

*Made like Us, Tempted like Us:
the Weakness of Jesus and the Perfecting of the Sinless High Priest in Hebrews 2-5.*

Midwest ETS, Chicago, March 2019 - Ed Neufeld

One of the perfections of Christ in Hebrews is that he is a merciful and faithful high priest, a sympathetic and compassionate priest for those who need propitiating help. That perfection will occupy us today. Our question: how did God arrange for this sinless priest to be merciful and sympathetic? The answer: by making this priest work hard for his sinlessness, by leaving him troubled and desperate in the face of strong temptations. In the words of Hebrews, Christ's temptations caused him suffering and left him weak. Though sinless, he came to know firsthand why people who love God would sin, and in that way he became gentle toward sinners.

Two Genesis characters will serve as examples, Cain and Joseph. Cain became angry with Abel. God said to Cain, "Why are you angry? ... Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it." Cain's rage was a temptation; although angry he had not yet sinned, but was close to it. As Paul wrote later, "In your anger do not sin." Cain did not rule over sin, but rather it defeated him; his anger led to sin. Joseph was well built and handsome, and Potiphar's wife said "Come to bed with me." She urged Joseph day after day, but he refused to go to bed with her or even be around her. Let us assume that Joseph felt the common young man's attraction to this ongoing sexual opportunity; in a word, he was tempted. But he ruled over it; he told her she was Potiphar's wife, he would not do this wicked thing and sin against God, and he did not. Sometimes God's people sin, as Cain, and sometimes they resist temptation and do not sin, as Joseph. The Gospels and Hebrews present Jesus as one tempted as we are, but who always chose like Joseph, never like Cain.

Louis Berkhof believes it was impossible for Christ to sin "because of the essential bond between the human and the divine natures."¹ Wayne Grudem also holds that it was not possible for Jesus to have sinned, because "the union of his human and divine natures prevented it."² Note that this impossibility rests not on the biblical writers, nor on the creeds themselves, but on an inferred result of the creeds.³ The Scripture does not say one way or the other if Jesus could have sinned. But the Gospel writers seem to assume that Jesus could have sinned, the devil certainly assumed it, the argument of Hebrews requires that Jesus saw himself as capable of sinning, and we know that in Gethsemane, Jesus fought with all his might to obey his calling rather than rebel against God's will. The writer to the Hebrews finds no tension between Christ's common human struggle to obey God and the Son's Perfect Divinity. Since the robust Christology of Hebrews

¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (new ed.; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1996), 318.

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 539.

³ Donald Bloesch more accurately says, "the sinlessness of Jesus is pictured as a result of a conscious decision and intense struggle rather than being a formal consequence of his divine nature (Heb 4:15; 5:7-9; 12:2-4)" in *Jesus Christ: Savior & Lord* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 55.

holds the Son's deity and weak humanity together without discomfort, we are compelled to do the same.

To support the perfecting of Christ's compassion, we will observe ten phrases in Hebrews, five from Hebrews 2:10–18 and five from Hebrews 4:14–5:10. First, however, some observations from the Gospels.

In Gethsemane, Jesus was “greatly distressed and troubled (Mk 14:33).” “‘My soul is very sorrowful, even to death,’ he said. Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed.” Jesus dreaded the ordeal of the coming day, and wanted to escape. “All things are possible for you. Remove this cup.” He also wanted to submit, “not my will but yours.” Jesus experiences both the desire to flee and the desire to obey, he fears death and he fears God more. There was nothing perfunctory or rote about this submission to the Father's will.

The other Gospel episode of temptation occurs at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when the Spirit led him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. Since the Gospel writers do not record the distress and turmoil of Jesus that we find in Gethsemane, we can read this wilderness story as if the devil's enticement was feeble, and as if Jesus was unmoved except for hunger. More realistically, it was a fierce battle on both sides, the devil desperate to divert the Son, and Jesus equally determined not to lose his way. Perhaps our Lord's prayer emerged here. “Father in heaven, may your name be honoured, may your kingdom come, may your will be done, give me daily food, lead me not into temptation, save me from the evil one.”

In Matthew and Mark it says that after the devil left him, angels came and ministered to Jesus. Jesus had fought with all his might; he seems to be spent and totally worn out. He needed angelic first responders. Did they bring food? Perhaps. But Mark says that angels came to help him, and Mark's Gospel says nothing about Jesus going without food. Food is not the main reason why the angels came. I expect he knew giving in would be disastrous, but it was a battle to not give in. Can we imagine Jesus saying to the angels, “that was so close, I would not have lasted two more days.” He suffered when he was tempted. He learned about obedience from his suffering.

The Gospels treat both the wilderness and Gethsemane temptations as real temptation, and they do not assume these were his only temptations. The stories assume that for Jesus sinning was entirely possible, and in both cases his obedience is a genuine victory, not at all guaranteed at the outset. That is, he was made like us, tempted like us, and surrounded by weakness, yet without sin. Now to Hebrews.

(1) *He was perfected through sufferings*, 2:10. The eternal Son, though sinless, was not yet the perfect priest. He needed also to suffer, and it was fitting for the Creator to perfect the champion of our salvation through sufferings. The previous verse spoke of the “suffering”

(singular) of death, but “sufferings” (plural) in 2:10 widens the topic to more than just death.⁴ Heb 5:8–10 tells us that Christ learned obedience from what he suffered, and being perfected in that way, learning about obedience from his suffering, he was appointed as high priest. Today we consider that learning of obedience, that perfection which God achieved in Christ by means of Christ’s sufferings.

(2) *He was made like us in every way* (2:17a). Christ came to help Abraham’s descendants, and for this reason he needed to be made like his brothers and sisters in every way. Whatever kind of help it is that Christ offers, it requires him to have the same experience of life as his brothers and sisters. Being perfected through suffering, mentioned earlier, is bound up with being made like us in every way, that is, his likeness to us here pertains specifically to sufferings.

A few lines earlier, the writer states that all the followers God gave Christ were subject to slavery their entire lives through their fear of death (2:15). So “made like us in every way” will include the dread of death. Christ shared this with us and battled it in prayer, with loud cries and tears. This will be a part of his being made like us in every way, and perfected through suffering.

(3) *Christ became a merciful and faithful high priest* (2:17b). This is the central statement of 2:10–18, and the central statement of this paper. This is the perfection that occurred in Jesus because he was made like us in every way and therefore shared our sufferings. Becoming “merciful and faithful” will appear in different words in Heb 4–5.

He was made like his brothers and sisters in every way *in order that* he might become a merciful and faithful high priest, not simply to become a high priest, but to perform mercifully and faithfully. The writer draws attention to “merciful” by bringing it to the front of the Greek clause. God insisted upon a high priest who would mercifully and faithfully propitiate the sins of the people. The priest must never condemn or delay propitiating, must never be critical or careless in atoning the people’s sins, but rather must be unfailingly compassionate and prompt, that is, merciful and faithful. This was God’s purpose in making him like us in every way.

(4) *He himself suffered when tempted* (2:18a). At first glance, “he suffered when tempted” would describe a painful fight against the pull of temptation, any temptation. But commentators often assume that “suffering” here must refer to the suffering of death, and reshape the phrase into “he was tempted *when* he suffered” or “he was tempted *by* his suffering.” This is a possible Greek reading, but not the easiest one. The phrase as it stands is not ambiguous: suffering did not cause temptation, temptation caused suffering.⁵ He suffered when he was tempted. The clearest evidence of Christ’s suffering in Hebrews is the loud cries and tears of 5:7, which are not the cries and tears of death by crucifixion, but the cries and tears of prayers

⁴ David Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection: An Examination of the Concept of Perfection in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, SNTSMS 47 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1982), 68–69.

⁵ Marcus Dods, *Expositor’s Greek Testament*, vol 4, ed W. Robertson Nicoll (1897; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 1970), 270.

before the event, prayers of one dreading death, prayers that according to Hebrews showed godly submission and the learning of obedience. He himself suffered when he was tempted, and by this experience, probably a repeated experience, he became a priest who was merciful and faithful.

What kind of suffering when tempted would cause Jesus to mercifully and faithfully propitiate the sins of his people? What kind of suffering when tempted would substantially increase Jesus' readiness to make atonement for sinners? What kind of suffering when tempted would erase any possibility of Jesus being judgmental or harsh when chronic sinners come to him for atonement?

This suffering requires Jesus seeing himself in a precarious position, dangerously close to sinning, battling to resist the attraction and submit to God. In short, sinning made sense to Jesus. Imagine him saying to himself, "no wonder they sin; this is fiercer than I thought," and to the Father, "you have no idea what it is like, it is a terrible fight," and the Father saying, "Perfect; that is just how a High Priest should speak to me. That is why I made you in every way like them, that is why I led you into temptation."

Jesus became motivated to propitiate people's sins compassionately and endlessly. It will not do to say Jesus does this because he is loving. He is loving, but Hebrews has something else in mind, a motivation that comes out of being made in all ways like us, and out of suffering when he was tempted. A Jesus who is *not* deeply attracted to sin and *not* shaken by the strength of its pull does not satisfy the logic of Hebrews. The sinlessness of Jesus occurs in a Jesus pulled toward sin with such vigor that he has ongoing compassion for those who do sin. Westcott rightly says that Christ's "sympathy with the sinner in his trial does not depend on the experience of sin but on the experience of the strength of the temptation to sin."⁶

(5) *He is able to help the tempted* (2:18b). The only kind of help mentioned in the surrounding lines is merciful propitiation. "Help" means "help the tempted and sinful by propitiating their sins," rather than "help them to resist before they actually sin." We find the same pairing between help and atonement in 4:16-5:1. In my loose paraphrase, "we should approach the throne of grace boldly to receive timely *help*, because every priest is appointed to *offer gifts and sacrifices for sins*." That is the help which the priest mercifully and sympathetically provides. The suffering that Jesus endured when he was tempted motivated him to mercifully and quickly provide this help. Other kinds of aid will be included, but the emphasis falls on forgiveness.⁷ Now to Heb 4-5.

(6) *He is able to sympathize with our weaknesses* (4:15a). The original readers were like many of us: they knew Jesus was sinless, the writer needs only two words to affirm that,

⁶ B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (1892; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 59.

⁷ Harold Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 96–7. "Christ 'is able' (δύναται) to give aid because, as a fellow sufferer, he is merciful and sympathetic; but also because, by his suffering, he has been brought to that position of honour and glory from whence true help comes." His "perfection involves both objective (exaltation) and subjective (personal preparation) dimensions."

“without sin;” but like us they did not believe he could sympathize with their weaknesses, and that the writer corrects at length.

The weaknesses that Jesus can sympathize with are specifically those weaknesses that coincide with temptation, and that lead others to sin. Jesus did not sin, but he shared our weakness in the face of temptation. God’s people often sin, as Cain did; but they also often resist and flee, as Joseph did. Jesus is not the only one to be weak and tempted and yet not sin; he is rather the only one who did that every time. This is how the Gospels and Hebrews portray him. He can sympathize with the weaknesses that coincide with temptation, and that often enough though not always lead the rest of us into sin.

We approach the throne of grace because we need forgiveness for sins, often chronic sins, repeated sins. What kind of Divine reception do we imagine to that approach? Anger? Frustration? Sadness? Our Lord’s face turned away? Hebrews says the High Priest receives us with *sympathy*, and God’s people need to hear this, because *sympathy* does not occur to us.

(7) *He was tempted as we are in every way* (4:15b). It is remarkable to read theologians who affirm the sympathy of Jesus for our weaknesses because he was tempted just as we are, and who then explain why it is not true. Consider three lines already covered. One, in the context of temptation and sin (2:17-18), we have a Jesus who was *made in every way as we are*. Two, we have a Jesus who is *able to sympathize with our weaknesses when tempted*; and three, we have a Jesus who was *tempted in every way just as we are*. We will yet see that Jesus knew himself to have the same weakness toward sin as the ignorant and wandering. Some fear we will take this too far, but the writer to the Hebrews fears that his readers will not take this far enough. The only protection he wants for Jesus is that Jesus never sinned.

We want a Jesus who was made like us in every way, but not quite. We want a Jesus who was tempted in all ways as we are, but not quite; who laboured under the same weakness as the ignorant and wandering, but not quite. Hebrews does not want that Jesus. We want the “not quite” because we cannot put anything else together with the Son’s deity. But Hebrews 1 has as full a description of the Son’s glorious deity as we find anywhere in the NT. The problem here is not Christ’s deity, it is our lack of imagination. The only protection Hebrews wants for Jesus is that he never sinned.

(8) *Every high priest has the same weakness as the ignorant and wandering* (5:2). Every high priest is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wandering, since he himself is surrounded by weakness. Every high priest proves this by making offerings for himself concerning sins. Heb 5:3 does not specify what the high priest offers, only that he offers something for himself concerning sins. The Aaronic high priest offered *sacrifices* for himself, which demonstrates his weakness regarding sin and temptation. Jesus also qualifies as weak: Jesus offered *prayers and pleadings* with loud cries and tears, also for himself concerning sins, that is, desperate prayers that he would not sin. Jesus shared the common dread of death that makes us all slaves, and he escaped this slavery only by offering up prayers and pleadings with loud cries and tears, praying

that he would do God’s will, not his own will. We do not see such intense suffering elsewhere in Hebrews, which suggests that “suffering when tempted” in 2:18 has more to do with the suffering in Gethsemane, or some similar event, than the suffering of crucifixion. Jesus’s experience of temptation did not cause him to separate himself from the ignorant and wandering, but rather he came to know himself as weak, and one of them.

In Synoptic terms, Jesus can ask either to have the cup removed, or to do the Father’s will. It is real temptation, a real choice. Isaiah puts these words in the Servant’s mouth, “I have not been rebellious, I have not turned away, I have offered my back for beating, I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting” (Isa 50:5–6). The Gethsemane stories and Hebrews’s loud cries and tears tell us how difficult it was for Jesus not to rebel against God, not to turn away.

(9) *He learned obedience from what he suffered* (5:8). It is when we are told to do what pains us, and from which we shrink, that we learn the meaning of obedience and submission. This suffering for Jesus was not separate from the suffering of humiliation, flogging, and crucifixion. But in the writer’s mind the foremost suffering occurred in the earlier battle of the Lord’s will, the prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears which exhibit fierce struggle and the dread of choosing obedience over escape.

(10) *And so he was made perfect* (5:9). We began today at Hebrews 2:10: Jesus was perfected through sufferings. Here we find that perfecting complete. He was made like us in every way, and he became merciful and faithful in helping us, in propitiating our sins, because he himself had suffered when he was tempted. He can sympathize with our weaknesses, because he was tempted in every way as we are. He was made in every respect as we are, and he was tempted in every respect as we are.

We need to imagine Jesus saying something like this to himself, after resisting strong temptation, “That was too close. I would not have lasted much longer. No wonder God’s people sin. May that never happen to me again. Why will this temptation not go away? Why am I pulled so strongly to something so disastrous?” We could imagine Joseph speaking to himself like this after fleeing Potiphar’s wife. Jesus was made in all ways as we are, and tempted in all ways as we are. He never sinned, but his temptations were desperate fights and left him overwhelmed with his own weakness. We should imagine Jesus saying to his Father, “you have no idea what it is like. I will *never* stop interceding for them.” And the Father responds: “That’s perfect! That’s just how their high priest should talk to me.” We may recoil from seeing Jesus in such a vulnerable position regarding sin, but Hebrews does not.

Reflections. Our observations on the temptation and sympathy of Jesus raise questions regarding Christology. Did Christ have a weakened human nature? Could Christ be attracted to something sinful? Was it possible for Christ to actually sin? Did Christ’s humanity have the birthmark of sin? Did he endure the weakness we inherit because of sin? Perhaps we need to adjust the traditional view of original sin.

Holding to Christ's human nature as damaged by Adam has a long and honourable history within orthodoxy: Tertullian, Gregory of Nazianzus, Athanasius and even Augustine among the fathers;⁸ C. E. B. Cranfield, Thomas Weinandy, Donald Bloesch, T. F. Torrance, and Ian McFarland in more recent times.⁹ Jesus lived and acted in fellowship with human weakness. On the other hand, Herman Bavinck holds to the sinless nature of Christ, in keeping with the more common Reformed view, and nevertheless affirms the weak and temptable experience of Jesus without reservation; so also Charles Hodge and Donald Macleod.¹⁰ Perhaps that view can also absorb the strong language of Hebrews. This much is clear from Hebrews: the humanity of Jesus was like ours in being subject to all the temptations and weaknesses that lead to sin in the rest of us.

In his forward to Weinandy's book, Colin Gunton says that a truly human Christ is not to be found by rejecting dogmatic tradition, but by faithful exegesis of the biblical texts as they stand.¹¹ That is the posture of this essay. My real interest is pastoral. God determined to have someone at his right hand who would speak for believers, someone who knew their experience from the inside, and who would respond with sympathy. By only affirming the glorious deity and utter sinlessness of Christ, we have protected his divinity but left him inaccessible to sinners. The first readers of Hebrews did not need to be convinced of Christ's sinlessness, but they certainly needed to be convinced about his weakness and temptability and his sympathy for sinners.

He was made in all ways as we are. He was tempted in all ways as we are, though without sin. He experienced the same weakness in temptation as the ignorant and wandering. In this way he became merciful and faithful in atoning our sins, sympathetic and compassionate. So let us approach with confidence the throne of grace. We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place, and we have such a great priest, so let us come near to God with a sincere heart and full assurance of faith (Heb 4:16; 10:19-22). Amen.

⁸ Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), 18. Among the early fathers, the position this paper takes was common. They combated Docetism and Apollinarianism with the weakened humanity which Jesus inherited. Using "he was made sin on our behalf" and "God sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh" (2 Cor 5:21; Rom 8:3), they argued "what is not assumed (by Christ) is not saved." Gregory of Nazianzus (329-390) gave this its classic form: "For that which he has not assumed he has not healed; but that which is united to his Godhead is also saved. If only half of Adam fell, that that which Christ assumes and saves may be half also; but if the whole of his nature fell, it must be united to the whole nature of him who was begotten, and so be saved as a whole" *Epistolae*, 101 (quoted in Weinandy, 17, n1).

⁹ Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 379; Weinandy, 17–19; Bloesch, *Jesus Christ: Savior & Lord* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 54; Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 61–62; Ian M. McFarland, "Fallen or Unfallen? Christ's Human Nature and the Ontology of Human Sinfulness," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10 (2008) 399–415.

¹⁰ Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (1909; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 340.; Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1998), 226-9.

¹¹ Weinandy, ix.