

06. Hebrews 4:15 - 5:10



Hebrews 2:17-18

Part Two B

Part Two A

so that he might be a **compassionate and trustworthy high priest** in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Part Two

A. A trustworthy high priest

1. Like Moses, Jesus reveals God's word 3:1-6
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B. A compassionate high priest

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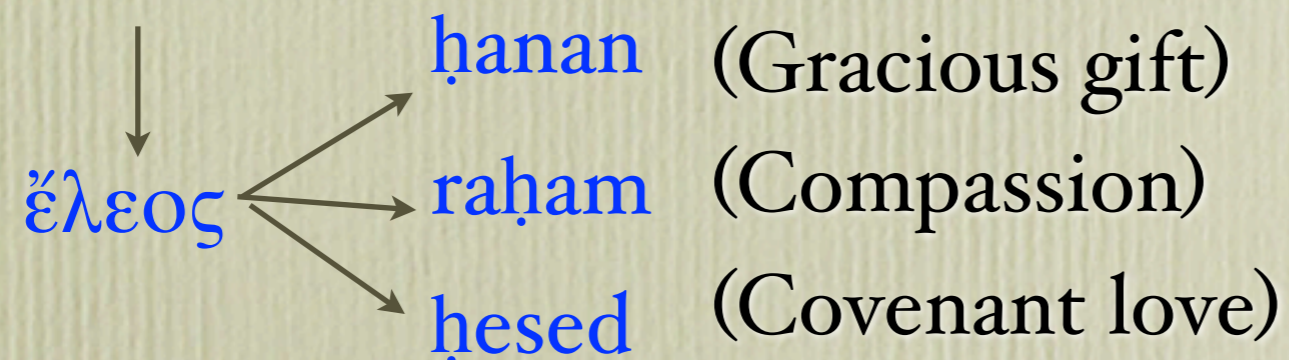
Our author began by portraying Jesus as being in intimate communion with God as the Son, and in intimate communion with us as our brother. He is thus the perfect mediator, bringing to fulfilment the ministry of the Jewish high priest. In the section just concluded, he focused on Christ as a faithful high priest. We can have complete confidence that his word is indeed the 'word of God'.

Now he focuses on his mercy (compassion).

B. A merciful (ἐλεήμων) high priest

1. An appeal 4:15-16

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace [high priest] with boldness, so that we may receive mercy (ἔλεος) and find grace to help in time of need.



Mercy (ἔλεος) speaks of God's gracious care and all the ways in which God looks after us. It speaks of God's tenderness, and there are innumerable texts in which it speaks of God's faithfulness to the commitment of love which he has made to us.

Like Father, like Son. The mercy which is characteristic of God fills the heart of his Son Jesus. We can 'approach the throne of grace with boldness', knowing that we will 'receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need', because the one who is 'seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high' (1:3) is our brother, Jesus.

The traditional portraits of Jesus found in the Gospel records reveal, again and again, his capacity for compassion. Sometimes our attention is explicitly drawn to it, as in his encounter with the leper (Mark 1:40-45), in his response to the needy crowd (Mark 6:34), and in his dealings with the widow of Nain (Luke 7:15). He draws attention to this quality of love in his parables of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33) and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:20).

We watch Jesus learning to listen. It was this that trained his heart in compassion

‘That evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were sick and those possessed by demons. The whole town came crowding round the door, and he cured many who were suffering from diseases of one kind or another; he also cast out many demons ... In the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there. Simon and his companions set out in search of him, and when they found him they said, ‘Everyone is looking for you’. He answered, ‘Let us go elsewhere, because that is why I came’. And he went all through Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons’ (Mark 1:32-39).

According to Jewish law, understood as expressing God's will, a leper must be declared unclean by the priest: 'He must wear his clothing torn and his hair disordered; he must shield his upper lip and cry, 'Unclean! Unclean!' ... He must live apart: he must live outside the camp' (Leviticus 13:44-46). Let us watch what this leper does, and watch Jesus' response.

'A leper came to him and pleaded on his knees: 'If you want to' he said 'you can cure me'. Moved with compassion for him, Jesus reached out and embraced him. 'Of course I want to!' he said. 'Be cured!' And the leprosy left him at once and he was cured ... The man went away, but started talking about it freely and telling the story everywhere, so that Jesus could no longer go openly into any town, but had to wait outside in places where nobody lived. Even so people from all around would come to him' (Mark 1:40-45).

Those who knew Jesus came to see in him the incarnation of God, the perfect expression in human nature of God's own Self-giving Word. Influenced by this central belief of the Christian community, it is difficult for us to avoid thinking that this truth in some way changed his humanity, making him someone very unlike us in his way of thinking, feeling and responding. We are in danger of imagining Jesus as somehow half-God and half-man. Unwittingly we are in danger of being caught up in the oldest heresy in the Church, being so dazzled by his divinity that we think of him as really God and as only appearing to be man. It is as though he is acting a part just to give us good example, without being really human himself. To think in this way is to deny the reality of the Incarnation.

The author of Hebrews is quite straightforward in stating the real humanness of Jesus. The one who is faithful, and whose word, therefore, can be trusted as he continues to speak to us from the throne of glory is one who knows our human condition from personal experience.

‘He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect’ (Hebrews 2:17).

What sets Jesus apart – and it is an extraordinary and wonderful truth – is that while being human he did not sin. He was tested, as we are. He had to struggle, as we do. He succeeded in the struggle because he heroically and steadfastly clung to ‘every word that comes from the mouth of God’ (Matthew 4:4). He did not sin, not because his humanity was of a different kind to ours, but because he refused to act from anything less than his humanity – something that we, sadly, find ourselves doing under the stresses of life.

Jesus remained loving, even when circumstances tempted him to act otherwise. He remained prayerful, believing, gentle and truthful. While giving expression in his life to God's being and to God's love and fidelity, he showed us how it is possible to respond to God in a fully human way, despite pressures to the contrary. He can therefore 'sympathise with our weaknesses', for he experienced them. However he showed that, with faith, hope and love, we do not have to act out of them. It is possible to be human and not sin.

Our author will return to the subject of Jesus' sinlessness (see 7:26; 9:14 and 10:5-10). It is asserted also in other New Testament writings:

'For our sake God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Corinthians 5:21).

'In him there is no falsehood' (John 7:18).

'Which of you convicts me of sin?' (John 8:46).

'You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin' (1 John 3:5).

'You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot (1 Peter 1:18-19).

'He committed no sin; no guilt was found on his lips' (1 Peter 2:22).

Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God' (1 Peter 3:18).

Sin has the effect of desensitising us. Being sinless, Jesus' heart remained sensitive to the horror of sin. Knowing our human condition from personal experience, his heart goes out to us who have been tested and have failed. He knows the price that sin demands of us. He knows that repentance will not be easy for us. As our mediator he continues to give himself to us in love to encourage us to **'approach the throne of grace with boldness'** seeking the mercy which we need.

Hebrews 4:16

Let us therefore approach the throne of grace [high priest] with boldness, so that we may receive mercy (ἔλεος) and find grace to help in time of need.

In the Jewish cult only the high priest could approach the ‘throne of grace’, and that only once a year. Now, thanks to Jesus, the way is open for us all. We will ‘receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need’.

Since it is a common experience for us to approach and not to experience receiving the help we need, a comment on the timing of grace may be in order, though it goes beyond the text of Hebrews. It is a fact that the timing is not always according to our desires.

In the first place we do not always have the wisdom to know what is best for us. Our prayer like that of Jesus himself should recognise this as we pray with him: 'Not my will but your's be done' (Mark 32:36).

In the second place we are not always ready for or truly open to grace. We pray, but are not yet ready to welcome God's grace which is being offered us whether we pray or not. The price of truth is sometimes beyond what we are willing to pay. The purpose of prayer is to face us towards God, to open us to God's word and to the energy of God's creative Spirit. But God's grace will be fully effective in our lives only to the extent that we are ready to respond to God's word with all our hearts, all our minds, all our souls and all our strength. The measure of God's grace is the measure of our openness to it. The timing of God's response is a matter of our genuineness and openness to grace. Perhaps this explains the present tense used by our author: 'Let us keep on approaching the throne of grace'. If we persevere in prayer we may become ready for God's response.

2. Like Aaron, Jesus offers a sacrifice 5:1-10

Hebrews 5:1

Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

Our author has shown that as a mediator of God's word to us, Jesus is superior to Moses (2:3-6). He now wishes to demonstrate that as a mediator who enables us to approach the throne of grace Jesus is superior to Aaron.

He begins by describing the sacrificial aspect of the ministry of a Levitical priest. This is not intended as a complete definition of a priest's role, as we have already been reflecting on his function of being a mediator of the word. The offering of sacrifice is a response to that word, and so necessarily secondary and complementary.

Hebrews 5:2-3

He is able to deal gently with those erring through ignorance, since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people.

Our author wants to demonstrate the underlying continuity of the priesthood of Christ with that of Aaron, while indicating a new perspective. For this reason he stays with the fundamentals. The details require change. He will deal with these later. His stress is on the fact that the high priest shares the human condition of those whom he represents before God. He has just shown how this is true of Jesus. In the case of the Levitical priest – and in this Jesus is different (see 4:15) – it included sharing our sin.

Hebrews 5:4

One does not presume to take this honour, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

He then speaks of the ‘honour’ that goes with the priesthood (see 2:9). Before we hear what he has to say on this subject we might note the following:

‘He raised up **Aaron**, a holy man like Moses, his brother, of the tribe of Levi. He made an everlasting covenant with him, and gave him the priesthood of the people. He adorned him with impressive vestments, he dressed him in a robe of glory’ (Sirach 45:7-8).

‘How splendid **Simon** the high priest was with the people thronging around him when he emerged from the curtained shrine (on the day of Yom Kippur), like the morning star among the clouds, like the moon at the full ... when he went up to the holy altar, and filled the sanctuary precincts with his grandeur’ (Sirach 50:5-6, 11-12).

Jesus did not seek honour

‘He poured himself out taking the form of a slave.
Being born in the likeness of men,
and being found in human appearance,
He humbled himself and became obedient unto death,
even death on a cross.

Therefore God has highly exalted him,
and bestowed on him the name which is above every name,
that at Jesus’ name every knee should bend...
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father’ (Philippians 2:6-11).

Our author returns to Psalm 2 which celebrates the investiture of the king (see 1:5), and to Psalm 110 which speaks of the special priesthood of the royal Messiah (see 1:13).

Hebrews 5:5-6

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you' (Psalm 2:7);

as he says also in another place, 'You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek' (Psalm 110:4).

He goes on to speak of how it is that our high priest, Jesus, is capable of experiencing mercy towards us, his brothers and sisters

Hebrews 5:7-8

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.

Agony (Mark 14:32-42). Faced with an unjust and apparently meaningless death, Jesus penetrated to the deepest level of identification with our human condition. In his prayer, he remained obedient in faith, and his obedience opened up his situation to the action of divine grace. From a cry of agony, he rose to a higher trust that if he remained true to his mission of love, God his Father would not abandon him.



‘Abba (Father)! Everything is possible for you. Take this cup away from me. Let it be as you, not I, would have it’ (Mark 14:36).

Hebrews 5:8

Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.

In the Hebrew Bible יָשָׁע means to obey. It also means to listen.

The Greek for ‘to obey’ is ὕπακούω which is derived from ακούω (to listen), with the prefix ὑπο (‘under’), indicating a listening from a position of submission.

The Latin for ‘obeying’ is ob-audiens, from which our English word ‘obedience’ is derived. Audiens means listening and ob indicates that the listening is from close contact and not from a distance. We are obedient when we are listening right up close.

To obey God is to be close to God and to be listening for the slightest indication of God’s will with the desire and intention of doing what God inspires us to do with all our heart and with joy, knowing that God’s will is the most beautiful and liberating thing we can do.

Jesus constantly insists on the central importance in his life and in ours of wanting only what God wants and of being committed in all things to doing God's will. In essence he is calling us to be attentive to the movements of God in our hearts and in our world. The reason for this is obvious. God is love and God is creating us moment by moment in love and for love. To be guided by God's inspiration is to be guided along the path of holiness. To resist God's inspiration is to resist the gravity of grace drawing us into divine communion.

Let us listen to Jesus as he resists the tempter: 'It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Matthew 4:4).

Again and again Jesus reveals the importance of obedience: 'I do nothing on my own ... And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him' (John 8:28-29).

Jesus threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want ... My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done' (Matthew 26:39 and 42).

Jesus asks the same of his disciples: 'Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven' (Matthew 7:21).

Pointing to his disciples, Jesus said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother' (Matthew 12:49-50).

A problem could arise for us in the light of Jesus being sinless. We might wonder how he could understand what it is like for us who, because we have sinned, have lost our innocence and suffer from the confusions, hurts, temptations and habits that result from sin. This is surely a valid question, for there are things that we can learn only through experience. The fact that Jesus was sinless does say a lot about what he did not experience

However, it seems true that in many and important ways sin dulls rather than sharpens our perceptions. Does a person who is always giving way to self-interest really understand selfishness? Does a person who frequently acts violently really have a feeling for the true nature of violence? Does a proud person have a deep appreciation of the reality of pride.

Is it not true that in some ways it is only the very gentle person who is sensitised to the horror of violence; it is only the genuinely humble person who sees pride for what it is. In the same way it is the saint who knows the awful reality of sin. Jesus' sinlessness meant that his sensitivity to evil was never dulled. His beautiful and faithful humanity meant that he never lost his sensitivity to man's inhumanity to man. Precisely because sin had never dulled his conscience, Jesus did not know the experience of one who sins.

But this does not mean that he had less compassion. The contrary is true. He saw sin, and its effects on people, with lucid clarity and he responded to evil with the response that is possible only to a mature person who has retained the innocence of childhood, and so has not learnt to rationalise, to pretend, to cover up, to run away, to protect himself from the awful clarity that belongs only to the innocent.

Hebrews 5:9-10

having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

As is his custom, our author concludes this part of his treatment by preparing his audience for what is to follow. He has just examined the two connections which a mediator must be able to make: the connection with God which ensures that his word is truly the word of God; and the connection with us that ensures that the word really connects with our experience. As to the first, our high priest is superior to Moses. As to the second, he is superior to Aaron. He is about to move on to examine the three essential characteristics of priesthood to show how in each of these the priesthood of Christ surpasses that of the Levitical priesthood.

Hebrews 5:9

having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him

He tells us that Christ has been made perfect (τελειωω - used for the consecration of a priest). He is preparing us for the centrepiece of the following section in which he will demonstrate that Jesus, unlike the priests of the Old Covenant, has been made perfect (reached fulfilment) in the sanctuary of heaven.

He goes on to say that Christ has become 'the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him'. He will go on to demonstrate that the mediation from mankind to God is complete in Jesus who draws us into the eternal salvation of complete communion with God.

Hebrews 5:10

having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

He introduces the theme that he will develop first as he demonstrates that the mediation from God to mankind which is effected by Jesus is more secure than that of the levitical priests, and is eternal, not being bound by the vicissitudes of time.