are under the sentence of death, the sentence of eternal death. But our Lord, the Son of God, became a Man in order that He might die for us, taking upon Himself our debt, and fully satisfying God that our debt has been paid in full.

But, since it is still possible for us to sin even though we are saved, so we have a continuing need for a Great High Priest. So here in these last two verses of Hebrews 2, the writer of this book begins to deal with what is really the main theme of this epistle.

Nor is this the first time that we have come upon this theme in this epistle. In the opening verses of chapter 1, while not mentioning that our Lord was our Great High Priest, the writer did mention our Lord’s priestly work when he said in about the middle of verse 3, “when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.” “Purged” means that *He cleansed us from our sins*. This is what the writer of that Gospel song meant when he asked, “What can wash away my sins?” And then he gave the answer: “Nothing but the blood of Jesus.” Because we couldn’t cleanse ourselves and make ourselves acceptable to God, the Lord Jesus had to come to cleanse us. And this He did by shedding His precious blood, but giving His life to ransom us from the judgment of God. The One referred to by the words “the Majesty” in Heb. 1:3, is God the Father. And for the Lord Jesus to be seated at the Father’s right hand means that His work for us was accepted by God, and that is why we are saved.

And so we are introduced to this subject which ought to be of the greatest importance and interest to every child of God. There is no subject in all of Scripture that has greater significance for us than that the Lord Jesus Christ is our Great High Priest. This is a truth that we are involved with every day that we live. It is by the work of Jesus on the Cross that our sins are put away, and it is by the present work of the Lord Jesus Christ in heaven, at the Father’s right hand, that we continue to enjoy fellowship

with our God and heavenly Father. And so the writer's emphasis on this great doctrine begins here at the end of chapter 2, and continues right on to the end of this epistle. It would take several weeks to cover all that we are taught in this great epistle, but for today we need to concentrate on these last two verses of chapter 2, and this will give us a good foundation for the remainder of the epistle.

We have three main points in these two verses:

1) This statement of our Lord's incarnation:

“Wherefore in all things it behoved Him to be made like unto His brethren.”

2) The purpose of His incarnation:

“That He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.”

3) A further word of explanation:

“For in that He Himself hath suffered being tempted, He is able to succour them that are tempted.”

Let me read these two verses to you in the NKJV to clarify the meaning of some of the Old English words which we have here in verses 17 and 18:

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.

18 For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted (NKJV).

Now let us look first at:

I. THIS STATEMENT OF OUR LORD'S INCARNATION (Heb. 2:17a).

This is the third statement of our Lord's coming to the earth as a Man which we have had in this chapter. In verse 9 we read, “But we see Jesus Who was made a little lower than the angels.” In verse 14 it is stated in a different way: “Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same.” And then here in verse 17 we have, “Wherefore in all things it behoved Him to be made like unto His brethren.” All three statements are different, and yet all speak of the same doctrine: the incarnation of our Lord, the Son of God Who became a Man, born as we know of the virgin Mary.

But what did the writer of Hebrews mean when he expressed the coming of Christ into the world as a Man with this word “behoved.” It is sometimes spelled with two “o’s.”

He meant that the Lord was obligated to come as a Man, that it was absolutely necessary for Him to become a man, it was incumbent upon Him, He had to become a Man. When I say He was obligated, this means that it was a debt that He had to pay. But to whom was He obligated – certainly not to us! The Lord Jesus didn’t owe us anything. He would have been perfectly justified in letting all of us go on to Hell, *except for one thing: It was the will of the Father that He should come to redeem us from our sins.* We have these words of our Lord Jesus Christ in John 6:38: “For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of Him that sent Me.” This does not mean that He came although He didn’t want to come. He did want to come. But the main reason He came was to do what He had always done in eternity past: the will of the Father. The Apostle John that “the Father sent the Son to be the Savior of the world” (1 John 4:14). And there was no other way for Him to be “the Savior of the world” except by becoming a Man so that He could suffer and die to save us from our sins. The Son of God always did what pleased the Father. See John 8:29. And since it pleased the Father to save sinners, and it required a Man, a perfect Man, to be the Savior, therefore only the Son of God as a Man could qualify for such a work, our Lord was obligated to His Father to come to earth as a Man.

What amazing truth this is! And if you and I are to be like the Lord Jesus, we must obligate ourselves to do the will of God. And this means that we must live in obedience to the word which God has given us.

But let us move on to the second part of these three verses.

II. THE PURPOSE OF THE INCARNATION (Heb. 2:17b).

(Read v. 17b.)

Here for the first time in the epistle our Lord, whose Name was Jesus, is called *a High Priest*. He is the Chief Priest. There is none greater in power and authority than He! But there are two adjectives attached to His position. He is “a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God. “Merciful and faithful.” What truths do we need to understand here?

God certainly does not need mercy, but we do. Many expositors have told us that mercy and misery are two words that go together. Sin does not make people happy. Today people are freer to do what they want to do, but there is undoubtedly more unhappiness in the world today to go along with such freedom. Sin makes people miserable, so miserable many times that they choose to die rather than to live. Sin at the same time renders us totally unworthy of any help from God. God doesn't owe us anything except judgment! But He is a merciful God. And Jesus Christ is His merciful Son. And the Holy Spirit, although as holy as the Father and the Son, yet is He compassionate toward sinners. And the mercy of the Godhead *moves them to take action*. They could not let us suffer the consequences of our sin, which was eternal death. The Cross of Jesus Christ spells *divine mercy for guilty, lost, and helpless sinners*. *And that is good news, the best news man ever heard!*

But what about *faithful*? Ah, this is where we see again our Lord's relationship with the Father. Our Lord knew that God in His righteousness could not just turn His back on sin, or overlook it, or just excuse it. If He were to forgive sin, it must be only when the penalty had been executed on the sinner. The debt must be paid by the sinner (and this would take all eternity, and then never be paid), or a fit Substitute must be found. But there was no human on earth who could qualify because all men are sinners and under the judgment of God. So God sent His Son Who at the cost of His own life, was faithful to God, thus securing for us a salvation that was perfect and eternally acceptable to God.

So our Lord came as an expression of the mercy of God toward sinners, and yet faithful to a God of righteousness Who cannot lower His standards, but must fully stand by His own righteousness. Only Jesus could meet the requirements for such a High Priest. "In things pertaining to God" means that when the Son of God came to earth He came to do business for God. He came to do a work that would satisfy God as well as meet the needs of guilty sinners. And so His work is called a propitiation. This means that God is satisfied with the work of His Son, and that all sinners for whom Christ died are guaranteed an eternal salvation.

But there is one more point that we need to make, and I am calling this:

III. A FURTHER WORD OF EXPLANATION (Heb. 2:18).

The work of our Great High Priest, Jesus, the Son of God and the Son of

Mary, the Lord Christ, did not end at the Cross, but it will continue on as long as time shall last. Verse 17, which we have just considered, is a most wonderful verse, and we should never get over what it tells us. But the same is true of verse 18. You see, the moment we are saved, we are prepared to go to heaven. If a person is saved one minute, and dies the next minute, he or she will be in heaven. But the Lord leaves us here to grow in the Lord, to mature as Christians, as His people, but also He leaves us here to bear witness to the people of the world who are still in their sins. But this means one thing for all of us. It means that we are going to be tested and tried. It means that we are going to face all kinds of temptation, and we all know by experience that we are not always victorious. It is still possible for us to sin, and unfortunately we do sin. We sin by what we do. We sin by what we say. We sin by what we think. We sin by what we fail to do as well as by what we do. There are sins of omission and sins of commission. We no longer live in sin, but sometimes we fall into sin. What is our hope that we can be delivered from the power of sin. It is all centered in our Great High Priest. He faced trials and temptations that you and I know nothing about. But He never sinned. He could not sin, but being perfect, He was capable of being offended by sin that goes beyond anything that you and I have ever known, or will ever know. The Devil threw his heaviest weapons against our Lord. He felt the power of evil, but never succumbed to it. And so He knows what we are going through when we are tempted and tried, and He is able *to help us*. Thayer says that this word “succour” means that our Lord *runs to the cry of those who call upon Him for help*.

Place this word “succour” along side of those wonderful verses which we often quote, and love to read, in Psalm 34. For example Psa. 34:6:

This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles.

The word “cried” means *to cry out*, to be so desperate for the Lord’s help that we cry aloud as though He might have trouble hearing us.

Or take verse 17 in the same Psalm:

The righteous cry, and the LORD heareth, and delivereth them out of all their troubles (Psa. 34:17).

Again it is *to cry out!* Whatever the testing, whatever the trial, however strong the temptation might be, you and I who know the Lord have a Savior Who has been through all that we go through, and far more, and so He understands and is ready to help us and to deliver us.

So our Lord has not only saved us from sin’s penalty by coming into the

world as a Man to suffer and die, taking our penalty as though it were His own, but His time on earth enables Him to know what we are going through, and being God the Son, “He is able” to help and deliver those who are tempted.

Concl: I can’t close this message without reading to you the last three verses of Hebrews 4, verses which tie down and really strengthen in our hearts and minds the truth that we have seen at the end of chapter 2. (Read and explain Heb. 4:14-16.)

There are many things about the humanity of our Lord that we cannot fully understand, but the important thing is not that we try to explain it all, but that we believe what we are told, and profit from it. As our Lord once said, if we believe, then we will see. God’s word is infallibly true and unchanging. It was a rock under the feet of our Lord while He was here on earth, and it can be a rock under our feet as we live in the same evil world that He lives in.