

Sermon Summary #8

Jesus, Our Merciful and Faithful High Priest Hebrews 2:14-18

Last week our time in this passage was devoted to exploring what it means to say that God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, became a human being in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and how he, by dying and rising from the grave, was able to defeat and destroy Satan and to deliver men and women from the fear of death by which Satan kept them enslaved.

We also looked briefly at what it was about the *nature* of Christ's death that enabled him to conquer the Enemy in this way. We saw in v. 17 that it was because *Jesus, in being crucified as our substitute, satisfied or appeased or quenched the wrath of God that we deserved to suffer*. This is what is meant by the word *propitiation*. In doing so he obtained for us forgiveness of sins, he cleansed our souls from the guilt that our sin had incurred. The only way Satan can exert any meaningful influence on us is if our sins remain unforgiven. But in absorbing and enduring in himself the wrath and judgment of God against us, our sins are forgiven, all guilt is wiped away, and we are reconciled to God. In this way the Enemy was soundly and eternally defeated.

Today I want us to turn our attention to the other important message in this text. We are told that Jesus became a human being not only so that he might live the life we should have lived and die the death we deserved to die, but also *so that he might be qualified and competent and able to "help" us when we are tempted*. This is the point of v. 18.

Since he was human he suffered the force and power and seductive appeal of temptation and thereby stands ready and able to help us when we endure the same. He knows what we are feeling. He knows how lonely it can be. He knows what it is to be abandoned and to be afraid and to feel weak and to be abused and hated by others. He knows. He suffered just like us when he was tempted.

You can trust him. How do we know this? We know it because he is both "merciful" and "faithful" as a "high priest" in serving God, not only by dying to propitiate the wrath of God but also by providing us with strength and empathy, with encouragement and power, so that when we are tempted we can find reason to say No to the world, the flesh, and the Devil.

Now, before I dive into the main thing I want you to see today, let me briefly comment on two things.

First, let's revisit this word translated "propitiation" and make sure we understand it. There are two *mistakes* that you need to avoid.

(1) First, our author is *not* saying that Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, has by his death transformed God from a mean and cruel-hearted bully into a well-disposed and loving Father. That would be to pit one person of the Trinity against another. God doesn't need to be transformed from an angry and hate-filled God into a peaceable and loving heavenly Father. Never forget that *it was the kindness and tender-heartedness and love of God that moved him to send his Son to die for you and me*.

"FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON" (John 3:16a).

"BUT GOD SHOWS HIS LOVE FOR US IN THAT WHILE WE WERE STILL SINNERS, CHRIST DIED FOR US" (Romans 5:8).

"IN THIS THE LOVE OF GOD WAS MADE MANIFEST AMONG US, THAT GOD SENT HIS ONLY SON INTO THE WORLD, SO THAT WE MIGHT LIVE THROUGH HIM. IN THIS IS LOVE, NOT

THAT WE HAVE LOVED GOD BUT THAT HE LOVED US AND SENT HIS SON TO BE THE PROPITIATION FOR OUR SINS” (1 John 4:9-10).

You can't be clearer than that! Love was the fountainhead, the source, the motivating cause, the principle and the power that led the Father to send the Son and also led the Son to willingly give up himself on our behalf on the cross. God is love, and that from all eternity. The cross didn't transform the Father into love, as if before the cross he was altogether angry and mean. The cross was itself the *expression* of God's love! The cross of Christ came to pass because God already **is** love; *not* so that he might **become** love.

As strange as this may sound, it is the gospel truth: ***The love of God sacrificed the Son of God in order to satisfy the wrath of God so that we might become his children.***

(2) Second, contrary to how some translations read, the word here does *not* mean “expiation” but rather “propitiation.” So what's the difference? Expiation has sin as its object and means to wipe away or to dispose of sin so that it no longer poses a barrier between us and God. And of course, that is precisely what happened. Praise God that our sin has been “expiated” and cleansed and wiped away. But Christ did this in his death by “propitiating” the wrath of the Father. Thus, whereas expiation focuses on removing sin, propitiation focuses on satisfying or appeasing God. ***Sin was expiated precisely because God was propitiated.***

Jesus Knows

We are now ready to explore the incredible and heart-warming practical results of what Jesus did as a human being.

But before we do this it's crucial to keep in mind that the Incarnation involves far more than merely the idea of God becoming flesh and blood in the person of Jesus. The Son of God might conceivably have become a human being in Jesus of Nazareth and then lived out his life distant, cut off, and altogether remote from us and our struggles and our temptations. He might conceivably have entered into this world and taken to himself a human nature and then retreated to an ivory tower or behind fortress walls or have hidden with the protection of angels so that he wouldn't have to see or hear or feel or struggle with any of the issues of life that you and I face on a daily basis.

No! When God became incarnate in Jesus he not only “partook” (v. 14) of flesh and blood and was not only “made like” us, but also ***entered into the very conditions of human existence that we face each day. He experienced life as a human up close and very, very personal. He not only shares our nature but also our suffering! He experienced firsthand the weaknesses and limitations and obstacles that come with being a real human in this real world.***

It is not enough simply to say that Jesus Christ is a man. Rather, we must go on and say that as a man he hungered and thirsted and grew weary and slept and laughed and wept and rejoiced and was sorrowful and became angry and frustrated and was tempted by sloth and power and wealth and sex and impatience and countless opportunities for selfish and sensual indulgence and idolatry.

And yet for our sakes and to our eternal and temporal welfare he met head on every experience and every temptation and ***never once yielded to the point of sin.*** Never once! This is what our author says even more directly in Hebrews 4:15 – “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

In doing so he showed himself to be both “merciful” toward us in our struggles and “faithful” in his commitment to us to do everything necessary to provide us with an example and with power and with incentive to say No to sin.

Now, some push back against this truth and argue that if Jesus, although tempted, never actually sinned he can hardly understand what we go through; he can hardly be a helpful high priest to bring us to God and to supply us with what we need to live this life in a godly fashion.

But listen carefully. You need to remember two things. ***First***, if Jesus *had* sinned when he was tempted, like you and I sin when we are tempted, he becomes useless to us. He becomes just another sinner who himself needs someone to make propitiation for his own sins! And if he had sinned, he would hardly qualify as a “faithful” high priest because

sin would mean that he had been “faith-less” or “unfaithful” on each occasion that he fell victim to temptation. In order for us to be saved and reconciled to God, Jesus not only had to die the death we deserved to die, he also had to live the life we ought to have lived. But if in the course of that life he repeatedly sinned, we lose our savior!

Second, this objection is based on a false assumption. It is based on the misguided belief that one knows *less* of a temptation if he successfully resists it. But if you face a temptation and successfully resist it and say no to it and do not yield to it, you are *not* for that reason less familiar with it or less capable of understanding its power and seductive appeal. In fact, *precisely the opposite is true*. The person who resists a temptation to the very end and never gives in experiences and learns more of its force and its evil nature than does the person who gives in early on. Think of it in quantitative terms. If you and I very quickly and easily fall into sin after having only endured 20% or 40% of a temptation’s power but Jesus, because he never sins, perseveres and resists all the way to the point of having seen and felt 100% of the seductive appeal of a particular temptation, he stands to learn more and to know more and to be far more experienced in this regard than any of us.

Here’s the simple fact: ***It is not that he can’t sympathize with us because he didn’t sin, but that we cannot sympathize with him because we did! Let me say that again. Christ can easily and readily sympathize with us in our suffering from temptation, but we could never sympathize with him in his.***

Answering a Loud and Frustrated Objection

But this is where I often hear people shout in protest: “How can Jesus possibly know what I’m feeling? How can he help me when I’m tempted? How can he understand the pain of my suffering?” Please note: when a person like this uses the word “know” they aren’t saying that Jesus, as God, isn’t *aware* of their suffering. He is, after all, omniscient and knows all things. But what they are saying is that he can’t *feel* it or *sense* it or understand it from personal tragedy and trial and frustration and fear. And if he can’t, what good is he to me as this supposed “merciful and faithful high priest”?

Let’s go back to last week, to Easter Sunday morning when everyone walked in here with a smile on their face and making every possible effort to look happy and joyful so that no one would know how horribly they felt or how terrified they are or how angry and frustrated they had become.

Now, to be sure, a lot of you last week and again today are flourishing spiritually. You were excited about Easter and came anxious to hear more about the resurrection of Jesus. But many of you were in trouble, some worse than others. Life just hasn’t turned out the way you had hoped. A few of you have resigned yourselves to getting along as best you can, having closed your hearts to the possibility of things getting better lest you suffer more disillusionment than you can bear. Others, last week, were angry, without really knowing why. You may have tried hard to concentrate, but your mind wandered into the memory and heartache of shattered dreams.

I looked out on the faces of several of you to whom the future looks pretty dim. You were more concerned about Monday morning than with anything that might have happened two thousand years before. A few of you were close to collapsing under the burden of living with an unbelieving husband or wife or rebellious child who couldn’t care less about Christianity. Some of you were bemoaning your jobs, dreading Monday morning. More of you than I’d like to imagine were and still are struggling with loneliness. These were the ones who debated even coming for fear of having to leave church alone and return yet again to an empty house or apartment.

So there you sat, and there I stood, all of us wondering, for a variety of reasons, does it really matter if Jesus is alive? ***What possible relevance is there for me today in what happened to a carpenter 2,000 years ago? How could he possibly care about me? What could he possibly do about it? What does Jesus have to do with a job I dread and a spouse I distrust and a future I’d just as soon skip? What can he possibly know of my pain and disappointment? How could he possibly feel the depths of loneliness and isolation that I face every day?*** That’s where this truth in Hebrews 2:17-18 and in 4:15 comes into play. So let’s get personal. Let me provide you with just a few examples of what I mean.

Some of you struggle under the shame of illegitimacy and you wonder how you will survive and if anyone could ever understand what it feels like. Few have given thought to the fact that ***Jesus was born under a cloud of illegitimacy***. He lived with the stigma of his mother having become pregnant before she was married. *We* know it

was through the power of the Holy Spirit and not because of sexual immorality that she conceived (Luke 1:34-35), but people back then didn't.

It's an ugly word that I hesitate to use, but people would have called him a bastard. What was he to say? He could hardly have replied, "Oh, you're mistaken. My mom was a virgin when she was impregnated by the Holy Spirit." I'm sure that would have brought more than a few laughs and even more derision. He would be forced to simply listen to their bitter words and walk away.

People gossiped about him. They snickered under their breath. They pointed the finger and mocked. It's one thing when common folk treat you as different and heap scorn on your name. But when religious leaders publicly denounce you, there's nowhere to turn. All sense of safety is shattered. All hope for vindication disappears. In John 8:41 the Pharisees ridiculed him as one who had been "born of fornication." Ouch! Jesus lived with the sting of this every day of his life. The burden, at times, must have been unbearable. The anger would have been justified, though I trust he kept it in check.

Some of you were born in illegitimacy. The circumstances will differ from person to person, but childbirth out of wedlock is a commonplace today. But that doesn't eliminate the feelings of shame and reproach. Some of you have never known your father. He left before you were born, or soon after. You work hard to cover it up, hoping against hope that no one will ask. It's not your fault, but you feel different. There's a sense of shame you can't shake.

You ask yourself, "Does anyone have any idea what this feels like? Does anyone care? Who can I talk to about this? Who can I trust?" Well, I have a living, loving savior, who knows what it's like to carry that burden. He knows what it feels like. His knowledge isn't from a book he read or a sermon he heard or from hearsay. It comes from life. It comes from having walked where you walk and feeling what you feel. He sympathizes with all who buckle under the strain. He understands your resentment. He identifies with your pain. He knows.

Others of you live in virtual poverty. You wonder: If God really loves me, why can't I get ahead; why must I struggle to make ends meet? Did you know that *Jesus lived a life in relative poverty*? He knew the burden of having to work every day just to live and make ends meet. Jesus didn't have the luxury of sleeping in or taking a month off to get refreshed. He knew the daily pressure of wondering whether business would remain steady enough to pay the bills.

His situation was complicated by the premature death of his adoptive father, Joseph. Someone had to take up the slack. Someone had to provide. Jesus, the first born, would have assumed primary responsibility for the needs of his mother, and half-brothers and half-sisters. He would have felt the anxiety and fear and concern evoked by financial lack. He would have known the temptations such lack presented.

The good news is that Jesus knows today, right now, your fears and your struggle to maintain your faith in the face of financial hardship. He does understand. And he stands ready to preserve your confidence in God and provide your necessities and energize you to say No to the countless illegal ways to alleviate your plight.

Did you know that *Jesus lived in obscurity for the great majority of his life*? Of his thirty-three years on earth, thirty were lived as an unknown carpenter. No fame. No name. He knows what it's like to live day in and day out unacknowledged by those in power and unrecognized by neighbors. It hurts. The human soul is infused with a dignity of bearing the image of God that does not respond well to calloused disregard by others. We long for recognition. We yearn for a sense of personal significance. So did Jesus.

Perhaps most Christians live unacknowledged lives. They go through life unnoticed. Their presence is taken for granted. Their efforts are unacknowledged. Their words are casually dismissed. You feel as if nobody knows you. You live in secret. And you wonder if even God is aware of who you are. Well, I have a savior for you, a living, loving savior who not only knows how badly it hurts but is rich in mercy and pledges never to leave you or forsake you. Though men may ignore you, he treasures and cherishes you with such intensity that he sings (Zephaniah 3:17)!

Did you know that *Jesus lost his adoptive father, Joseph, at an early age*? We know that Joseph was alive when Jesus was twelve (Luke 2:41ff.), but most believe that he died soon thereafter. That means Jesus, as the oldest child

in the family, would have had to assume responsibility for his mother and family. He would have taken over leadership in the home, forced to grow up too early, too fast.

There's no escaping the fact that Jesus suffered a *loss of childhood*. He would not have been blessed with knowing the joys of normal teenage life. Responsibilities that should have come much later in life suddenly fell on his young shoulders. Worries that he should not have been forced to face came much too quickly. Perhaps he went to work prematurely, never knowing the carefree life of his peers. After all, someone had to pay the bills. Someone had to buy the food.

My father died in 1983. He was sixty-two and I was thirty-two. It still seems he died young, but I had thirty-two years of his presence and love and influence in my life. He was the best friend I ever had. He was never too busy for me. He listened when I complained and held me when I wept and encouraged me when I wanted to give up. I cherish each moment of each day I had with him. I can't imagine where I'd be today had it not been for his influence.

Jesus barely knew Joseph. At just that moment in life when a young man needs paternal presence and authority and guidance, Joseph dies. Mary remained single. Not even a stepfather to help. Jesus felt the pain of loss when Joseph died. Suddenly there was no one to talk to, no fatherly example to follow, no male role model to speak into his life. I've often wondered if Jesus asked his heavenly Father why his earthly father had to be taken so soon. I've often wondered if the answer he got satisfied him.

Some of you lost a parent, perhaps both of them, early on. You feel abandoned, even robbed of what your friends so carelessly take for granted. The emptiness is almost more than you can handle. You look back on those years with regret and pain and maybe a little bitterness. So much in life seems to have passed you by in the absence of a father's love and affirmation and presence at your piano recital or ballgame.

Jesus knows. You're not alone. Jesus cares. And he ever lives to supply you with the grace and mercy and sustaining strength to compensate for whatever you missed when your dad passed away.

More than a few of you hate your jobs. It feels demeaning and boring and beneath your dignity. Did you know that *Jesus made his living and supported himself through manual labor*? Carpentry is exceedingly hard work. Let's not forget that Jesus toiled as a carpenter before the advent of electric drills and power saws and Home Depot. Jesus knows personally how demanding and disheartening this kind of physical labor can be.

He knows what it's like to feel utterly exhausted at the end of a day, with little energy for anything other than falling into one's chair or bed. There was nothing glamorous in what Jesus did to make a living. Few if any would have praised him in the public arena for his job. And if that weren't bad enough, he did it six days a week. The five-day work week was centuries from invention.

I've spoken with many who suffer daily insults and ridicule because of what they do for a living. They feel inferior and second rate. The stigma of failure looms large and they have little to show at the end of the day for what they do. They sense a lack of value in their efforts and the most they can show for their work is a paycheck at the end of the month, and not a very big one at that.

Well, Jesus knows what you're feeling; he can sympathize. He dignified manual labor by spending the vast majority of his earthly life engaged in it. Just think of it: the second person of the Trinity who created the universe, who created trees and iron and plastic and linen and stars and oceans made his living mending broken tables and hammering nails into rotting wood. There is honor and value, apart from the size of one's salary, in manual labor. But there are also unavoidable consequences, both socially and physically. Jesus knows. He spent the better part of fifteen years, day in, day out, working with his hands. Someone *does* understand. Some really *can* help.

Jesus was in all likelihood an outcast among his peers. There's no reason to think that young people treated him any differently when he was a teenager and young adult than did the older people once he started his public ministry. He wouldn't have joined them in their sinful ways. He was different, and his moral convictions stood out at every turn and with every choice. His life was a constant rebuke to the rebellious and immature ways of those around him. I suspect that kids probably made fun of him and excluded him from their games.

Did you know that ***Jesus experienced the depths of loneliness***? Let's not forget that he was a celibate. He never married. He never had the opportunity to share his heart in intimate ways with someone of the opposite sex. He never knew what it was like to experience sexual intimacy and the joy and comfort of a life with a woman. Jesus knows what it's like to go home at night after a hard day's work to an empty house. He knows what it's like to eat alone, to sleep alone, to pray alone.

Many of you are single. You may be widowed or divorced or perhaps you've chosen to remain unmarried. Whatever the cause or reason, the pain of isolation and loneliness is often overwhelming. It would be nice to have someone at night with whom to share your thoughts and talk about your day. Seeing others with a wife or husband or family can often be devastating.

Jesus knows. He's been there. He knows how deeply it hurts, not because he's God and knows all things but because he's man and feels all things. He knows the temptation to fill the loneliness with sinful substitutes, and he can help.

Jesus experienced the pain of being unappreciated. Here was a man who devoted himself to people and ministry and service, yet so few responded with gratitude. Jesus knows what it feels like to be taken for granted. He identified with those whose efforts and sacrifice for others are presumed upon.

I've spoken with many who wonder if anyone will ever say "Thank you" for all they've done. It's not that they serve and minister for the payoff. They sacrifice out of love and kindness, but that doesn't mean they're oblivious to the joy of being appreciated. People often quit the church and live for themselves because no one has ever bothered to acknowledge and appreciate their efforts. Their name has never appeared in the church bulletin or been mentioned from the pulpit. Bitterness has set in their souls. They've devoted years of service to the church and no one seems to care. Well, I know someone who does. And he knows precisely how you feel.

Did you know that ***Jesus felt the pain of being misunderstood, of having his motives constantly questioned, maligned and misrepresented***? Virtually every sermon he ever preached was twisted and misunderstood by people who hated him.

Are you tired of being misunderstood? All of us feel the familiar frustration, and sometimes anger, when we work so hard to make one point and people deliberately distort it to mean something else. They rarely bother to ask what we really meant. They seem closed and calloused to our heart's intent. We're fed up and ready to quit. Jesus knows what that's like. But praise God that he didn't quit. But he was tempted to.

On numerous occasions ***Jesus felt the sting of slander***. I earlier mentioned that he was accused of being a child of fornication. If that were not enough, in the same passage they charge him with being demonized (John 8:48)! Vicious lies were spread about him. He was accused of being self-serving and power hungry. His name was dragged through the mud. Hardly a day passed that he wasn't the butt of someone's joke or the target of their unwarranted criticism.

It's devastating to be the victim of slander and no one come to your defense. Being called names and unjustly accused is bad enough, but feeling defenseless and alone makes it virtually unbearable. Worst of all, the slander often comes from people in the church, people you've tried to help, people you believed would always stand up for you when the chips were down. Jesus knows, and cares, and is committed to sustaining you and preserving you lest the pain of slander drive you to sin.

For a long time ***Jesus suffered from being rejected by his own family***. This isn't to say they didn't love him, but they were unpersuaded by his messianic claims. At one point during his ministry they actually thought he was insane. They were no doubt embarrassed by what he did and said. They didn't believe in him. They questioned his calling in life and refused to support him in his ministry. It wasn't until after his resurrection that they came to saving faith.

This is one that really hits hard for some of you. You love your family and are devoted to them, but experience only rejection and scorn in return. And often it's for no other reason than that you are a Christian.

Jesus understands. He sympathizes. He nods knowingly. You're not alone and you need not face this pain as if no one else has a clue how badly it hurts and how deeply it disappoints. There is a savior who lives to make intercession on behalf of those who come to him in faith and who put their confidence in his power as high priest and advocate and friend.

Jesus knows what it's like to feel the horrible anguish of being abandoned and betrayed by his friends. Betrayal hurts. It stings. Jesus put his confidence in people and they let him down. When times got tough, they were nowhere to be found. They loudly declared their loyalty but when it came time, all they cared about was themselves. First it was Judas Iscariot. Then the other disciples. Finally Peter capped it off with his three-fold denial when Jesus needed him most.

Some of you would just as soon forget the times it has happened to you. You've grown cynical and hardened as a result and find it almost impossible to trust anyone again. Well, I have a savior for you, a living, loving savior who can help you find the strength to trust again and who can turn cynicism into confidence.

All of us know that ***Jesus felt the pain of physical abuse***, to a degree that few if any will ever face. The beating he endured at the hands of the Roman guard is beyond words. He was stripped naked and subjected to open and public humiliation. He knows the shame of exposure and helplessness. He became an object for their selfish and perverted games. He was spit upon and mocked.

The number of people who have endured some form of abuse, whether emotional, physical, sexual, or all three, is staggering and saddening. Most who've come through it still live with the horrid memory and often can't break free of the paralyzing shame it produces. Jesus knows. And he weeps not simply for you, but with you. This is the one to whom we look and in whom we put our trust and on whom we count for our eternal life. You need never face another day under the weight of shame or reproach, thinking that no one could possibly identify with what you're feeling.

Did you know that ***Jesus was the victim of social injustice?*** The very laws designed to protect the innocent and vindicate the righteous were turned against him and used to justify his execution. He was dragged before a kangaroo court and became the victim of repeated perjury and disregard for the basic principles of justice.

To this point in life I've been spared such suffering. But a number of you have been the victims of injustice and had no one to stand at your side. Some of you probably suffered as much at the hands of an unscrupulous lawyer or judge as you did from your accuser. You are angry and unforgiving and can't imagine what it's like to be free of such corrosive emotions and deep-seated bitterness. Well, there is a man, Christ Jesus, who suffered far worse and he stands to give you aid and embrace you in trial and comfort you with the presence of his Spirit.

Finally, did you know that ***Jesus felt the pain of being abandoned, not simply by friends and family, but also by God?*** Who could possibly forget the plaintive cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me (Matthew 27:46)?"

All of us have faced situations and seasons in life when we were convinced God had abandoned us and forsaken us to our enemies, or worse still, to ourselves. We each know what it's like to feel as if we are at most a distant memory to him, barely a faint echo, and all of life seems only to confirm it. Of course, the truth is that God never abandons his children, though often it feels as if he does.

No one knew this better than Jesus. But for him the abandonment was real. No one felt the vacuum of God's absence quite like he did. In his greatest hour of need, not even his heavenly Father was present. Of course, it wasn't for lack of love, but because the Son had become sin. He laid on him the iniquity of us all, and by his stripes we are healed.

So, let me ask the question again: *What difference does it make whether Jesus is alive or not?* And if he is, how could he possibly care and what could he possibly do? He most certainly is alive to encourage you, to support you, to sympathize with you, so that you will never face one moment of human existence alone, without someone who has been where you are and faced what you face and feels what you feel. But better still, he lives to energize your soul and empower your heart and to give you hope and grace and mercy and kindness and the promise of an eternity with him!