

# MERCY IN NEED; STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS

*SERIES: THE SUPREMACY OF THE SON*

by Steve Zeisler

In our study of the book of Hebrews we come this morning to the ministry of Jesus as high priest. This ministry is probably the central concern of all of the comparisons made by the author of Hebrews regarding the supremacy of the ministry of Jesus. But, as we have seen, various digressions kept cropping up through the opening chapters of the book. So today we will begin an exposition of what the ministry of Jesus as high priest means to Christians (although we will have to deal with another digression next week).

The tendency of Hebrews to move back and forth between warning and encouragement could be compared with learning about life from the tough and demanding football coach Vince Lombardi on the one hand, and television's gentle Mr. Rogers on the other. At times, Hebrews sounds like that tough football coach, insisting that we take seriously our shortcomings and not allow ourselves to continue in them, that we demand more of ourselves. But this letter also sets out the magnificent ministry of the Lord to the weak and the hurting, giving one witness after another of his commitment to us.

We might even compare these different approaches with how parents and grandparents respond to news of a child's irresponsibility. For instance, if one of my children brings home bad grades from school on two or three consecutive days, I feel that a heart-to-heart talk is in order. You know, the kind of talk that begins with something like, "Do you realize what is becoming of you?" But I have found that, given the same circumstances, grandparents will sometimes say, "It's all right. You should have seen your father when he was your age." Every weakness and failure in the Christian life will not necessarily lead to disaster. God has a way of bringing a touch of hope when we find ourselves drifting. His mercy and grace are greater than our ability to run away from them.

But both of these messages need to be heard in every Christian heart. Sin is deceitful. If we allow ourselves to listen to its message, we can become hardened. That is one of the warnings we have already heard in this book. Hebrews 4:1 speaks in chilling terms: "Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it." We should fear lest this hardening process (Hebrews 3:13) will keep us from entering the rest of God and, finally, from life itself. But on the other hand, just a few verses later (Hebrews 4:16) we read, "Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need." We should be utterly confident that God wants to help us with our weaknesses. Jesus is a sympathetic high priest who cares for us.

Let us consider for a moment the difference between hard-heartedness and weakness. Hard-heartedness results in Christian lives that become routine rather than vital. Hardened hearts are more likely to respond to fads and hype rather than the deep things of God. Those whose best memories of their faith stem from years ago, and who do not have a recent memorable experience of the presence of God, are the very people who need to hear the warnings of the book of Hebrews—indeed the warnings of all of Scripture. We can make choices that turn into habits, which eventually turn into character traits that will then lead to destruction.

But weakness is different than hard-heartedness. People don't like to be considered weak. Sometimes, however, they find themselves deceived, unable to resist. They experience real sorrow and repentance before God for their actions, and are willing to change. When we are overcome by weakness, that can be a channel through which God produces growth and wisdom in our lives. The Scriptures recognize very clearly that believers are weak at times, that they are ignorant and foolish and capable of doing things they wish with all their hearts they had not done.

Thus we have on the one hand the stern warnings of Scripture against hard-heartedness, demands that we be stronger and further along than we often settle for. Then, on the other hand, we have the tenderness of Scripture, the commitment to understanding in the face of weakness. It is this second point, the message of God's understanding of our ignorance and our inability, that we are going to focus on this morning. We will look at the ministry of the great high priest to those in need. Heb:4:14:

**Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16)**

We will return to this section later because two calls to respond (and it is best to end a message with a call for response) are given in these verses: first, "let us hold fast our confession," and, secondly, "let us draw near the throne of grace."

But let us first consider the nature of the ministry of a priest, which follows in Hebrews 5. Here we will find the answer to the question, does Jesus fill the qualifications required of a high priest? Hebrews 5:1-10:

**For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins; he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness; and because of it he is obligated to offer sacrifices for sins, as for the people, so also for himself. And no one takes the honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God, even as Aaron was. So also Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest, but He who said to Him,**

**"YOU ARE MY SON,**

**TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU";**

**just as He says also in another passage,**

**"YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER**

**ACCORDING TO THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK."**

**In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety. Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation, being designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.**

Here we see that in order for a priest to be effective he must be appointed from among men; and, further, he must be appointed by God. No one can be an effective intermediary between God and man merely by being appointed through the instrumentation of human beings. The only person, man or woman, who can qualify to help others as a priest must be chosen by God. No amount of education or degrees or human authority can replace God's appointment. In this Jesus is well qualified because God appointed him; he was the chosen one of his Father.

The other qualification required of a priest is that he be sympathetic with human weakness. A priest must understand hurt, foolishness and inadequacy. He must be able to enter into human experience in order to be helpful with regard to the things pertaining to God. He must understand enough of God's heart and God's purposes to bring the wisdom and the love of God to bear on a given situation, but he must also understand the human condition so that he can offer help to hurting and needy people.

What mental image does the word "priest" raise in your mind? For most of us raised in the West, our most familiar picture is of a Catholic priest. Priests, we feel, are different than other people. Catholic priests, for instance, are forbidden to marry. They remain aloof, in a sense, from certain experiences that are common to most people. Even their clothing is different. We could say, in this sense, that what makes a priest a priest is that he is different from the ordinary run of life. But as far as God is concerned, Old Testament priests were qualified precisely because they were just like other folk.

When I think of one who qualifies as a priest, one to whom I would go to be ministered to in the way a priest is meant to minister, Ray Stedman quickly comes to mind. He understands the things that pertain to God. He is a very wise Christian servant who has a strong fix on the heart of God. But he also knows what it is like to raise a family. He knows what it is like to have to learn how to preach. He is a very sympathetic man who has always treated younger Christian pastors with tremendous sympathy. He is always ready to say, "I know what you are going through. Let me help you. God is able to overcome what is distressing you at the moment." That is the work of a priest. He is one who understands your feelings and can bring a touch of the Word of God into your life.

G. K. Chesterton wrote a series of mystery stories about a man called Father Brown. This character differed from Sherlock Holmes and other well-known detective figures in that his primary skill was an ability to understand human weakness and human fears. He could penetrate criminal minds because he knew that, given certain circumstances, criminals react in certain ways. Father Brown was a master of putting himself in the shoes of others and feeling the pressures they felt, thus he was able to figure out who committed the crimes.

A priest is one who understands what it means to be a failed human. He knows what it is like to be in need, and in those circumstances he can offer truth from God.

Hebrews 5:2 tells us that a priest must be able to "deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness." Have you ever felt "ignorant and misguided," trying to accomplish something but discovering that you are not doing it right? You stumble all over yourself; you act foolishly and ignorantly. Have you ever tried to drive a car in England, for instance? What an awkward sensation that can be! Although the car you are driving looks the same as an American car from the outside, everything is backward on the inside. Driving on the "wrong" side of the street, you must concentrate so as to not do what your instincts tell you to do. Everything is out of sync. That can often be true in a spiritual sense as well. We would like to do the right thing but we don't know how to do it. We need the ministry of a priest, an intermediary between God and man, to help the misguided.

Certain young Christians, for instance, want so much to do what is right yet they have no sense at all of how God would have them do it. Because of this they set about doing foolish things to try and earn God's favor. They say to themselves, "If I'm extra good this week, my prayers will be heard." They think God keeps a tally-sheet in heaven where good deeds are set against bad deeds. After all, they reason that is the way the world works. Here is where the ministry of a priest is needed in helping misguided, ignorant and weak people.

Further, in Hebrews 5:3 we learn that a priest must be able to help with the problem of sins, not just ignorance foolishness and weakness, but sins. This is not speaking of sin, of when we first came to God and our sin nature was dealt with. That happens only once. But there is the ongoing problem of sins, even for Christians. And it is the ministry of a priest, the intermediary between God and man, that helps us deal with our accumulation of sins. Remember the occasion when Jesus washed his disciples feet. John 13:5:

Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. So He came to Simon Peter. He said to Him, "Lord, do You wash my feet?" Jesus answered and said to him, "What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter." Peter said to Him, ""Never shall You wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, then wash not only my feet, but also my hands and my head." Jesus said to him, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean..." (John 13:5-10a)

Once you have bathed, once you have been placed into Christ and cleansed by his sacrifice you do not need to be bathed again. You have been cleansed and you remain clean, except for your feet. We must continue to make our way through this life. We still remain weak and foolish, and we fail. Even though we believe, we find accumulating around our feet the discomfort of sins committed. We need some way of having them cleansed and forgiven so that they do not accumulate and become worse. This is where the ministry of Christ comes in. Every day his forgiveness puts Christians right again and deals with the stupidity, the rebellion and the failure of the day. What a great ministry of our high priest! He deals with sins and cleanses us so that day after day we awake renewed, confident that what happened yesterday has been forgiven.

A priest must be able to help the ignorant, the misguided, the foolish, the weak sinner. He must understand what it is like to be human.

The question then is, how can Jesus qualify as a priest? Didn't he have advantages that placed him above the human condition? The first qualification of a priest, as we have seen, is that he must be appointed by God. Clearly, Jesus was appointed by God. But how can he be sympathetic with human failure? How can he know what it is like? The author of Hebrews here does an absolutely remarkable thing. He focuses on the occasion when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, mere hours before his execution. There, Jesus began the process of becoming sin for our sakes (2 Corinthians 5:21)—Jesus Christ became sin. He took upon himself all the accumulation of human rebellion against God. Increasingly, his heavenly Father rejected what he was becoming, until Jesus at last cried out desperately on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He was forsaken because his Father properly and righteously rejected what he had become, which was sin.

That sense of rejection and defilement, Hebrews would seem to suggest, began in the garden, hours before the cross. Hebrews 5:7 says, "In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and he was heard because of His piety." Jesus prayed, as great drops of blood fell from his forehead, "Lord, that this cup might pass from me." That is the prayer that is in focus here. Jesus was saying, "I don't want to die." But Hebrews 5:8 says, "He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. " In the garden, apparently, he wanted with all his heart to disobey God. Perhaps for the first time in his human existence he did not readily agree with the will of God. He wanted no part of it. He prayed, "Let this cup pass from me. I don't want this assignment." That is when he learned obedience through suffering. He obeyed although he did not want to, and learned obedience in the process.

The result, it says, was that he became perfect: "...and having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation." Again, the suggestion there is a little difficult at first reading. How could Jesus "become perfect" when he was already perfect? In the choice he made to willingly go to the cross, having become human defilement before God, he became a perfect sacrifice to us. He had to make a choice to do so, and it was that choice that made him a perfect and effective sin bearer for us. In that time of knowing that God had rejected him, of fearing what he had to go through, of asking his friends and others to help him, of calling out to his Father to spare him, in that time he entered into our human experience.

We know that God rejects sin. We know what it is like to deserve condemnation. We know we must obey even when it is painful to do so. Jesus came to understand all of those human experiences. And not because he sinned himself, as Hebrews 4 makes clear. He never sinned, but there was a time in his life when our sin was applied to him and he experienced it all, therefore he is qualified to be a high priest. He knows how you and I feel. He understands what it is like to sense distance from God, to be weak, inadequate, afraid, therefore he is qualified as a high priest. "Having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation; being designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek." Jesus is a qualified high priest because he knows in every way what it is like to be human.

Now let us go back to the closing verses of Hebrews 4 where we are given two ways to respond to this. If Jesus is an effective high priest who knows what it is like to be weak, to have to live with sins as we must live with sins and be cleansed of them, what should our response be? The first response is given in Hebrews 4:14: "Let us hold fast our confession." We have a great high priest, one who has passed through the heavens, the very Son of God himself. The Israelite high priest had to pass through the tent from the holy place to the holy of holies one day each year, the Day of Atonement. Then he would go into the very presence of God and present the petitions of his people, returning afterwards with the announcement of the forgiveness of God to the people. But Jesus has passed through the heavens, not just the curtain in the temple, but through the heavens themselves into the presence of God. And he remains there always. He is a totally effective high priest. Therefore let us hold fast our confession.

The word "hold fast" is used in other places in the New Testament of something being seized and gripped tightly. Let us seize and grip tightly our confession. You and I have made a public statement of our allegiance to Jesus Christ. We have confessed him before the world around us. Hold fast your allegiance to him. Do not seek some other source of spiritual help. Do not march under a different banner. Do not give yourself to any other philosophy that might replace Christ as the one from whom you learn of God, by whom you are forgiven and made emotionally and spiritually well. Hold fast your confession of Christ.

Secondly, in Hebrews 4:16 we learn that we should "draw near...to the throne of grace." "We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need." Let us draw near the throne with confidence; there we will find mercy.

Mercy is a relational term. When someone responds to your need, putting their arms around you to show they still care for you, that is mercy. They overlook all the things that are difficult about you and embrace you anyway. In the story of the prodigal son, the merciful father rushed to embrace his son who was returning with a sense of degradation. The Lord receives us just as we are. He is utterly unconcerned for the things we hate about ourselves. He is merciful. Let us draw near to his throne, because there we find mercy.

And we will find grace, the power of God to help us in our need. We find not only his acceptance, but also his power to begin to do something about those things that are failure-ridden and weak in us. We find power to confront them. We find that God's grace is sufficient, and we will grow stronger.

Earlier in Hebrews 4 we found that the Word of God was given a high place: "The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12). There was highlighted the Scripture's ability to clarify and bring light and truth. Here the ministry of our prayers is being highlighted. It is in prayer that we draw near to God, in prayer we find ourselves loving his presence, speaking to him and hearing from him, receiving a merciful and gracious response. Much of the marriage counseling I do involves listening, clarifying, teaching and helping people see what the issues are. In the midst of tension, it is difficult to see the issues. But eventually the couple must face the question, "Will you draw near to one another or not? Will you take the risks? Will you be vulnerable? Will you give of yourself without expecting to receive? Will you draw near?" It does not matter how much you know about marriage, or how much counseling and effort has been made, at some point somebody must make a choice to draw near or not.

That is the appeal in this section of the book of Hebrews. It is wonderful to know that Christ is our high priest, but at some point or other we have to do something about it. We have to hold tight our allegiance to our confession. And, perhaps, even more important, we have to make the choice to enter into the presence of God, to begin to receive his ministry, to pray with a sense of reality, and enjoy the benefits of being known by God.

Lord, we admit we need the ministry of a priest, someone who understands us, who is not put off by our weakness and inadequacy, someone who can represent us, take us into God's presence and teach us of the love of God. We need your mercy; we need to be strengthened by your grace. Teach us to draw near to you, to not just know these things but to be willing to respond to them in prayer. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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