

"PROTESTANTS IN NEED OF A PRIEST"

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

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Have you ever had a crisis of faith?

I mean have you ever had a time when you found yourself entertaining doubts about the existence of God, or the love of God or the ability of God?

Have you ever been desperate and in your desperation wondered if God was truly there to meet your need?

I am talking about those times when your faith was on the line - when it was decision time -

would you actually trust God or would you find another way?
could you actually continue to believe what you all along said you believed or would your beliefs change?

I've observed many men and women in the crises of life -

A father whose child dies after a protracted and painful illness.

A wife whose husband leaves her.

A man whose business fails.

A woman who feels herself withering from the lack of intimacy.

A young person who fears life or another whose parents divorce.

And I have sometimes seen them at that point in life - bail out.

I've seen them turn their back on the God they said they knew.

I've seen them at that time of decision, chose another way for their lives.

The English author and professor of literature, C.S. Lewis faced such a crisis of faith.

He was 58 years of age when he married for the first time.

The next four years of his life were by his own report the most exhilarating and enjoyable he had ever known.

Though his wife Joy was diagnosed with cancer shortly before their marriage, the cancer was soon in remission and all seemed well.

But the disease returned in full fury and four years after their marriage Joy was dead.

Lewis was devastated.

He later wrote "You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you.

"It's easy to say you believe a rope (is) strong as long as you are merely using it (tie) a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn't you then first discover how much you really trusted it?" (A Grief Observed p25)

Well Lewis' faith was on the line and I want you to listen to some of groaning of his soul as he wrestles with his faith in God:

I find myself asking the question "Where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms" of my grief. "When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing God (and) you remember (to) turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will - or so it feels - be welcomed with open arms.

"But go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. the longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the window. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited....Why is he so present in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?"

"It is not (I think) that I am in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all', but, 'So this is what God is really like' (- silent, uncaring).

Lewis was truly in a crisis of faith.

Have you ever had a crisis of faith?

Are you perhaps in the midst of one now?

Oh maybe it has not been brought on by something as dramatic as a death or a divorce but maybe your crisis is just a slow erosion of confidence in God's goodness or wisdom.

And you find yourself wondering if following Him is worth it.

You don't even know what your options are but you are in a crisis of faith.

Please open your Bible to the book of Hebrews - chapter 2.

The Israelites, we are reminded in Hebrews, chapter 3, faced a real crisis of faith when they were told by God to go into the territory called Canaan.

The reconnaissance team came back and most of them said it was impossible - God or no God it would be deadly to try to go into that country.

The crisis came - could they trust God?

Their answer was "no" and they turned back from following God.

The author of Hebrews knew that illustration was appropriate to his readers because apparently they too were facing some large obstacles in life.

We don't know for certain what the obstacles were but from the text we see these Christians were in a crisis of faith.

Look at

2:1 "Don't drift away"

2:18 "Because Jesus suffered when he was tempted he is able to help those who are being tempted."

3:6b "And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast."

3:12 "See to it brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God"

4:1 "Be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of God's rest"

4:11 "Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall.."

Do you hear what is apparently hanging in the balance?

The issue is whether they will continue to trust and follow God or not.

It wouldn't be a crisis of faith if that weren't the potential outcome.

When you or anyone else faces a problem in life and you feel strong to handle it and you stand in there until it's over - that may be a battle but it is no crisis.

It's a crisis when you know you have no strength to fight any longer.

It's a crisis when you know you are about to give up.

It's a crisis when you don't know what you will do next.

It's a crisis when you are afraid you will do what formerly was unthinkable - you might walk away from God or at least put him on the back shelf.

It's a crisis when you are out of resources - when you know it is humanly impossible to go on - when you need supernatural help or you just know will cave in.

It's a crisis of faith when you aren't even certain that supernatural help is available.

I can only imagine the stories we would hear if we opened the microphones and let you tell of your experiences!

What do we do at those times?

How do we keep from dropping out, from giving up, from just going into neutral and coasting?

I think "spiritual coasting" is the most likely for many of us.

Oh, we wouldn't go off the deep end and curse God - we would probably keep going to church and saying all the right words but our hearts wouldn't be in it and because of our crisis of faith we would just begin to coast.

How do we keep from doing that when we hit those times of crisis of faith?

God gives us His answer through the author of Hebrews beginning at verse 14 of chapter 4.

But before we look at the answer I want you to be certain with me that the question being answered in verse 14 and following is still the same as we have been discussing.

4:14b "...let us hold firmly to the faith we profess"

4:16b "...so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need."

Yes, it is the same question: "How do we keep from bailing out on God or just going into neutral when our faith is in crisis?"

And the answer is: WE NEED A PRIEST!

That's right - even Protestants need a Priest.

Now to explain what I mean by that I want you to look more closely at the passage that was read earlier: Chapter 4:14 - 5:10.

I think most of you know the chapter divisions in your Bible were not placed there by the authors but were added only a couple of hundred years ago.

It is unfortunate that the break for chapter 5 was placed what is in the middle of the thought the author is developing in these verses.

The thought begins with 4:14 and continues through 5:10.

And what the author does in verses 14-16 is give us a specific and succinct answer to our question AND THEN he gives some background explanation to that answer by what he tells us in 5:1-10.

I want to reverse that and have you look with me at 5:1-10 first and then we will conclude by looking at the specific answer itself in 4:14-16.

I have already said what we need is a Priest and the author is definitely developing that theme when in 5:1-4 he describes the high priest of the Old Testament.

In V 1 he reminds his readers of what they probably already knew.

A high priest was selected from one particular family - the descendants of Levi (one of the 12 sons of Jacob) AND the high priest was responsible for representing the people to God.

Anyone with any awareness at all understood that unholy human beings wouldn't stand a chance with a holy and just God unless someone stood as a mediator between God and them.

And so the high priest would bring sacrifices, as God had commanded, and thereby turn the wrath of God away from the people.

The truth is that unless the justice of God was responded to by the shedding of blood (the payment for sin) - the people would rightly be destroyed by a holy and just God.

In V2 the author tells us something else about the high priest.

The priest doesn't just go through the motions of offering sacrifices BUT the priest has a heart for the people he is representing.

He is able to deal gently with the people he represents because he too is subject to weakness - he too is human.

He knows what the people are going through because he goes through it himself.

In fact, V3, the Old Testament high priest is so much like the people he represents that he is himself a sinner - and so before he can offer sacrifices for the sins of the rest of the people he has to offer sacrifices for his own sin.

And finally, V4, the third characteristic of the OT high priest is that he

couldn't just independently decide to take on the role of a priest - he had to be appointed by God.

A high priest is selected from among humans to represent humans. He offers sacrifices to God turn away the wrath of God against sin. AND he is not self-appointed but God-appointed.

The author has given that quick background of OT high priests to get to his greater interest - the New Testament High Priest - Jesus Christ.

In fact what the author points out is that while the OT high priests were similar in some regards to Christ - namely in that they represented the people before God by bringing sacrifices for sin - they, the OT priests, were inadequate, imperfect and inferior to Christ and what he would do as a High Priest.

And so in verses 5-10 he points out the greater and far superior High Priesthood of Jesus.

A. V5 Yes, just like the OT high priests Jesus didn't independently take that role upon himself - God called Him.

BUT Jesus didn't become a high priest by virtue of being from the family line of Levi - Jesus is the High Priest of his people because he is the Son of God.

AND he is not a priest temporarily like the O.T. priests, Jesus is priest forever, as earlier symbolized by Melchizedek. (We'll learn more about Melchizedek in chapter 7)

Yes, the OT high priests had a legitimate position but Jesus' position is infinitely superior - God the Son is acting as the mediator between us and God.

Jesus is the Priest I need.

B. The second thing the author wants us to know about Jesus' superior priesthood is found in verses 7 and 8.

Back in verse 1 we were told that every high priest had to be selected from among men - had to be a human being.

A high priest couldn't represent human beings before God unless the high priest was himself a human being.

Back at the end of chapter 2, which we looked at a few weeks ago, we learned that Jesus is fully a human being even while he is fully God.

But here God wants us to get some sense of how true that is - not just theoretically but experientially.

Jesus became a human being.

What does verse 7 say? "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death."

What must Jesus have experienced when, weak from his fasting, Satan came to him and offered him the world and an escape from the future Jesus was facing.

I think we are mistaken if we think that was easy for Jesus - If he just quoted some OT Bible verses and "puff" Satan was gone.

Nonsense- Jesus is human - the struggle was intense. It was a crisis.

But when you read of Jesus crying out in prayer, what situation in Jesus' life most readily comes to mind?

The Garden of Gethsemene, of course.

Three of the Gospel writers give us some idea of the emotional pain and spiritual struggle Jesus experienced as he faced the crucifixion.

Jesus was crying out for help in the face of an overwhelming calamity. A crisis of faith.

With loud cries and tears he prayed and sought the Father. Jesus wasn't faking it - Jesus entered fully into the human experience.

The pain of your crisis of faith could not be any greater than was the Lord Jesus' pain.

But please don't misunderstand Jesus' crying.

He was not crying about the physical pain he would face.

Many people have faced terrible physical suffering with peace and courage.

Was Jesus just a wimp?

Contrary to some who try to make too much of the physical suffering of Jesus and thereby appeal to our sympathy, we focus on the wrong pain if we think primarily of thorns, beatings and nails.

Jesus' pain was physical alright but the deepest pain, pain felt not just in his flesh but in his soul, was what he knew he would experience when hanging on that cross - he would bear the sins of all God's people and he, Jesus the infinite God/Man would be separated from the Father.

Jesus faced a disintegration that was unimaginable.

And when it came he cried out "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Does Jesus know pain?

He knows a pain as deep as any mother or father whose child has died.

He knows a pain as sharp as any man whose wife has left him.

He knows a pain as enduring as any parents whose children are destroying their lives, their futures and their eternity .

And when, in verse 8, it says that the Son of God learned obedience, it does not mean that he was formerly disobedient and had to learn how to be obedient -

BUT it means that he gained experiential knowledge of obedience.

Griffith Thomas wrote, "This is the difference between innocence and virtue. Innocence, like Jesus before he became a human, is life untested, while virtue is innocence tested and triumphant." (Hewitt 98)

Jesus is human - he has been through it - he knows our suffering - he is able to represent us before the Father.

Jesus is the Priest I need.

C. And in verse 9 we find again the third thing that every high priest does: Just as in verse 2, so here, we see that a high priest offers sacrifices for sins.

When it says that Jesus was made perfect it obviously does not mean that he was previously sinful.

The word "perfect" as used in many other places in the N.T. has to do with completeness.

By his obedience, obedience even to death on the cross for our sins, Jesus completed his task - he became the sacrifice for sins.

He perfected his high-priestly role - and he, as it says in v 9, became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

Jesus is the Priest I need.

Now please be careful - when you hear and read the words "eternal" and "salvation", don't too quickly assume that these are just other words for heaven when we die.

While heaven would certainly be a part, a big part, of what Jesus, as our "source" provides, what is the context of this statement?

Is the author of Hebrews here discussing only heaven?

No, he is discussing life now - lives in crisis now - people who are facing enormous challenges and tempted to give up.

**Now let's take all of this back to the basic answer God gives to the question of what we do when our faith is in crisis.

The answer stated so powerfully in 4:15-16 READ

As the author has already told us, Jesus knows by experience what it means to suffer.

Betsy Ten Boom, the sister of Corrie said to her sister one day while they were in the Ravensbruck Concentration Camp during WW II when Betsy could stand that "pit" no longer - "No pit is so deep that Jesus is not deeper still."

You can enter no painful experience with which he is not familiar and which he has not endured even more.

And when verse 15 says that Jesus sympathizes it means two very specific things.

Contrary to some variations in our English use of that word, in the Greek the word has to do with truly suffering with us when we suffer.

When we use the word we use it psychologically - "I am sincerely sorry for what you are going through"

But Jesus experiences it with you.

When your heart is broken his breaks.

When the pain reaches clear into soul - an ache that surpasses physical pain - he aches with you.

What does your crisis of faith feel like? He feels it.

But not only does he experience our experience as we experience it - the word sympathy in Greek carries the idea of ASSISTANCE!

5:9 said that Jesus as our High Priest is now the "source" of our salvation - our assistance now as well as later.

And so what does God say we are to do in the times of a crisis of faith?
 What are we to do when we have reached the end of our resources?
 What are we to do when we don't even seem to have faith to believe?

"LET US THEN APPROACH THE THRONE OF GRACE WITH
 CONFIDENCE THAT WE MAY RECEIVE MERCY AND FIND GRACE TO

HELP IN TIME OF NEED"

In those times of crisis we may and we must appeal to our Priest - Jesus.

In our crisis, in our weakness we lie to ourselves and say Jesus wouldn't understand.

In our crisis we lie to ourselves and say there is no reason why Jesus would help us.

In our weakness we lie to ourselves and we say we aren't even sure we want help - we just want to give up.

BUT JESUS says come, just come - approach the throne of grace with confidence.

That English translation "confidence" bothers me a little.

If by it, we mean, we must come with full faith and strong belief that God is and that he is the rewarder of them who diligently seek him - I won't make it.

Too often my faith is so weak - it seems non-existent.

But the word translated "confidence" may also be translated "bold frankness" or "speaking everything".

We come to Jesus telling him everything.

We come telling him how fearful we are, how weak we are, how little belief we have any longer in him or anything.

We come spilling out our feelings and our fears - but we come.

And Jesus, who knows those feelings, who knows those fears, take my poor halting, little-faith words and adds his strong words and meets my need.

Maybe all I do is stumble into his presence - but stumbling, I come.

And I find mercy - he forgives my weakness, my unbelief and I find grace to help in time of need.

And what help does Jesus in His love provide?

Does he remove the circumstances of our crisis?

Not often.

He enables us to endure.

In the Gospel of Luke it is recorded that when Jesus cried out with tears to the Father to "if possible remove this cup, this experience, from me" it says that an angel came and "strengthened him"

He still bore the sins of God's people on that cross.

He still endured separation from the Father.

BUT HE ENDURED! - AND SO CAN WE!

Jesus, my Priest, the High Priest I need.