

Our Great High Priest

Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9 (NIV84)

¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

⁷ During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸ Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered ⁹ and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him

Worship in the Old Testament was different from how we worship today. Almost everything in Old Testament worship was regulated by commands from God, but in the New Testament era God has given us much more freedom in how we worship. The location of worship was different. In the Old Testament it was an exclusive place like the Tabernacle - church via a tent - and then later on in the Temple, a building of great beauty. In the New Testament we have churches, home churches, church buildings. Anywhere two or three gather together in the name of Christ, that is church. The person who leads worship was different. Old Testament worship was led by priests. In the days following Jesus' ascension, there are apostles, evangelists, pastors, elders leading worship instead of priests.

Then there was the high priest. The high priest of the Old Testament worship life represented the people before God. This was often done not only through prayers but also through sacrifices. They would offer sacrifices on behalf of the people in the way that God had instructed them and thus made atonement for their sins.

But there was a problem with the Old Testament priests. They offered prayers and sacrifices on behalf of the people to reconcile them to God, but they themselves were sinners. They were tempted like everyone else was, and they too failed in resisting. They fell for temptations. Because of this fact, they were sinners and they, just like everyone else, died.

What has taken the place of the outmoded high priests of the Old Testament? A high priest has come who is unlike any high priest who has ever come before. We have a high priest who is the only one worthy of the title great high priest, one who eliminated the need for another sinful high priest who would fall for temptations and die like all those who had come before him. We have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens: Jesus, the Son of God. Even though he is the Son of God, he also is just like one of us. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are." (verse 15) But Jesus handled these temptations differently than we would.

Last night on Maundy Thursday evening, our Gospel reading ended with Jesus and his disciples going to the Mount of Olives, the Garden of Gethsemane. It was there, before Judas came back with the mob of people looking to arrest Jesus, that Jesus "offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death." (verse 7) Up to this point, we have heard Jesus say that the Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. Earlier in the week as he acknowledged that he would glorify the Father in the way that he would die, by being lifted up on a cross, Jesus said, "Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour." (John 12:27) Jesus rode in on the donkey on Palm Sunday knowing that he was riding to his own death. He had decided to do this, and we had not heard him up to this point ask God to do what he then asked while in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death, he prayed with his face to the ground, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." (Matthew 26:39) He offered up prayers and petitions three times not to have to go through what he was about to suffer over the next day, but "It was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer." (Isaiah 53:10) God the Father answered Jesus' prayer by strengthening him to go forward with the prophesied suffering. Jesus was obedient to the Father's will, humbling himself to be obedient to death – even death on a cross.

As the events unfolded, Jesus was tempted to deliver himself from the suffering he was enduring. The soldiers hit Jesus, spit on his face, feigned worship of him, "O hail, the King of the Jews!" Jesus could have turned them to ash. He could have wiped them out with one word, one thought, called down legions of angels to defend him and free him. But no. He did not open his mouth. Silent as

a sheep before his shearers is silent, he allowed the mocking and the ridicule to continue without a word back, without putting them in their place, without showing them with his power as God who they were truly insulting.

They hit him, put the crown of thorns on his head and beat the thorns into his skull. They scourged him, ripping open his flesh. They nailed his hands and feet to the cross. His blood is shed as the ultimate sacrifice a high priest could offer – himself. Yet, at any time, Jesus could have turned the pain off. He didn't have to feel the suffering. But in obedience to the Lord's will, he would not even allow the wine mixed with myrrh, something to dull the pain, be administered to him. He felt it all, just as we would have, when he could have simply turned it off.

They challenged his divinity, his godhood. "If you really are the Son of God, come down from the cross. Prove it to us. If you come down right now, then we will see that you truly are the Christ. We'll believe you if you come down." Jesus could have done it. He could have come down from the cross right then and there without the help of anyone and maybe they would actually believe in him. But Jesus resisted and remained obedient to the Father's will. He remained on the cross. When Jesus didn't come down, they threw it in his face. "He saved others but he can't save himself. If he really is the Son of God, let God rescue him now if he wants him." He stayed on the cross with our iniquity on his shoulders, sacrificing himself for us.

If it had been any of us going through all that, how long would it taken before we said enough is enough? If we had the power like Jesus did to make all that suffering stop, all the pain go away, to shut the mouth of the naysayers in an instant, wouldn't we have taken it?

We don't like the idea of bearing crosses, to suffer for doing the right thing, to suffer for obeying God. We just want the salvation. Don't show me the suffering. Don't tell me about the suffering. Don't tell me that I have to suffer to obey God, to follow him. We want the easier route, the less painful route. And so we fall to the temptations of disobeying God instead of suffering in obedience to him. Because of this, I deserve the cross. I deserve to suffer as Jesus suffered. That should have been me!

This is why we need a high priest who makes all other high priests obsolete, one who could resist every temptation for us, one who would be obedient to the Father's will even when it meant suffering for himself and then sacrificing himself. We are weak. We fall to temptations, just like all those high priests of the Old Testament.

Where we failed, where the Old Testament high priests failed, Christ our great high priest succeeded. He cried out in triumph, "It is finished!" His sacrifice was completed. He "has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin." (verse 15) He resisted temptation for us. He completed those trials. He gave himself up in sacrifice to satisfy God's justice. In this way "he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him." (verse 9) He saved us!

Christ as our great high priest resisted every temptation on our behalf, but we still have many temptations to come in our lives. When those times come, especially when we are tempted to disobey God when we think we will suffer for obeying him, remember Jesus our great high priest. He can and wants to help us resist. Because he resisted temptation for us and became our source of eternal salvation by his sacrifice, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." (verse 16)

When you are tempted, pray to God to help you. Ask him to be your strength as someone who resisted every temptation. When we do this, we have every confidence that we will receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need because Jesus is our great high priest, because he learned obedience through his suffering. Approach God's throne in prayer, now a throne of grace. He will help you and me resist every temptation and hold firmly to the faith we profess because Jesus is our great high priest. Amen.