

Glory to God in the Lowest  
Hebrews 2:5-18  
Sunday, December 6, 2020

We're now less than twenty days away from Christmas. By now you probably have your decorations hung and your Christmas tree set up. At our house we have two Christmas trees, an artificial tree decorated upstairs, and a fresh-cut tree down in our living room. On both of our trees, it's our family tradition to put an angel on top.

Do you know how the tradition of placing an angel at the top of a Christmas tree got started? In December 1848, after the *London Illustrated News* published a picture of England's Queen Victoria and Prince Albert decorating their tree with an angel on top, everyone—both Brits as well as Americans—decided to follow the trend and place an angel at the top of their tree.

It makes sense that angels top our trees since these heavenly beings feature so prominently in the Christmas story. Earlier, we heard the familiar story of the angel's announcement to Mary:

“Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:30-33, NIV).

One of the greatest angelic announcements in all of Scripture was given to a field full of shepherds:

“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:10-14, NIV).

These familiar scenes tell us what happened surrounding the events of Jesus's birth. But Scripture gives us another perspective on the Christmas story. It not only tells us *what* happened when Jesus was born, but also *why* it happened. This morning we're going to look at why the incarnation was necessary. We're going to turn to the book of Hebrews and consider four reasons why the Son of God became a human being.

Although *Hebrews* sounds like something in the Old Testament, you'll find the book of Hebrews near the end of the New Testament. That said, the original readers of this letter were well versed in the Old Testament. And even though this book is filled with

quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures, Hebrews is all about Jesus. So turn with me to Hebrews 2, and we'll start by looking at verse 5.

In verse 5, the writer of Hebrews says,

“It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking.”

If we were to read through chapter 1, we would see that the main argument is that the Son of God is superior to angels in every way. Again, angels play a particularly important role, not only in the Christmas story, but throughout the story of the Bible. And yet, we're told that it wasn't to angels that God gave dominion over this world. In God's original plan for this world, he gave dominion to a much more unlikely candidate.

In verse 6, we are pointed back to Psalm 8 as we consider why Christ became man. We get a snippet of the quote in verses 6-8, but since it's short, it's worth us looking at it in its entirety. Psalm 8 reads,

1 LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!  
You have set your glory in the heavens.  
2 Through the praise of children and infants  
you have established a stronghold against your enemies,  
to silence the foe and the avenger.  
3 When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,  
4 what is mankind that you are mindful of them,  
human beings that you care for them?  
5 You have made them a little lower than the angels  
and crowned them with glory and honor.  
6 You made them rulers over the works of your hands;  
you put everything under their feet:  
7 all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild,  
8 the birds in the sky, and the fish in the sea,  
all that swim the paths of the seas.  
9 LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Have you ever felt like that? Have you thought about how great God is and how relatively insignificant we are as human beings? Have you ever thought for a moment how incredible it must be to be an angel in the presence of God in heaven rather than a piddly little earth-dweller?

And yet, it wasn't to angels that God gave dominion over this world. God gave this authority to men and women. Even though he made humans “a little lower than the angels; [God] crowned them with glory and honor and put everything under their feet.” And by everything, he means *everything*. He says in verse 8 that,

“In putting everything under them, God left nothing that is not subject to them.”

At the beginning of the story of the Bible we read about God’s original intention to create men and women in his image and entrust them with dominion over the created world. In Genesis 1 we read,

“Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:26-28, NIV).

God’s original design was for his image bearers to rule over creation. God crowned Adam and Eve “with glory and honor and put everything under their feet” (Heb. 2:7-8, NIV). But that wasn’t good enough for the head of the human race and his wife, and together they rebelled against their creator. They sinned by claiming more authority for themselves than what God had granted them.

In Hebrews 2:8 we read what we already know to be true of the world we live in:

“Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them.”

We don’t see God’s original design as described in Genesis 1-2. Rather, we live in a post Genesis 3 world, one where God’s design has been corrupted by sin. If what we see now is a fallen world and God’s image bearers tarnished by their rebellion, what hope do we have?

The good news of Christmas is that we do have hope. Our hope is found in verse 9:

“But we do see Jesus.”

*We see Jesus.*

A generation before this letter was written, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and said,

“Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:20-21, NIV).

Yes, at Christmas we see the *infant* Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph lying in a manger. But we also need to see Jesus the way that the writer of Hebrews does:

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

As the ultimate fulfillment of Psalm 8, we see Jesus “made lower than the angels for a little while.” Jesus took on full humanity in order to undo the damage done by Adam’s sin and our continued rebellion against God. The first reason why the Son of God became a human being was **so that he might fulfill God’s original design for men and women.**

Jesus did what Adam failed to do, what we fail to do as sinners. Jesus fully obeyed his Father. By God’s grace, the sinless Jesus tasted death—the just penalty for human sin—on our behalf. And because he suffered and died, God crowned him with glory and honor.

But there’s more to the story. Not only does Jesus’s coming as a man fulfill God’s original intention for humankind, second, **the Son of God became a human being in order to fully restore God’s image bearers to their original glory.**

This year I had to do something about our artificial Christmas tree. When we bought it a few back, it came pre-strung with lights. Over the years, more and more of the pre-lit strands have stopped working. Whole sections of the tree would no longer light up. So this year, I removed the old strings which were securely fastened to each and every branch, and replaced them with some new LED lights.

When we think about Jesus’s work of restoration, restoring us to the glory originally intended for us as God’s image bearers, this may be the picture we have in mind. We might think that Jesus came to remove what’s damaged, and to replace it with what’s good. But there’s a better picture of what Christ has done for us.

Out in a brush pile in our backyard I still have last year’s Christmas tree. When we bought it last year, it was a living tree, freshly cut and filling our living room with that great Christmas tree smell. Today, it’s dead. It’s completely brown and has almost no needles left on its branches. If I were to drag it into the house and set it up, there would be no possible way for me to restore it to its original glory. It’s dead. Even Charlie Brown would turn it down. It is impossible to make dead trees live again.

But it’s not impossible for spiritually dead men and women to be made alive again and to be restored to their former glory. In Ephesians 2 we read,

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts.

Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.” (Ephesians 2:1-5, NIV).

In order to bring many sons and daughters to glory, it says in verse 10 that it was absolutely necessary for God to send his Son in order to trailblaze a way of freedom from sin for us. In order to restore God’s image bearers, the Son of God had to take on sin’s penalty—the penalty of death. He had to go through the suffering of death on our behalf, and to do this he had to become one of us. He had to be made fully human.

There’s a third reason that we’re given as to why Jesus had to be made fully human and we see it starting in verse 14. **The Son of God became a human being in order to break the power of death and of the Devil.**

In order for sinners like you and me to be brought into the family of God, the Son of God had to become our brother. He had to take on flesh and blood and share in our humanity. And by dying the death that we should have died, we read in verse 14 that Jesus “[broke] the power of him who holds the power of death—the devil.” We might say that by his death, Jesus pulled the plug on death depriving the devil of his power.

I don’t think many people today think much about the devil or his power. But every person on this planet is well aware of the reality of death. The news is filled with statistics about those dying from COVID-19. And when the news isn’t about the pandemic, we hear about war, terrorism, gun violence, and other evils. And how many of us have attended at least one funeral this year for a friend or loved one? We humans fear death.

But think about this for a moment: the eternal Son of God willingly took on our humanity in order to become completely vulnerable to death. Though he did not deserve it, Jesus Christ fully accepted what we fear most in order to set us free from our enslavement to death. And just so we don’t lose sight of God’s amazing grace, we read in verse 16 that Jesus didn’t do this to rescue angels. He came for men and women, who, like the Old Testament patriarch Abraham, trust in God’s saving work by faith.

The writer of Hebrews concludes this passage with a final reason why Jesus came as a man. **The Son of God became a human being in order to become our perfect representative and substitute.**

I don’t know how many of you are science-fiction fans, but you may be familiar with the concept of an android. In the sci-fi world, an android is a human-like being that is typically flesh on the outside but mechanical on the inside. Almost without fail, in these sci-fi stories, the android character is found to be far inferior to their human

counterparts. They may have the strength of a machine, or the mind of a computer, but they fall short of what it means to be truly human.

We need to be very careful that we don't think of the Son of God incarnate in the same way. Notice the emphasis in verse 17 that Jesus "had to be made like them, fully human in every way."

Over the centuries of church history, Christians have worked to find the proper biblical tension between Jesus as fully God and fully man. Often this has been in response to errors that have tried to creep into Christian teaching. One of those responses came in the year 451 A.D. and became known as *The Symbol (or Creed) of Chalcedon*. This statement may sound strange to our modern ears, but if you'll bear with me, I would like to read it for us.

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [coessential] with us according to the manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets from the beginning [have declared] concerning him, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.

Now lest we think that these nuanced statements should be reserved for the egg-heads and theologians, let's consider from our passage two critical implications of Jesus becoming fully human in every way. First, Jesus had to be fully human in order to serve as our representative. Going back to Genesis, we know that Adam, our first representative, failed us. Since that day, the only way for any sort of relationship between God and man to continue was through a mediator. Under the old covenant system, this required the services of a high priest.

One of the major themes of the book of Hebrews is that the office of high priest was at best a temporary fix, and one that ultimately pointed to the need for a Great High Priest. That is exactly who Jesus is. The Son of God became a man in order to become our perfect representative, our merciful and faithful high priest.

But, second, the Son of God became man in order to become our perfect substitute. Notice at the end of verse 17 that Jesus is described as the one who "make[s]

atonement for the sins of the people.” Other English translations use the term *propitiation*. Not only did the Son of God become fully man to represent us before the Father, Jesus became one of us in order that he might serve as our substitute, bearing the full penalty due us for our sin—the wrath of God.

We’ve looked at four reasons why the Son of God became a human being. We’ve looked at the *why* of Christmas so that when we come to the more familiar stories, we might see these scenes in a fresh light.

One of the things we love most about Christmas are the songs that we sing. But as we get ready to worship together, consider this. Back in verse 12 we read another quotation from the Psalms but attributed to Jesus. There Christ says,

“I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises.”

Do you know what this means? This Christmas, as you sing,

*Joy to the world! The Lord is come; let earth receive her King.*

as you sing,

*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*

and as you sing,

*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail th’incarnate Deity,  
Pleased as man with us to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel;*

As you sing these familiar hymns, our text tells us that Jesus the Son of God incarnate is singing praise to his Father right along with us, his brothers and sisters who share in his humanity. I can think of no better way to respond to the good news of the Son of God made fully man for us than to sing with joyful praise to him.