

## Why Jesus Came

Hebrews 2:17 Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

Sunday, February 7, 2021 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

Introduction: Mark Twain toward the end of his life wrote a story, *The Mysterious Stranger* in which the ending has people awaiting word from an angel about forgiveness for people who are too flawed to stop sinning. Does there come a point in which God no longer forgives? There is a verse that talks about "the unforgiveable sin" but I think that is when someone finishes their life on earth and rejects the Gospel through their very last breath. God hasn't chosen no longer to forgive, but that forgiveness has been rejected. Hebrews tells us, among other places in Scripture, why Jesus came, and this passage uses a strange word with large ramifications. It uses the word "propitiation."

### Set the Stage

The word is the New Testament equivalent for the Old Testament "mercy seat" upon which the blood of a sacrifice was sprinkled to atone for sin. In the New Testament it can mean, in addition to "mercy seat", mercy, or to be merciful. At its root it means "to make happy" and the implication is that the beneficiary can stand before the Judgment Seat of the Lord without fear. It involves, I think, not only the price paid for sins but also any shame or disgrace as well. Imagine someone who has finished a ten year sentence for robbery. His time in prison is over but his reputation in the community is still in tatters. This word implies that the repentant sinner is welcomed as if his reputation was never damaged.

### Mercy for the tax collector but not for the Lord

The Lord Jesus makes this point when he describes the tax collector in prayer. In Luke 18:13-14, He states, "And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to

his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." "Merciful" is the very same word as "propitiation" in Hebrews 2:17. The tax collector is asking the Lord for the benefits of the mercy seat in the Old Testament while admitting that he does not deserve the grace. It is that tax collector that returns to his home justified, as if he had never sinned.

But such grace comes at a price. When Jesus told His disciples about His upcoming death on the cross, Peter rebuked Him, saying, 'Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!' ("Far" being lit. "Merciful to you" Matthew 16:22) Jesus would have none of it. There was to be no mercy for Jesus if God was to be merciful to us.

### Application

The applications are presented in the text. We can pray accordingly for one another with the promises that Jesus came to destroy the devil, that He came to release us from the bondage caused by the fear of death, and come to the aid of those who are being tempted. Evil is a formidable foe in the world, but it is doomed. The fear of death is a fundamental, deeply held fear and anyone who is freed from that can live with great fullness. To receive aid in trouble or in temptation to do wrong is a wonderful promise. Add these promises to your prayer list when you lift up other church members in prayer.

### Conclusion

The anonymous writer of Hebrews gives us a profound response to the questions of "why Jesus came?" He came to pay the penalty of sin and take the shame of sin from us. He came to destroy the works of the devil, to release us from bondage and to help us in trial and temptation. He is the very embodiment of what was symbolized by the "mercy seat" in the Old Testament. He gives us much to rejoice over and much about which to pray.