



THE PERFECT PRIEST
Hebrews 2:14-18
Hebrews 4:14-16

There is a simple – but powerful – announcement in today’s scripture. This promise brought tremendous encouragement to those who heard in the first century. They were being threatened, tortured, persecuted, and killed for their faith. The Roman government was making a persistent effort to destroy this tiny, growing Christian community.

This word inspired courageous and faithful discipleship in a most difficult time. To a church which saw some of its members turn away from Christ and bow before the image of Caesar – this text provided encouragement and edification.

It shares that in Jesus Christ we have “a Perfect Priest.” There are 5 helpful words in our text: **“He is able to help.”**

From **chapter 8 of Leviticus** we learn that our need of a priesthood does not originate with men – but with God. In **verse one** God spoke to Moses: “Take Aaron and with him his sons.” A priest is one who represents us – or presents God to us. A priest is one who stands in the gap between a Holy God – and a sinful people. Our lesson today presents Jesus Christ as the Perfect Priest – Bridge Builder between God and us. The priest reminds us of our need for God – for salvation and for righteousness. The High Priest (beginning with Aaron) was always to hold the nation of Israel close to the heart of God. Our lesson today reassures us that our great High Priest – Jesus Christ – holds us close to the heart of the Father – and makes intercession for us as well. With holy boldness we can go before the Father.

The entire letter to the Hebrews is an elaborate demonstration that Christ is the High Priest who connects God and humans in a living and loving relationship.¹

Let us reflect together on why Jesus Christ is the Perfect Priest.

FIRST, HE HAS BEEN TEMPTED.

Every Lenten season we begin with the gospel account of the temptation (testing) of Jesus by Satan. Christ is literally driven out into the desert to do battle with the Evil One.

It is important to understand that the Lord who stands beside us today is one who has himself experienced the reality of human temptation. That is something we often forget. Toward the end of **chapter 4 of Hebrews** there is a remarkable and inspiring passage. The book of Hebrews presents Jesus as our great High Priest, who stands on our behalf before the justice and righteousness of God. He brings – not the blood sacrifice of animals – but presents on our behalf – the sacrifice of his own life upon the cross. Lest we should feel an impossible distance between ourselves and such a high priest we read, “For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning.”

This means in the temptation of Jesus, God has entered fully into the struggles of our humanity. This means that God understands our struggle, not from a distance as a spectator, not as a plastic Jesus riding on the dashboard of our cars, but from within the very midst of our human existence. He is not harsh, rigid, detached high priest who is remote and inaccessible. He is with and for us! Jesus has been tempted! Then **verse 16 of chapter 4** points us to a joyous, positive conclusion.

“Let us then with confidence (confidence means with trust); let us with confidence, draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in the time of need.”

Unlike many theologians and philosophers today – the New Testament does not debate whether Satan exists or if spiritual conflict is real. The New Testament warns about a shepherd who is **not** good – who comes only to steal – rob – and destroy.

All you need to **do is** to read the front page of the Sunday newspaper and you’ll know there is a battle going on for the souls of the human race – and the control of the human mind.

Gratefully “Christ is the one who is totally familiar with us – having been tempted at every turn of the road – just as we have been. Christ has been through it all yet without falling before any of it. In Christ, we are supplied with all the necessary resources to claim victory over that which will tempt us in life.”² That is why we can hold firm to our confession of faith. That is why Jesus Christ is our Perfect Priest.

SECONDLY, HE HAS SUFFERED.

In the Protestant tradition we often forget – before the cross was empty – it was quite full.

One of my favorite stories is about an event that takes place at the end of time. It seems all the people who had ever lived were brought before God to be judged for their life on earth. They were assembled together before the throne of God. However, they were not a submissive crowd. They were mumbling and grumbling among themselves. They had complaints to make. It was like a meeting of the Annual Conference or an Administrative Board.

One of the groups was made up of **Jews** who had suffered great persecution. Some had died in gas chambers and concentration camps.

How could God judge them? What could He know of their suffering? “Who is God, that He should be our Judge?” they cried.

Then there was a group of **slaves** who had suffered all kinds of indignities. How could God judge them?

Then there were **homeless people** who had no place to lay their heads. How could God know how they felt?

And there were **poor folks** toilers/workers who had never been able to make ends meet.

There were **sick ones and sufferers** all kinds each with a complaint against God! “How could God judge them?” they thought. How lucky God is to live in heaven where all is goodness and light no tears, no worries, no fears, no hunger, no inhumanities.

So a commission was appointed to draw up the case against God! It was simple. Their conclusion was that before God could judge them, He must first endure what they had endured in their troubled world! So, instead of God judging them, they judged God!!! And the verdict was that they sentenced God to live on earth as a man and be submitted personally to the painful, agonizing, troublesome hard knocks of life.

The particulars were set forth. They shouted them out:

“Let him be born a Jew!
Let him be born poor!
Give him hard work to do!
Let him be rejected by his people!
Let him be betrayed by one of his friends!
Let him preach to people who refuse to listen!
Let him work with people who seek to manipulate him!
Let him be indicted on false charges, tried before a prejudiced jury, and be convicted by a cowardly judge!
Let him be abandoned by his friends!
Let him be tortured!
Let him be lonely!
Let him die at the hands of his enemies!”

As each group announced its sentence on God, cheers of approval went up from the throng. Then, suddenly, there was quiet, a long silence. No one moved. No one uttered a word or made a sound. There was **silence in heaven** and then someone shouted out loud, **GLORY HALLELUJAH! GLORY HALLELUJAH! NO**

PROBLEM, FOR GOD HAS ALREADY SERVED THAT SENTENCE.” That is why he is able to help! That is why Jesus Christ is our **Perfect Priest!**

THIRDLY, HE HAS WON THE VICTORY.

The Archbishop of Paris was a well-known preacher – who drew crowds to hear him preach at the famous Cathedral of Notre Dame. It seems that three rugged and less than Godly young men came to the church building. Two of the young men made a bet with the third young man that he didn't have the courage to go and make a confession to the priest. The third young man smiled at the thought of making some easy money and carried out the wager. By chance, a priest of the Cathedral overheard the conversation and subsequent wager – and took his place in the confessional. After the confession, he assigned penance to the young man of kneeling before the Crucifix. While kneeling at the altar, he was to look up into the face of the Crucified Lord and repeat loudly three times: **“All of this you did for me and I don't care at all.”**

The young man began to act out his penance, but before he finished saying it through the first time, he burst into tears and realized he couldn't affirm that statement. The congregation became quiet, and then the Archbishop said with great emotion and feeling, **“I know that this is a true story because I was that young man.”**

There is indeed victory in Jesus. We need not be a victim. We can become a new creation in Christ.

This is the meaning of the New Testament from St. Matthew to the Revelation of Jesus Christ to John. Christ has opened the gates of paradise through his death, burial, and resurrection. God the Father has set him on the right hand of the throne.

Christ acted and still is functioning as our mediator, intercessor on behalf of those who cry out and confess their need of a Savior. There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. That is why we can bring our every need to Christ today and share the victory with him.

LASTLY, AT THE THRONE WE FIND MERCY AND GRACE TO HELP US IN OUR TIME OF NEED.

My colleague Steve Brown shares a story about a priest who dreamed he was called before God. He expected a big book and a BIG MEAN GOD reading it. Instead, in his dream, he saw a gigantic pair of scales. On one side the angels were piling up the good he had done. He had done a lot of good. After all, he was a priest. But, to his horror, he noticed that the angels simply couldn't keep up with all the demons who brought accusations against him. They didn't have the material. The scales began to tip quickly to the bad side. He cried out, **“Oh Christ, have mercy!”**

At that moment, he heard the sound of three blood-stained nails falling on the good side. They didn't look that heavy. After all, how much could three nails weigh?

But as they dropped onto the scales, the scales tipped back to the good side and no matter what the demons added, they stayed there. Those nails, of course, were the **nails driven through the hands and feet of Jesus Christ.**

That is why Jesus is our One and Only Perfect Priest.

He has been tempted.

He has suffered.

He has won the victory.

We receive his mercy and grace.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz

August 9, 2009 – Preached at both services

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SECRETARY'S NOTE: Pastor Eric will be away on vacation August 16th and August 23. There will also be a guest speaker on August 30th. Pastor Eric will return to the pulpit on September 6, 2009.

ENDNOTES

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message Bible with Its Translator**, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO, 2007, page 1894. The preceding paragraph was also informed by thoughts of Eugene Peterson on page 162 (**Leviticus 8:1-35**) of the same publication.

² Louis H. Evans, Jr., **THE COMMUNICATOR'S COMMENTARY Series, Hebrews**, Word Publishers, Waco, TX, 1985, page 105.