

JESUS IS OUR PERFECT HIGH PRIEST
Hebrews 5:7-9 | Lent Midweek | 2018

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸ Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered ⁹ and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him

Juva Jesu!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Is it possible for something to be too good, too great, too perfect? A couple of years ago a girls basketball team in Minnesota that was kicked out of their league for being too good. The other teams in the league refused to play them anymore. The team was deemed "too talented."

What about Jesus? Is it possible for him to be too great, too perfect to be our High Priest? After all, the high priest was supposed to be able to relate to the people he served. Just a few verses before our text we read: **Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness** (5:1-2).

Is Jesus too great to deal with us gently, too perfect to deal with people as profoundly imperfect as you and me? This is something the Hebrew Christians wondered about, and something that the writer deals with in our text. He assured them and he assures us that Jesus is not

only our *great* High Priest, he is also our *perfect* High Priest, who prayed for us and obeyed for us.

I. Perfect in the Way He Prayed

When I read our text did the words "**made perfect**" trouble you? Does that seem like the right way to talk about Jesus? Well, the writer isn't saying that Jesus was imperfect and then later became perfect – not at all.

Let's look at the text. It begins: "**During the days of Jesus' life on earth**" (literally, "during the days of his flesh"). Obviously, as we often confess, Jesus is true man.

As a man, he prayed. When the author writes, "**he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death,**" he takes us to Gethsemane. In that garden it is clear that Jesus is true man, with human body and human soul. He told his disciples: "**My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death**" (Mark 14:34). And so this man prayed. His human lips cried out. His human eyes shed tears. His human face was covered in sweat.

But, of course, Jesus isn't just a man. He is also true God. Our text says, "**Son though he was.**" It was also the Son of God praying in that olive grove. He had good reason to pray. As true God Jesus knew exactly what lay ahead, the bitter cup of suffering that he was about to drink.

What a crushing weight of guilt weighed on him! On the news this week we have seen images of Nikolas Cruz, the very troubled young man who killed 17 students and teachers last week. He sits in the courtroom looking down at the floor, no doubt riddled with guilt. Other criminals turn from the cameras and hide their faces in shame.

Jesus bore the guilt and shame of all people: Nikolas Cruz, Jeffrey Dahmer, Adolph Hitler, you and me. You know what it's like to struggle with a guilty conscience, how it unsettles your stomach and keeps you from sleeping. Think of Jesus. In his conscience he heard the voices of millions of sinners. He felt their guilt. He carried their shame, our shame. And he knew he was about to face the white hot anger of a holy God.

Nevertheless, he rose from the dust and went to face the music for our sin. He went to the betrayer and the mob. He went to the kangaroo courts of Caiaphas and Pilate. He went to the cross. He did this on purpose. He did this willingly – so determined was he to win our salvation, so great is his love for us.

Jesus is the perfect High Priest, the perfect Savior – God and man in one person. He is holy. When the angel

announced his coming birth to Mary he called Jesus "**the Holy One to be born of you**" (Luke 1:35). You can't be a little bit holy and more than you can be a little bit pregnant. Mary was pregnant with the Holy One of God. On the Mount of Transfiguration, the Father confirmed all these facts. "**This is my Son ... with him I am well pleased**" (Matthew 17:5). On his report card Jesus gets an "E" for exceptional, not an "N" for needs improvement. There simply is no room for improvement. Jesus is the perfect High Priest.

So, if Jesus is perfect, then why did he pray to "**the one who could save him from death,**" and ask him to take away the cup of suffering he was about to drink? How could Jesus not know that there was no other way to save the world? While we're at it, how can the writer of our text talk about Jesus as one who "**learned obedience**"?

The simple answer to all these questions is that Christ *humbled himself*. From the time the Spirit conceived him in Mary's womb through his burial in Joseph's tomb, Jesus willingly gave up the full use of his divine power and glory. He humbled himself to the point that he – the Creator of angels – was strengthened by them to continue his mission. This Jesus – God's Son in humble humanity – is our perfect High Priest.

He prayed to the One who could spare him, but he never rebelled. His prayers were spoken in recoil, not refusal. He looked at that cup of suffering like a child

might look at a spoonful of foul-tasting medicine. But he held his nose and took that medicine. And so he healed us.

He prayed, **“Not my will but yours be done.”** How different from us! Though we don’t pray it, in our heart of hearts we often think it: *“My will be done.”* We want what we want. This is often reflected in how we budget our time, spend our money, in how we think, in what we say and in what we do. **“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way”** (Isaiah 53:5). It’s so hard to pray, *“Your will be done”* and mean it.

Thanks be to God! Jesus, our High Priest, prayed it perfectly for us. And not only did he pray perfectly, he obeyed perfectly too.

II. Perfect in the Way He Obeyed

If it’s hard to pray, *“Your will be done”* – and it is – imagine how hard it is to actually do God’s will. That’s what the writer was talking about when he wrote, **“He learned obedience from what he suffered.”** The writer is taking us from Gethsemane where Jesus prayed for God’s will to be done to Golgotha where Jesus carried out God’s will. In this sense Jesus learned obedience. Obedience went from the theoretical to the practical. Jesus experienced what it meant to obey his Father’s will: the mockery, the scourge, the nails and thorns, crucifixion, death and the grave.

To use an imperfect illustration: Ask a couple on their wedding day if they will love and honor each other in their marriage, and you hear a hearty *“I will.”*

But then the husband has to tell his buddies to go on that fishing trip without him, because his wife doesn’t want him to spend the money they need to pay the bills. Or the wife has to tell her girlfriends to go to lunch without her because her husband needs her help at home. That’s what obedience is like. It means painful self-denial and sacrifice.

Sadly, we don’t always follow through on our promises, whether it’s our confirmation vow or the promises we made on our wedding day. We don’t always obey God’s will. But Jesus did. Every time. He said, *“I will,”* and he did. He obediently went where the Father sent him. He endured the cross, scorning its shame. There our High Priest offered himself in sacrifice to pay for the sins of the world.

Our text says, **“Once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”** A better translation might be *“once he reached his goal”* or *“after he had finished his work.”* Does that sound familiar? Jesus cried out from the cross, **“It is finished”** (John 19:30). Interestingly, the word *“finished”* and the word *“perfect”* both come from the same Greek root. If Jesus had prayed perfectly in our place but failed to obey perfectly – in other words, if Jesus had lived a perfect life but refused to suffer and die for sinners – he would not be our perfect High Priest. We would not be saved. But Jesus finished his work. And so he is **“the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”**

“All who obey him” – that bothers you, doesn’t it. I thought salvation was by grace alone through faith in Jesus alone. And so it is! Here’s the thing: Faith is obedience to God. John wrote: **“This is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ”** (1 John 3:23). God not only invites faith in Jesus. He commands it. He requires it. And then, through that word of command and invitation, the Spirit works to give us the gift of faith in our Savior. Through the gospel the Spirit works in our hearts so that we turn from our own works and trust in Christ alone, so that we rely on him as our perfect High Priest.

That he is. We see it in the way he prayed. We see it in the way he obeyed. He is our perfect High Priest. And, by the way, he’s not *too* perfect. He is exactly what we need. In Jesus’ saving name: Amen.

S.D.G.