

Good Friday – Epistle

“HOLDING FAST TO OUR CONFESSION”

Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9

Good Friday

Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

4: 14 Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested* as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

5: 1 Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. 2 He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; 3 and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. 4 And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was. 5 So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

*“You are my Son,
today I have begotten you”;
6 as he says also in another place,
“You are a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.”*

7 In the days of his flesh, Jesus* offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. 8 Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; 9 and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him,

DIAGNOSIS: Flunking the Test

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – “Tested”

The writer of Hebrews assumes (4:15) that being tested, constantly being put on the spot, evaluated and criticized are inescapable facts of human life. We are always being measured and judged. There is no advancement in this world without somehow passing a test. Sometimes we pass the test. Sometimes we don't. But there is never any rest. Our status and value are constantly being challenged, criticized and called into question. Tested! Despite our temporary achievements and attempts to insulate ourselves, nothing lasts. We are haunted by our growing sense of weakness (4:15) and that ultimately there will be a test that we cannot pass.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – “No Sympathy”

Living under this constant pressure, we long to have someone assure us that we are okay, that everything is fine, that we are forgiven and have nothing to be ashamed of. It's nice when such sympathy is offered by family, friends, and significant others. But ultimately we long for such sympathy from God (4:15). Only God's sympathy will ultimately count. The problem is that God's sympathy never seems to connect with us. Instead, God seems to be far removed, sitting somewhere on that distant heavenly throne (4:16), too far away to care. We need to be assured but

all we can see is a world devoid of God, a world where faith and belief in such a God is impossible. Unable to believe, convinced that God really doesn't care, we feel weak and broken. We have flunked the test, have been convince that we will never pass and, therefore, have given up. If God has no sympathy, if God doesn't care, then why should we?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (External Problem) – “Suffering and Death”

But the problem is even worse. Eventually we must face an even more devastating possibility. If daily life is fraught with tests, then just who is administering those tests? What if such tests don't just happen “willy nilly?” What if someone is sitting behind the desk and administering them? What if someone has put us on the spot? What if someone is pressuring us to prove ourselves and pass? What if this suffering is not some accident or quirk of fate but the deliberate choice of someone who is unhappy with the way we have conducted ourselves? What if the grave is not just something that “happens” to all of us but the deliberate judgment of someone who is fed up with our repeated failures to pass the test? What if that “someone” is God? Then we are indeed in big trouble. Then the problem is not just God's lack of sympathy but God's righteous anger and disappointment with our miserable test taking. Has God become our enemy? God forbid! If that is what God has become, then who needs God! Confessing faith in that kind of God seems to be nothing more than a death wish.

PROGNOSIS: Passing the Test

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – Reverent Submission

Offering an eternal solution is the major occupation of this text from Hebrews. It is about Jesus and what this high priest has accomplished for us on Good Friday on his blessed cross.

Seeing our plight God, in love, takes the initiative to rectify the situation and helps us to pass the test. No longer content to be the awesome, holy, unsympathetic and terrifying God on a distant throne, God chooses to become one of us. There is no better way to sympathize than to suffer with us. So, God in Jesus becomes a most unconventional high priest choosing to offer his own Son for us. Jesus becomes fully human and therefore is subject to testing just like us. He sweats out the test taking just like us, “offering up prayers and supplications” (5:7) in the Garden of Gethsemane and “with loud cries and tears” (5:7) on the cross. But he was without sin (4:15). He passed the test where we failed. “Because of his reverent submission” (5:7) he received a “perfect” (5:9) grade and on Easter was saved from death (5:7). In Him God has shown that God is not coldly indifferent or distantly unsympathetic to our plight. Through the suffering and death of this high priest, God’s anger has been suffered out of existence.

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) – “Receiving Grace and Mercy”

Through the telling of this marvelous story the writer of Hebrews seeks to offer Jesus’ “perfect” (5:9) test score to his hearers, to us. God’s sympathy is offered so that we would see that God’s throne is not distant and threatening but near and gracious. What could be more near and down to earth than this priest’s suffering on a cross, the Roman world’s vivid reminder that everyone flunks and no one can ever hope to pass the test of Roman power? Therefore, in Jesus we have a high priest who is “the source of eternal salvation” (5:9), a report card filled with straight A’s! The grace and mercy offered from that throne are ours when we “obey” him, i.e., hear, listen and trust this offer of a perfect test score. And suddenly the God/high priest we thought we could never “have” (4:14) is now ours.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – “Holding Fast”

Once we had been weak and needy, cowering and afraid to approach a God who not only was too distant but too angry. But now through faith we “have” a God who is near, full of sympathy, and so dear that we can approach God not timidly but with “boldness” (4:16). Now the tests that had previously crushed us are transformed. Our suffering no longer burdens us, reminding us of our chronic weakness and need. Au contraire! It is now an opportunity for reverent submission, obedience, and faithfulness just like Jesus before us. Now we can rise to the occasion and pass the test just like Jesus before us. How? By holding fast (4:14) to the mercy and grace of God and in spite of evidence to the contrary, in spite of our crosses, still boldly (4:16) confess that in Jesus, the Son of God, we have been made perfect (5:9). We might look like losers but because of him our test scores are perfect! Therefore, we can be sure that God still looks at us with a smile. There is no need to cower. We know who we are. We can stand tall.