

Hebrews

Hebrews 2:17-18 - We need help

Part 9 was about the reasons we Christians have for hope in a scary world, which is remarkable when you think about it, because what reason is there for anybody to have hope in a world that hasn't found any solution to death yet, nor has it found any solution to the problems of a warming planet, or to plastic pollution in the oceans, or to the chemical pollution of our bodies, or to the attitudes in people that are causing all these problems in the first place? And our future will remain grim while we still think we can do what we like to the planet and to each other, and what's more, we are coming to realize it too. Young people especially are dreading the future as more facts come to light about the complete disregard by big corporations for the health of people and the planet, and the destruction their greed is causing.

So what would you say to these young people - who have their whole lives yet to live in such a world - to give them hope?

The answer the author of Hebrews would give is quick and easy: "But we see Jesus," **Hebrews 2:9**, because in **verse 14** Jesus got right at the cause of all our problems, which was the devil's "power of death." The devil, through the serpent in Genesis 3, managed to tempt both Adam and Eve into eating what God said would be the death of them. And they immediately experienced that death too, in the death of their relationship with God as his children, the death of God's plan for creation through them and their children, the death of happiness and innocence, the death of peace and progress, and the death of any purpose in a human life. Everything we humans did from that point on, therefore, became utterly pointless and futile, resulting in frustration, anxiety, anger and all sorts of fears and phobias that still plague us today.

But in Jesus destroying all those deaths by his own death on the cross our relationship with God as our Father was restored, which flung open the doors to discovering the clues to happiness, peace and progress, which Matthew listed for us in the Sermon on the Mount. We are now living in the beginnings of a new world and the creation of an entirely new group of humans called Christians who make what Jesus taught in that Sermon their lifelong purpose in life. And it's in other people seeing what that's doing in us Christians - that's so obviously different and superior to anything we humans have done on our own strength so far - that gives people, and especially young people, hope.

It is hugely important, then, that we Christians live the Sermon on the Mount. It is the key to the blessing of all nations promised by God to Abraham and his descendants, which we Christians now are. With such responsibility now placed on our shoulders, then, it's good to hear the author of Hebrews telling us in **Hebrews 2:16** that "it's not angels Jesus helps, it's Abraham's descendants," because we're going to need all the help we can get.

Because - as we're about to find out in Hebrews - we have a problem. The devil's power of death may have been destroyed, but he still has a major weapon in his arsenal. And we know exactly what that weapon is, from what happened to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, to what happened to God's people Israel all through the Old Testament, to what the author of Hebrews is about to tell us in the last couple of verses in Hebrews 2, and what happens in our own experience as Christians every day.

It can all be summarized in just one word: **TEMPTATION**.

And that's our introduction to **Hebrews 2:17**, to explain "the reason that Jesus 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 the sins of his people." All these things had to happen in Jesus' life for a reason, the reason being, **verse 18**, that "**BECAUSE Jesus suffered when he was tempted he is now able to help those who are being tempted.**"

So Jesus had to go through all that he did - from being made into a human just like us, to dying on a cross, to becoming a fully qualified high priest involving all that suffering along the way - for one key reason: that he learn what it was like to be tempted. And why was it necessary for him to know that? So that he's now in a position to help his followers through temptation too, because **that's where we need help most of all**. It's dealing with the most powerful weapon the devil still has, and has always had - and used with great success too - in knocking us humans off the tracks of God's plan for us.

It's not surprising, then, that temptation by the devil was the first thing Jesus had to face at the beginning of his ministry. Immediately after Jesus' baptism, when "a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love and I'm delighted by'" in **Matthew 3:17**, Jesus was "led by the Spirit into the desert," **Matthew 4:1**, "**TO BE TEMPTED** by the devil." And in **verse 3**, "The tempter came to him." What follows next is an amazing look at the kind of temptations the devil uses. It's like being handed a manual of the tactics a car salesman uses to sell cars, and being able to tick off each tactic as he uses it on you.

Clearly, then, God wants us to know what we're in for with the devil. And again, it's through his Son that he tells us, because **Hebrews 2:17** says Jesus was made like us in every way, which included being "tempted in every way just as we are" in **Hebrews 4:15**. So whatever temptations we face Jesus faced too, but since he was tempted just like we are, the temptations he faced are also the temptations we face. So what were the temptations the devil used on Jesus in **Matthew 4**?

The fact that that there were just three is interesting, because we see the same three temptations being used by the serpent on Adam and Eve, the same three tripping up the Israelites, and the same three being described again as a warning to us Christians in **1 John 2:16**.

John describes the three as "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life," all three of which Eve fell for in the Garden of Eden. She ate the fruit because it was "good for food," "pleasing to the eye," and "desirable for gaining wisdom." And there we see the three chinks in our armour that the devil can use to tempt us into loving the world rather than our Father (verse 15). We also see in the story of Adam and Eve how easily we humans are tempted in those three areas. It doesn't take much at all.

All it takes is inflaming a natural appetite, like the smell of freshly baked bread, or that new car smell as you sit behind the wheel. And if it looks good too, even better, which the fruit clearly was to Eve. It was irresistible in its beauty, like a new dress in a store window. She simply had to have it. And then the pride of life too, the promise by the serpent that eating the fruit - or that new dress or new car in today's world - would make her feel like a god. And how easily she was taken in. And how quickly all thoughts of God and his wishes for her completely evaporated too.

The Israelites were no better either. They even wanted to go back into slavery in Egypt because of "the fish we used to eat for free in Egypt, and all the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic we wanted too" (**Numbers 11:5**). And it was the good looking women of Moab that seduced the Israelites into worshipping pagan gods (**Numbers 25:1-3**). And instead of God ruling Israel the Israelites wanted their own king, so they could set themselves up as a great nation and a power to be reckoned with, which was simply the jolly old "pride of life" at work again, along with the lusts of the flesh and eyes.

And look at our culture today, where obesity is epidemic because of our lust for junk food, the lives of women are ruled by the fashion and cosmetic industries, and our homes and cars are show pieces rather than practical.

We live in a world that believes things that taste good, look good, and make us feel good about ourselves, are what make us happy. But at what cost to ourselves and the planet when we're poisoning ourselves to death with chemicals in our food and in our clothing and medication, we're killing the oceans and waterways with our garbage, and we're changing the climate so rapidly that disaster awaits hundreds of millions of people in the lifetimes of our grandchildren. And all because we've been suckered in by the clever marketing and advertising by big corporations that are themselves ruled by their lust for profit and power - and with no conscience or what God might think of their actions either.

It's no wonder, then, that the devil thought he could easily tempt Jesus into dumping God by inflaming HIS flesh, eyes and pride of life too, starting with the alluring smell of fresh bread, which after a forty day fast must have had Jesus' body screaming for relief. And in each temptation the devil always started with, "IF you're the Son of God," which would naturally tempt Jesus into wanting to prove it, like jumping off the Temple Mount at its highest spot and being swept up by angels before he hit the ground. The temptation to yell at the devil, "That'll show you who's who" must have been screaming in Jesus' head. And then, of course, that fabulous view from the mountain top and the thought that all of it could be his - without having to go through the agony of atoning for our sins on the cross first - must have been irresistible to Jesus too.

I can't fully put myself into Jesus' head to know how tempting these things must have been for him, but they were clearly excruciating enough for the Holy Spirit to need to be there with him. It was the Holy Spirit who took him to the devil to be tempted in the first place, so this was never meant to be a battle that Jesus could win on his own. We also see that in Jesus purposely weakening himself to the point he had no strength in himself to do or win anything. And that's the message of **Hebrews 2:18** too, that the whole point of Jesus being tempted was to be there for us in our temptations too, because he knows from experience now that humans cannot resist the devil on human strength alone.

It's also the message of **Hebrews 2:17** that Jesus is now our "merciful and faithful high priest." And why is that important? Well, the high priest had two main jobs in Israel, both of which are mentioned here in Hebrews 2:17-18. The first was entering the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement to "make atonement for Israel's sins" committed in the past year, and the second was to be the mediator between God and Israel, or advocate on behalf of Israel, who entered God's presence in the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement to reconcile Israel to God for the following year. It is these two jobs that Jesus inherited as the church's high priest today.

So, if we are tempted by the devil and fall for it, knowingly or unknowingly, Jesus' death on the cross atones for whatever temptation we fell for. He also enters God's presence as our high priest to plead on our behalf, knowing full well what the power of the devil's temptations are like, and then he's on hand for us - just like the Holy Spirit was on hand for him when he was being tempted by the devil - to help us resist the devil's temptations in the future.

But he can only do that for us if we recognize **we need his help**, or as John phrases it in **1 John 1:8-9**, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, however, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

So if we like to give the impression that we're really pretty good Christians and there's not much wrong with us, or that we don't have much to learn from anyone, or that we're not at fault or to blame for things going wrong in our lives, or that we're immune to temptation, we're whistling in the wind. We're even making God "out to be a liar" if we think his Son's help "has no place in our lives" **verse 10**, because (same verse) we clearly **DO** need his Son's help for both forgiveness and "purifying us from all unrighteousness." That's what he's our high priest for.

"The truth is only in us," **verse 8**, when we can readily admit and confess our need for Jesus' help. That's what true Christians do. Why? Because we know the power of temptation. And we know it from two angles - from the obvious temptations we so easily fall for in our own experience, like what we eat, the stuff we buy, and how we talk about other people, to Jesus having to resist the temptations of the devil **because we can't**.

But admitting that we weaken on occasion and fall for temptation - and especially when our lusts of flesh, eyes, and how "sinless" we believe ourselves to be are clearly clashing with God's word and will - is extremely difficult for us to do. It's not just difficult, it's impossible. And the devil knows that, which is why he keeps tempting us in the hope we'll go with our lusts instead of obeying and trusting God, to break our relationship with God so he can then accuse us before God that the truth is not in us and therefore we're obviously not his children - which is exactly why he tempted Jesus, to prove he wasn't a true Son of God and the truth wasn't in him either.

So we need help even admitting we need help, but that's one of the best things that can happen to us, because it ties in beautifully with the Sermon on the Mount, which starts off with, "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

It doesn't say, "Blessed are those who are full of spirit," who've got their Christianity all nicely put together, and they're just fine, thank you very much. "Poor in spirit" means we know we need help, and desperately. And that's not such a bad thing when even Jesus said, "By myself I can do nothing" in **John 5:30**.

The great Jesus himself admitted publicly he was utterly helpless without God constantly in his ear teaching him, constantly in his head giving him the love and wisdom to obey and trust, and constantly giving him the power he needed to resist the devil's temptations. Jesus openly confessed all that, and taught it to his disciples as the place for them to start too.

And we see that in "Blessed are the poor in spirit" being the first lesson on Jesus' list. His disciples would have heard it in their native Aramaic too, so that the word "Blessed" came out as, "Oh, the blessedness of," or "Oh, the absolute happiness of," or as I call it, "Oh, the unshatterable joy of," because Jesus also said his blessings could not be taken away. They are permanent. And who are these permanent blessings meant for? They are ready and waiting for those who admit their utter helplessness, who see themselves as weak and as vulnerable to temptation as Jesus was after forty days fasting.

And Jesus made sure he was poor in spirit by fasting too, to give us the one great clue we needed to neutralizing the devil's top weapon in his arsenal. It isn't being strong; it's being helpless. It isn't trying to resist temptation by one's own strength and willpower, it's by recognizing one's weakness and dependence on our high priest gaining God's forgiveness for us if we weaken, and being on hand to help and "purify" us when temptation is making us say, think and do things we know are wrong. Because that's what high priests are for, and it was God who set that system up for Israel - and for Christians too.

He also set up the second part of that verse, which says, "Oh the unshatterable joy of the poor in spirit, **for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**" It's to the poor in spirit, therefore, that the doors to the treasures of God's kingdom swing open, and to those who **see Jesus** with all the powers of heaven at his disposal as God's designated high priest to help us. It's not to the person who's trying so hard to be good or moral that he opens up these powers to, it's to the person who says, "I'm trusting you, Jesus, to make me good and moral, and to say and do the right and wisest and most loving things in line with God's will, because if I don't do that the devil will tempt me into thinking I've got to do them, and I'll then make a right hash of it, and then I'll get all discouraged and wonder if I'm even a Christian or a child of God at all," which is exactly what the devil wanted to make Jesus think.

If the devil could just tempt Jesus into putting the lust of his flesh, eyes and pride in his own strength before loyalty to and trust in his Father, then he could rightfully say to Jesus, “Well, what kind of Son of God are you when I can tempt you as easily as I tempted Adam and Eve?” But Jesus was able to fend off the devil’s temptations? How? Because the Holy Spirit, with all the powers of the kingdom of heaven at his disposal, was present with him. And why was the Holy Spirit with him? Because Jesus made sure by fasting he wasn’t depending on his own strength in dealing with the devil’s cunning. He didn’t dare to.

And nor should we dare to depend on our own strength against the devil’s temptations either according to the Lord’s Prayer. “This is how you should pray,” Jesus said in **Matthew 6:9**, and in that prayer he included the statement, “**And lead us not into temptation**” in **verse 13**.

Which seems like an odd statement, but of course we pray that God not lead us into temptation, because we’d never survive it if he did. We know that for certain, because God allowed Adam and Eve to be tempted - and even “led” them into temptation’s way too - because it was he, God, who created the serpent and let it loose under the devil’s influence on Adam and Eve. And look what happened. Adam and Eve’s defences melted like pouring boiling water into a chocolate teapot. And Eve soaked up all three of the serpent’s temptations like a sponge - and without so much as a raised eyebrow.

It was an unmitigated disaster, but it taught us humans a very important lesson, that **we have no natural defences against the devil**. People talk about having a strong will as if it’s something to be proud of, but it’s only made them more vulnerable to the devil, not less, because the devil can get them on their pride in their willpower now.

But didn’t James tell us to “Resist the devil and he will flee from you” In **James 4:7**? Yes he did, because we absolutely need to resist the devil, but James immediately coupled that verse with “Draw near to God and he will draw near to you” in **verse 8**, because there is no resisting the devil **without God’s help**.

And it’s the same with the Lord’s Prayer. Asking God to “Lead us not into temptation” is immediately coupled with “But deliver us from the evil one” in **Matthew 6:13**, in recognition that we have no power against evil within ourselves. It’s like Paul saying, “Work out your salvation” in **Philippians 2:12**, which would include resisting the devil’s temptations, but he immediately couples it with “for it is **God who works in you** to will and to act according to his good pleasure” in **verse 13**. Because that’s how salvation works.

So yes, we can resist, but only with God's help, and it's only the "poor in spirit" who recognize and admit they need help who then get the help they need. And it was this second part that the Christians in Hebrews were neglecting. In trying to resist the discouragement and fears they felt, and the temptation to throw in the towel, they were reverting back to obeying the law on their own strength as their solution, rather than realizing and accepting that God had supplied salvation from their every worry, fear and temptation in his Son. If only they could see Jesus, then, in his role as high priest as well, loaded up with all the powers of heaven at his disposal to help them. And it was God who'd set Jesus up in that position so they'd have the help they needed when these feelings and temptations were overwhelming them.

We have the story of Job to illustrate this too, when the devil got permission to tempt Job into dumping God - and Job, just like those Christians in Hebrews, was left floundering, confused, and frustrated. There was no help from his friends to explain why these things were happening to him either. But he hung on grimly, despite all the awful things that were happening to him, which to some people might seem like a good thing: "Good old Job, he never gave up." But God's response was, "No, you keep at it Job, because if you can prove to me that your own right arm (or your own willpower or reasoning power) can save you, I'll admit it" (Job 40:14).

God was actually ready to admit that Job didn't need him, based on Job being able to prove it. What an amazing challenge, because isn't that what drives so many people in this world today? It's proving that on our own strength, and our own goodness, and on our own power to reason things through, that we can find peace and happiness and save our world from all its ills, including the devastation being caused by climate change and big corporations. But we know from Scripture that it's only because of God's intervention that the human race and the planet are saved.

And It was only when God directly intervened and showed Job that everything that happened on this planet had only come about because of God and HIS power that Job then said, "Oh, I get it, I've been trying to handle this by my own strength, but now I see you as the only source of power in this world, not me."

And this is what the author of Hebrews wants his congregation to see, because they are hopelessly entangled in worry and stress and they can't see any way out of their slump, or any hope for themselves or their children, or any reason, therefore, for staying with the church. This wasn't what they'd signed up as Christians for. Surely they were entitled to better treatment from God.

The author of Hebrews comes back with, “But, you silly people, you’re neglecting the salvation God provided for you in his Son. Can’t you see that Jesus went through all that he did, including facing the temptations of the devil, so he could know by experience that there’s no way humans can handle temptation on human strength alone, and he could be there for you now?”

But let’s get real and see if this works in our own experience. Well, by interesting coincidence I was hit with a sucker-punch temptation while preparing this sermon, and for a while there I went down in flames unable to resist it by trying to dismiss it from my mind, distract myself with something else, or talk it out with a friend, and all the usual ways of human coping. Nothing worked. I couldn’t stop thinking and fretting about it.

I don’t mind telling you what the temptation was too, because it ties in perfectly with what the Christians in Hebrews were experiencing, so it’s not something shocking or strange. They didn’t like the direction things were taking in the church, and it was a couple of articles by church leaders on our church’s website that got me not liking the direction we might be going in our church too. I felt heartsick. I even got to thinking that maybe I should pack it all in and go do something else with my life. It was that bad. But shocking? Not really, because it was only my pride of life being stirred, that in my lofty estimation and “wisdom” this wasn’t the way I would do things, or the direction I would go. It nicely primed me for a “fiery dart” from the devil (Ephesians 6:16), and it did its job with ruthless efficiency, inflaming my mind beyond my ability to control it.

But the power and destructive force of the temptation did shock me. It was sudden, like stepping on quicksand and down I went, just like that. And caught by surprise my mind immediately went into panic mode, which is the worst thing you can do when sinking in quicksand, because the more you struggle the faster you sink. It made me wonder later if that’s why God created quicksand, to help us realize how temptation works on us, and exactly what we **shouldn’t** do in dealing with it. And it certainly pictures what poor in spirit means, because when you hit quicksand you are helpless, and only the help of a powerful outside force can get you out.

And it’s this little drama we face so many times in our Christian lives, the purpose of which from the devil’s point of view is to get his power of death back, and specifically the death of our relationship with God, where we simply give up on God and drift away, which was exactly the danger the Christians in Hebrews were facing (Hebrews 2:1). But Jesus is involved too, because it’s a high priest’s job to keep our relationship with God intact.

So like Jesus we're in a wilderness in this world involving spirit forces too, that on the one hand are trying to tempt us through our flesh, eyes and pride of life into drifting away from God so he doesn't seem real, but on the other hand we have a high priest who can make God real through trust in him and experiencing his power.

But how would all this relate to giving young people hope (the question asked on page one)? Well, what was it that gave Job hope, that gave Jesus hope, and gives us hope in whatever circumstances we're in? It's that God is real, that there really is another dimension out there that has our best interests in mind, and we've got proof of it every day.

And it's to that end that God set things up the way he did, with evil being just as real, and a devilish creature let loose in our world that doesn't have our best interests in mind, who can easily tempt us humans through the lust of our eyes, flesh and pride of life into thinking we can ignore God and we have no need of him, and we can handle things on our own, thank you very much.

And God allows us to think that, but we've ended up in a world with problems we cannot handle - just like Job, just like Israel in the Old Testament, just like Jesus after fasting for forty days, just like the Christians in Hebrews, and just like many young people today who realize we've gone too far as humans this time, and our planet is in deep, deep trouble.

But God set things up for just that realization to dawn on us, to get us to that crucial point of realizing we are poor in spirit, that we don't have it in us to deal with the temptations of the devil that got us into all this trouble in the first place. Because that's the starting point to a totally new and different life where God and his love for us become real.

And to prove it he added a promise in **1 Corinthians 10:13** that "he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear." Which means he knows us so well and cares for us so much that we can have total confidence that the devil can't destroy us through temptation either. That's the wonderful freedom we now have as children of God (Romans 8:21). You can see why Jesus talked of the unshatterable joy experienced by the poor in spirit, because we now have all the powers of the kingdom of heaven at our backs with yet another promise too in **verse 13**, that when we are being tempted "he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

That's a guarantee that if we hit the quicksand and we're helplessly trapped in a temptation he'll get us out.

Because on hand at all times is our merciful and faithful high priest who knows the power of the devil's temptations, and knows that the only way to resist them is the power of the kingdom of heaven.

Well, the first thing Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount is that the power of the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit, and it can be proved over and over again by anyone, including young people facing a scary world full of temptation by the devil to give up on life and give up on God, because all it takes for the powers of heaven to be released to us and our merciful and faithful high priest to throw us a rope to pull us out of the quicksand as it sucks us down is just three words from us: "We need help."

And it's in receiving that help that the great hope we all have - that there really is another dimension out there more powerful than anything this world throws at us - is real. Which is why God set it up this way, to prove it, and prove it over and over again. And that's the blessing that awaits the poor in spirit.

And what better source of hope can there be than that?