

## WHAT MORE CAN GOD SAY?

(Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews)

### Study 4

## "The Throne of Grace"

(Hebrews 4:14-5:10)

### VERSES (to ponder and/or memorize)

"We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Heb 4:15-16).

### WHAT?

Yes, we *do* have to think through some concepts that are not all that familiar to us. To appreciate the picture of Jesus and the salvation he brings us, and to feel the force of the exhortations (warning and encouragement), we have to understand the argument, and that takes a bit of mental work. **But the rewards are rich.** And we are here to help one another (You certainly help me by raising questions and showing me where my explanations are not as clear as they should be).

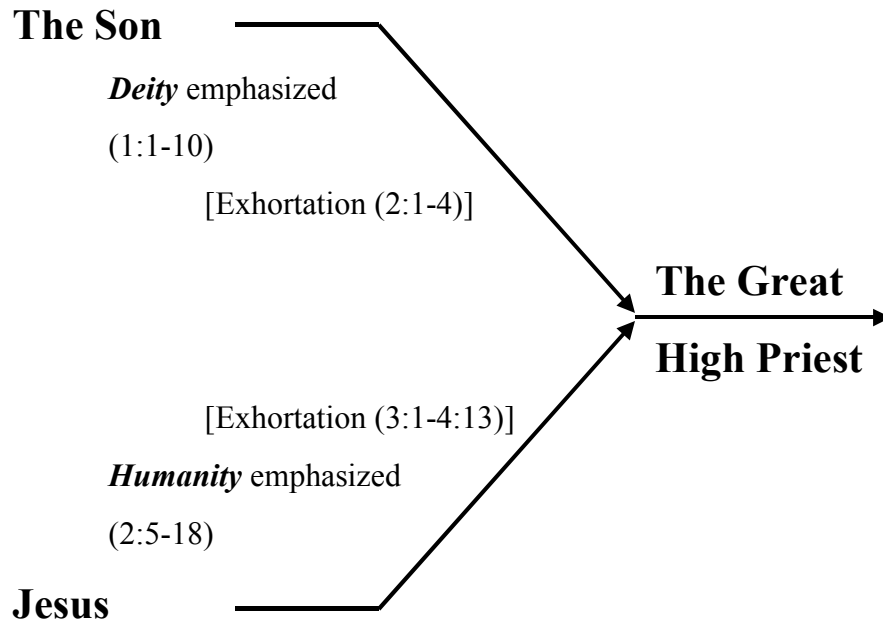
#### 1. The Lines Converge

In chapter 1, we are introduced to the Son as God's ultimate revelation, heir of all things, greater than the angels, and seated at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. In chapter 2, the Writer slides deftly into a discussion of his humanity (the Incarnation), explaining that he had to become like us in every way in order to save us. Appropriately, he withholds the name *Jesus* until this point (2:9). In chapter 3, he points out that as the Son, Jesus is greater than Moses, and introduces the name/title, Christ (Messiah).

It's all very well thought out. He is in the process of constructing an argument. He knows exactly where he wants to go, but he is taking us along with him step by step. And he pauses en route to exhort (warn and encourage) as any good preacher would. He alludes early on to the fact that the Son "provided

purification for sins" (1:3). Speaking about the Son's identification with us as Jesus, he explains that this was so that he could become "a merciful and faithful high priest" (2:17).

Now the lines converge in chapter 4, verse 14: "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, *Jesus the Son of God*, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess." This is represented in the diagram below:



2. Just How Human was Jesus?

We don't even have to read the passage carefully to discover that Jesus' *genuine* humanity is crucial to the Writer's argument (4:15; 5:1-2, 7-9). This raises an important question that theologians have debated. In the early centuries of Christian history, the church strongly rejected the notion that Jesus only appeared to be human. It affirmed that he was unique but insisted that he lived a *genuine* human life. But is it valid to say that he "has been tempted in every way, just as we are"?

Perhaps three remarks will help to place the matter in perspective for us. In the first place, with regard to Jesus' *genuine* humanity, a theologian has remarked perceptively, "Everything that could be said about man, as man, could be said about Jesus, but not everything that could be said about man, as fallen man, could be said about him." In other words, sin may be a universal human experience, but being without sin does not make one "*unhuman*" (sic).

In the second place, the Writer is not attempting to *quantify* his temptations. Donald Hagner explains: "The full humanity of Jesus means that he experienced the full range of human temptations (rather than every specific manifestation) of human temptation."<sup>1</sup>

In the third place, William Barclay points out that:

The fact that Jesus was without sin necessarily means that he knew depths and tensions and assaults of temptation which we never know and never can know. So far from his battle being easier, it was immeasurably harder. Why? For this reason--we fall to temptation long before the tempter has put out the whole of his power. We are easily vanquished; we never know temptation at its fiercest and its most terrible, because we fall long before that stage is reached. But Jesus was tempted as we are--and far beyond what we are. For in his case the tempter put everything he possessed into the assault, and Jesus withstood it.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Empathy at the Throne of Grace

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin." This has to be one of the most encouraging concepts in Scripture. It is difficult for us to realise just how revolutionary this concept was at the time. Jews tended to emphasize *God's transcendence* (the fact that he is infinitely higher than his creation; his otherness). Stoic philosophers taught that if God "felt" anything he would cease to be divine. Epicurean philosophers believed that the gods were detached. "So, the Jews had their *different God*; the Stoics, their *feelingless gods*; the Epicureans, their completely detached (remote) gods. And into that world of thought there comes the Christian religion with its incredible conception of a *God who has deliberately undergone every human experience*."<sup>3</sup>

Of course, theologians may debate whether *God*, who is omniscient and perfect, could not have understood without having to *experience* our situation *from within* the human race. The point is that he *did* become human! Whether we

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<sup>1</sup>Donald A. Hagner, *Hebrews* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1990), 79.

<sup>2</sup>William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews*. The Daily Study Bible (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1957), 38.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 40.

say, "God understands because he was human," or "God became human because he understands," he saw the appropriateness (necessity?) of becoming human in order to redeem mankind. His incarnation and suffering make that abundantly clear, and that is what the Writer stresses. I can't resist quoting Jürgen Moltmann here: "When the crucified Jesus is called the image of the invisible God, the meaning is that this is God and God is like this. God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity."<sup>4</sup>

This is the only place where God's throne is described as "the throne of *grace*." How very appropriate!

#### 4. The Essential Qualifications for Priesthood

In the first six verses of chapter 5, the Writer lays an excellent foundation for his detailed discussion of the high priesthood of Jesus in chapters 7 to 10. This is about as close as one gets to a definition of the role of priest. The Latin word for priest is *pontifex*, which means bridge-builder. And that, in essence' is what a priest is.

- To fulfil this role it is imperative that he be human (he is appointed from *among* the people to *represent* them in matters related to God).
- He offers sacrifices for sins.
- He himself is subject to weakness, and can therefore empathize.
- He needs to offer sacrifices for his own sins and those of the people.
- He has to be appointed by God (he cannot aspire to the office).

He briefly points out the similarities and two major contrasts.

**Similarities:** Jesus is appointed *from among* the people to represent us; he offers gifts and sacrifices; he is able to deal gently with us because he himself is subject to weakness; he does not take this honour on himself but is called by God.

**Differences:** He did not have to offer sacrifices for his own sins (implicit, cf. 4:15; 7:26-28); he is a priest, not after the order of Aaron but after the order of Melchizedek (more about that later).

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<sup>4</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: S.C.M.,1974), 205.

## 5. How the Writer Constructs His Argument

You have probably realised that the Writer loves to quote from the Psalms. Here he cites two well known messianic psalms (2 and 110). It is by seeing the connection between the two that he provides us with one of the most brilliant insights in the New Testament. Both of these psalms have already been quoted in chapter 1. Both speak of God's anointed King who rules over the nations. In Psalm 2:7, the person being addressed as Son is the messianic king by divine decree. In Psalm 110, the person being addressed as "a priest forever" (110:4) is the one addressed in Psalm 110, verse 1: "The LORD (Yahweh) said to my Lord (Adonai): 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" By linking these two passages it is possible to say: *The person who is described as the King and the Anointed One (Messiah) is also described as the Son and a Priest forever.*

## 6. What the Son had to Learn by Experience

There has been an unfortunate tendency in Christian history to downplay the genuineness of Jesus' humanity. This is understandable because of our legitimate emphasis on his deity, but it is unhelpful, not to mention unbiblical. He really lived our life, with its full range of emotions and temptations. If we read carefully the accounts of his experience in Gethsemane, we realize that he was pushed to the limit (Matt 26:36-46; Luke 22:39-46). More was going on here than the fear of physical pain and death (as though Jesus suddenly got cold feet). His deity did not insulate him from the unimaginable horror of death (especially *this* death). On the contrary, it made that experience worse!

He "learned obedience," not in ideal circumstances, but in the school of suffering. In other words, he reached a new level of experience from what he suffered. Actually, the clause, "he learned from what he suffered" is a linguistic jingle ("*emathen aph' hōn ephathen*").

When we understand what the Greek reader understood by "made perfect," we realize that this does not imply moral imperfection prior to suffering. It means being equipped or rendered complete for the purpose for which one was designed. That's what the Writer wants us to see: Jesus' human experience makes him the ideal High Priest. He has felt the full brunt of temptation. We never can face any situation that he doesn't understand.

## SO WHAT?

1. How "real" do you think Jesus' temptations were? Is it fair to compare his trials with ours?
2. What qualities were absolutely essential for one to be a priest? (5:1-4)
3. Can you explain how the Writer links Psalms 2 and 110, concluding that the Son is both God's anointed King (Messiah) and also his appointed High Priest? [Read point 5 carefully].
4. How can one who is, by definition, perfect be "made perfect" and "(learn) obedience from what he suffered"? [What does "perfect" mean?]

## NOW WHAT?

1. Respond to the following statement: "We are often least likely to come to God in prayer when we most need to do so." Do you think that this statement is true?
2. Do *you* ever feel reluctant to come to God when you are in need of help? If so, how do you account for this reluctance?
3. What factors should encourage us to approach God, even when you feel most unworthy to do so? (4:14-16; 5:2, 9).