

“He Himself Has Suffered”

The Fourth in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

Texts: Hebrews 2:10-18; Isaiah 12:1-6

The very fact that human priests are themselves sinners raises a number of important questions. How can sinful priests offer sacrifices that remove the guilt of our sin, unless they first offer sacrifices for themselves? And sacrifices they offer—the blood of animals—only temporarily removes the guilt of our sins. Such sacrifices only delay the judgment of God, and they must be continually repeated by the priests not only for themselves, but also for those on whose behalf they are offered. It will take a perfect priest offering a perfect sacrifice, if we are to be saved from the guilt and power of sin. This perfect priest is Jesus Christ who has made himself lower than the angels, suffered on the cross and tasted death, was raised from the dead and then ascended on high, before taking his place at God’s right-hand. And yet, this perfect priest is merciful to us because he himself has suffered and was tempted, just as we suffer and are tempted.

As we continue our series on the Book of Hebrews we come to the second half of the second chapter of this epistle, where the author continues to make his case for the superiority of Jesus Christ. As the author has shown us from the pages of the Old Testament, Jesus Christ is superior to angels. Jesus is superior to Moses. And Jesus is superior to the priesthood of Israel. While in the previous verses, the author has focused upon our Lord’s superiority to angels, in verses 10-18 of Hebrews 2, the author now begins to address a topic he will develop in great detail throughout the balance of this epistle—the superiority of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Jesus is a much greater priest who offers a much better sacrifice for sin.

Before we turn to our text this morning (vv. 10-18), a bit of review is in order. The church receiving this letter was very likely a small congregation meeting in a home in a large city (Rome or Alexandria?). It was composed of mostly Hellenistic Jews (Greek in culture, Hebrew in theology), who had recently converted to Christianity. A number of these people had come under a great deal of persecution from governing authorities, and from their Jewish friends and families in the synagogues they had ceased attending. Many, apparently, made professions of faith in Jesus Christ and were baptized, but then sadly renounced both when the persecution became too great.

The letter we know as the Epistle to the Hebrews is an unknown author’s response to this tragic situation. Likely written by someone in the Pauline circle, in this epistle the author preaches a sermon (the epistle is in the form of a homily—a written sermon) making a very powerful case that since God has spoken finally and definitely in the person of his son, Jesus Christ, and since Jesus Christ is greater than Moses, angels, and Israel’s priesthood, the New Covenant of which Christ is mediator is superior to the Old Covenant and its types and shadows. His main point is “why would someone want to return to that which is inferior (the Old Covenant) with a priesthood with perpetual and bloody animal sacrifices which were intended to foreshadow the once-for-all sacrifice for sin, made by Jesus Christ?”

As we saw last time, in verses 1-4 of chapter two, the author offers a solemn warning to those in this church not to neglect that great salvation secured for them through the doing and dying of Jesus Christ. In fact, he opens the second chapter by exhorting his readers, “*therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.*” The people in this church have heard the gospel, and responded to it by professing faith in Jesus Christ. Now, sadly, some were drifting away from that gospel which had been preached to them. In verse 3, the author sternly warns them “*how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?*” If Jesus Christ is who Christians claim he is, then apostasy (renouncing Christ) is a most serious and grievous sin.

The law of God which was given to Israel at Mount Sinai is grounded in the blessing-curse principle. God blesses those who obey his commandments perfectly. But because God is holy and must punish all sin, if we break his commandments in even the slightest degree, then the covenant curse comes down upon the offender with full fury. Whether they realize it or not, those who return to the inferior covenant God made with Israel, are renouncing everything Jesus did to rescue us from the curse of the law!

By renouncing Jesus Christ and returning to Judaism, those who were committing such apostasy were demanding that God now judge them by their law-keeping and personal righteousness—not through the lens of the sacrificial death and perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. The author of Hebrews is making it as clear as he can that those who neglect this great salvation will not escape the blessing/curse principal upon which the law is based. This is about as foolish a move as one can make. Those who seek to be righteous by law-keeping will not escape the covenant curses. As the author put in Hebrews 2:2, “*every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution.*”

In verses 5-18, the author returns to the Old Testament to make his case for the superiority of Jesus Christ to angels. Citing passages from the LXX (which was accepted as authoritative word of God by Hellenistic Jews), the author conclusively demonstrates that Jesus Christ is that one who created the angels. Jesus is that one whose orders they obey, and Jesus is the one whom the angels worship. In verse 5, the author writes that “*it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking*” to make the point that whatever role angels have played in the past, that role will change when Jesus returns on the last day when his kingdom is consummated. On that day, death will be defeated, and Satan and all his host will be cast into the lake of fire. Therefore, there will be no need for angels to restrain the effects of human sin, since human sin will no longer be present.

Next, the author addresses the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ, now citing from Psalm 8 to point out that God has made men and women as divine image-bearers, but little lower than the angels. In his incarnation, Jesus Christ took to himself a true human nature, and made himself like us in every way (including being a little lower than the angels), for the purpose of saving us from our sins. Although Jesus died for our sins, and tasted death for all, he was raised from the dead, is now seated at God’s right hand and crowned with glory and honor. When the author states that Jesus tasted death for all, he is not addressing the debate over the extent of the atonement—whether Jesus died to make all people savable if they meet certain conditions, or whether Jesus died to actually and effectually save God’s elect. The author of Hebrews is addressing the fact that Jesus died because he is bearing in his own body the curse for our sin, thereby securing the grace of God for those whom he intends to save.

This brings us to our text, verses 10-18 of Hebrews 2. The author continues to build his case that all things are in subjection to Jesus Christ, even if we cannot now see this to be the case. Given the presence of sin and evil in the world around us, as well as the presence of sin in our own hearts, it is easy to conclude from this that Christ is not yet reigning, or that evil is beyond God’s control. But the fact of the matter is that having conquered death and the grave, Jesus has authority over all things, and is allowing human rebellion and the consequences of the fall to run their course and fulfill all things. The author takes this occasion to once again reminds us that Jesus is the creator and sustainer of all things and creatures, who directs everything to their appointed ends. Now he adds that the one who has created everything, is also the savior of God’s elect. As we read in verse 10, “*for it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.*”

This verse contains several points which need to be unpacked in some detail. First, that one through whom and for whom all things exist is the Father, who directs his eternal Son to both secure for, and

apply to, that salvation he has earned to God's people—those given to Christ by the Father to quote from the gospel of John (John 10, 17). Second, it is through Christ's suffering on our behalf that our salvation is accomplished for us. It is important that we notice that this is a very strong assertion of monergism over synergism. Monergism simply means that God is the active party in our salvation. God saves us when we were dead in sin, or to put it another way, "God saves sinners." Monergism ("one working") stands over against "synergism," ("working with") or God helping sinners save themselves. The author's point is that to bring his people to glory—making the sinful children of Adam the adopted sons and daughters of God—God ordained the cross, i.e., the suffering of his own son (who is now exalted to God's right hand) to "secure" our salvation. God decreed our salvation, and Jesus Christ accomplishes it for us.

This is what the author means when the Father ordained Jesus—making him perfect—to be the founder (or "originator") of our salvation. The great salvation of which the author had just spoken in verse 3, was decreed by God and accomplished by Jesus Christ through his death, resurrection, and ascension. Our salvation depends upon God's grace purchased for us by the suffering of Jesus Christ, who bore in his own body the wrath of God, which otherwise would be directed against us on the day of judgment. Jesus even tasted death for us, providing for us this "great salvation." And then in his resurrection and ascension, Jesus is given that glory and honor which he alone rightly deserves, yet which he will share with us when we are brought into his glory. We see in this both Christ's humiliation, and his exaltation.

As the author makes clear, Jesus Christ made perfect our salvation by doing for us that which we could never do for ourselves—remove the guilt of our sin and provide us with a justifying righteousness. To do this, Jesus took to himself a human nature, making himself lower than the angels. Jesus suffered and tasted death for us. He was then raised from the dead and ascended on high, to be crowned with honor and glory ensuring his return on the last day when his kingdom is finally consummated. Our great salvation is great, because Jesus accomplishes it for us! There is not a word here about us "doing" anything. Jesus Christ does it all, for us, and in our place. Jesus perfects that salvation which God graciously has decreed to bestow upon us. As the author will go on to point out in the following chapters, Jesus' priesthood is vastly superior to the priesthood of Israel.

As we learn in the first part of verse 11, "*for he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source.*" Sanctification is another "Christian" word we use often without proper definition. The primary sense of sanctification is to be set apart from those not chosen, in order to become God's own possession and to be used for his purposes. Although we are born as slaves to sin, because he is gracious towards us in Christ, God then sets us apart and calls us to be servants of his beloved son. The secondary sense of sanctification is ethical and moral purity—yet, the secondary sense is often made the primary sense in many Christian circles. Those sanctified are set apart by God, and are then progressively purged of sin through the weakening of our sinful habits, and through the progressive strengthening of the new nature.

This means that all Christians are set apart by God for his purposes, and as a result, are presently being sanctified (in terms of being transformed into the image of Jesus Christ). As our catechism puts it in Q & A 114. *Can those who are converted to God keep these Commandments perfectly? No, but even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of such obedience, yet so that with earnest purpose they begin to live not only according to some, but according to all the Commandments of God.* The author's point here is that Jesus Christ is the Sanctifier, and we are those being sanctified. To trust in Jesus Christ (justification) is to be simultaneously undergoing the process of sanctification. There is no sense anywhere in the New Testament that people can accept Jesus as Savior, but not make him Lord, or that someone can be justified by one act of faith and then sanctified by another act of faith later on. All those who are Christ's are presently justified (reckoned as righteous) and are presently in the process of sanctification. You cannot have the one without the other.

Because Jesus is our sanctifier, the author goes on to say in verses 12b-13, “*that is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers.*” The reason why Jesus is not ashamed to call us “his brothers” is because we are now members of God’s family because of that salvation accomplished for us by Jesus himself. To bolster his case, the author now quotes three Old Testament texts in which Jesus’ connection to his people is set forth—even in the Old Testament. The first of these is found in verse 12, “*I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.*” This is a citation of Psalm 22:22, a messianic Psalm which Jesus quotes while suffering on the cross. From the beginning of the church, Christians understood that in this particular Psalm the pre-incarnate Christ is speaking of that very same salvation he would accomplish for his people in his future messianic mission.¹

The author quotes this passage to demonstrate that because Jesus has suffered for us, securing our salvation, Jesus now calls us his brothers in the midst of the congregation, which, by the way, is the Greek word *ekklesia* (or church). By dying and rising again, Jesus calls us to himself, then declares us brothers (and sisters), including us in his congregation, which is his church. The scene here is the heavenly congregation of all redeemed saints. In fact, we might even say that when God “sanctifies us,” he sets us apart from the world, by making us members of his church.

This explains why there is no such thing in the New Testament as a professing Christian who is not identified with a particular local church. To be Christ’s, is to belong to his people, and his people belong to his church. And his church assembles each Lord’s Day not only to hear the gospel and receive the sacraments, but as a testimony of the grace of God to the watching world around us. Sanctification is not just of individual Christians, but the sanctification of a new humanity, a new people, the church. Although we are called to faith in Christ as individuals, and we must personally place our faith (trust) in Christ to be justified (saved), when we do so we become part of the body of Christ which is his church, and his church has a particular manifestation in a local congregation of believers.

The next verse cited is found in Hebrews 2:13—“*And again, ‘I will put my trust in him.’*” This passage is quoted from Isaiah 8:17 and Isaiah 12:2 (our Old Testament lesson). These passages speak of a time when Isaiah had prophesied of blessing (salvation) and curse (judgment), yet received no response from either the people of Israel or from the king. As Isaiah waits for YHWH’s vindication, he seals these words for the people of God to receive at a later time, so as to prove that Isaiah has faithfully received the word of YHWH. These words are taken by the author of Hebrews to teach that the *ekklesia* (the congregation) is that group to whom Isaiah’s words were actually intended. Isaiah’s trust in YHWH has been vindicated by the presence of a church composed of believing Jews in this unidentified church and an unknown city. The author takes a prophecy Isaiah made about Israel, and applies it to the church.²

The next passage quoted by the author is also from Isaiah 8:18, “*and again, ‘Behold, I and the children God has given me.’*” In the original prophecy, Isaiah is speaking of his own children (his family) who follow YHWH and trust in his word, but the author takes the prophecy and uses it to speak of those who trust in Jesus, and who thereby become God’s true children in the messianic age. As with the three other passages, the author reinterprets these texts (familiar passages to Greek-speaking Jews) and now applies them to Jesus Christ, by putting these Old Testament verses spoken by Isaiah on the lips of Jesus Christ.

This means that Isaiah’s trust in YHWH and in identifying his children as God’s followers serves as a

¹ Bruce, Hebrews, 82.

² Bruce, Hebrews, 82-83.

type of Christ. We cannot know that this is the case in the Old Testament, but only as the Old Testament is explained in the New Testament. What the author is doing is making his case that the hardness of heart which was characteristic of Isaiah's day, will be removed when the Messiah comes with his own children and family, who are now children of Christ, and therefore members of his *ekklesia*.³ The point to anyone considering returning to Judaism is simply this—"why do you want to go back to a people who remain hard of heart toward the things of God, when the one who ended that period of redemptive history has now come in the flesh?"

Because the whole point of the author's argument is that the church is composed of God's children (people who are saved by the grace of God purchased by Christ's suffering unto to death), the author must now address the question of *how* Jesus Christ is identified with God's people ("his children") so as to actually save them. This brings him to a discussion of Christ's incarnation. The eternal son of God, who created all things, took to himself a true human nature in the womb of the virgin so as to save us from our sins. In verse 14, the author makes this point in a way aimed at his particular audience. "*Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.*"

How can God have "children?" How do they relate to Christ? With the words of Isaiah in mind the author seeks to answer this question being reminding them that the Savior himself shared the same flesh and blood that his creatures do. Jesus did not merely appear to be human. He was not God in a "man suit." He took to himself a true human nature, so that the very one who "*is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature*" likewise truly partakes of human nature. Notice that after laying out the fact of the incarnation—Jesus is fully God and fully man—the author spells out why Jesus did such a remarkable thing—through his death he might destroy the devil who has the power of death.

On its face, this statement seems to conflict with Revelation 1:18 and our Lord's declaration, "*I am the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.*" But Satan is himself an angelic being, created by Christ, and although fallen, the devil is like any other angel. He is not omnipotent nor omnipresent and can only do those things that God allows him to do. Jesus called Satan a murderer from the beginning in John 8:44, and in the gospels Satan has the power to afflict people—the demon possessed man and those women Jesus describes as being bound by Satan (Luke 13:16). But here the author's point seems to be that what power Satan has, and however that power is tied to death, it has been broken by Christ's death and resurrection. Jesus will destroy Satan. Jesus will destroy death itself. He did so through his own death and resurrection. And it is through knowing and understanding what Jesus has done that Satan's power regarding death is broken.

But in order to do any of these things, Jesus had to identify with those whom he intends to save. As the author states in verse 15, Jesus partook of human nature, to "*deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.*" People fear death. Surveys show that the older we get the more often we think about it. Fear of death holds us captive. We do not die because we are human, but because of Adam's fall into sin. Ben Franklin was right when he said that the only two inevitabilities of human life are death and taxes. What Franklin failed to add is that both are the consequence of human sinfulness. As long as we keep before our eyes the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we may fear dying, but we will no longer be slaves to the fear of death. Even as Jesus sits at God's right hand crowned with glory and honor, so too will his children, those whom he purchased by tasting death for us. How do we know? He has promised! And he is the one who died, who was raised, and who now sits at God's right hand.

³ Geerhardus Vos, The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews (P & R, 1956), 60-61.

While the Hellenistic Jews of the first century often focused upon Moses and angels, the author now directs his readers back to the superiority of the promises of the covenant of grace (which God made with Adam, then with Abraham, then with David) over those promises of Sinai (with Moses as mediator), which, ironically had left Israel under the fear of death (which the devil has exploited). In verse 16 he writes, “*for surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham.*” Jesus does not provide salvation for angels, yet he does for us, his people. Notice that the author focuses upon the offspring of Abraham, not the children of Moses—the children of Abraham are the children of God through faith in the promise that God would justify his people, and give them the gift of the Holy Spirit. The covenant God made with Israel did not replace the Abrahamic covenant—both were present simultaneously. One (the Abrahamic covenant) was a grace based covenant, while the other (Sinai) was, in part, works based covenant. God blesses us in the covenant of grace (of which the Abrahamic covenant is one administration, the New Covenant is another), by sending Jesus Christ to be perfectly obedient under the covenant of works, thereby earning the covenant blessing which Jesus freely gives to us through faith in the promises made under the covenant of grace.

This brings us to the author’s fundamental point. “*Therefore [Jesus] had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.*” Jesus became incarnate to save us from our sins, and the way in which he would save us from our sins is by becoming that high priest who could offer that one sacrifice which could turn aside God’s wrath (“to make propitiation”), namely himself. Jesus is at the same time the great priest, and the perfect sacrifice for sin. Jesus alone can turn aside God’s wrath from us (by offering a propitiation for our sin), because of who he is and because of the sacrifice he makes.

The practical consequences us this are profound. “*For because [Jesus] himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*” In taking to himself a true human nature, and completing his messianic mission, Jesus not only knows what our suffering is like (hunger, need for sleep and rest, physical pain and exhaustion, in addition to persecution and rejection), but he has also been tempted in all ways like us, yet without sin. This means that the one who tasted death for us, who has been raised and now sits at God’s right hand, who is now our sanctifier, knows full well what it is like to suffer (as we do), and what it is like to be tempted to sin (as we are). Our high priest not only offers the perfect sacrifice, he himself has suffered and has been tempted. He is therefore merciful to us because he has been made like us, and because he himself has suffered, and has been tempted.

What then, do we take with us, from this section of Hebrews?

Jesus has saved us from the guilt of our sins, he now sanctifies us, and he includes us in the congregation of God (the *ekklesia*). Despite our sins, Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters. Jesus knows what it is like to suffer—because Jesus’ suffering was so much greater than any man’s, bearing in his own body God’s wrath against our sin. And because Jesus took to himself a human nature, Jesus was truly tempted, yet never sinned. Therefore, Jesus alone is the perfect high priest. Because he is without sin, Jesus alone is able to offer the final and perfect sacrifice for sin. And because he himself is the sacrifice for sin, Jesus’ death turns aside that wrath of God which we so rightly deserve. That Jesus is always merciful to us, because he himself has suffered, and because he himself has been tempted. This is what the author means when he says that we have a faithful high priest.

And because all of this is true, why would anyone turn his back on such a great salvation?