

# The sympathetic priest

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[ 0 : 00 ] So the writer, you remember having introduced his theme in the first chapters of the centrality of Jesus, and in the first chapter of Jesus, and in the first chapter of Jesus, in the first chapter of Jesus.

And these two things are brought together here in this passage in which he talks about this essential role of the priesthood, the high priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And as he says, he says in that warning he's got much to say about this, and he is going to say more about it later on in the letter, but this is where he introduces this vital and very glorious topic. So I'd like to look at this passage under three headings about the priesthood of Jesus, our man in heaven, God's accreditation and the sympathetic priest.

And then again we'd look at the third warning. English really has no word to translate the word that's used in the Greek here.

[ 1 : 17 ] Grow up, lazy bones was the best I could do. Grow up sluggard is more accurate, but that's a rather old-fashioned word. Grow up, couch potato, something like that.

That's what he says. Quite blunt really, as you saw when we read it. So let's look, first of all, at these three things that he tells us about Jesus, our high priest.

So first of all, although his readers almost certainly were of Jewish background, he reminds them anyway what a priest is for and what a priest does.

And he says in chapter 5 verse 1, the role of a priest is to represent the people before God. That's what the Aaronic priesthood did.

And of course what the Levitical priests of the Old Testament would do was enter the Holy of Holies, that most holy place in the temple, once a year in order to make sacrifices and plead for mercy for the people of God.

[ 2 : 25 ] In the Holy of Holies was kept the Ark of the Covenant and above it was flanked by two angels, was what was called the mercy seat, a seat like a throne, although there was nobody visible sitting on the throne.

And once a year the high priest would go into the Holy of Holies to make atonement. But even so, the best he could do of course was to go into that Holy of Holies on earth.

And as the Old Testament writers were very keen to point out, and even Solomon when the temple was dedicated of course, that God doesn't really live in a tent in the desert or even in a stone building in Jerusalem.

And so, at best, this could really only be a symbol of God's rule and presence. So, where does God really live?

Well, of course, in heaven in a sense. And moreover, the priest was always limited by his own weakness and sin. He reminds us of that in chapter 5, verse 2.

[ 3 : 38 ] Now this did have an upside in at least that the priest would be more gentle in his treatment of others because he had shared their weaknesses, but still it made a barrier between himself and God, as is described rather graphically in Zechariah, when the prophet Zechariah, when the high priest Joshua was described as being in filthy clothes.

So that was really the best the Aaronic priests could do once a year to go into the Holy of Holies and plead for mercy for God. But we might ask then, is there a better deal on offer?

Is there a better way, a better person to represent us before God? And that's the person that the writer is presenting to us here. Because he tells us that Jesus has gone through the heavens or ascended into heaven.

He tells us that, chapter 4, verse 14. Now, of course, that does mean that he's no longer with us physically on earth, but more importantly, it means he's now at the center of spiritual power, at the

true throne of God.

Whereas the mercy seat was only a symbol of the throne of God, now the Lord Jesus stands at the true throne of God. As we might say, we have a man in heaven.

[ 5 : 04 ] We have a representative in heaven. And so when we come to the throne of grace in prayer, 4.16, we're not making a cold call anymore. It's not as if we're just knocking on the door and hoping that there's somebody there who's going to open the door and listen to us, but probably doesn't want to.

Instead, we already have a representative there in heaven. We have somebody there who's already spoken for us. And he assures us that God is kindly disposed towards us and that we will get a favorable hearing.

That's why he talks about grace. That's what it means, that God will be favorable towards us. Now, of course, unlike Jesus, we have sinned, but we will be shown mercy on his behalf.

That's what the writer is telling us. And since most of us here, I think, are probably not of Jewish background, there's an important point here that we might well have missed.

In the Old Testament, only the high priest was able to enter the Holy of Holies and approach the mercy seat. And even he was only allowed to do that once a year, having made himself richly clean and pure.

[ 6 : 22 ] If anyone else wanted to appeal to God for mercy, in a sense, he had to do it through the high priest. Of course, that's not to say they didn't pray in the Old Testament, they did, but they weren't actually invited to approach the mercy seat.

Only the high priest could approach the mercy seat. But Hebrews, now in chapter 4, verse 16, the writer invites us to approach the throne of grace.

He invites us to approach the mercy seat. As only a priest could do. In other words, he's actually inviting us, in a sense, to be priests.

We talk of the doctrine that theologians call the priesthood of all believers. But he's saying, now all believers can approach the mercy seat, can approach the throne of grace.

in a sense, in their own right, although, of course, it's really not in their own right, but through the right of the Lord Jesus Christ, who has spoken for them. So this is indeed a better deal than was available under the Old Covenant.

[ 7 : 26 ] Now each of us is invited ourselves to approach the throne of grace through the mediation of the Lord Jesus Christ. Still, one might raise perhaps a couple of objections to this.

Firstly, do we know that God accepts Jesus as our representative? And secondly, do we know that Jesus really has our best interests at heart?

Will he put our case sympathetically? And the writer deals with both these issues. How can we be sure that Jesus' intercession for us will be acceptable to God?

If you're an ambassador, you can't just sort of turn up at a foreign court and say, I represent the government of wherever it is. An ambassador must be both sent by the government at home and he must be accepted as such by the receiving government and the receiving government has a right to say, no, I don't want him as the ambassador, declare him persona non grata, as it were, and ask for a different representative.

An ambassador must be properly accredited. And even then, even if he is properly accredited, even then the receiving government may treat him as a sort of hostile person, accepted only to provide some channel of communication with their superiors who are trusted even less.

[ 9 : 03 ] But that's not the sort of ambassador, that's not the sort of priest that Jesus is. And to assure us on this point, the writer sets out Jesus' CV, as it were, his qualifications and letter of appointment.

And so first of all, he reminds us that he is the Son of God. And so he is competent to operate in the heavenly realm.

It's in chapter 5, verse 5, where of course he's quoting from Psalm 2, verse 7. So he is the Son of God. He has the competence to do the job. He's without sin.

So he can't be excluded on grounds of misconduct. And much more than that, he actually has a letter of appointment from God himself.

God has said to him that he's the one to be the true priest. The priest forever. In verse 6, he's quoting Psalm 110, verse 4.

[10:07] And he's going to say a lot more about Melchizedek later in the letter, so we won't go too much into that. But Melchizedek was not an Aaronic priest. He was a king priest. He was king of Jerusalem, king of Salem, but also a priest of the Most High God.

And so that psalm is, if you like, a prophecy that there would one day be a king priest, a priest from the line of Judah. And it says in Hebrews 5, verse 10, he was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

So far from shouldering his way into heaven, Jesus was invited by the Father. He's favorable towards his own son, and because of that, he's also favorable to us, who his son is representing. So as a son of man and a son of God, Jesus is fully qualified to be our high priest. But can we be sure he will show us in a positive light before the Father?

We might raise that question. After all, he didn't sin himself. The writer's already told us that the Aaronic priests, the Levites, of course, were sinners themselves, and so that made them sympathetic to the sins of the people.

[11:28] But Jesus was not a sinner, and so perhaps he won't be very sympathetic to us. Perhaps Jesus will just tell the Father that really we're just a hopeless case, not worth bothering about.

But no, the writer goes to great lengths, doesn't he, to tell us that he's a sympathetic high priest. And he gives, basically, two reasons for this.

First of all, we're told that Jesus suffered, was tempted, as we are. We're not presented, as it were. Sometimes we say that, you know, this character is Teflon, nothing sticks to him. But Jesus is not presented to us as a sort of Teflon character, one whom temptation just slides off like water off a duck's back.

Verse 15 tells us, 4.15, I think it is, tells us that he was tempted just as we are. And we can look back and think about that. The devil came to tempt him in the wilderness.

[12:41] That's recorded in all of the first three Gospels. It's in Matthew chapter 4, in Mark chapter 1, and in Luke chapter 4. And what actually happened, if we think back to that story, I won't read it all, but Jesus didn't just ignore Satan, if you read it, we found that he fought back.

He was genuinely tempted, but he refused to submit to Satan's approaches. And then in Hebrews chapter 5, verse 7, commentators think this probably refers to that, in particular, to that final spiritual battle at Gethsemane, where Jesus asked for the cup of his coming death, bearing the sins of others, and the Father's face turned away to be taken from him.

And Hebrews 5, verse 7, tells us a remarkable thing. It tells us his prayer was answered. You think, hang on a minute. It wasn't answered. Jesus did, indeed, bear the cup.

And yet, we're told that his prayer was answered, not in taking the cup away, but rather than in giving him grace and strength to carry it through.

So Luke 22, verses 42 and 43, records that answer. It says, Jesus' prayer says, Father, if you're willing, take this cup from me, yet not my will, but yours be done.

[14:16] And then Luke tells us, an angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. It doesn't tell us a great deal, but that was the answer to the prayer that God sent, help from heaven to strengthen him.

And yet, Luke doesn't stop there. He tells us that the struggle and anguish was real. He goes on to say, being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

It was a real struggle that Jesus went through. He was tempted, as we are, and although he did not submit to that temptation, he does understand that so often we do fall.

And that's why he's an advocate for us with the Father. And he is a sympathetic priest because he's seen the suffering that sin causes.

He's seen it firsthand and knows what it's about. And then remarkably, in chapter 5, verse 8, the writer tells us that Jesus learned obedience.

[15:28] That makes you stop and think, doesn't it? What does that actually mean? I mean, surely, as the Son of God, Jesus knew obedience. It wasn't that he was going to, he was ever going to disobey the Father.

But what does it mean when he says he learned obedience? Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered. Well, I think what it means is that he learned the struggle and cost of that obedience.

It wasn't that obedience came easily for him in that sense because it was a struggle. It was a fight. And so he learned the cost of that obedience.

And his sacrifice needed to be completed. That's probably what verse 9 means when it says being made perfect. It probably means being made complete. The sacrifice had to be carried through. He had to drink the cup of the wrath of God on the cross. It had to be done. And in that sense the sacrifice was made complete. In that sense he was made perfect.

[16:39] Jesus went, as we say, through the mill. Chris used that phrase this morning when he was talking about those who were suffering. And it's, I think it means, you know, it's like being ground between two stones to go through the mill.

And because of that he's sympathetic to our weaknesses. And we're told if we share in his death we will also share in his life.

Verse 9. And if we submit to him we're told if we cry out to him in our struggle as Jesus cried and submitted to the Father in verse 7 then he is indeed our advocate with the Father.

And so the writer says to us he's a high priest with a more convincing case to make than any dissent of Aaron. He is there at the throne of grace at the very side of God and is pleading for his people even now.

Even now as we sit down here feeling a bit damp and a bit tired and a bit perhaps discouraged yet Jesus is standing at the throne of God and saying you haven't forgotten them have you Lord?

[17:56] have you Father? They're my people. So have you got your head around that? Well oh good Julia says that's good because the writer obviously thought that maybe maybe his readers wouldn't because he goes on with this rather fearsome warning we now get this third warning and let's let's look at that a little bit.

if you're a newborn baby then milk is the ideal food nothing better to feed a baby in the first weeks of its life but of course to grow up for strong and healthy growth the baby must progress to solid food can't live on milk all its life and yet the writer says to his readers that they refuse to grow up that's what he says in chapter 5 verse 12 he says we've got much to tell you but you just you're not up for it you're not up to it and you're not up to it because you've refused to grow up now we need to watch this sometimes Christians sort of say things that you know just tell me the simple gospel I don't understand all that theology stuff and even worse sometimes you actually see this presented as a sort of commendable spiritual attitude as if all this head knowledge is somehow unspiritual but the writer here is having none of that he says that attitude is to condemn oneself to being to permanent babyhood verse 13 with all the vulnerability that this implies baby is helpless human babies are probably the most helpless creatures on this earth all they can can't do much except just cling on even that not very strongly a baby is helpless but you need they need to grow up and become strong you won't be able to progress in righteousness the writer tells us because you haven't studied it you know chapter 5 verse 2 one of the weaknesses we need sympathy for is ignorance but that's not to say that's a desirable state and in fact neither is ignorance to be condoned and the writer is quite blunt about it and that word translated slow to learn in a rather bland

NIV translation is quite a strong word the Greek word is nothos which means slow or sluggish or dull or languid or lazy he says you haven't progressed because you're too lazy you haven't made the effort you've become flabby you've become a couch potato now I hope that's not true of any of us but we need at least to listen to the warning and make sure that's the case it's not that they lack ability they just lack application they just can't be bothered to wrestle with these deep truths well what's the remedy for flabbiness we all know that don't we remedy for flabbiness is a good diet and lots of exercise and that's exactly what the writer proposes here solid food and a trip to the spiritual gym verse 14 talks about training and the word is gymnaso the word

Greek word from which we get our English word gymnasium training exercise get a regular workout in the word of God that's what he's telling us to do and then he says you'll be able to tell right from wrong good from evil you may think this is a bit strange actually you may say well hang on surely it's not very difficult is it to tell good from evil righteousness from unrighteousness but the writer doesn't seem to think that seems to think you've got to work at it and do we really need a spiritual fitness regime well I thought I'd just remind you of one or two other passages of scripture which seem to say much the same thing and so in a well known verse in Romans 12 verse 2 Paul says the following do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is his good pleasing

and perfect will and remember he's writing here to

Christians he's not when he says transformed he's not talking about conversion he's talking about well the same thing a spiritual workout get your mind trained trained up so that you're fit to approve and test what God's will is or even these words of Jesus himself and this is Mark 7 and this is a debate on why Jesus' disciples don't keep the laws the various laws in the same sense that the Pharisees did in particular the food laws and Jesus called the crowd to him and said listen to me everyone and understand this notice understand nothing outside a man can make him unclean by going into him rather it is what comes out of a man that makes him unclean after he had left the crowd and entered the house his disciples asked him about this parable what did

[ 24 : 13 ] Jesus reply are you so dull he asked don't you see that nothing that enters a man from outside can make him unclean well again the NIV is a bit bland there it just translates that word dull but actually it's a different even stronger Greek word than the writer to the Hebrews used the word here is asonatos the Greek word from which we get our word asinine the meaning complete nonsense the most polite translation you could make of that word really is lacking in understanding the more literal translation is unintelligent or without understanding or just plain stupid Jesus is saying you know do you not understand do you not put your mind to it to understand what really matters what in this case what enters a man from outside cannot make him unclean but what comes from inside

Jesus reminds them they need to work at it they need to think and have their mind transformed by the word of God and by studying and by thinking about meditating on the Lord Jesus Christ and then they'll be fit to run the race and to distinguish between righteousness and unrighteousness and this isn't I think should remind ourselves this isn't just a sort of abstract thing that seems like a good idea but doesn't have much to do with the real world we live in a complex world don't we sometimes if we're honest it isn't at all easy to distinguish good from evil just see the mess that the world gets in with its political correctness and how you know you push button there and it pops out somewhere else it just doesn't work you can't it's very difficult to distinguish good from evil sometimes and I have to say how much damage has been done in the past by Christians who opened their mouth before they engaged their brain it's happened you have to admit it has happened how much prejudice masquerades as spirituality I've just mentioned this prejudice against teaching the word of God even among Christians nowadays people say it's more spiritual to do something else but no the most spiritual thing to do is to study God's word and to be changed by it Francis Schaeffer called super spirituality but super spirituality is not super and it's not spiritual either how much prejudice masquerades as spirituality and on the other hand how much world in this passes as tolerance how much do we accept that we shouldn't and that we should be speaking up against I believe I'm right that in French a gymnasium is a school rather than a place to exercise people may know more about France than I do but I heard schools described in France as gymnasiums anyway grammar school type places place to exercise the mind so we belong to a gym and we try and go along and get some exercise once or twice a week but you need to come to your spiritual gym as well and that's what you've done this evening and hopefully on Wednesday as well come along to the spiritual gym exercise that you need but of course you can do it at home as well you don't have to do it here get the spiritual exercise in God's word that you need to do physical flabbiness as we know can lead to a premature exit from this earth can make you ill and give you all sorts of nasty diseases and cause you an early death that's physical flabbiness even Paul says that physical exercises are of some use but spiritual exercises are much more use because spiritual flabbiness can mean a failure to enter heaven at all and so we need to exercise ourselves in the word of

God seriously to take what it says seriously and to make an effort to understand what it says to get to grips with it not just when it says Jesus is our great high priest to think yeah that sounds really spiritual I like that to think what he actually means what that actually means what it means for us what it means for God what it meant for Jesus himself and then we'll be able to understand right from wrong and to understand what is righteousness from unrighteousness so we need to think about these things work on them but let's not stop there with that I say really quite firm warning should we say firm perhaps he's even understating it that the writer gives us at the end he says well you've got to get to grips with this stuff but let's remind ourselves again of that great doctrine that Jesus does is our great high priest and he is sympathetic to our weaknesses and does plead with us before the very throne of grace so we'll sing another hymn before we close rather before

[ 30 : 06 ] Chris comes and leads us in prayer to