

HEBREWS VERSE BY VERSE - The New and Living Way - Part ten

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NEVER LET DIVINE GRACE BECOME FORMAL AND COLD

Hebrews 2:14-18 - "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, [15] and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. [16] For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. [17] Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. [18] For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."

There are **four results** of our Lord's Incarnation strung together in these verses - **four reasons** Jesus "**partook of the same things**" (14). And those "**same things**" are the "**flesh and blood**" bodily natures into which "**the children**" - mankind - are born.

Here are the **four reasons**: **First**, He came to "**destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.**" (14). **Second**, He came to "**deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery**" (15). **Third**, He came to become "**a merciful and faithful high priest....to make propitiation for the sins of the people**" (17). And **fourth**, He came to be "**able to help those who are being tempted**" (18).

We looked at the first two of these reasons last Sunday. Today we will study the last two.

1) **CHRIST TOOK ON HUMAN FLESH AND NATURE TO BECOME A MERCIFUL AND FAITHFUL HIGH PRIEST AND MAKE PROPITIATION FOR OUR SINS**

Hebrews 2:16-17 - "For surely it is **not angels that he helps**, but he **helps the offspring of Abraham.** [17] Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become **a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.**"

As you study Hebrews you immediately see the writer's unique and important emphasis. This is the only letter in the New Testament that specifically calls Jesus "**a merciful and faithful high priest**" (17). In fact, Jesus is not called a "**high priest**" by any other New Testament writer.

Most Bibles include a note at the beginning of **John 17** calling that chapter Jesus' "**High Priestly Prayer.**" And I have no problem with that. I'm only saying that's something the editors of various Bibles have added. That title, "**High Priest**" doesn't occur in the text of John 17. Only the writer of Hebrews **calls** Jesus our **High Priest.**

And it's not just some side reference. Our writer will refer to Jesus as our High Priest some 18 times. It's the major Christological emphasis of the writer of Hebrews. Quite uniquely, our writer makes Jesus' ministry as our High Priest the most important thing to understand.

Here's why I think this matters so much. We need to study Hebrews because the tendency in much of modern Christianity is to think of the work of Jesus only in terms of "**believing Jesus died for our sins.**" Almost automatically we summarize the entirety of salvation in terms of **John 3:16**. The problem with that is we tend to frame salvation exclusively in the past. Salvation becomes more **historic** than **contemporary**. After all, Jesus Himself said of His atoning work, "**It is finished!**"

Now, our salvation surely **is** anchored to solid history. Christianity is not just a **life philosophy** or **series of moral principles or teachings**. The saving events of the New Testament actually **happened**. They are **objective** in nature, not **subjective**. The core events of the Christian faith don't depend on my acceptance for their authenticity. They become **effective** for me through a commitment of faith. But they **exist** as God's saving acts whether I believe them or not. In fact, they are solid realities whether **anyone** believes them or not.

And Christ's work **is** finished, as long as by that we all mean there is nothing of our own effort or acts of religious penance that can merit God's forgiveness. "**Love's redeeming work is done!**" - as the church has sung for decades.

But we need the reminder of the writer of Hebrews that, while the work of Christ surely is *finished*, it hasn't *ended*. It is ongoingly active and potent and saving and liberating. It's a finished work that keeps working. Our writer doesn't say we *had* a great High Priest. He says we *have* a great High Priest - **Hebrews 4:14** - "**Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.**"

Jesus didn't *retire* after Calvary. He didn't leave, just hoping we'd be able to *believe enough* to make it to the finish line. He *applies His great strong work to our weak flesh and blood lives*. All of these Jewish believers to whom our writer writes knew about the priesthood. They knew their Scriptures. They knew how God had appointed Aaron and his sons to be their priests. They knew not one of those Old Covenant people of God could have any approach to God on his or her own. They needed a *priest* to approach God on their behalf. They needed a *priest* to offer atonement for their sins.

And what you're looking at throughout that lengthy Old Testament of yours is God *training people for a coming High Priest*. God was training the people to know they were in *constant need of Someone Else to come before a holy God on their behalf*.

Last week we saw our writer detailing exactly how Father God *prepared and perfected Jesus as our High Priest*. That priestly work was initiated, but not terminated, at Calvary. We benefit eternally from the nature and work of our High Priest *right now*. And exactly *how* this wonderful work takes place is still the theme of today's text.

Look again at the two verses we're considering under this first point: **Hebrews 2:16-17** - "**For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. [17] Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.**"

God the Son didn't come in the *form* of an angel. And, according to our text, He didn't come *on behalf* of angels. The angels who fell from holy devotion did so *willingly*. They acted without the influence of a fallen tempter. And those who fell had no effect whatsoever on the rest. Many, many angels, according to Jesus, remain in faithful, sinless devotion around the throne of God.

Not so with mankind. Our situation is more desperate. Through our link with Adam the whole of mankind is bound to sin and destruction. There is none righteous. The pollution of sin is universal and complete. By ourselves there is no relief whatsoever and no hope of restoration or eternal life.

This is where **verse 16** just starts to reveal the first glimmers of hope - "**For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham.**" The text just begins unfolding good news with a classic understatement. Truly Messiah comes and "*helps*" the offspring of Abraham. But it's *how* He helps that the writer will yet unfold.

The Incarnation of God the Son means Jesus doesn't just *help* the offspring the way you might help someone looking for directions in New York with your map. No. Jesus *helps* the offspring of Abraham by becoming the *promised Seed* of Abraham himself:

Galatians 3:16 - "**Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring' who is Christ.**"

Here is the DNA of our High Priest. He is a descendant of the *man* Abraham. He is one of *us*. He had His own fingerprints and teeth. He had to clip His fingernails and wash His feet. He was of a certain height and weight. He could eat fish and bread. He could ride a donkey.

Exactly how does this help each of us in our bondage to sin? Our writer goes on to explain - **Hebrews 2:17** - "**Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.**"

I see three thoughts here:

- a) **First, "....he had to be made like his brothers...."** As our writer has already pointed out, our High Priest couldn't be an *angel*. He had to be *one of us* - **Hebrews 5:1** - "**For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.**"

Nothing could be clearer. If a High Priest is to represent **me** before God he must be a **human** High Priest. He has to do his work from **my end** of things. If not, he's some other creature's High Priest, but not mine. Our High Priest "**...had to be made like his brothers...**" (17a). Underscore that absolute necessity - "**...had to be...**"

- b) **Second, He had to be "...a merciful and faithful high priest in the service to God..."** (17b). Those two qualities - **merciful** and **faithful** - must be linked together. Either one on its own nullifies any help from our High Priest.

Let's take "**faithful**" first. Jesus must be a **faithful** High Priest before God if His sacrifice is to be acceptable. He couldn't be a sinner - a covenant breaker. That's why, in the training of the Old Testament sacrificial period no imperfect sacrifice was to be offered and wouldn't be accepted. The sacrifice had to be better than the sinner for whom it was offered or it was useless.

The problem is God's people have had no completely faithful High Priest before Jesus came. Our Lord died on that cross as the only faithful **covenant keeper** before the law of God. He is a "**faithful**" High Priest.

Then look at that term "**merciful**" - "**...a merciful and faithful high priest...**" (17b). The striking thing about that term is there is not one single reference to any priest being **merciful** in the Old Testament. Father God was merciful, yes, but the priest merely did his job. He just followed the system - the rules.

Jesus, our High Priest, doesn't offer **cold** forgiveness. That's why He is the only one called a "**merciful High Priest**." There is nothing **clinical** in His work on our behalf. I want to save more on this thought for the next verse when I wrap up.

Remember where we are. I said there were **three ideas** unpacked in **verse 17**. **First, Jesus had to be made like His brothers.** (17a). **Second, He had to be a "merciful and faithful high priest in the service to God"** (17b). And now to the third powerful idea:

- c) **Third, Jesus had to "...make propitiation for the sins of the people"** (17c). Every Jewish reader of this letter would know exactly what our writer meant. Every Jew wandering through the wilderness could go to Moses or Joshua or parents or any wise sage for counsel. But none of those leaders could do the work of the **priest** for the people.

To deal with God the people had to go to the priest. The priest was for **atonement**. Other people were for advice, life-skills, and support. The priest was for **sins**. The priest was to clear up the dreadful situation - the **threatening** situation - of the wrath of God against sinners. People couldn't just sit safely with their sin and hope God would forget about it or get used to it.

Never forget that important **training period** of the Old Testament sacrificial system. There was a point God was trying to make. What was the meaning of those tens of millions of dead lambs and goats? Those bloody little carcasses would make a pile as high as mount Sinai. **What point was God trying to make?**

Sin matters. It's a brutal, ruthless, life and death issue. God can't just **pronounce** forgiveness without **punishing** sin. A holy God is not an easy God for fallen people to deal with. Divine justice comes with a high price tag.

O, how careful the church needs to be to **keep the main thing the main thing**. We all carry around inner persons in no position to be anywhere near God. We need a perfectly righteous, covenant keeping High Priest to stand in our stead. We need a High Priest who is one of us, for sure, but one who offers a righteousness none of us possesses. God's absolute justice must be authentically satisfied. There is only **one** such High Priest.

When we say people **need** Jesus we don't mean they need Him for inner tranquility or emotional therapy. No. Jesus took on human flesh to "**make propitiation for the sins of the people**" (17)

- 2) **CHRIST TOOK ON HUMAN FLESH AND NATURE TO REMEMBER OUR WEAKNESSES AND HELP IN OUR TEMPTATIONS**

Hebrews 2:18 - **“For because *he himself has suffered when tempted*, he is *able to help those who are being tempted*.”**

The driving idea behind this whole series is ***how the New Covenant is so much better than the Old. God***, of course, is exactly the same. But, as we said in our study of chapter one, His self-revelation is ***unfolding*** and ***progressive***. And we are greatly benefitted by that.

Sinners have always needed to approach God in both the Old and New Covenants. We need help. In His grace, God provided the temporary sacrificial system in the Old Testament. This was primarily designed to train people around two important concepts.

First, that God's love must never be interpreted as mere ***tolerance***. He would never just look the other way when His people sinned. And what would make people see sin as something serious and offensive? Shed blood. Over and over again, death is the price of sin. God's love for sinners must never be confused with tolerance for people's sins.

But **second**, God wanted His people to know He Himself would initiate a plan to allow His people access even after they had sinned. Priests would offer sacrifices - dreadful sacrifices - over and over again. That was the only way God could be worshiped and loved by fallen people. So both the ***seriousness of sin*** and the ***persistence of grace*** were being taught in rudimentary, repeated, preparatory fashion.

Enter the New Covenant. We don't approach God like that anymore, though He is the same and those two principles abide. Our ***approach*** to the same God is vastly different.

Since I was a child I was taught to end all my simple prayers saying, ***“In Jesus' Name....”*** And while I probably didn't understand the significance of that fully, I did start to realize it marked a change in the way sinners called out to God - the way they ***approached*** God.

People under the old covenant were never able to pray, ***“In Jesus Name.”*** Jesus said so in **John 16:24** - **“Until now you have asked nothing *in my name*. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.”**

“Until now....” How could they? Jesus hadn't shed His blood. The Lamb of God - like all those slain lambs in the Old Testament - still awaited the cup of God's wrath against your sin and mine. The final Priestly sacrifice was still ahead. ***Then*** the disciples would pray - whether they used the exact same phrase or not - in ***Jesus' Name***. Jesus would be the ***fully human offspring of Abraham, yet perfectly righteous Son of God***, who would bear their sin and carry their love and their worship to Father God.

And what I want to close with is the way our text pounds out a ***huge difference*** with the priestly ministry of Jesus, God the Son. It's the reason for the title of this whole teaching - ***“Never Let Divine Grace Become Formal and Cold.”***

Take this home from Church. When you ***sin*** and when you are struggling ***not*** to sin your High Priest remembers what it's like to be tempted. This is the ***brand new feature*** of the New Covenant. And though it is a great condescension that under the Old Covenant our creator God ***“knew our frame and remembered we are dust,”*** before Jesus took on human flesh the Godhead had no way of ***remembering what it is like to be tempted and tried by both the rejection of this world and the face-to-face conflict with the Devil while in a weak human condition***. All of this came with Jesus and the New Covenant. This is the New Covenant ***participation*** initiated by our descended from Abraham High Priest.

Here's what this means. There is a huge difference between believing in a technically, correct ***doctrine*** of forgiveness through Christ's death, which is true enough, and ***feeling how such forgiveness is generated in our merciful High Priest***.

Apply this truth. When you struggle with your own weakness and face extreme times of testing with the Devil, of course you call out for grace and help. And when Jesus hears your cry ***the first thing He remembers isn't this is the second time today you've failed in the battle. The first thing He remembers is how demanding it was when He was tempted in the wilderness by Satan Himself***.

He never forgets this. There is ***an identifying*** with you and with me by our High Priest - a ***sympathetic*** identifying. I ***don't*** mean He ever shares in our sin or guilt. But I ***do*** mean He doesn't offer grace and pardon the way a President might sign some document of pardon for criminals he's never met as he leaves office. Our Lord's ***heart***

and **memory** are with repentant sinners. There's emotion in His grace. Our Lord always forgives **with a sympathetic memory** of our humanity. There's passion in it. He doesn't just offer forgiveness like some divine **deal**. He **feels** forgiving toward us because He has been exactly where we are, minus the sin. Remember - your High Priest is not ashamed to call us His brothers and sisters.