



## **A Merciful and Faithful High Priest**

*Series: Hebrews – An Anchor for the Soul*

Hebrews 2:14-18

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One of the most challenging things to being a preacher is realizing that you only have so many Sundays to preach in your lifetime. It is particularly so when you are trying to figure out how to preach a book like Hebrews. It could be really easy to miss the forest for the trees, if you know what I mean. Every verse, almost, is like giant Redwood that you are trying to cut down with a camp hatchet. In other words, you could preach a number of sermons with a number of themes from any one of them. I could preach in Hebrews for the rest of my life, but in doing so I would have to neglect other books. So this sermon series is an attempt, under the guidance and instruction of the Holy Spirit, to present this sermon to the Hebrew Christians in Rome and to retain its flow and focus. So let's take a moment to remember the overall direction of this sermon that we are studying together. We don't want to miss the forest for the trees but rather we want to keep the truth that we are studying each week grounded in the overall message of the letter, right? That's the way it was meant to be read.

The Hebrew Christians, you remember, were facing hardship and persecution, the temptation to quit, to give up, maybe to return to their old lives and abandon Christ, altogether. Many of them had lost jobs, friends, their place in society, been cast out of their families -- all for their faith in Christ. As a result, some people's faith was hanging by a thread. Still others were determined to be faithful, to be resolute and to stand firm in their faith, but it was really difficult. In either case, they each needed strength and encouragement to endure.

So, to these believers, and to us, the author of Hebrews writes words that will encourage, challenge, and uplift them and give them the strength to persevere. Think about how he does it. He first gives to them, in chapter 1, a vision of Jesus, a picture of the greatness, the glory, the majesty, the power and the rule of Jesus. He holds forth Christ as the final word

of God, the radiance of His glory, the purifier of sinners, and the heir of the universe and calls the Hebrews not to drift away from Him.

Then here in chapter 2, He talks to us about the truth that though we may not see it with our eyes right now, Jesus reigns over the eternal and lasting Kingdom of God. This world in which we live is coming to an end but there is coming a new heavens and a new earth – a kingdom of peace and joy, of the glory of God, in which the faithful will enjoy fellowship with God forever.

He has reminded his readers that Christ has made this future glory possible for sinners like us by tasting eternal death for us, in our place, on our behalf. He has spoken to his readers of the way that Christ has acted to restore the broken image of God in us and that it was right that He would suffer in order to become the perfect Savior for fallen men and women.

He has spoken to us of the solidarity, the unity, the cohesion, the standing that we have in and with Christ – how Jesus is not ashamed to call us His brothers; how because we are united to him by faith, through Him we know God the Father in a way that unbelievers in this world do not and cannot; how in solidarity with us Christ leads His people in the worship the Father; how Christ has given us an example of how to live by faith and hold fast to trust in God when we suffer persecution and trial, hardship, hatred, and mocking and when few believed our message. Then last, the writer of Hebrews encouraged us by reminding us that the very fact that the church exists, that Christians exist in this world, is in itself a testimony, a proof of the reality of the Father's grace and the power of the gospel. That is a great deal in a couple of chapters.

They needed to hear these things. They needed this truth, this encouragement for their souls. We need it. Faithfully walking with Christ, loving and following Jesus is costly and it's hard and we need encouraged with solid, soul-nourishing gospel truth in order to remain faithful, right? But, as we have talked about, the persecution that the Hebrew Christians were facing was about to take a more sinister turn. The very real possibility of death was on the horizon under the persecution of Nero. What words could the writer of Hebrews possibly speak that would engage and alleviate even that fear? Well, that's what we are

going to look at today. We are going to see how Jesus kills not only the fear of death but also the fear of living. This is such a rich text. First, let's see that:

**Jesus Came To Disarm the Devil and Extinguish the Fear of Death (14-16)** The writer of Hebrews says: ***“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham.”*** (Hebrews 2:14–16, ESV) Now, there is a lot in these few verses – a world of truth, right? So let's consider what we are reading here. The writer of Hebrews is picturing Jesus as our liberator, as our deliverer, and the two main adversaries that he presents to us are the devil and death -- the power and fear of death.

Let's talk about death first. Death, since the fall, is a fact of our human experience. It is the just judgment and the consequence of our rebellion against God in the Garden and it is pervasive and universal. It has spread to all of humanity. Death is the direct result and the inevitable fruit of sin and man is haunted by its constant threat. The Hebrew Christians, in the political and social climate in which they lived, were particularly aware of the specter of death that disturbed them daily. There was a growing sense that death for their faith in Christ could be their lot any day. That was an obvious and open threat, especially to them.

But the truth is that death haunts all men – sickness, debilitating pain, aging, disease, the loss of natural strength – are all evidences that physical life has an expiration date. The fear of death is a silent master, a constant reality, which takes a number of forms and not always so obvious. For instance, you can see its dread grip in the way that men and women will delude themselves into denial about the reality of death. Most people refuse to allow themselves to think about ultimate realities – particularly unbelievers. They labor ever so hard to blind themselves and close their ears and refuse to consider the testimony of Scripture that ***“it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,”*** (Hebrews 9:27, ESV) when every soul will give an account to God. The trend of our culture to expunge every reference to God is an evidence of slavery to the fear of death. It underlies the pursuit of man to make a lasting name for himself, to try to make much of himself in order to live on in the memory of others, or to pursue a philosophy as empty as “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” It shows itself in the philosophers' deluded hopes that

death is “a melting into the sun,” or “a retreat into nothingness,” or “a becoming one with cosmos.”

But for all of man’s “whistling in the dark about death,” its slavery is plain to see. And the reason is because physical death is a picture of something deeper – spiritual death. You see its evidence all throughout the human race – war, hatred, enmity, strife, cruelty, wickedness, immorality, depression, fear, anxiety, despair, boredom, addiction to narcotics, alcohol, and sex. The worldly answer for such fear of death is avoid its clutches by amassing wealth, pursuing perpetual youth by strenuous exercise, nutritional supplements, magic makeup, or expensive treatments. The unrelenting hunger for adventure, the thrill of falling in and out of love, the lust to satisfy every whim, to accomplish the bucket list, the pounding quest for novelty, for more sensual pleasure, for more thrills, for more power, the unsatisfied restlessness and yearning for what cannot be found – this is the response to our fear of death. Anything to keep our minds off the reality of death. Sin has placed a death sentence upon us and none of these things, that man so feverishly pursues, can lift its dread hand. Slavery to the fear of death – physical death and spiritual death – rightly describes all of lost humanity.

And behind death, the writer of Hebrews sees the power of the devil, who uses God’s righteous judgment against sin to bring to death all human beings who sin. The devil is not a fairytale, not an imaginary being to the author of Hebrews – he is real and he is powerful. Understand what he’s getting at here. The devil did not create death. Death was the divine sentence pronounced against sinners in the Garden of Eden. Death is the power of Satan in the sense that he brought death into the human existence when he seduced Adam and Eve to rebel against God through his lies and deception. This monumental fall allowed the reality of death to enter into the human experience. And the specter of death has been a reality in our lives ever since. As Jesus said of Him: **“He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”** (John 8:44, ESV) The devil has the power of death. What gives death its power is sin, unforgiven sin. The wages of sin is death – physical and spiritual death.

And so, the devil makes it his business to keep men and women under the sway of death by slandering God, by denying the power of the gospel, by confusing its simplicity, by attempting to turn mankind away from the salvation that is found in Christ, to hold forth all

these promised ways of avoiding the power of death, by distracting mankind from real and ever-present realities, or by leading people to ignore the reality of death altogether. He purposefully operates, this liar, deceiver and murderer, in order to keep men in their sins, under the judgment of God, deaf and unresponsive to the good news of the gospel, in a never-ending cycle of spiritual and physical death. This is the way that the vast, vast majority of humanity lives, but it should not be that way for the Christian.

As I said earlier, the power of death, the fear of death, the power of the devil was not nearly so subtle when it came to the Hebrew Christians facing the very real possibility of death for their faith in Christ. They were tempted to avoid death by compromise, by defection from Jesus, by abandoning the faith, by melting back into the rest of godless humanity. And the message of the author of Hebrews to them was, “Don’t do it! You are not like the rest of mankind. Death should hold no fear for you. Don’t try to silence its threats by compromise, by abandonment of Christ, by wasting your life like the rest of mankind that tries to silence the reality of physical and spiritual death by numbing themselves with worldly antidotes to a spiritual problem. Your Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ, came to disarm the devil and extinguish the fear of death and liberate you from its clutches.” Just follow with me the train of thought here. This is awesome.

***Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things...*** You and I, we are human beings. Flesh and blood beings – not angels, not gods. And since the children whom God loves, whom Christ loves and desires to save are human, He took upon Himself the very same nature as us. To deliver us, Christ became one of us. Here’s how...

***That through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery...*** Jesus did all of this for one reason –so that He could die. In His divine nature alone, Christ could not die. He had to become a human precisely so He could die. By His death, Jesus dealt profoundly with the guilt and punishment of sin and disarmed the devil. That is what the word that is translated as “destroy” really means. It means to make someone powerless, to make them ineffective, or put them out of use. Jesus came to render the devil powerless as it regards the Christian and death. We no longer have to be afraid of death, or be driven by the fear of death to distraction or denial or self-delusion, or be under the weight of spiritual death at

work in our minds, our hearts, and our souls. How does Jesus do that? We'll see in verses 17 and 18. And then he says,

***For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham...*** He is not simply flattering us here. He is stating a fact. There were angels, along with Lucifer, the devil, that rebelled against God. God did not rescue them. He did not pursue them for repentance and restoration. There was no mercy found for them. They were not made in God's image and they were not the object of His saving, compassionate, and merciful love. God does not love the angels like He loves us.

The Lord does not give His help to the angels, but He does to the offspring of Abraham, which is a Hebraic way of saying, "those who know Him through faith in His Son." And this word "help" is a powerful word. It's not the idea of just lending a helping hand. It is the idea of pursuing, chasing after, going after someone who is in need in order to rescue them. Ok, so how does Jesus do this? Let's see.

**How Jesus Does It (17)** Look at verse 17, ***"Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people."*** (Hebrews 2:17, ESV) Beloved, we are standing on holy ground. This is glorious stuff. Think about this. The devil wields the power of death and the power of death is unforgiven sin. So the way to break the devil's power and deliver mankind from the slavery of death is to deal a deathblow to sin and that is just what Jesus did.

He became like one of us, in every respect, except sin so that He could become a merciful and faithful high priest in God's service. Now this is the first place that we see Jesus referred to as our high priest, but it will not be the last. Calling Jesus our high priest looks back to the OT and the OT sacrificial system. If you have been here on Wednesday nights, this is going to come alive for you, but even if you haven't, you can get the picture. What was the role of the high priest in the nation of Israel? Their responsibility was two-fold. First, it was the job of the high priest to represent God to the people. That was the reason for all of their priestly apparel that pointed to the holiness, righteousness and glory of God. By their dress, their character, their teaching, they represented God to the people of Israel. But, just as

importantly, they represented the people before God, serving God in the temple/tabernacle, offering prayers on behalf of the people, and offering the various sacrifices, particularly on the Day of Atonement when he would enter into the very presence of God and sprinkle the blood of a sacrifice for forgiveness of sins on the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant, which was the throne of God on earth. As a representative of the people, he wore the names of the 12 tribes of Israel on the breastplate that he wore, bearing their names on his heart before God. All of this, of course, pointed forward to Jesus Christ, who is the Great High Priest over the household of God.

The writer of Hebrews takes special care here to tell us that Jesus is both merciful and faithful as the high priest in the service of God. Merciful toward us – fully sensitive to our needs, fully identifying with us in our suffering as result of sin, having compassion on us as sinners, representing God to us. And faithful to God – fully accomplishing the demands of His role as high priest for us, representing us before God, faithfully obedient to God in all things, culminating in His death on the cross so that He could accomplish the one thing most necessary to destroy the power of Satan and rescue us from death’s power and fear – propitiation for our sins.

Propitiation is a big word, but it is a word that we must understand or be forever lost. Propitiation is what Jesus accomplished when He died on the cross, in our place, fully God but also fully one of us. Propitiation is the turning away of God’s just wrath against us for our sins and the bearing away of the guilt of all of our sins, by enduring the wrath and guilt of all of our sins – past, present, and future – on the cross in our place. It was man who sinned against God, man who stood condemned before God – not mankind in the abstract, but you and me. And it was man who must satisfy divine justice that was demanded from sin and rebellion. But not just any man – the only man who could do it – Jesus Christ. So Jesus became a man, our high priest, so that our high priest He could satisfy divine justice for us by offering the only sacrifice that would work – His own blood, His own righteous life.

In order for Christ to deliver us from the power of sin and death, God’s Son had to experience the process common to all flesh and blood, the experience of death, but not any death. It was absolutely necessary for this pure, undefiled, spotless Savior to take upon Himself in death the weight and burden of our sin, doing for us on the cross, what we could not do for ourselves, obtaining the pardon for our sins and the removal of our guilt which

we receive through faith in Him. He bore our names before God the Father on the cross, and cancelled the guilt of every sin recorded against us, forever.

So, how does this disarm the devil? How does this take away the fear of death? Here's how. The only weapon that the devil can use to destroy us is our sin. But if your sin is forgiven and the wrath of Almighty God has been turned away from you because of Christ's death in your place, paying your sentence, then the devil is disarmed and the fear of death is defeated. We still die physically because we live in a world of sin and in a sin-affected body that we need exchanged for a new, glorified one and a new heaven and a new earth. But we can only receive those through physical death. But physical death is no longer a terror – not for true Christians. Physical death is no longer a terror because the judgment that awaits every sinner after physical death has already been endured by Jesus for you. Paul declared that through the death and resurrection of Christ, ***“Death is swallowed up in victory.” “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*** (1 Corinthians 15:54–57, ESV)

Death's sting is sin, but Jesus Christ has carried our sins before the judgment of God at the cross. Sin's power to condemn us is found in the law, but Christ endured the condemnation of the law for us. Christ has faced death and been raised from the dead. He is the resurrection and the life! Physical death holds no fear because spiritual death, the suffering of Hell, has been defeated by Jesus' death on the cross. The devil is powerless over you. The sting of death has been removed from his hand. The fear of death and the distractions or denials or self-delusions that it spawns in the human heart, no longer have sway over you.

How the Hebrew Christians needed to hear that. How we need to hear and believe that. Physical death holds no fear because spiritual death has been defeated. Through this work of propitiation, Christ has destroyed not only the fear of death, but also the fear of living.

**Jesus Destroys Not Only the Fear of Death But Also the Fear of Living (18)** That is the heart of this last verse. The devil does not give up. Sin does not give up in the life of a Christian. The slavery of the fear of death still tries to master you. The devil still holds forth the false promise that sin is more satisfying than serving God, still holds forth as desirable the



distractions and delusions of life apart from God as something to be desired., still tries to deceive us about God's character, about the power of Christ's blood to forgive, about the power of the Holy Spirit to make us obedient. Sin still tries to master us and lead us into death. The fear of death will still try to influence our desires and try to entice us to satisfy every whim, to accomplish the bucket list, to pursue novelty, more sensual pleasure, more thrills, more power, it still plays the drumbeat of unsatisfied restlessness and yearning for what cannot be found in any other place than Christ. Jesus said, ***“The thief (speaking of the devil) comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10, ESV)*** How do we endure when we are tempted in this regard? It can make us fearful to live. But it shouldn't.

The writer of Hebrews tells us: ***“For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” (Hebrews 2:18, ESV)*** The fear of death is conquered and so is the fear of living faithfully until you die. Our help for living is more than sufficient for our need. Our help is Christ and He helps in real and powerful ways because He was one of us, and He has suffered real temptation. Jesus's help is not theoretical, or academic, but personal because He has lived as one of us. He suffered temptation – pride, envy, lust, hatred, self-gratification and the like – but even more He suffered the full force of the temptation to forsake His calling, to mistrust the Father, to forsake the Father and to forsake us. This is what was at the heart of the temptations in the wilderness, in the dealings with His family that thought Him crazy, in the temptations from Peter to avoid the cross, in the brutal temptations of Gethsemane.

Jesus suffered the full force and relentless onslaught of temptation and never once yielded to it, but resolutely refused its power. His temptation was not less than ours, but far, far more. Sometimes people will say, “How can that be if Jesus never sinned, if He couldn't sin?” The answer, beloved, is this: Christ knew the full force of temptation in a way that we have not because in every instance, He withstood it to the end. He never gave in.

And because He has suffered such temptation, He comes to our aid. He is able to help – the idea is to run to us in our need.

These Hebrews Christians were not only facing the temptations common to all of us, but especially the temptation to be unfaithful to God, to give up their calling, to avoid death at all costs. What an encouragement to them and to us that our Savior and High Priest had endured similar and far greater temptations, suffered more, yet emerged victorious. He understood and He stood ready to help. And He does.

He removes our fears as the One who has tasted death and temptation and conquered them both. He speaks to us truth in the midst of lies and sets our minds to rest as they are stayed upon Him. He brings His word to bear in our lives with power and we receive it and believe it. He reminds us continually of the reality of fullness of forgiveness. Nothing is as debilitating and demoralizing as the sense of failure when we fail and sin. It breaks our will to continue pursuing Christ and holiness when we see how we fail. But Jesus is able to help us in temptation because He declares to us, clearly and unmistakably, by His Word and His saving work, that our sin is forgiven and that our guilt is taken away. We are given a fresh start to pursue Him and walk with Him. He teaches us, disciplines us, and gives to us of His own invincible and available power. He responds to prayer, fully dependable, always available. He who endured the greatest suffering of all, the bearing of human sin and separation from God, and yet triumphed, is fully able to help anyone who turns to Him. He is able to help us in the moments of fierce temptation. ***“Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” (Hebrews 7:25, ESV)*** That is life and that is freedom from the devil’s power and slavery to the fear of death.

People talk about freedom, they pursue all sorts of avenues to freedom, they immerse themselves in sin and call it freedom, but the only truly free people in the world are those who have been freed from the power of the devil, from the power of sin, and from slavery to the fear of death, through Jesus Christ.

Are you free? Then live like it, Christian. Do you want to be free? Then come to Christ today and find true freedom.

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