

10 April 2016

Reconciled by Life
Hebrews 2:5-18

We read John chapter 1, verses 1-5 and 10-14:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it . . . He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

What the prologue of John says poetically, the author of Hebrews says in more depth, quoting from the Hebrew Bible as he declares the amazing story of the Word Become Flesh, and why it matters. We read from Hebrews 2, verses 5-18:

Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. But someone has testified somewhere, 'What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honour, subjecting all things under their feet.'

Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying, 'I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.' And again, 'I will put my trust in him.' And again, 'Here am I and the children whom God has given me.'

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

My college roommate my junior year was a new Christian, filled with the joy of his salvation, eagerly seeking God's will as he responded to a call to be a minister of the gospel. Rodney was a

little older than most students, having served in the Army for a while first, but as a Christian he was brand new, and it showed. His greeting when we passed in the halls was not, “Hey” or “What’s up?” but “Praise the Lord!” One evening he and a friend took a hike around the campus, anointing it with olive oil to prepare it for revival. It could be a little irritating, not to mention weird, to live around that much bubbling joy all the time, but at the same time, I was jealous. When had I last responded to the name of Jesus with a spontaneous, glowing smile? Had I ever? We shared a faith, but I didn’t share his excitement. Well, you probably know what happened. He crashed. The money for school ran out. Oklahoma Baptist University’s commitment to training ministers stopped short of doing it for free, and Rodney had to go. He was bewildered. He had given his life to serve Jesus. Had Jesus let him down? Rodney had had a powerful, transforming experience of the presence and calling of God, and the memory of that experience had sustained him for a long time, but the experience alone wasn’t enough when hardship came.

In his poem “The Dry Salvages,” T.S. Eliot writes,

*We had the experience but missed the meaning,
And approach to the meaning restores the experience
In a different form.*

This is why we have theology. Theology is an attempt to find and express the meaning of our experience with God and, in doing so, to recapture that experience in terms that others may recognize and share. And this is why the book of Hebrews was written. Thirty or forty years after Christ’s resurrection, the initial experience of the Risen One had faded. It had been a life-changing experience for the first witnesses – no question about that – and they had lived transformed lives. But as that generation died off, someone had to reflect on the meaning of that transformation. *How* had Christ changed people’s lives? What had happened? And how could it continue to happen for others?

The answer to the question of meaning is the bald assertion that this Jesus, whom the first disciples initially experienced as a workman from Nazareth, was more than a man. Hebrews 1:2-4: *He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.* Jesus the Jewish artisan from a backwater Galilean town was nothing less than the Son of Almighty God, the perfect imprint of God’s glory stamped on the imperfect medium of human flesh. He was superior to prophets, higher than angels, infinitely above our own being and our own understanding. Infinitely beyond our value, as well. We had been made to be in covenant with God, partners in creation, but we had spoiled that. Psalm 8 declares that humanity had been “crowned with glory and honor,” but it had all gone wrong. Instead of being faithful stewards of paradise, humanity had created nothing but suffering and death, separating themselves still further from their creator.

But . . . chapter 2, verse 10: *It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings.* For some reason, God still wished to crown us with glory, to bring us back into covenant. And the means of this reconciliation was for the Son, Jesus, to pioneer the way back, by taking on our sufferings. He became our brother on earth. Verse 14: *Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that*

through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. The creator became the created, going through every ill that flesh inherits, up to and including death itself. Only by doing this, by becoming one of us could he truly represent us to God. Verses 17-18:

Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

To recap: those who met Jesus, before and after his death, were transformed by the encounter. They were set free from their sins, given new purpose, reconnected to God, and sent out in love for others. That was their experience. Now Hebrews is telling us that what happened to those initial followers in Galilee and Judea was bigger than that. It was a cosmic event, in which God closed the separation between creator and created. By becoming one of us, bearing our sufferings with us, enduring death, then conquering it and returning to God on our behalf, Christ made it possible for all people, not just his disciples, to experience forgiveness, purpose, connection with God, and love. That's the *meaning* of the Christ experience. That's theology.

Theology's gotten a bad name in recent years, but to be fair, it's earned it. Far too many theologians have gone about their task for every purpose except the right one. Theology has been used to divide and demonize people with different ideas. It has been played as an intellectual game – medieval theologians argued over how many angels could dance on the head of a pin, and modern Dispensationalists dispute over whether a Rapture will take place at the beginning, the middle, or the end of a hypothetical seven-year Tribulation. Theologians have twisted their reasoning to justify terrible things: Crusades, Inquisitions, academic conferences. Worst of all, people keep on writing theology under the delusion that their goal is to explain God. That is not the purpose of theology. God is, by very definition, beyond our understanding. The only way to make God understandable is to diminish God and drag the Almighty down to the level of our own feeble faculties. A rationally coherent and consistent God is nothing but the silly invention of a small imagination.

No, the purpose of theology is what we said earlier. It is to recapture and express our own encounter of God in a form that reflects for others the awe and mystery and life-changing power of that experience. The test of a theological writing is not whether it hangs together logically but rather is whether we read it and say, "Yes! That's what my own encounter with God was like! I recognize that!"

And that's what this book, Hebrews, does for the second generation of Christians. It puts into words the essence of their experience with Christ. Because God loved us too much to remain separated from us, God healed the rift, crossed over to our experience, shared it, conquered it, redeemed it. By living our life, God healed it and reconciled us so that we can come into God's presence, stained but confident in the vastness of God's forgiveness and love.

Remember that feeling? It's still true.