

Part 2: God With Us

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December 23rd, 2018

Last week we started our Christmas and New Year's series called New Birth/New Life. In light of the season we are looking at not only the birth of Jesus, but more specifically the change Jesus brings into our life. And we are doing so by looking at a book in the New Testament called Hebrews.

For many of you this might seem like a bait and switch. Its Christmas time, and maybe you've been in church your whole life, or maybe you're someone who is checking us out just because it is what you do during the holidays. And what you would expect is a traditional story of Mary and Joseph, no lodging at the inn, cattle, shepherds, angels and wise men. We will look at that story in a bit more detail tomorrow night at our Christmas Eve service, but as a whole that's not the story the book of Hebrews focuses on.

This isn't because the birth narrative isn't important, but it's because often times we sterilize this narrative and it becomes a sort of supercharged nostalgia. For many of us that is what the Christmas season is all about.

At Christmas we spend time with our family and our friends. We get invited into people's homes or work parties, and we invite people into our own lives. I'm sure for each person in here, humbug or not, there is something unique you do during this season that you don't typically do at other times. But there is one thing we can bank on regardless of the extent of our nostalgia: it will end. Life will go on.

Some for the worse: people will stop being as charitable or self-less. And sometimes for the better: our noisy family will leave, the obligations to reconnect with old friends will dissolve, the peer pressure to drink disgusting things like eggnog will be relieved. Life goes back to normal.

For many of us, this is how we view our encounter with God this Christmas season too. We want to come and hear a birth story, we want to sing the traditional songs, we want to encounter the idea of a transcendent and benevolent God. But just like with everything else we feel that if we do it well enough this Christmas season, we can create enough capital to make it the rest of the year. We get a nostalgic encounter here, maybe again at Easter, and then we coast until next year.

This is why the book of Hebrews is important. The author is writing to a group of people who heard the message of Jesus, who were acquainted with the story of his birth, but on the whole they didn't know what to do with it. This is often our own reality with this Christmas story.

But the author of Hebrews is showing us how the coming of Jesus Christ changes things. If we know who Jesus is and what Jesus came to do, we cannot be unmoved. We may choose to disbelieve, but if we really believe the reality behind the baby in a manger, then it will change the course of our life. The birth of Jesus will give us new birth and a new life.

Last week we looked at Jesus as the king who has come to change our hearts. And the author really stressed the transcendence of Jesus. Who Jesus is transcends who we are. We've all encountered a sort of transcendence before: at Glacier National Park, maybe at the birth of your child, in the heart of the

Rattlesnake wilderness; a place where we are made fully aware of our smallness in contrast to an idea or an encounter with something so much larger than ourselves.

Jesus as our king is truly transcendent. Last week we saw that he is the radiance of the glory of God, the exact imprint of God's nature. He, this Jesus, is the one who upholds the universe by the word of his power. He sits at the right hand of the Majesty on high and he rules over us with uprightness and gladness. No one and nothing is like this Jesus.

But today in Hebrews, the author is going to stress Jesus' nearness to us. Theologians call this his immanence. Not only is Jesus transcendent, but he is immanent. In other words not only is Jesus superior in every way to us, but he has chosen to draw near to us, to be close to us, to be like us. This has always been true, God was always a God who sought us out before we ever sought him out, but at Christmas, he drew so near to us that he became one of us in Jesus Christ.

This is important because when a transcendent God becomes immanent with his people, the change is enduring. If we understand who Jesus is, he will not pack up his bag and leave when he has worn out his welcome. He will not fit back into the box of lights and get put on a shelf. When Jesus was born as an infant, he came near to us and began to share himself with us.

One of the names of Jesus we sing often about at Christmas time is "Emmanuel," which means God with us. Jesus is God with us, a God who is distant and distinct from us, becoming near and like us. So what we are going to look at in the book of Hebrews today is this: **What does it mean that Jesus is "God with us"?** And to answer that, we are going to look at three things in Hebrews 2 today. We are going to see what Jesus shares with us, what we share with Jesus, and what this means for us.

Now before we look at these points, there is a sort of preface that the author of Hebrews gives us when he says this: **Hebrews 2:10-11a**.

I love how the author of Hebrews puts it here. Have you ever seen someone say or do something which is such a perfect representation of that person's character? For instance we can say about our roommate, "That's so Dale to be meticulous about where we put the remotes when we are done watching TV." Or "This wedding is so Susan, the décor and the feel is a perfect reflection of who she is."

That's what the author is saying here when he says, "For it was fitting..." In other words he's saying, "It is so God, so perfectly in line with his character that he would do this."

It is so God that he would seek to bring many sons to glory. That he would take broken and ordinary people and bring them into his perfect glory. From death to life. That's just so God. That's what God does. The whole Christmas story is an extension of God continuing to do exactly what God would do.

And part of the way in which God is going to bring these sons to glory is by making the founder of their salvation perfect. In order to bring us to glory, in order to save us and fix us, we needed not only a salvation but a perfect one. But this salvation was not a system of belief. This salvation was not a moral code. This salvation wasn't a social-economic status. This salvation was a person. The founder of our salvation is Jesus Christ: God with us.

And while Jesus always existed in heaven, for a time he was born as a human, fully-God and fully-man. And there was something about this time on earth that would establish his perfection, but it would

happen through suffering. How could this be? How could a perfect and transcendent God be any more perfect? And how could that perfection come through suffering?

We will talk about that more as we move on, but I want us to see why Jesus needed to be perfect. Look with me **at Hebrews 2:11a**. Here we see the first attribute Jesus is going to share with us: **What Jesus Shares with us: His perfection**. Why is it important that Jesus be perfect? Because he is going to sanctify us. The word sanctification means to be set apart, it means to be holy. Think of sanctification like the fine china your grandma had: due to their value and beauty, they have a distinct purpose. They aren't used for what is normal, they are used in a special way, for a special purpose. Sanctification then is being set apart for a special purpose and being used to that end.

And this text says that there is one who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified. Jesus in being perfect is able to sanctify us. In the Greek one of these words is active and one of these words is passive. Meaning that as Jesus is set apart by being perfect in suffering, so too then are we set apart by Jesus' perfection. In other words we all have a vested interest in the life of this Jesus.

You can have the perfect Christmas experience, and you can enjoy it, but its perfection doesn't make you any different. But this is not so for Jesus. Part of the way God is going to save his people is by changing them by the perfection of Jesus. So in this text we see two truths about God with us. We see first that Jesus came to do something for you. He came to establish and accomplish your salvation. But also he came to do something to you. He came to sanctify you. To make you less like what you were, and more like him who saved you.

Jesus shares with us his perfection. But this is not all that is shared between Jesus and us. In the following verses we see our second point: **What Jesus shares with us: His relationship with God**. When Jesus took on flesh, he shared the same source of life we had. He was human, we are human. But because Jesus is also God he not only shares humanity with us, but he also shares with us his relationship with God. **Hebrews 2:11-13**.

Jesus calls us brother, he shares a name and familial standing with us. But Jesus as our brother is giving us a window into a world we had never had before. He is revealing to us the way a relationship with God is supposed to work. Included in these verses are three Old Testament passages which reflect Jesus' perfection inside of his relationships. To be perfect he must have a perfect relationship with God, but to be human he must have a perfect relationship with us as a fellow human. And all three of these passages stress that dynamic.

And as he is perfectly doing both of those things, he is inviting us to share in that relationship with him. He is exhorting us to see God, to praise him and to trust in him. He is inviting us into something exclusive and once outside of our reach.

I read an article this week about the relationship Charles Barkley had with one of his fans. For those who don't know, Barkley is a 6'6", 11 time All-Star in the NBA. He has been in movies, he is part of the most popular NBA show on TV, and he has a huge international following.

The article picks up at the funeral of Charles Barkley's mother. And it describes a random, small Asian man who walked into the small-town funeral home. The article says this: "Barkley's friends couldn't quite place him. He wasn't a basketball player, he wasn't a sports figure, and he wasn't from Barkley's hometown. Here's what I can tell you about him: He wore striped, red polo shirts tucked into khaki

shorts and got really excited about two-for-one deals. He was a commuter. He worked as a cat litter scientist in Muscatine, Iowa. In short, he was everyone's suburban dad."

People asked Barkley, "Hey who's the Asian dude," and Barkley just laughed and said, "That's my boy Lin."

Lin was a random man who met Barkley at a hotel. And the two became friends. Eventually Barkley began to take Lin to places where an ordinary suburban dad wouldn't go. They have pictures of Lin relaxing with NBA superstars and hanging out on the set of NBA Tonight.

Lin wasn't famous, he wasn't a celebrity, journalist or all-star. He was just a guy who was the friend of a really special guy. They were both men, but one of them was able to offer the other relationships and experiences which were unavailable without this relationship.

This is what Jesus did for us when he became a man. He came to call us into the VIP places that we couldn't get to on our own. He came to proclaim to us the name of the God who was beautiful. He came to make it known to us that there is a way to glorify him with all of your life.

He came to expose us to a trust we hadn't seen before and a salvation which is kept by Jesus himself as our brother. Without Jesus we would have no access to such a relationship with God, but when Jesus comes to us as a brother, as a fellow human, he opens up opportunities we never thought possible before.

You see the problem with humanity has always been the heart of humanity. We were made to live in perfect peace not only with one another, but with God. This is what God made Adam and Eve to do in the Garden of Eden. They were to obey God perfectly and love one another joyfully, and then they would enter into a perfect world. But even in the best of circumstances they failed to obey God. They sinned. And because of that death, pain and suffering entered into this world.

But here Jesus came to show us the life and the relationship Adam should have had. This is what Jesus shares with us. Jesus is a perfect window into a life lived for the glory of God as a fellow man. But this is only half of the story. It's easy to be perfect when you're God.

While Jesus shared his perfect relationship with us. We also shared something with him. This is our third point today: **What we share with Jesus: The weakness of humanity**. Where Adam was tested in a perfect garden and failed, Jesus was going to be testing in a hostile world, and he would succeed.

We have seen how Jesus brings to us some of the very best parts of his life in heaven. The problem was we brought to him the very worst parts of life on earth. Read with me **Hebrews 2:14-18**.

Jesus became like you. In his incarnation he partook with us of all the things we know to be common to humanity. Jesus was human. He was able to stub his toe, he was able to be grieved, sinned against, and hated. When Jesus took on flesh he was still God the Son, but he became vulnerable to the entire human condition.

He knew what it was like to lose loved ones. In the gospel narrative we don't hear anymore about his human father Joseph so he probably knew what it was to either lose his father, or to be rejected relationally by his father.

He could feel the pain of feet aching after walking for hours, the bite of hunger, the thirst for water. He could feel not only the lack of satisfaction but the presence of pain and suffering.

This is quite possibly the worst white elephant gift exchange. Jesus brings with him a window into a right relationship with God, and we bring to him the pain of the human experience.

The whole of human history is dotted with death, suffering and hostility. But here comes the one who is going to save it, and he himself is human. Jesus became just like us, but the problem is we need someone who is different than us. What the Jewish people, what we are waiting for is someone to save us from our sins, but we couldn't even find someone able to save themselves from their own sins. Every stand-in savior history could throw at us failed to be perfect. And here comes another one, claiming to be God, but who is also fully human.

You've all seen a movie where one character falls into an exhibit at the zoo. And his buddy is up there and sees him, but instead of going for help he jumps into the pit with his friend. Yes, he came down, he transcended the gap between the two, he came near, but now there are just two people who needed to be saved.

I imagine that this is partly what the Jewish people reading this letter thought about Jesus. In fact they already knew the passages the author just quoted. They were written words of other men. It was King David who said he would make God's name known, but he didn't do it. It was Isaiah who said he would trust in God and keep God's children, but Isaiah the great prophet couldn't do it.

Why would we trust in this guy? How is this any different? Because Jesus, even though he was just like us, he was going to live the perfect life. He wouldn't sin. Even in his heart. He would live life in a broken world with all the potential to fail that we experience, but he would continue to trust God and obey him perfectly.

This is what the author of Hebrews meant when he said that God would make the founder of our salvation perfect in suffering. Jesus would suffer the temptation to not worship God, to find his identity in something else, he would face the temptation of lust, of deceit, and hate in his heart.

Look at what is said a bit later in **Hebrews 5:7-9**. Jesus became perfect because he came to us perfectly and passed the test of humanity that none of us could. Jesus was born as a man able to feel all the pain of the world so that he could prove his perfection by choosing to value the promises of God over the promise of sin. When Jesus was born as a vulnerable infant, he was born to bear the greatest test of strength.

And yet he died. Not for his own sin, but for our sin. That's what that author means when he says that he made propitiation for sin. Propitiation is a theological term which just means he turned away the wrath our sin deserved. Our sin demands our death. And Jesus took that punishment for us.

This is at the very heart of the gospel. This is what we looked at last week. Look at **Hebrews 2:9**. Because Jesus was sinless, he was the only one who could die for someone else's sin. Everyone else has to die for their own sin, but being sinless Jesus didn't have to die for his. And in being God, Jesus' death was able to atone for the sin of all who believe in him. He wants to give you his hard fought, suffering laden perfection.

Do you see that it is only “God with us” who can solve the problem of sin in our lives? The author of Hebrews uses an allegory of slavery, and did you see what he said: Jesus came to “deliver all those who through the fear of death are subject to lifelong slavery.”

We live in a society where we can feel almost every day the desperation of humanity. We know something needs to change. We realize that humanity is broken and that it needs to be delivered, but we turn time and time again to people and to things which will never save us because none of them have or will prove themselves to be perfect. This is slavery out of fear.

But when we see the Jesus in a right perspective, he defeats death in his own perfect death. He frees us from all our false hopes by becoming the perfect object of hope. Jesus is the cure for humanity because he bore the whole curse of it on the cross. Every other hope we have comes from the mind of humanity, but here, this hope comes from the mercy of God. Knowing our state he sent his son to stand in the gap for us.

And here is our last point in closing: **What does this mean for you?**

Well I guess it depends. If you do not see Jesus as God with us, as Emmanuel, if he is not your faithful brother, then it really means nothing. You will continue your life as it is, but one day you will find out that you are held under the power of death. That the whole of your life is a slavery to find, to have to achieve only what Jesus has achieved for you.

But if that's you I call you to consider the great love God has shown for you in sending his son like this to us. God loves you, and Jesus has come to suffer for you. Will you see him as your fellow brother who is faithful in your stead? Wouldn't you like to rest from your fears of thinking you have to be good enough or that you must find something good enough? Wouldn't you love to know that in Jesus you have not only a savior who is God, but one who is your brother, who wants to draw near to you even in the hardest parts of life?

For those who see Jesus, who are a fellow brother with him; this is where we cannot leave Jesus as we do the Christmas season. We can't pack him up till next year. We cannot put him on a shelf. We cannot get him out of our home.

Why? Because he is here to change us. Because he has been made perfect, he is helping us to be changed by his perfection. That's where all of this ends. Look back at **Hebrews 2:18**.

Jesus is perfect, you are not. But Jesus has promised to help us with his perfection. He is with you now. He has promised to come to us in a time of great need. He has come to whisper into your ear: "I know."

I know how hard it can be. I know the power of false promises. I know the weakness of your flesh. I know the pain of loss. But you know me. You know that I am here to help. You know that I have come not only to do something for you, but something to you. We are saved by Jesus' perfect obedience to God, and Jesus' salvation helps change us more and more into one who seeks to obey God in an imperfect world. He enables us to choose freedom and joy instead of slavery and death.

What does it mean that God is with us? It means that Jesus shared the worst part of your life so that you might share the best part of his.

Because Jesus is God with us. God is changing us to be more like him. That's what this baby reminds us of. The defeat of sin and its slavery over us and the promise of new life in Jesus Christ. I want to close with one quote from an 16th century pastor: **"Let the world now take its course, and the men therof do their worst; let Satan rage, and the powers of hell be stirred up against them; let them load them with reproaches and scorn, and cover them all over with the filth and dirt of their false imputations; let them bring them into rags, into dungeons, unto death; --Christ comes in the midst of all this confusion and says, 'Surely these are my brethren, the children of my Father,' and he becomes their savior. And this is a stable foundation of comfort and supportment in every condition."**

At Christmas we celebrate the savior who entered into our confusion to be made the perfect foundation of our salvation. Christ has come. Come let us adore him.