

God's Great High Priest - Hebrews 1:1-14

In the name of God, the Father, Son & Holy Spirit
Amen.

Redeemer, Word made flesh, Messiah, Saviour, Son of God, Prince of Peace, Christ, Good Shepherd.
There are many different terms that are used in the New Testament to describe who Jesus was.

When we start to look at all these terms a couple of things become clear.

First of all, Jesus was not a one-dimensional person and secondly, there are many ways of interpreting who he was and what he was all about.

The writer of Hebrews has a unique way of describing who Jesus was.

Hebrews is the only book in the New Testament where Jesus is called the great high priest.

For the Jews who would have been reading this, the notion of Jesus being the great high priest would have been just plain wrong.

Because, for the Jews, being a priest was a family thing.

It was reserved for the Levites, and Jesus wasn't a Levite.

That wasn't the family he belonged to, so how could anyone say that he was a priest?

However, the writer of Hebrews challenges the traditional criteria for priesthood and says that Jesus wasn't a priest because of his family tree, but he was a priest in the same way that Aaron was a priest ... because he was chosen by God.

Now, just prior to today's passage from Hebrews, the author writes about the job of a priest.

The priest is chosen from among a group of people to act on their behalf, offering gifts and sacrifices to God.

Because the priest is a human being, he or she can identify with the people.

He or she will experience the same kind of weakness that all people experience.

So when they offer a sacrifice for sin, they are offering a sacrifice for their own sin, as well.

In other words, what makes a priest effective is their humanity,
the way he or she identifies with the struggles and weaknesses that all human beings experience.

The writer of Hebrews wants to make the strong point that,
as one who was called to the priesthood by God,
Jesus was greater than any other high priest who ever lived.

Like all good priests, he was very human.

Unlike other human priests however,
Jesus was the great high priest who was also perfect.

There's a tricky paradox here.

Jesus is the great high priest who is both weak and perfect.

So how did that work?

How could Jesus be both weak and perfect at the same time?

First of all, I think we all know what it means to be weak.

It means that we have limitations and struggles in our lives that we find difficult and challenging to manage.

And, as a human being, Jesus experienced weakness.

But if that's what it means to be weak,
what does this passage mean when it says that Jesus was perfect?

That needs a little more explanation, because it's not what we would think by the way we usually use that word "perfect."

It doesn't mean that Jesus never did anything wrong.

It doesn't mean that Jesus never had a mean thought about another person or that he never said something he would have been better off keeping to himself.

What it means is that Jesus directed his life toward one goal, and that goal was being obedient to God.

He gave his life over to what God wanted for him, and not what he wanted for himself.

That's what the perfection of Jesus was all about.

The example that this passage from Hebrews gives us from Jesus' life is a great one, because we can see how the weakness of Jesus and his perfection played out.

"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" (v. 7).

What incident in Jesus' life is this referring to?

Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane when he prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done".

Jesus saw what was ahead and he didn't want to do it.

He prayed that God would lead him in another direction.

The gospel account tells us that he cried.

And he prayed so hard that his sweat became like drops of blood falling on the ground.

Jesus was afraid.

He really didn't want to die on a cross, but we know that he did.

The passage from Hebrews says: "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him".

So, here's the main point of this rather confusing little passage from Hebrews.

As our great high priest, Jesus was a human being who knew weakness just like all human beings. It was through his weakness that he learned obedience.

Through his suffering, Jesus learned what it meant to be weak as a human being.

Without knowing his weakness, Jesus would not have realised how much he needed to depend on God.

So, for Jesus, suffering was a necessary part of his journey of faith.

Now, this was true for Jesus, and since in his humanity Jesus has gone before us down the road of faith, it's true for us, too.

Through our suffering and weakness, we follow in the way Jesus has gone.

It's through our human struggles that we can learn what it means to follow the will of God for our lives.

But let's make clear the kind of suffering this passage from Hebrews is talking about.

It's not the kind of general suffering that all people can expect in life, like the suffering that results from an accident or a serious illness.

Jesus didn't suffer because he was dealt a bad hand in life.

He suffered because he could only be the person he knew God created him to be; he could only do what he knew God had chosen him to do.

The kind of suffering this passage is talking about is the kind of suffering that comes as a result of faithfulness.

It's a suffering that is evitable whenever the gospel of love confronts the ways of the world.

It's suffering that happens when a person moves from living for self to living according to the will and values of God, which is, living a life of obedience toward God.

Obedience here is not just trying to do what God says to do. It's much deeper than that.

It's about transforming our will, so that everything in our life reflects the will of God: every action, every relationship, every priority, every conversation, and every decision.

Although many of us try to live like this, we also know that it's not easy.

If following God's will has never been a struggle for us, then perhaps we haven't really been following God's will at all?

The truth is, we all have opportunities to hurt because of our desire to act out the will of God in our lives.

We don't have to go around seeking suffering, but it has a way of finding us.

I don't believe this passage is telling us that God wants us to suffer or that God inflicts suffering upon us.

Suffering is not something that God does to us for our own good.
God does not purge us so we're fit for his kingdom.

But, when we live what we pray in the Lord's Prayer,
"Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," there are consequences.

We will not live lives of luxury while others struggle for bread.
We will not set out to destroy anyone who dares to threaten our way of life.
We will not stand by and quietly go with the flow when the flow is clearly going in a direction that is contrary to the love and mercy of God.

We will not always choose the easy way, the most comfortable way, the way that is best for us when it is at the expense of others, even if those others might be people who are not easy to love.

This passage reminds us that, like Jesus, although we may not welcome suffering or look for it, when it finds us, we don't need to run from it.

We can stand fast and, even in our weakness, grow more Christ like in our obedience to God's will.

Amen.

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