

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

WHY JESUS BECAME A MAN

Hebrews 2:16-18

By

Steven J. Cole

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Hebrews Lesson 8

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If we were to go out on the streets and ask people at random, "What is your greatest need?" we would probably hear a number of responses. Some would say, "My greatest need right now is to get a decent job. I can't pay my bills and get out of debt in my current situation." Others may say, "My greatest need is that I'm lonely. I need a mate or some good friends." Others might say, "My family is a war zone. My husband is abusive towards the kids and me; the kids are defiant and disrespectful. We need peace in our home."

If we went to a poor country, like India or Bangladesh, the answers to our question would center more on raw survival: "I am starving. I need food!" "I'm dying of a disease that is treatable, but I can't get the proper medicine." "I live on the streets. I need a roof over my head."

Without denying the legitimacy of any of those needs, according to the Bible, the people giving those answers are blind to their greatest need. Their greatest need is for God to forgive their sins and give them eternal life. They need to learn how to live in accordance with God's Word, so that their lives bring glory to Him. Without this focus, we could meet all of the perceived needs, but their greatest need would go unmet. If they were to die, they would spend eternity in hell.

I just read K. P. Yohannan's powerful book, *Revolution in World Missions* [gfa books]. He grew up in India and didn't wear shoes before he was 17 (p. 55). He has preached the gospel all across India. He is not oblivious to India's oppressive poverty. But he strongly contends against getting distracted with meeting physical needs, but ignoring the spiritual needs. He says that India has seen 150 years of schools and hospitals brought to them by British missionaries, but it has not had any noticeable effect on either their churches or society (p. 103, 110).

Yohannan says that it is one of Satan's lies that people will not listen to the gospel unless we offer them something else first (p.

109). He has sat on the streets of Bombay with beggars who are about to die. He has told them that he does not have material goods to give them, but he has come to offer them eternal life, and he has seen many respond. He says (p. 111),

There is nothing wrong with charitable acts—but they are not to be confused with preaching the Gospel. Feeding programs can save a man dying from hunger. Medical aid can prolong life and fight disease. Housing projects can make this temporary life more comfortable—but only the Gospel of Jesus Christ can save a soul from a life of sin and an eternity in hell!

Thus our emphasis should always be first and foremost on evangelism and discipleship. Social concern is a result of the gospel. We must not put the cart before the horse (pp. 106, 99).

This relates directly to our text. Many would read these verses and think, “This isn’t relevant to my needs. I’ve got to find a job. I’ve got to solve my personal problems. I’ve got a number of issues pressing in on me right now. These verses don’t relate to me.”

But the greatest need for us all is for a high priest to reconcile us as sinners to the holy God. Verse 17 shows how Jesus is that merciful and faithful high priest. If Jesus is your high priest, then your greatest need is to learn to live in victory over the power of sin, which will destroy your life if left unchecked. Verse 18 shows how Jesus is able to come to your aid when you are tempted.

To review, in chapter 1 the author demonstrated to his readers, who were tempted to leave Christ and go back to Judaism, how Jesus is God’s final word to us. As the Son of God, He is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His nature. He upholds all things by the word of His power (1:3). He is seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high, supreme over all angelic beings (1:4-14). After a brief exhortation not to drift (2:1-4), he shows that Jesus is not only the eternal Son of God, He is also fully human. God’s original intent was for man to rule over the earth, but that was hindered by the fall (2:5-8). By His incarnation and death for our sins, Jesus recovered what we lost in the fall (2:9-10). As the Captain of our salvation, Jesus became man in order to bring us to God (2:11-15). Our text continues the theme of Jesus’ humanity, showing us why He became a man:

Jesus became a man so that as our high priest,
He could offer Himself for our sins and
come to our aid when we are tempted.

He makes three points:

1. Jesus became a man, not an angel, because He came to save men (2:16).

The author is wrapping up his argument that he began in 2:5, that God put man on the earth to rule, and that the role of angels is "to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation" (1:14). The word "for" (2:16) relates to the previous two verses, about Jesus freeing us from the power and fear of death. There is debate about the meaning of the word translated, "give help." It literally means, "to take hold of" (NASB, margin). It is used of Jesus taking hold of Peter when he was sinking after walking on the water (Matt.14:31; see also Mark 8:23). It is also used in a spiritual sense of taking hold of or appropriating eternal life (1 Tim. 6:12, 19). So the debate is, in 2:16 does it refer to Jesus' taking hold of His people in the sense of helping them? Or, does it refer to His taking hold of human nature, in the sense of 2:14a?

The early church fathers uniformly interpreted it to refer to Jesus' taking hold of human nature in the incarnation (Philip Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 115). In this sense, the verse means, "Jesus did not take to Himself the nature of angels, but rather He took on the seed of Abraham," that is, He became a Jew in fulfillment of God's covenant promise to Abraham. About the 17th century, some commentators began to interpret the verse to mean that Jesus does not give help or assistance to angels, but rather to people. In this view, "the seed of Abraham" refers to those who are Abraham's true children by faith in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:7).

The difference does not seem that great to me. The first view emphasizes the *fact* of the incarnation, whereas the second emphasizes its *purpose*. The extended context discusses both the fact and the purpose of the incarnation. Thus I understand the sense of the verse in context to be: "While the Messiah is God, and thus superior to the angels, He also had to become man so that He could suffer and die for our salvation. He did this in fulfillment of God's

promise to Abraham, that through his seed, He would bless all peoples. So don't look to any angelic Messiah, and don't despise the fact that Jesus suffered and died. He had to do this to atone for our sins."

Before we move on, let me point out that this verse refutes an objection raised by those who deny the doctrine of God's sovereign election. They argue that if God does not choose everyone, then He is unloving and unjust (C. H. Spurgeon refutes this error in his sermon, "Men Chosen—Fallen Angels Rejected," *New Park Street Pulpit* [Baker], 2:293; Dave Hunt promotes this error in *What Love is This?* [Loyal], pp. 111-112, 114-115). If they are wrong, they are also guilty of blasphemy, because they are accusing the Sovereign God of being unloving and unjust!

They *are* wrong, for at least two reasons. First, it is plain from Scripture and history that God did not make His salvation equally available to all people in all places. He chose Abraham, but not Abraham's extended family and not anyone else in any other place on earth. He later chose Abraham's descendants through Isaac and Jacob, not because they were more deserving than others, but simply because He chose to do it (Deut. 7:6-8). This meant that God chose to reject Ishmael, Esau, and their descendants (Deut. 7:1-5). As far as Scripture reveals, all the other peoples in the world in the centuries before Christ only had the general witness of creation, which is not sufficient for salvation. God permitted them to go their own ways, but He didn't reveal to them the truth about the Savior to come, as He did to the Jews (Acts 14:16-17).

Second, our text makes it clear that God did not provide for nor offer salvation to fallen angels (2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6). He could have devised a way to offer salvation to the angels that joined Satan in his rebellion, but in His sovereign purpose, He chose not to do this. Would we dare say that this negates His love and justice? Can the fallen angels bring a charge against God because He didn't give them a way out of their condemnation? Of course not! And neither should rebellious people claim that God is unloving or unjust if He chooses some as vessels of mercy, but demonstrates His wrath and power on others as vessels of wrath prepared for destruction. As the Potter, He is free to do with the clay whatever He chooses to do, and we are not free to challenge Him (Rom. 9:19-24). I contend

that the main problem with those who reject God's sovereign election is not just deficient theology. They are not in submission to God's claim to be the sovereign over His creation.

Anyway, the author's main point in 2:16 is that Jesus became a man, not an angel. As the next verse makes clear, He did it to provide salvation to men.

2. Jesus became fully human for a specific purpose, to become a high priest to offer Himself for our sins (2:17).

Verse 17 makes three points:

- A. Jesus became fully human for a specific purpose.

The verse reads, literally, "Therefore, He was obligated to be made like His brethren in all things, ..." The obligation relates to the purpose that the rest of the verse delineates, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. And, as verse 18 states, as a result of His complete humanity, which included His being tempted, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.

But the significant words in this opening phrase are, "in all things." This refutes the Docetic heresy, that Jesus only *seemed* or *appeared* to be human. No, He adopted a complete human nature, yet without sin (4:15). His body had normal human needs (for food, rest, etc.), human emotions (although not sinful emotions), and human limitations (His body was not omnipresent, although in His deity He is omnipresent). A. W. Pink (*Commentary on Hebrews* [Ephesians Four Group], vol. 1) states firmly that since Jesus was not subject to sin, He was not subject to illness. I'm not sure that this is a necessary inference, since He did live in this fallen world (harmful germs are a result of the fall) and He was subject to death. So I don't know if Jesus ever had a cold. But clearly God protected Him from any illness that would have hindered His accomplishing His ministry.

- B. Jesus is our merciful and faithful high priest in the things pertaining to God.

This is the first mention of Jesus as our high priest in Hebrews, which is the only book in the New Testament to mention this truth. It is a vital concept for us to grasp, but we are at a disad-

vantage in that we did not grow up under the Jewish system. The Jews knew that they could not approach God directly. They had to come to Him through the priest, who would offer their sacrifices on their behalf. He represented them in everything pertaining to God. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would represent the entire nation by entering the Holy of Holies and presenting the blood on the mercy seat. If anyone else dared to enter that sacred place, or even if the high priest went in there on any other occasion, it meant instant death (Lev. 16:2). Thus the role of the high priest was essential so that the nation could be cleansed from its sins each year (Lev. 16:30).

Have you ever thought about what an expensive hassle it would have been to be required to bring a sacrifice to the priest every time you sinned? It would have been embarrassing, too! All the neighbors stop to look up from what they're doing as you trudge toward the tabernacle with your sacrifice. "There goes Steve again! You'd think he would learn! I wonder what he did this time?" But, as our author will develop later, Jesus offered His own blood once and for all, so that there is no need for continuing sacrifices (7:27; 9:12; 10:11-14). This must have been a *huge* relief to believing Jews! Jesus is our permanent, final high priest, who offered Himself once and for all for our sins! Thank God!

But He wasn't just any kind of high priest. He is a *merciful* high priest. That describes His motive in going to the cross (Hughes, p. 120). He had compassion on us as sinners. This means that we should never hesitate to draw near to our Lord for fear of rejection, or for fear that He will not understand. Although He will discipline us as a loving Father (12:5-11) for our good, He is never harsh or lacking in compassion. As David put it (Ps. 103:13, 14), "Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust."

John Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on Hebrews, p. 75) explains that a priest needed to be merciful so that he could help the miserable, raise up the fallen, and relieve the oppressed. Jesus, of course, did not need any experience to become merciful, but the trials that He endured assure us that He understands our trials. As Calvin puts it, "it is a rare thing for those who are always happy to

sympathize with the sorrows of others." He adds, "Therefore whenever any evils pass over us, let it ever occur to us, that nothing happens to us but what the Son of God has himself experienced in order that he might sympathize with us; nor let us doubt but that he is at present with us as though he suffered with us" (*ibid.*).

Jesus was also a *faithful* high priest. This refers to His faithful obedience to God in all things, culminating in His perfect obedience in going to the cross. He always trusted in and obeyed the Father, even to the point of death on the cross. You can trust in a faithful person completely. He will never let you down. So the character of Jesus as merciful and faithful invites us to draw near to Him in our every need. But that is especially true in the greatest need that every person faces:

- C. Jesus' offering of Himself on the cross satisfied God's wrath for our sins.

He became fully human "to make propitiation for the sins of the people." The NIV translates it "atonement"; the RSV has "expiation." Atonement and expiation refer to the cancellation of sin, whereas propitiation refers to the turning away of God's wrath. John Owen pointed out that there are four elements in propitiation: (1) an offence or crime to be taken away; (2) a person offended, to be pacified or reconciled; (3) a person offending, to be pardoned; and, (4) a sacrifice or other means of making atonement (*An Exposition of Hebrews* [The National Foundation for Christian Education], on Heb. 2:17, p. 476).

The notion of God's wrath is not popular. User-friendly churches don't mention it. Liberals argue that it was borrowed from the pagan idea of appeasing an angry god with a sacrifice. But it occurs no less than 585 times in the Old Testament (Leon Morris, "Propitiation," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by Walter Elwell [Baker], p. 888), and more than 30 times in the New Testament. Jesus often spoke in frightful terms about the future judgment (Mark 9:48; Luke 16:19-31). The Gospel of John (3:36) speaks of the wrath of God abiding on the one who does not obey the Son. Paul spoke often of God's wrath (Rom. 1:18, plus nine other times in Romans; 2 Thess. 1:7-9). The Book of Revelation is filled with horrifying images of the wrath of the Lamb (6:16).

God's wrath is not an angry outburst, but rather His active, settled hatred and opposition to everything evil, arising out of His holy nature. The Bible states that God not only hates sin; He also hates sinners (Ps. 5:5; 11:5). While as fallen sinners, we are to love even our enemies (Luke 6:27), we also are warned with some to "have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh" (Jude 23). We who love the Lord are commanded to hate evil (Ps. 97:10).

The important point is that if we diminish the wrath of God against all sin, we also diminish the love of God for His people. What God's holy justice required, His love and mercy provided, in that "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). As Philip Hughes exclaims (p. 120), "Our hell he made his, that his heaven might be ours. Never was there such mercy, never such faithfulness, as this!" So we must hold firmly to the biblical idea that Jesus became a man to offer Himself as the perfect sacrifice that the wrath of God demands for our sins.

The chapter ends with a practical consequence of Jesus' becoming a man:

3. Because Jesus became a man, He is able to come to our aid when we are tempted (2:18).

Because Jesus was fully human, He was fully tempted, although not in the same sense as those who have a sin nature. He was tempted in the same sense that Adam and Eve were tempted before the fall. We would be wrong to assume that because Jesus never fell into sin, He doesn't understand the depths of our temptations. As Hughes explains (p. 124), Jesus "knows the full force of temptation in a manner that we who have not withstood it to the end cannot know it. What good would another who has failed be to us? It is precisely because we have been defeated that we need the assistance of him who is the victor."

The Greek verb translated "come to the aid" means to run to the aid of those who cry out for help. Imagine a parent who hears his or her child cry out, "Help me!" We would drop what we were doing and run to help our child. That is the picture here of our merciful high priest. It also means that we are responsible to cry out to Him when we are tempted, and to flee when necessary.

God's Word promises, "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

Conclusion

What is your greatest need? I hope that you see that your greatest need is to be reconciled to the holy God. Have you come to Jesus in faith that He is your propitiation, the one who bore the penalty that you deserve? If not, the wrath of God abides on you! Do not rest until your faith is in Jesus as your high priest!

If you do know Him as your high priest, are you crying out to Him for help when you are tempted? Do you know experientially the consistent deliverance from sin that is yours in Christ? He is your merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God. He is able to come to your aid when you are tempted!

Discussion Questions

1. What is the biblical answer to the charge that God is not fair if He does not choose everyone for salvation?
2. Why is it essential to affirm Jesus' full humanity? What are the practical ramifications?
3. Why is it essential to hold to the doctrine of God's wrath against all sin? What do we lose if we compromise here?
4. Where is the balance between God's responsibility and ours when it comes to overcoming temptation?

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