

**“The ABC’s of the Christian Life: (23)
Following Jesus Christ Rightly: #15b. Affirming the Incarnation” (part 2)**

Introduction:

Let us begin by reading the familiar words of Matthew 1:21-23.

But while he (Joseph) thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. ²¹And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.” ²²So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: ²³‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name IMMANUEL,’ which is translated, ‘God with us.’ ²⁴Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, ²⁵and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS.

Last Lord’s Day we began to address the very important biblical truth of the incarnation of God in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a foundational Christian doctrine; one which we should all understand clearly. The Apostle John wrote of some who had departed from the truth of the incarnation. He wrote, “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. (2 John 9).

This essential Christian doctrine simply stated is this:

The incarnation is the event in which the eternal Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, took into union with Him the nature and body of a man, whereby Jesus Christ is true God and true man, two natures in one divine person who will continue in this blessed union for eternity.

Last week we quoted **Robert Reymond**, who had described the incarnation in this way:

Without ceasing to be all that he was and is as the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the eternal Son of God took into union with himself in the one divine Person that which he had not possessed before—even a full complex of human attributes—and became fully and truly man for us men and for our salvation. Jesus of Nazareth was and is that God-man.¹

J. I. Packer spoke of the relationship of the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation in Jesus Christ:

Trinity and Incarnation belong together. The doctrine of the Trinity declares that the man Jesus is truly divine; that of the Incarnation declares that the divine Jesus is truly human. Together they proclaim the full reality of the Savior whom the New Testament sets forth, the Son who came from the Father’s side at the Father’s will to become the sinner’s substitute on the cross.²

¹ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), p. 546.

² J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology; A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Tyndale House Publishers, 1993), p. 104. Packer included these verses at the end of this paragraph: Matt. 20:8; 26:36-46; John 1:29; 3:13-17; Rom. 5:8; 8:32; 2 Cor. 5:19-21; 8:9; Phil. 2:5-8.

It is in and through the incarnate Son of God that we are able to know God and relate to Him. In Jesus Christ the age-old promise of God is realized by His people, in which He said, “You shall be My people and I will be your God.”³ This covenant relationship involves our knowing God and enjoying His presence with us, even as He is our transcendent God, “far above the heavens” (Cf. Eph. 4:10). In the incarnation of Jesus Christ we have the transcendent God as immanent with us. It was said to Joseph, “They shall call His name IMMANUEL”, which is translated, “God with us.” There is God’s transcendence in Jesus Christ. And the angel said to Joseph, “You shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.” There is God’s immanence in Jesus Christ. God meets with us, His people, and relates to us as our God in Jesus Christ. This is the heart of what the incarnation means and brings to us.

We began to consider this important doctrine (teaching) of the incarnation last week by first showing that the Holy Scriptures give abundant teaching of *the divinity of Jesus Christ*. Jesus Christ is God; that is, He is the Second Person of the blessed Holy Trinity, Who was begotten of the Father as His Son from eternity. “In the fulness of the time” the Son of God “came down” (we use that sort of language), and was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary. In doing so the Son of God assumed a human soul and body, even as He remained eternal God. And so, whereas we gave attention last week to the deity of Jesus Christ, today let us give attention to the human nature of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I. The biblical presentation of the humanity of Jesus Christ

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten (Son) of the Father, full of grace and truth.

Now we might think that this is a rather easy and straightforward matter, one with which people should not have trouble. But this is not true. There have been many people and groups who have denied through history the biblical teaching of the humanity of Jesus Christ. But *to believe in the humanity of the Lord Jesus is essential to biblical Christianity*. We may assume that this is such a given truth that we need not even address the matter. But actually it is something that needs to be addressed, for there have been serious errors respecting this doctrine that have threatened orthodox Christianity since the first century. And so, our consideration of this matter will require us not only to consider biblical teaching, but also to consider a measure of reflection on church history and how the Lord’s people have historically dealt with the defense of the humanity of Jesus, as well as with the deity of Jesus.

First let us consider...

A. Several biblical matters.

1. The use of the expression in the Bible, “the Son of Man.”

The expression, “the Son of Man” is used in the New Testament to refer to Jesus on dozens of occasions. And yet it should be noted that aside from Stephen’s use of the expression, “Son of Man”, in Acts 7:56 when he was being stoned, he saw the “Son of Man” standing at the right hand of the Father, and its use twice in the Book of Revelation (1:13; 14:14), it is used only by the Lord Jesus referring to Himself. He does so on 65 occasions as recorded in the four Gospels.⁴ “In the Gospel tradition the Son of Man was Jesus’ favorite way of designating himself; in fact, it is the only title he freely used.” And then consider too, that no evidence exists that the early church ever used this title to refer to Jesus. Rather, it is a title that Jesus used to identify Himself.

What does the expression mean, “The Son of Man”? Most commonly it has been understood as a designation of the humanity of Jesus. It is commonly taught that the title, “Son of God”, depicts our Lord’s deity and the title, “Son of Man”, depicts the humanity of Jesus. But this is not correct, for although the title,

³ Cf. Jeremiah 30:22; Ezekiel 36:28.

⁴ George Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 65.

“Son of God” does speak to our Lord’s deity, the title “Son of Man” is not used by our Lord to emphasize His humanity. He did not need to go about Galilee convincing people that He was a man. All people knew this to be the case. Rather, the term Son of Man was our Lord’s self-designation of Himself as the “Christ”, the “Messiah.” He did not claim openly that He was the “Christ/the Messiah”, for there was great misunderstanding about the coming Messiah and what He would do. Jesus did not declare himself to be the Messiah during His earthly ministry lest He be cast by His own followers in a role which was contrary to the true purpose of God. Rather, Jesus went about referring to Himself as the “Son of Man”, thereby avoiding misconceptions. By referring to Himself as the Son of Man, Jesus was able to disclose Himself and the true nature of His work to His disciples over the course of time. The time would come, however, after He had taught His disciples the true nature of His mission, that He would ask them, *‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’* The result was Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” And so, the expression, “Son of Man”, speaks to Jesus as *the promised Messiah*, not directly of His human nature.

I would like us to be aware of...

2. The early danger and warning of the spirit of antichrist.

A great error respecting the understanding of the humanity of Jesus Christ arose toward the end of the first century in the Gentile regions where Christianity had spread. There were some who denied the humanity of Jesus Christ, yet claimed to be Christian. John the Apostle wrote against this heresy that arose in Gentile lands toward the end of the apostolic age. It could be argued that John’s writings of his Gospel and his three short epistles were penned to refute and correct this error that had crept into the churches. We may see his concern reflected in a number of passages. Consider **1 John 4:2**.

“By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, ³and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.”

And so, according to the apostle John, according to the Holy Spirit of God who had moved John to write his epistle, the spirit of the antichrist at the end of the first century was a denial of the humanity of Jesus Christ, “every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God.”

The opening verses 1 John speak about this matter. John wrote in **1 John 1:1-3**:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life-- ² the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us-- ³ that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship *is* with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

You see that John opened his epistle with a very great emphasis on confessing that Jesus, the Son of God, was actually a human being. The eyes of the apostles had seen Him. They had touched Him. They had handled Him. Indeed, He was a man. John was opening his epistle so as to refute the heresy that was denying the humanity of Jesus.

We read in other verses of John’s epistles the same emphasis. **2 John 7** records:

“For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist.”

John wrote in **1 John 2:18-20**,

“Little children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come, by which we know that it is the last hour. ¹⁹They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us. ²⁰But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things.”

Apparently these heretics who denied the humanity of Jesus at one time had been in the churches, claiming to be Christians. They had been Trinitarian, believing in the deity and the humanity of Jesus Christ. But then they separated from the Christians and went out from their churches and started their own denominations. The reason they separated is that they no longer believed in the humanity of Jesus Christ.

We also read John’s words in **1 John 2:21-24**.

“I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth. ²²Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. ²³Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also. ²⁴Therefore let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father.”

Here again, John was refuting the heresy of those who denied the humanity of the Lord Jesus. And so, the Bible clearly teaches that the eternally begotten Son of God was incarnated. He took upon Himself a human soul and body. Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man.

But when the incarnation is considered carefully, questions surface. How are we to understand the person of the incarnate Son of God? How do the divine nature and the human nature of the Son of God meet together in the one person? How are we to understand one nature influencing or affecting the other nature? And if it does so, to what extent? Our present understanding, that is, the accepted and widely confessed understanding of historic Christianity, was only understood and stated with conciseness after several centuries into the Christian era. Let us, therefore, consider...

II. The historic theological development of the Christian understanding of the person of Jesus Christ

The formulation of the stated Christian doctrine of the incarnation of Jesus Christ took place in the arena of conflict in the early Christian era. We have already spoken to the error that is reflected in John’s writings, but now let us speak more specifically of errors or threats to the biblical teaching of the incarnation. But the historic orthodox understanding of the person of the incarnate Son of God was formulated over time as the people of God addressed errant teachers and their doctrine that rose in the churches. In other words, it was largely due to the identifying, confronting, and correcting false doctrine that sound doctrine was established and affirmed in the churches.

Now some do not like preaching and teaching that seems always to be pointing out the error of someone or some church, even as the aim of that teaching is to correct, instruct, and confirm His people in the truth. For there are those who only desire to accentuate the positive. They have an aversion to speak of anything and anyone in a negative manner. “There is all too much negativity in the world” they say. “Let us just proclaim the truth; that is sufficient.” But actually that kind of philosophy of ministry is counterproductive to the proclamation of truth. For it is the midst of conflict that the Lord often reveals Himself to His people. It is in identifying and confronting error that truth is confirmed and proclaimed. It is when false doctrine infects the churches that the Lord has raised up His men to come to the aid of his people. Through them, the Lord corrects His people of error and establishes them in the truth.

Even the writings of the New Testament reflect this manner of God’s working. The books of the Bible are what we refer to as “occasional” documents. In other words, there was some occasion that led to the writing of the book or letter. For example, Jude wrote his epistle to confront and correct licentiousness among those who claimed to be Christian. Paul wrote the Epistle to the Galatians to correct the error of

legalism in the churches of that region. And we have seen how John wrote to confirm Christians in their faith in the incarnate Son of God for salvation.

And this is the manner in which God has worked through history among His people. Some movement emerges, commonly led by a single, influential false teacher. His error becomes popular and spreads among others. The Lord then causes men to arise to confront and correct the false teaching and its promoters, thereby further defining and establishing His truth to the people of God.

Let us consider some of these early heretical teachings regarding the person of Jesus Christ and consider how the Lord in addressed them through His churches and the men who led them.

A. The heresy of Gnosticism was addressed and corrected toward the end of the second century.

John's Gospel and his epistles addressed what is commonly referred to as incipient Gnosticism toward the end of the first century. The full error of Gnosticism emerged to become a significant threat to the Christian faith throughout the second and into the third century AD.

Gnostics did not believe that Jesus Christ was both God and man. Their teaching was born of their philosophy about the spirit world and this physical world. They believed everything physical was inherently evil, including the human body. They believed that the spiritual realm was inherently pure and good. They concluded from this that God could not have become a man.

But there were different forms of Gnosticism in how they addressed the nature of the person of Christ. **Marcion** (85-a.160 AD) taught that Jesus had only appeared to be a man. He believed that the death of Jesus was only a hallucination, because Jesus did not have a physical body. But **Cerinthus** (2nd century AD) also a Gnostic heretic, taught differently. He claimed that the Christ spirit came upon the man Jesus at His baptism, and then guided and empowered Jesus through His ministry, but that this Christ spirit departed from Jesus at or just before His crucifixion.

The Lord raised up men to write against these heretics and their teaching. One of these was **Irenaeus** (died 202 AD) who wrote a work entitled, *Against Heresies*. He repudiated Gnostic teaching that denied the humanity of Christ by arguing largely from Paul's epistles that Jesus was indeed a man, for he must be the second Adam who brought salvation from the sin introduced by the first Adam. The early church fathers **Tertullian** (155-240 AD) and **Origen** (185-253 AD) also wrote against the heresy of the Gnostics. The outcome of this controversy was the affirmation of the doctrine of the two natures of Jesus Christ, of both the divine nature and the human nature in the one person of Jesus Christ.

B. The heresy of Arianism and the Council at Nicaea (AD 325)

Arius was a leader of the church at Alexandria, Egypt. He taught and promoted an aberrant view of Jesus Christ. He taught that although Jesus was the Son of God whom God sent into the world to save sinners, he taught that Jesus was not God incarnate. He believed and taught that Jesus was a created being, but was not God himself. Jesus was the "firstborn" Son, that is, the first of God's creatures. Arians taught Jesus was the Son of God, but He was not God the Son. The cult of the Jehovah's Witnesses are modern day Arians.

Arianism became a widespread belief in the early 4th century. Because the church at Alexandria was so influential, Arianism spread through the regions of the eastern Mediterranean Sea. The problem became so great that **Emperor Constantine** called for a church synod to address the matter. This is how one described the event:

July 4, 325, was a memorable day. About three hundred Christian bishops and deacons from the eastern half of the Roman Empire had come to Nicaea, a little town near the Bosphorus Straits flowing between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

In the conference hall where they waited was a table. On it lay an open copy of the Gospels.

The emperor, Constantine the Great, entered the hall in his imperial, jewel-encrusted, multicolored brocades, but out of respect for the Christian leaders, without his customary train of soldiers. Constantine

spoke only briefly. He told the churchmen they had to come to some agreement on the crucial questions dividing them. "Division in the church," he said, "is worse than war."⁵

The Council of Nicaea (325 AD) convened and denounced Arianism as heresy. The council produced what has been called the Nicene Creed. To this day this is the classic definition of the biblical teaching on the person of Jesus Christ. Here is the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things seen and unseen.

And in one Lord, Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten, that is, of the essence of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of the same being as the Father, through whom all things came to be, both the things in heaven and on earth, who for us humans and for our salvation came down and was made flesh, becoming human, who suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, who is coming to judge the living and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

The focus of this church council was the precise relationship of Jesus Christ with God the Father. The Greek term the council used was that the Son was of the same **ὁμοούσιος** (*homoousios*) with the Father. In other words, Jesus was of the same substance or essence with the Father. This was a declaration that Jesus was fully God, equal with the Father.

C. The heresy of Apollinaris and the Council at Constantinople (381 AD)

Apollinaris (died 382 AD) was the bishop of the church at Laodicea. He denied the doctrine of the Trinity, even though it had long been the orthodox teaching of Christianity. He taught that Jesus Christ could not have in His one person both a divine nature joined with a human nature. Apollinaris declared all humans sinners, and therefore if Jesus had a human nature, He would be a sinner. He, therefore, lessened the human nature of Christ. He denied that Jesus Christ had two natures. His heresy spread through a wide region, which resulted in the sound, biblical churches to respond and correct the heresy.

A council was convened in Constantinople in 381 AD. It condemned the doctrine that Apollinaris had promoted. It produced a modification of the Nicene Creed. And so, here is that creed, which is sometimes called **The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed**:

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Who, for us men for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

And I believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

⁵ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-28/325-first-council-of-nicaea.html>

The council promoted the true humanity of Jesus Christ and that only through Christ being fully human could He redeem humanity.

We have through these councils the clear setting forth of classic orthodox Christian understanding of the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is one divine Person, with two distinct natures, both divine and human. With respect His divine nature, He is the Son of God begotten from eternity; with respect to His human nature, he derived it from his mother, the virgin Mary, through whom He was born into the world as the God/Man.

That this is the classical statement on the person of Christ may be seen in the language that is reflected in our own Baptist Confession of 1689. Centuries after these councils were convened and had drawn up their conclusions derived from the Holy Bible, we read these words of the Person of Jesus Christ:

The Son of God, the second person in the Holy Trinity, being very and eternal God, the brightness of the Father's glory, of one substance and equal with him who made the world, who upholdeth and governeth all things he hath made, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man's nature, with all the essential properties and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin; being conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the Holy Spirit coming down upon her: and the power of the Most High overshadowing her; and so was made of a woman of the tribe of Judah, of the seed of Abraham and David according to the Scriptures; so that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion; which person is very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only mediator between God and man.⁶

Our Lord is a single divine person with two natures. As the eternally begotten Son of God, He came into time and into this world to become our Redeemer. He assumed a created, finite, and temporal human nature into union with His divine nature. These two natures are distinct from one another and never co-mingled. That our Lord has two natures, therefore, means that He has two minds, two wills, two sets of affections. Our Lord's human nature informs His divine nature with respect to our human condition, so that He may truly know and sympathize with us in our human weakness. While on earth His divine nature informed His human nature about matters which He would need to know in order to accomplish His work of redemption our behalf.

III. The Importance of Christ's divine and human nature so that we may know God.

A. Jesus Christ in His incarnation as our as our Prophet, Priest and King

We understand that our Lord Jesus is our Prophet, Priest, and King. It is because He is both God and man in one Person that He is able to fulfil the functions of these roles or offices on our behalf.

It is Jesus Christ as the God/man that is our *Prophet*. Because He is God and man, He can reveal to us what God is truly like. God is infinite; we are finite. He is the Creator; we are the creatures. We cannot know God, for we are but flesh. Paul reasoned this way:

For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. (1 Cor. 2:11)

God must reveal Himself to us if we are to know Him, for "no one knows the things of God." The Holy Spirit reveals them to us because He reveals Christ to us, who reveals God to us because He is both God and man. John wrote, "No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him" (John 1:18). And He must reveal Him, or He would not be known by us. **John Owen** said it this way:

⁶ *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, Article 8, Paragraph 2.

By the beams of the sun, light, and life, and heat, unto the procreation, sustentation, refreshment, and cherishing of all things are communicated. But if the sun itself should come down unto the earth, nothing could bear its heat and luster; our eyes would not be enlightened but darkened by its glory, and all things be swallowed up and consumed by its greatness; whereas, through the beams if it, every thing is enlightened and kindly refreshed. So it is with this eternal beam of brightness of the Father's glory. We cannot bear the immediate approach of the Divine Being; but through him, as incarnate, are all things communicated unto us, in a way suited to our reception and comprehension.⁷

We can only know eternal God through Jesus Christ the God/man who reveals God to us.

It is Jesus Christ as the God/man that is our *Priest*. The Lord Jesus must be a man in order to atone for man's sin. He must be God for His human sacrifice to have infinite value to save sinners.

⁴For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins. ⁵Therefore, when He came into the world, He said:

“Sacrifice and offering You did not desire,
But a body You have prepared for Me.
⁶In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin
You had no pleasure.
⁷Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come—
In the volume of the book it is written of Me—
To do Your will, O God.’” (Heb. 10:5-7)

How could Jesus Christ offer Himself as a sacrifice for sin, unless he was a Man, as one of us? How could His sacrifice have been of infinite value to atone for the sins of all His people unless the divine nature was in union with His human nature? And how could Jesus have represented us before God unless He had been one with us? And how could He have approached the Father on our behalf unless He were the Beloved Son of God from eternity?

It is Jesus Christ as the God/man that is our **King**. God is the King over His creation. But He has purposed that man would be His co-regent, who would rule over His creation on His behalf. But through sin man has fallen from his former privileged position, rather than being a servant of God he became a servant of satan, a slave of sin. But God the Father sent His Son into the world to assume our human nature that through Him God would fulfill His purpose and destiny for mankind. The writer to the Hebrews expressed it this way:

⁵For He has not put the world to come, of which we speak, in subjection to angels. ⁶But one testified in a certain place, saying:

“What is man that You are mindful of him,
Or the son of man that You take care of him?
⁷You have made him a little lower than the angels;
You have crowned him with glory and honor,
And set him over the works of Your hands.
⁸You have put all things in subjection under his feet.”

For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for

⁷ William H. Goold, ed., *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 1 (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), p. 16.

the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone. ¹⁰For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. (Heb. 2:5-10)

God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to fulfil His purpose for mankind to rule over His creation on His behalf.

B. Jesus Christ in His incarnation may bring comfort and rest to His people (Heb. 4:14-5:11)

Let us read of the High priesthood of Jesus Christ in Hebrews 4:14ff:

¹⁴Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins. ²He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness. ³Because of this he is required as for the people, so also for himself, to offer sacrifices for sins. ⁴And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was.

⁵So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but it was He who said to Him:

“You are My Son,
Today I have begotten You.”
⁶As He also says in another place:
“You are a priest forever
According to the order of Melchizedek”;

⁷who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, ⁸though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. ⁹And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, ¹⁰called by God as High Priest “according to the order of Melchizedek,” ¹¹of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.

1. Christ’s High Priesthood is an encouragement to His people (4:14-16)

Verse 14 reads, “*Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.*” Jesus Christ “*has passed through the heavens*”, that is, He has gone into the very presence of God. Later in the epistle the writer shows that whereas the ancient Israelite high priest entered through veil in the earthly tabernacle, Christ “passed through” a veil, that is, His body, into heaven and the presence of God. Since Jesus the Son of God has already arrived ahead of us and stands representing us, we may be encouraged to maintain our confession (confidence) in Him.

Verse 15 gives a further reason to maintain faith in Jesus Christ. “*For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.*” Because He experienced all the weaknesses of humanity, He is able to sympathize with us. Because He did so without sin, He is able to give assistance. Our Lord Jesus was a man who endured and overcame much temptation to falter in His own walk of faith and devotion to His Father. The devil tempted Him directly, after He had gone many weeks without food. People around Him were a cause of temptation, even those closest to Him would attempt to lead Him away from a path of obedience. There were many in direct opposition to Him, who plotted to discredit Him and to take His life; these were ones who would tempt Him to forsake a path of trust and obedience to His Father. He endured all His temptation without succumbing to sin.

There was a time when I had trouble understanding how it was that Jesus could *really* sympathize with me in my sin, if he never experienced committing sin. But this “problem” was dispelled when I read some comments of others. One commentator, **B. F. Westcott**, reasoned,

Sympathy with the sinner in his trial does not depend on the experience of sin but on the experience of the strength of the temptation to sin which only the sinless can know in its full intensity. He who falls yields before the last strain.”

The point is that Jesus Christ suffered terribly under temptation to sin, therefore He can sympathize with you in your weakness. And it is wrong to say, “Because He never sinned, therefore He could not really know what I suffer.” No, rather, you and I have never even approached the degree to which He suffered. For we always yield to sin before the “suffering” of temptation becomes too great. But He never surrendered, so His suffering must have become very intense.

In **verse 16** we read, *“Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”* Had Jesus Christ sinned, He would have been unable to assist us. But since He did not, we may come with confidence to the throne of God because Jesus sits there. The writer will later show how the mercy seat of the ancient tabernacle prefigured this throne of grace upon which our High Priest sits. There we may find our greatest needs--mercy and grace. We need God’s mercy, so that He does not heap on us what we deserve for sinning against Him. We need God’s grace, in order to strengthen us to go onward and live in faith and obedience. Mercy and grace are the two gifts that every Christian is in constant need. They are assured to every Christian, because every Christian has Jesus Christ as a faithful High Priest who secures for us and dispense these gifts to us.

Now after having declared that Jesus Christ is the High Priest of God’s people, a problem arises that must be addressed. These Jewish Christians were of course informed about Old Testament law. The Jews understood that in order for a man to be a legitimate High Priest, he had to meet the qualifications set forth in the Law of Moses. If the writer is to give force to his argument about the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ, he will need to demonstrate that Jesus Christ fulfils the essential qualifications for the office. He does so by first describing what was common to all Jewish High Priests through history. That is what we have in 5:1-4.

B. Qualifications for High Priesthood (5:1-4)

Let us again describe our context. The writer has just exhorted his readers to strive to enter the true rest that God has available for them. This rest may be forfeited, however, just as the generation of Israelites forfeited their rest of the Promised Land of Canaan. But the consequences of failing to enter our promised rest is far greater than the consequences which they suffered, for Jesus is greater than Moses, and our rest is vastly superior to what was available to them. As God scrutinized them closely on the day of decision, so God is now scrutinizing us, to determine if we will continue to follow Him in faith and obedience. Therefore, we need mercy and grace for forgiveness of sins and strength for our journey. Thankfully, Jesus, our High Priest, is able to give us this assistance. He has gone on before us and now stands before God on our behalf. The mercy and grace which we need are available through Him. But again, a theological problem arises, which the writer now addresses. How could Jesus be a high priest? Does not the Law of Moses stipulate one be descended from Aaron? The subject of verses 1-4 are the qualifications of a high priest which were required under the Mosaic economy.

Verse 1 reads, *“For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins.”* Obviously, a high priest had to be a man (generically), taken from among the people in order to represent them before God. Here we see the necessity for the incarnation. Jesus must be a man if He is to serve as our high priest.

The writer says that his job is “pertaining to God.” The thought is regarding those matters for which man is responsible before God. The High Priest’s responsibility is to “to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins.” His job was to represent sinners before their holy God.

Verse 2 declares that he must be a man who is sympathetic with the sinners whom he represents. **“He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also beset by weakness.”** This describes the ideal high priest. History reveals that many failed to properly represent their people. The intertestament period was replete with high priests who were corrupt and indifferent to the needs of the people. But a legitimate high priest was not above the struggles of the people he represented, for he was one of the people; he struggled himself. He is able to have “*compassion*”, or “*deal gently*” with his people. He is to have forbearance, or patience, with those who stray due to ignorance. But there was no provision under the Mosaic covenant for the purposeful, willful, deliberate, defiant lawbreaker. That one was to be cut off from the people (cf. Num. 15:30). The writer will later assert that this principle has not changed under the new economy; the consequences of rebellion are greater today (cf. Heb. 10:26ff.).

And so, in describing the general characteristics of high priests in the Old Testament, the writer is alluding to the fact that the Lord Jesus deals gently, is forbearing with those who are struggling. But again, with respect to the rebellious, the self-willed, the self-indulgent, Jesus Christ Himself will fight against that one at His coming (cf. Matt. 7:21-27). He does not represent their case before the Father; they are on their own.

In **verse 3** we read of the high priest, **“Because of this he is required as for the people, so also for himself, to offer sacrifices for sins.** The high priest of the old covenant had to first make atonement for his own sins through an animal sacrifice before he could enter the tabernacle on behalf of others. Later in the epistle the writer will show that Jesus is a superior Priest to all that went before, for it was not necessary that He first offer a sacrifice for himself.

Now that the first general qualification of a high priest has been explained, he sets forth a second, more specific qualification that was required of every legitimate Old Testament high priest. This is described in **verse 4**, he must be called of God. **“And no man takes this honor to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was.”** Aaron was the brother of Moses. He was the first high priest that God Himself had ordained to be high priest under the Mosaic law (cf. Ex. 28:1ff.; Lev. 8:1ff.; Num. 16:5, 17:5). After Aaron, only his descendants were ones qualified to become Israel’s high priests (cf. Num. 20:23ff.). The issue of Jesus being of the tribe of Judah rather than the priestly tribe of Levi will be dealt with by the writer later (7:1-28). Here, the writer is simply making this point: **as Aaron was called to become a high priest, so was Jesus Christ.**

C. Christ’s qualifications for High Priesthood (5:5-10)

After having described the general qualifications of high priests, the writer shows how Jesus Christ meets these standards. He does so by quoting Old Testament Scripture that he applies prophetically to the Lord Jesus. **First**, he shows that just as all other high priests, God had called Jesus to be a high priest. **Verse 5** reads,

⁵So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, but it was He who said to Him:

“You are My Son,
Today I have begotten You.”⁸

⁸ Here the idea of Jesus being “begotten” should not be thought to be saying the same thing as the expression, “the only begotten Son.” “The only begotten Son” speaks of Christ in His eternal generation as God’s Son in eternity; He is the Son of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Holy Trinity.” Here in Hebrews 5:5, however, the Father is begetting

Jesus is a high priest because God “glorified” Him to be a high priest to His people. Jesus did not glorify himself, that is, He did not thrust Himself into this office; God the Father had conferred it upon Him.

Second, the writer quotes another Old Testament verse to substantiate the fact.⁹ In **verse 6** he quotes **Psalm 110:4**,

As He also says in another place:

“You are a priest forever
According to the order of Melchizedek”;

The writer quoted Psalm 110:4 to show that as God called Aaron to be a high priest, God called Jesus to be a high priest, but a high priest like unto the king-priest Melchizedek, not as Aaron.

Now note two points of interest respecting the manner in which the writer quoted these two Old Testament passages. First, **the writer declares that it was God speaking**, not Moses, who wrote Genesis, or David who penned Psalm 110. The Bible is the Word of God. When we read the Bible we may pray and read understanding that God is speaking to us. Second, again, **the writer is using the present tense of God speaking in verse 6**. He did not say that God had “said”, but rather, **God “says.”** Once again we have before us the abiding authoritative speech of God instructing His people; the writer believed that God was speaking at the present time he was writing, speaking through the Scriptures, although they had been written long before. When we read the Scriptures, if we are reading rightly and God is blessing our effort, He is speaking to us as we read His Word.

Now that the writer has shown that Jesus was called, that being the first qualification, he shows how Jesus is able to sympathize with those who struggle, for He Himself struggled. In this way Jesus is indeed qualified to be the believer’s High Priest. **Verses 7 and 8** read,

⁷who, in the days of His flesh when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear,
⁸though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.

He makes reference to Jesus “in the days of His flesh”; in other words, during His earthly sojourn. Jesus had offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death. Perhaps the account of our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane most readily comes to mind in which this aspect of our Lord’s life is recorded (cf. Mark 14:33ff.) The point being made is this: **Because Jesus needed assistance in His trial, we can be assured that He is sympathetic toward us in our trials.** Here we read why His prayer was answered? It was due to His piety (godly fear).

Verse 8 speaks of one of the benefits that Jesus received through His suffering. “*Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered.*” Not only does one learn what suffering is by being obedient, but, as stated here, one learns obedience through suffering. Now consider that for the Lord Jesus Christ, although He is the eternal Son, the notion of obedience must have been foreign to His experience until He learned obedience in the days of His flesh. He was always ruling in history, not “obeying”, in the strict sense. But when He became incarnate, being made for a time a little lower than the angels, He learned obedience.

Jesus from the dead at His resurrection. This speaks of God enthroning the Son of David as His Son, Who would rule over His creation on His behalf.

⁹ “In the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established” (Matt. 18:16).

The desire to escape pain and suffering is human, to refuse to escape that suffering (which is in the plan of God) involves obedience. This was seen most clearly in our Lord's prayer of acquiescence, "Not my will but Thine be done."

We then read in **verse 9**,

⁹And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, ¹⁰called by God, as High Priest "according to the order of Melchizedek," ¹¹of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.

Jesus Christ obeyed God and was delivered from death. We believe in Him and are to obey Him and He will deliver us from death. He is "the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him." He is our Mediator through whom flows all the blessings of salvation. He is described as having been perfected. In other words through His suffering He became in every way qualified to be a perfect Savior and High Priest of His people. Christ obtained salvation for us because He was obedient. He gives salvation to the obedient. Not *because* of their obedience, that would be the error of works-righteousness; rather He gives salvation *to* the obedient, i.e. His people. His people obey (follow) Him (cf. John 10:27, 28a).

May we embrace and confess the incarnation of our Lord Jesus. He is both God and Man in one person. Only as God can we know God. Only as man can He represent us and bring us into everlasting relationship with our God in His holy presence.

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust,
that he might bring us to God' (1 Pet. 3:18)

On Christ suffering in His Temptation

by Charles Spurgeon

In a sermon on the text of **Hebrews 2:18**, which reads, "*For in that He Himself has suffered being tempted, He is able to succor them that are tempted*", Spurgeon wrote these words:

Notice, the text does not say—"In that He Himself also has been tempted, He is able to succor them that are tempted." It is better than that—"In that He Himself *has suffered*, being tempted, He is able to succor them that are tempted." Temptation, even when overcome, brings with it to the true child of God a great degree of suffering. The suffering consists in two or three things. It lies, mainly, *in the shock which sin gives to the sensitive, regenerate nature*.

A man who is clothed in armor may walk in a wilderness through the midst of tearing thorns and brambles without being hurt. But let the man be stripped of his garments and then let him attempt the same journey and how sadly will he be cut and torn. Sin, to the man who is used to it, is not suffering. If he is tempted it is no pain to him. In fact, frequently temptation yields pleasure to the sinner. To look at the bait is sweet to the fish which means to swallow it by-and-by. But to the child of God who is new-made and quickened, the very thought of sin makes him shudder. He cannot look at it without abhorrence and detestation and without being alarmed to think that he is likely ever to fall into so abominable a crime.

Now, dear Friends, in this case, Christ indeed has fellowship and far outruns us. His detestation of sin must have been much more deep than ours. A word of blasphemy, a thought of sin must have cut Him to the very quick. We cannot get a complete idea of the degree of wretchedness which Jesus must have endured in merely being upon earth among the ungodly. For infinite Purity to dwell among sinners

must be something as terrible as if you could suppose the best educated, the most pure, the most amiable person condemned to live in a den of burglars, blasphemers, and filthy wretches. Such a man's life must be miserable. No whip, no chain would be needed—merely associating with such people would be pain and torment enough. So the Lord Jesus, in merely bearing the neighborhood of sin without any other troubles, would have had to suffer a vast, incalculable amount of woe.

Suffering, too, arises to the people of God *from a dread of the temptation when its shadow falls upon us before it comes*. At times there is more dread in the prospect of a trial than there is in the trial itself. We feel a thousand temptations in fearing one. Christ knew this. What an awful dread was that which came over Him in the black night of Gethsemane! It was not the cup—it was the *fear* of drinking it. “Let this cup pass from Me,” just seemed to indicate what the sorrow was.

He knew how black, how foul, how fiery were its deeps and it was the dread of drinking it that bowed Him to the ground till He sweat, as it were, great drops of blood. When you have the same overwhelming pressure upon your spirit in the prospect of a trial yet to come, fly to the loving heart of your sympathizing Lord—for He has suffered all this—having been Himself tempted...

I cannot, of course, particularize this morning so as to hit upon the precise sorrow which you, beloved Brother in Christ, are enduring as the result of temptation. But whatever phase your sorrow may have assumed this should always be your comfort—that He has suffered in temptation—that He has not merely known the temptation as you sometimes have known it—when it rattled on your harness and fell harmless to the ground. But it has rankled in His flesh. It has not made Him sin, but it has made Him smart. It has not made Him err, but it has caused Him to mourn. Oh, child of God, I know not a deeper well of purer consolation than this—“He Himself has suffered being tempted.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Charles Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 9, pp. 5f.