

20 – Christ the Sympathetic Priest

The Present Truth : December 2, 1897

Our last lesson, the closing portion of the fourth chapter of Hebrews introduced us to Christ as our High Priest who, although in the heavens on the right hand of the Majesty, is touched with the feeling of our infirmities, so that we may come boldly unto the throne of grace, assured that we shall obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. In the following verses the apostle gives us further assurance of Christ's oneness with us, from which we are to derive comfort and encouragement.

“For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts wd sacrifices for sins; who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way; for that he also himself is compassed with infirmity. And by reason hereof he ought, as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins. And no man takes this honor to himself, but he, that is called of God, as was Aaron, So also Christ glorified not Himself to be made an High Priest, but He that said unto Him, Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee. As He saith also in another place, Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchisedek. Who in the days of His flesh when He had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death, and was heard in that He feared; though He were a Son, ye learned He obedience by the things which He suffered; and being made perfect, He became the Author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey Him; called of God an High Priest after the order of Melchisedek. Of whom we have man, things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing. For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat [R.V., solid food.] For every one that uses milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness; for he is a babe. But strong meat [solid food] belongs to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.” Hebrews 5.1-14

This is a most important portion of Scripture, for it deals with the very heart and soul of the Gospel. It reveals the secret of Christian living and victory. It brings Christ to us in the closest fellowship, as the sympathizing friend and companion who, while knowing from experience all the weaknesses of the flesh, and therefore kindly sympathizing with those who are in sin, hath all power to deliver. Because it deals with the vital, practical part of Christianity, the enemy of souls has sought to envelop it in a fog, and the consequence is that the real truth concerning Christ is by many professed Christians counted as heresy. The whole trouble, however, lies in not taking the Scripture literally at its own word. Let us therefore question it closely, that we may be the better able to study it with true reverence.

Questions on the Test

- For what is every high priest taken from among men ordained or appointed?
 - “That he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins.”
- What kind of person must a high priest necessarily be?
 - One “who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way.”
- How can he have compassion on such?
 - “For that he also himself is compassed with infirmity.”
- Since the priest must necessarily be one who is compassed with infirmity, what must he therefore do?
 - “He ought, as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins.”
- Can a man raise himself to this office?
 - “No man takes this honor to himself.”
- Who only can do the work of priest?
 - “He that is called of God, as was Aaron.”
- How did Christ show His fitness for the position?
 - “Christ glorified not Himself High Priest.”
- Who set Him apart to that office?
 - “He that said unto Him, Thou art My Son, today have I begotten Thee.”
- What positive declaration did God also make to Christ?
 - “Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedek.”
- What did Christ do in the days of His flesh?
 - “Offered up prayers and supplications.”
- What showed that these prayers and supplications were not mere prayers of ceremony?
 - He offered up prayers and supplications “with strong crying and tears.”
- To whom did He offer these earnest petitions?
 - “Unto Him that was able to save Him from death.”
- What was it then from which He prayed with such agony of soul to be saved?
 - “From death.”
- Was His prayer answered?
 - He “was heard in that He feared.”

- What was Christ all the time?
 - “A Son.”
- What did He nevertheless learn?
 - “Though He were a Son, yet learned He obedience.”
- How did He learn obedience?
 - “By the things which He suffered.”
- When did He learn obedience by the things which He suffered?
 - “In the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears.”
- What did He therefore become?
 - “The Author of eternal salvation.”
- To whom?
 - “Unto all them that obey Him.”
- When did He become the Author of eternal salvation to all that obey Him?
 - “Being made perfect.”
- What was He called-of God to be?
 - “Called of God an High Priest.”
- After what order?
 - “After the order of Melchisedek.”
- Is this great truth all that there is to be said of Christ?
 - “We have many things to say, and hard to be uttered.”
- Why is it so difficult to set forth the whole truth?
 - “Seeing ye are dull of hearing.”
- How dull?
 - “When for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God.”

The Work of an High Priest.—The office of high priest is no different in kind, but only in degree, from that of ordinary priests. All the people of God are priests (1 Peter 2.9) deriving their priesthood, as their life, from Christ the Head. Verses 4, 5. Therefore in the work and character of our great High Priest we learn what should be the work and character of all His followers. Every high priest “is ordained for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins.” “Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus

Christ.” 1 Peter 2.5. So in Malachi 2.6, we read of Jesus Christ: “The law of truth was in His mouth, and iniquity was not found in His lips; He walked with Me in peace and equity, and did turn many away from iniquity.” Therefore is given the general rule: “For the priest’s lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts.” Verse 7. The work of high priest, as of all priests, is to make reconciliation for sins, by presenting righteousness. God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, and now Christ has committed to us in His stead the ministry of reconciliation. 2 Corinthians 5.18, 19

The Qualifications of High Priest.—He must be taken from among men, since his work is for them. He must be one “who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way.” God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, “not imputing their trespasses unto them.” He was not condemning, but pitying. Harshness repels, love draws. That is how God draws men to Himself. “I have loved thee with an everlasting love; therefore with loving kindness have I drawn thee.” Jeremiah 31.3. But the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man” (Titus 3.1) appeared in Christ; for “God commended His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5.5. Therefore Christ said: “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Me.” John 12.32. It is the goodness of God that leads men to repentance. Romans 2.1. The word “goodness” as applied to God, means all that anybody means by goodness, and much more. It means more than what is ordinarily thought of as strict conformity to the law of right; it means kindness, benevolence, pity, sympathy, and forbearance. These are the qualities by which God draws men to Himself. No others can attract. All these are manifested in Christ. “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them.” 2 Corinthians 5.19. “Neither do I condemn thee; go, and sin no more.” “This Man receives sinners, and eats with them.” Luke 15.2. “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” Luke 13.34. Peter denied his Lord with cursing in the hour of His sorest need; “and the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter.” Luke 22.61. That look melted Peter, and made a new man of him. Oh, what gentleness and tenderness toward frail sinners is manifested in Christ!

“Learn of Me.”—“Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly in heart.” Matthew 11.29. “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” Galatians 6.2. Christ the High Priest is the example to the under priests. “Be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.” Ephesians 4.32. Nothing but love can by any possibility win an erring one, and yet professed followers of Christ, who are active and full of zeal in what is called Gospel work, often manifest impatience and even bitterness toward those who through weakness or ignorance wander out of the way. And what would seem most strange, if we did not know the wickedness of the human heart, this harshness, and lack of sympathy is often manifested to the most marked degree toward those who have the most claim on our love. Why is this?—Simply because the errors and frailties of those nearest to us are more likely to affect

us personally than are the sins of others, and we find that our Christianity does not go to the extent of forgiving sins committed against us. We can quite readily deal gently with the sinner, so long as we regard the sin as only against God; but when it comes to us personally, that is quite another matter. We love ourselves more than we love God, and so of course much more than we love another person, even our nearest friends. No one can be sure that he loves his friends, until they fall into sin, and into such sin as touches him personally. When that occurs it is too often made evident that the supposed love for others was only self-love. Their ease is disturbed, feelings are ruffled, their pride is touched, their self-love is wounded, and instead of pitying the erring ones, they pity themselves, and so drive the sinner farther away. When love is most needed, then is the least shown. But that is not Christ. Oh, that men and women who bear the name of Christ would learn that He has compassion on the ignorant and on those that are out of the way!

“To Make Reconciliation.”—The subject is too vitally important to be left here. The lesson ought to be impressed on every heart. The work of priest is to effect reconciliation. Of Christ it is said “in all things it behooved Him; to be made like unto His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.” Hebrews 2.17. “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them.” Note, reconciling, not creating or increasing enmity. Not even imputing their trespasses unto them, much less upbraiding them or turning the cold shoulder to them for their trespasses. A person may be cowed, but never reconciled, by harsh words or blows, or by surliness. No man ever yet made a friend by acting unfriendly. Christ’s work as High Priest is to make reconciliation, to win; if we are not doing the same, we are not associated with Him in His priestly work; and if we are not priests of God, then we are not among His chosen people. It is very evident that we all have needed to learn much in “the first principles of the oracles of God.”

The Secret of Sympathy.—The true priest can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way. “For that he also himself is compassed with infirmity.” No one can sympathize with a sufferer except one who feels the same pain, or at least has a vivid recollection of it. That is what the word itself means. “Sympathy” is made up of two Greek words, which mean, “to suffer with.” The word “compassion” has the same meaning, being formed from two Latin words. The only reason why the priest ordained of God has compassion on the ignorant and the erring, is because he himself has the same infirmities. People often mistake pity for sympathy or compassion. Pity may be expressed in words, but sympathy shares the burden. If one is staggering under a heavy load, the sympathizer gets beneath the load and helps bear it. This is true even of heart burdens. If one has lost a friend, a grasp of the hand, or a few words, or anything else done as only one who has lost a friend knows how to do, eases the pain. The true priest of God has kindly compassion for the sinner, because he knows his own frailty. “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

Taken from Among Men.—This is why the priest who is to make reconciliation for the sins of the people must be taken from among men; for only men have sinned. The angels in heaven have not sinned; therefore the work of preaching the Gospel could not be committed to them. They could not put themselves in our place. But the pitiful part is, that even fallen men lift themselves up so high in their own estimation that they forget that they are sinners like others, and so act as though they were not men but gods. Men who are hard in their treatment of the erring, who thrust them back instead of drawing them with sympathy, show that they do not recognize that they are equally weak and erring, and that if they have not actually committed the same sin, it is only because of different circumstances. “All have sinned,” “there is no difference,” “Man at his best state is altogether vanity.” He who remembers this, will never cause another to stumble. How much we need continually to be put in mind that we are but men.

The Man Christ Jesus.— All these qualifications of a high priest are found in Christ, and in Him alone in their fullness. He was taken from among men. Read Deuteronomy 18:18: “I will raise them up a Prophet *from among the brethren*, like unto thee, and will put My words in His mouth.” Raised up from among His brethren, yet in all things “like unto His brethren.” So also Psalm 89:19: “Then You spoke in a vision to Your holy one, and said: I have given help to one who is mighty; I have exalted *One chosen from the people*.” “The Word was made flesh” and thus bore all the sins and infirmities of the flesh. “Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses.” Matthew 8:17. “Tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin.” “He Himself also is compassed with infirmity,” because He is still in the flesh (“in thy mouth and in thy heart.” Romans 10:8), and feels everything that mankind feels; and this is true not merely of mankind in general, but of each individual. He is still “the Man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5), and is therefore the Mediator. Judgment is committed to Him, “because He is the Son of man.” John 5:27

Upon the expression, “By reason hereof,” that is, of being compassed with infirmity, “He ought, as for the people, so also for Himself, to offer for sins,” much might be said, but it is perhaps better to leave it to the reader’s meditation. There are truths of God, which it is not lawful for men to utter. It is impossible for human mind to grasp the depth of the truth of Christ’s Divinity and humanity. One thing must not be forgotten, and that is that there is as much the mystery of God in the humanity of Christ as in His Divinity. He was faultless; no taint of sin ever defiled Him, yet He was in the flesh, “sinful flesh.” So He insisted on being baptized, for said He, “thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Matthew 3:15. So He made an offering for His own sins, and in that an offering for the sins of all the people, for it was the sins of the people that He made His own, God was in Christ, not imputing the trespasses of the people unto them, but assuming all the responsibility of them Himself, as though He Himself had committed them. The Just suffered for the unjust; for in His suffering the justice of God is revealed. Romans 3:26. This was because He was man in every sense of the word, having in Himself, although sinless, all the frailties of mankind. So closely has He identified Himself with us.

The tendency is to minimize the humanity of Christ, as though thereby His Divinity could be exalted. It is the devil who has been instrumental in leading the minds away from Jesus as man, because the more Christ is regarded as remote from us, and out of touch with humanity, the less He is treated as a Saviour. In losing sight of the humanity of Jesus—His oneness with mankind,—men have not, as they thought, exalted His Divinity, but just the contrary; for the Word that was, in the beginning with God, and which was God, is revealed to us only as “made flesh.” To ignore the humanity of Christ is therefore to deny His Divinity.

Praying to Be Saved.—This same Jesus who was the only begotten Son of God, and also Priest after the order of Melchisedek, “in the days of His flesh” “offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death.” Think of it! The Son of God praying in agony to be saved from death. Dare anyone even remotely suggest that this was only a sort of acting, and that there was no real danger? No; there was no guile in His mouth. He is the Truth itself. He did nothing simply for effect or show. The fact that He prayed shows that there was need of prayer; and the fact that He prayed with strong crying and tears, shows that the need was urgent. Jesus had voluntarily, for our sakes, put Himself in a place of danger,—where there was danger of death,—and from this He prayed with anguish to be delivered.

The Sting of Death.—“The sting of death is sin.” “Sin when it is finished brings forth death.” Death cannot harm one in whom is no sin. Where there is no sin, there is no danger of death. Therefore that which Jesus really prayed to be saved from was sin, for only in being saved from sin could He be saved from death. He was in the flesh as helpless as we, for He said, “I can of Mine own self do nothing” (John 5.30) yet all our sins were upon Him. His only help lay in God. Read again the twenty-second Psalm, and see, how He trusted in God for deliverance. Also Isaiah 50.7, 8. “For the Lord God will help Me; therefore shall I not be confounded; therefore have I set My face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed. He is near who justifies Me.” Or Psalm 16.8, 9: “I have set the Lord always before Me; because He is at My right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore My heart is glad and My glory rejoices; My flesh also shall rest in hope.” His hope in death was that He had been saved from sin. Mark this: it is not that He had ever committed sin, and that He was saved from its consequences, but that He had all the sins of humanity in His flesh, and was saved from their dominion. Not once did they master Him. Not for an instant did He yield to their power.

Saved from Death.—He “was heard in that He feared,” or “for His godly fear.” In what was He heard?—In His prayer to be saved from death. “But He died, nevertheless,” you say. Yes, but He was not overcome by death; He went into the grave a conqueror. He laid down His own life, that He might, take it again, in spite of death. Not all the power of Satan could take His life from Him. Even on the cross He gave up His own life, and the Roman soldier’s spear thrust in His side simply furnished proof that He was already dead. When the appointed time came, He came forth from the grave in spite of all the power Satan could muster. “It was not possible that He should be held” by death (Acts 2.24), because He had not once been betrayed into sin. He trusted wholly in God, who

was able to save Him from death, and therefore from sin, which causes death, and was heard for His godly fear. His victory was every moment of His life complete. But it was a real victory, for He fought a real fight. Jesus did not come to earth to amuse the universe with the sight of a sham fight with sin. This idea, altogether too general, that Jesus was not in the same situation as we are, and that He had not to resist sin as we do, not having temptations in the same way that we do, is the reason for so many sham victories, among professed Christians.

“By His Stripes We Are Healed.”—“We being made, perfect, He became the Author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey Him.” Now we come to the joy of the truth that Jesus was in all respects in our condition, with all our weaknesses, wholly dependent on God for deliverance. We must not think that He was simply in a condition *similar* to ours, but that He is in our identical condition, for it was *our* sins that were in Him. He was here in our behalf. His whole life work was for us, not for Himself. The victory He gained was our victory. So when we come into temptation, and sin presses us closely, “this is the victory that hath overcome the world, even our faith.” Remember that the sin is already overcome. Jesus in the flesh overcame it for us, and He still lives in our flesh to maintain the victory, which He has gained, provided we confess Him. Isn’t there the joy of victory in this truth? My sins are already overcome, and I have but to enjoy the fruits of victory, which is peace. Who would be overcome by an enemy, which he knew, was already overcome and disarmed? This confidence in what Christ has done for us is our strength. He has the joy of victory, and the joy of the Lord is our strength. Therefore let us say, and continue to say from the heart: “I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in Me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me.” Galatians 2.20