

**Hebrews 2:9-18 (New International Version)**

9 But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

10 In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.

11 Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.

12 He says, "I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises."<sup>[a]</sup>

13 And again, "I will put my trust in him."<sup>[b]</sup> And again he says, "Here am I, and the children God has given me."<sup>[c]</sup>

14 Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—

15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

16 For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants.

17 For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for<sup>[d]</sup> the sins of the people.

18 Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

My study of this text from Hebrews opened my eyes to a number of impressive things. The letter to the Hebrews is the only book of the New Testament that goes into detail about Jesus as our great high priest. We Lutherans are not particularly interested in the work of priests. We don't call our clergymen by that title. The Roman Catholics like the title for their clergy, partly, if not entirely because of their peculiar belief that their clergymen, after they have been ordained, are given what they call "Indelible Character" which supposedly gives them the ability to change the bread and wine of Holy Communion into the body and blood of Jesus. In addition, then, they take the position that this changed body and blood is another sacrifice for our sins.

The writer of Hebrews describes Jesus as the merciful and faithful high priest. The High Priest in Old Testament times had the unique privilege of offer the sacrifice of the sacramental lamb on the Day of Atonement after he had sacrificed a lamb for his own sins. The writer uses that analogy in speaking of Jesus as the high priest who actually was holy and in his holiness was merciful to us and faithful to God our Father. Now he "comes running" to any believer who is in distress.

In speaking of Jesus as our merciful high priest, we are reminded that the Old Testament High Priest and his sacrifice of a lamb was symbolic, for no animal could be a substitute for guilty mankind. The reality is: by the grace of God Jesus tasted death for everyone. Jesus was that High Priest who, not symbolically, but actually died as the punishment for the sins of everyone: for you, for me and for the whole world.

Today is the last day of that season, and an opportunity to remember once again what the ongoing gifts of Christmas are. We have received mercy, certainty, and the promise of help. Is Christmas really getting old for you? A week and a half has passed since our Christmas celebration. Isn't it time to change the subject? This text urges us to take another look. There are precious gifts that we may not have opened yet. Let's take a look at how the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews describes our precious and on-going gifts.

v. 9. Jesus came as a baby in Bethlehem for one basic reason: He came to die for everyone. It is in that that the words of Simeon were fulfilled. He is the light for Gentiles and the glory of his people Israel. He died for everyone – and so you are reminded, that you can say, "I am one for whom Christ died."

v. 10. He brings many sons to glory. That's really two gifts. We are the children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. We aren't by nature. We are by nature under God's wrath, but through Christ we are members of God's family. So you can say, through Jesus I am the son of God. Yes, that applies to both males and females, because the word "son" refers to an heir. That's the other side of the gift. Because of Christ, our High Priest, we are assured of a home in glory.

v. 11. Jesus makes us holy. That is, we are separate from sin. Our sins are laid on Jesus and so God no longer charges our sins against us. We are part of God's family. So Jesus "is not ashamed to call us brothers."

All of this by the grace of God! Two words are used to describe what has been given to us. One is "grace." That means, undeserved kindness. It emphasizes the gift which God our Savior gives us. The other term is mercy. It also refers to things which are given freely, without a price that we must pay. But in the case of mercy, the emphasis is on the terrible condition of those who without mercy would be in. Jesus is our merciful high priest. He knows what suffering we would be under if he would not have shown us his mercy.

What, precisely, is life like without Christ's mercy. I think we get a picture from looking at the natural fears of infants. Children, according to some psychologists, have only two inborn fears. One is the fear of falling. Those of you who have infants have probably observed this. Children must be held firmly. If they sense they are falling it is a traumatic for them. The other inborn fear is a loud noise. It not only awakens an infant. It also traumatizes him. (Just as I was saying this in Sunday's sermon, a baby in one of the front pews began to cry! It wasn't a "plant.")

This period of history is often called "the age of anxiety," and it often seems that we haven't really gotten over our infant fears. At times our fears seem to be hagridden, like a witch is riding on our back. Many fears, however, have a basis in reality. The headline in the State Journal this morning predicts that as many as 65,000 jobs may be lost in Wisconsin this year. Doesn't that prompt anxiety? How was 2008 for you? For many people, savings accounts may have dropped significantly. Our nest egg may be more like a pullet. For others, health may have been falling. There may be evidence that a visit to the clinic is overdue and we wonder what the doctors going to find? Maybe you have noticed, as I have, that parts of your body are falling, notably, one's chest.

How about the loud noise? We have been "endowed with a mushroom shaped cloud," and while so far the lid has been kept on, will it remain that way? Terrorism is certainly a potential on-going problem since we live in a world in which militants are very ready to

blow themselves up if they can take enemies with them. We are becoming very familiar with anxiety.

There is more that causes us discomfort. That is our personal insignificance. One advantage to living in a small town is that we tend to be known. We got a laugh when we were preparing to move to Lake Mills. Johanna was in the store and somebody asked her if she lived in Lake Mills. When she told the woman we lived on county Rd. B near Setz's motel, the woman said, "Oh, the one with the hot tub?" Mostly, though, we feel like the astronomer looking into the galaxies in the sky. Gives you an idea of how insignificant you are.

For others there is also a feeling of futility of life. There are no winners, only survivors. Murphy's Law. Some say, Murphy is an optimist. Some may agree with Thomas Hobbes who observed that life is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. Loneliness is a real problem for many people, and we don't find consolation from other people. Like the man who hit his thumb with a hammer and was told, "Don't feel bad, you have nine good ones."

We have a merciful high priest who has gone thru life as a man. He knows what you are going thru and what you will go thru. Scripture tells us, "Don't be anxious about anything."

How could Jesus have made it clearer to you that he loves you as a dear brother or sister. If God spared not his own son, but delivered him up for us all, won't he also with him also freely give us all things.

We also have a faithful high priest. Rejoice in the Lord always. Christ was faithful to the task the Father gave him. In his faithfulness he was willing to taste death for all. For this very reason – that he might make you a member of the family of God. Read your life like the Jew reads his Bible. Go to the end and read forward to where you are today. You don't know what is going to happen in your life, not even tomorrow. But you know how your story ends. Remember the 72 sent out to announce the coming of God's Kingdom. They were so happy because of their successes in casting out evil spirits. Jesus told them, "Rejoice rather that your names are written in heaven."

During the worst part of WWII Winston Church stood before the British parliament and told them that an old friend of his observed that when he thinks of all the terrible things in his life, he realized that most of them never happened. Don't be anxious about anything, says St. Paul. Be concerned, yes, but don't act as if your life is out of control. In everything by prayer and petitions with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. The word "prayer" is a word which indicates communicating with God. It is a two way communication. Listen to what God says to you. He is our Father. Jesus is our Brother.

But speak also to him. He really is listening. The statement translated, "he is able to help" is a much more graphic word in the original. The original says, "He will run to our cry." He who suffered temptations knows what we are going through, and when we pray, he runs to our cry.

So on this last day of the Christmas Season take another look under the tree of the Cross of Calvary and see what great gifts you Great High Priest continues to give you. He is your merciful and faithful Savior who promises that he will run to your cry. May it assure you again that you can have a Merry Christmas.