

THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST

"Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." Hebrews 4:14-16.

The Jewish high priest, on the annual Day of Atonement, after the appointed sacrificial victim had been slain, passed through the veil of the first Sanctuary, and entered "the Holy of Holies" to make intercession for the people. He sprinkled the blood of the slain victim on the Mercy Seat, and presented the burning incense before the Shekinah, the symbol of the divine Presence; and these significant acts were performed in silence. There wasn't any form of prayer prescribed for the high priest, even on this most solemn occasion; not a word passed his lips; all was done in solemn silence.

A priest was a person divinely appointed to transact business with God on man's behalf. He fulfilled his office, first by offering sacrifice, and secondly by making intercession. The function of a priest is to mediate man's relation to God. A prophet speaks to man for God. He brings God's message to men. But a priest speaks to God for man. He makes offerings or intercedes for those whom he represents. Because of a consciousness of sin and failure, men have, through the ages, felt the need of somebody to speak to God on their behalf and obtain for them the favor of God.

From the book of Leviticus we learn that the essential idea of the High Priest was that of representation. He stood for the people, and represented them in all of their dealings with God. The chief features of his work were somewhat as follows: go into the Holy of Holies on behalf of the people, take with him the terms of acceptance, offer gifts and sacrifices, sprinkle blood as the symbol of intercession, preside over the services of the sanctuary, seek the blessings of God for the people, deliver the responses of God to the people, explain the law and decide legal controversies, and bless the people in the name of the Lord.

This epistle reminds the people to whom it was addressed that their Priest had passed into heaven, and that there He was seated upon a throne of grace, to which they were urged to come. One of the central ideas of the Epistle to the Hebrews is that Jesus Christ is our High Priest.

I. Christ's Qualifications As High Priest.

1. His relation to the Father.

He is the only begotten and eternal Son of God. He shared with the Father all the glory of the past. He joined with the Father in the creation of the world. In obedience to the Father He came to the world and wrought out the plan of salvation. After He had fulfilled the will of the Father, He went back to take His place at the Father's right hand.

2. His relation to man.

He came to earth and took upon Himself a body of flesh, and thus identified Himself with men. He entered into the experiences of men. He was tempted. He experienced suffering and death.

3. His sinlessness.

He is "one that hath been in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." He was faced with temptations on all sides, yet He never yielded to temptation. He Who had come from the Father spotless and clean returned to the Father without a stain. He was one with us in everything except sin. It was at the point of sin that men needed help most, and, if He had been emmeshed in sin, He could not have given us the help that we needed.

4. His atoning sacrifice.

In the Old Testament dispensation, when the High Priest went into the Holy of Holies to appear before God for the people, he carried the blood of the victim which had been sacrificed for the sins of the people. Because of His sacrifice for us, He can stand before the throne of grace as our High Priest, and make it possible for us to "receive mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."

II. Christ's Characteristics As High Priest.

1. He is strong.

Christ is superior to angels, Moses, Aaron and all others. The word "great" suggests this fact. He is great in His Person, Position and Power. He is also great in His Calvary sacrifice, Heavenly sanctuary, and Present service for His people. He has settled the sin question and given us access to the throne of grace. He is strong and mighty to save amid the perils of our pilgrim way.

2. He is sympathetic.

We need His sympathy as well as His strength. Sympathy means to suffer with another, or to put yourself in his place. He is concerned with our infirmities, ignorance and helplessness. We can take our weaknesses, limitations and burdens to Him. He knows our failures, frailties, and waywardness. He seeks to bring us into fellowship with God.

3. He is sinless.

He did no sin. He was holy. He knew the full force of temptation, but never yielded. He knew the power of the enemy, but He overcame it.

4. He is sufficient.

To be sufficient He must be strong, sympathetic and sinless. No other has ever combined all these qualities in his person. Man needs forgiving, forbearing and preventing mercy. He is sufficient for every need.

5. He is supreme.

His strength, sympathy, sinlessness, sufficiency and supremacy combine to make Him the worthy object of our adoration and praise.

As to His personal glory, Christ was the Son of God; in His official glory, He was a priest forever after the order of Melchisedec; and the source of His office was in the divine will.

III. Christ's Cordiality As High Priest.

Who is invited to come to the throne of grace? It is believers in Christ. To what place are believers invited to come? It is to the throne of grace. The word "throne" suggests royalty. A throne is a place where a king sits and reigns. It is the symbol of royal authority, dignity and power. The throne about which the inspired writer is talking in this verse is the throne of God, the place where God sits and reigns, the symbol of His authority, dignity and power. It is certainly expected that the subject in approaching the king should pay him homage and honor. Then, in what spirit or attitude should we approach the throne of God? We should approach Him with lowly reverence, deep sincerity, unshakable confidence, devout joyfulness, complete submission, enlarged expectations and great boldness.

Coming to the throne of grace gives us two things:

1. A sense of our smallness.

Almost instinctively we are led to ask, What are we ordinary folks doing at a

throne, the Throne of the universe? We are made conscious of our littleness, and anything that makes us feel that way is good for us. An old veteran of the cross told some young Christian workers, who were gathered about him, "You can easily become too big for God to use you, but you can never become too little." How true; and nowhere more so than in the sphere of prayer and service.

2. A sense of our sinfulness.

If it were any other kind of throne than grace, we would not dare to approach it. On His throne is a figure of majesty and of mercy. He occupies a throne of grace and His seat is a mercy-seat. His majesty will not drive us from Him in confusion and despair, for His mercy bids us welcome and insists that we "come boldly." We come to the throne of grace to obtain mercy and to find help. Obtaining mercy expresses the heart of God, and finding help refers to the hand of God. It is in His mercy that we see His heart opened, and it is in His hand outstretched that we observe His grace. The heart of God is opened for our sins and weaknesses. How wonderful to have mercy! The hand of God is extended for our trials and needs. How good it is to have help! The heart and hand of God are offered to us. Let us take them and live better and more useful lives.

This letter encourages Christians to come courageously to God because Christ is a Friend above all friends. The Bible insists that we believe the promise that God will be responsive to us because he is like His Son Jesus Christ. "He is touched with the feeling of our infirmities." As Christ looks upon our world today with its need, its sin, and its open and running sores, He sees us as sheep who have had the fleece ripped off, bleeding, bruised, unable to rise up and to make our own way. Thank God, Jesus Christ is touched with the feeling of our infirmities. Knowing the brokenness of our hearts and the needs of our spirits, He is responsive to our needs.

Christ was "tempted in every way like as we are." Yet, He was without sin. Every temptation and every onslaught that is common to us was directed towards Him. He faced the great drives of the body. He faced the ambitions of the mind. He faced the subtle intrigues and confusions of the heart that hears many voices. How did He gain the victory? He realized that the temptation is not the sin, that for the thought to come, or the idea to enter the heart, is not the sin. It is only when we put it into practice that we sin against the Son of God. Jesus Christ, by the power of His character and by His faith in God the Father, was more than victorious in the circumstances of temptation. "So let us continue coming with courage to the throne of God's grace to obtain His mercy and to find His spiritual strength to help us when we need it.