

The Marvel of Christmas

Born to Die

Hebrews 2:9-18

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Born to Die

Scripture

If you were here last week, you may recall me saying that the word *advent* means “coming.” Advent signifies the period preceding the birth of Jesus when the Church anticipates the coming of the promised Messiah. The purpose of Advent is to help worshippers understand the events preceding the birth of Jesus. Historically, Advent spans a four-week season before Christmas.

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. This is the second in a series of Advent messages on “The Marvel of Christmas.” The word *marvel* means “something that causes wonder or astonishment.” The birth of Jesus is something that should indeed cause wonder and astonishment among us. But Christmas should cause wonder and astonishment among us supremely because of the reason Jesus came to earth, and that is because he was born to die.

Today’s sermon is titled “Born to Die,” and much of the material for this message is from John MacArthur’s book, *God with Us: The Miracle of Christmas*.

My text for today can be found in Hebrews 2:9-18:

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

¹⁰ In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. ¹¹ Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. ¹² He says,

**“I will declare your name to my brothers;
in the presence of the congregation I will sing your
praises.”**

¹³ And again,

**“I will put my trust in him.”
And again he says,
“Here am I, and the children God has given
me.”**

¹⁴ Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. ¹⁷ For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (Hebrews 2:9-18)

Introduction

Do you remember Thanksgiving Day last year? On Thursday, November 27, 2003—with extraordinary secrecy—President George W. Bush paid a surprise visit to Iraq. His purpose was to thank U.S. troops for “defending the American people from danger.” While there, the President served up Thanksgiving Dinner to 600 stunned soldiers in a mess hall at Baghdad’s airport.

The soldiers had gathered for what they thought would be a speech by Chief U.S. Administrator, Paul Bremer. Bremer told the troops he would read a Thanksgiving proclamation from the President, then paused and noted that it was customary for the most senior official present to read the President’s proclamation. “Is there anybody back there who’s more senior?” he asked.

The President himself then emerged from behind a curtain as cheering soldiers climbed on chairs and tables to shout and roar their approval.

With regard to this Thanksgiving visit to the soldiers far from home, President Bush said, “It’s got to be lonely for them. I thought it was important to send the message that we care for them.”

The Marvel of Christmas

The unannounced visit not only brought wild cheers from battle-worn soldiers, but also stunned the nation and even surprised the President's parents, who had been expecting him at the Thanksgiving table at his Crawford, TX ranch.

Similarly, God, who had formerly delivered his message through others (Hebrews 1:1-2), made a surprise personal visit to the world on that first Christmas—and “the Word became flesh and lived among us.” When God wanted to show a sinful world that he cared, he came into this world in the person of Jesus.¹

But the important truth to note about Christmas, however, is not so much that Jesus came, but *why* he came. Jesus came primarily to die.

John MacArthur notes:

There was no salvation in his birth. Nor did the sinless way he lived his life have any redemptive force of its own. His example, as flawless as it was, could not rescue men from their sins. Even his teaching, the greatest truth revealed to man, could not save us from our sins. There was a price to be paid for our sins. Someone had to die. Only Jesus could do it.²

Lesson

Some may lament that Jesus' death was a great tragedy. But Jesus' death was not a tragedy. In fact, Jesus' death is the greatest victory over death and evil that has ever been accomplished.

Today, let's note in Hebrews 2:9-18 five reasons why Jesus' death was not a tragedy.

I. Jesus Became Our Substitute (2:9)

First, Jesus' death was not a tragedy because through his death he became our substitute.

¹ Associated Press, (11-27-03).

² John MacArthur, *God with Us : The Miracle of Christmas* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1989), 116.

Hebrews 2:9 says, “**But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.**”

Jesus created all things, including angels. In his incarnation he **was made a little lower than the angels**. What does this mean?

This does not mean that Jesus became less than God. Jesus always was God. He did set aside some of the prerogatives of deity when he came to earth, but he was still fully God while on earth.

So, in what sense was Jesus **made a little lower than the angels**? Jesus was made a little lower than the angels “**because he suffered death.**” No angel, you see, can ever die. Angels are not eternal. Jesus created angels, and although they have a created beginning, they do not die. Death is reserved for humans, and because Jesus became fully man, he was subject to death. And it is in that sense that he **was made a little lower than the angels**.

But why did Jesus suffer death? The answer is **so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone**. The writer to the Hebrews is saying that Jesus became our substitute by dying in our place. That is the marvel of Christmas! Jesus died for us!

I want you to notice that the writer to the Hebrews says that Jesus **suffered death**. In other words, Jesus did not die simply and easily, but in dying he **suffered**.

Earlier this week my wife Eileen and I had dinner with the Tampa Bay area PCA pastors and their wives. One of the pastors shared a story about his father who was listening to a sermon. The elderly preacher concluded his sermon by saying, “Hallelujah! Amen!” Then he slumped forward in the pulpit, dead.

Well, that preacher’s death was apparently easy and painless. It was so unlike the death of the Preacher from Galilee. Jesus’ death was excruciatingly painful.

Many of you have seen Mel Gibson’s movie *The Passion of the Christ*. The word *passion* means “suffering.” Gibson’s movie depicts in a powerful way the terrible, horrible, painful suffering that Christ endured in his death.

If Jesus wanted, he could have called the angels from heaven to come and deliver him off the cross. But he didn't. Because if he did, there would be no salvation for you and for me. Jesus willingly and voluntarily **suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.**

Jesus went to the cross and suffered death, which was the payment for the penalty of our sin. On the cross, Jesus received the full expression of God's wrath against sin.

Death was not God's plan for mankind in the beginning. Death is part of the curse of sin. God warned Adam that if he disobeyed and ate the forbidden fruit, he would die (Genesis 2:17). Adam disobeyed, and introduced sin and death to the human race (Romans 5:12), where it has been passed down to everyone who has ever been born—except for Jesus. The prophet Ezekiel wrote, "The soul who sins is the one who will die" (Ezekiel 18:4). And the apostle Paul wrote, "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Sin inevitably brings death. The only reason we have death in this world is because of sin.

Jesus, however, was born without sin. At the age of thirty-three when Jesus died he had never ever committed a single sin. He could have escaped death for himself, but he chose to die as a substitute for us, bearing our sin. As the apostle Paul puts it, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

When I came to the United States in 1983 to study at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL, I had a rather large savings account. At the end of my first year though, the exchange rate severely diluted my savings account. By the end of my second year at seminary, I had virtually no money. I decided to visit the Dean of Students to let him know that I was going to forego my final year. After our discussion, he told me to come back in a few days. When I returned, he told me that the seminary had decided to pay my tuition in full for the rest of my final year. And so I was able to continue my studies and preparation for Gospel Ministry.

In a sense, that is what Jesus did for us. We incurred a great debt—a debt too great for us to pay ourselves. He fully paid our debt. Jesus freed us from the obligation of God’s justice, which is death for sin, and he liberated us to experience God’s grace.

It is just that simple. That is the grace of God. Jesus did not come because we deserved to be rescued. No. He came because he simply set his love upon his own, and he became our substitute.

II. Jesus Pioneered Our Salvation (2:10)

Second, Jesus’ death was not a tragedy because through his death he pioneered our salvation.

Hebrews 2:10 says, “**In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.**”

The word *author* means “pioneer, pacesetter, or leader.” It refers to someone who starts something for others to follow.

So, in Hebrews 2:10 the writer is saying that Jesus is the pioneer, the pacesetter, and the leader of our salvation. Jesus is the one who leads the way **in bringing many sons to glory.**

When I was in the South African Air Force we had to get all kinds of injections shortly after we arrived for basic training. There was one particular injection that was known to be very painful. We heard stories that the recruits passed out, cried, shouted, and so on. Therefore, we were all naturally nervous when the day arrived to receive our injection. All of us watched intently as one recruit volunteered to go first. After he received his injection, he did not pass out or cry or shout. Seeing him pioneer the way encouraged the rest of us as we followed and received our own injections.

In a similar way Jesus pioneered the way to God the Father through his own suffering when he died on our behalf.

Elsewhere Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Scripture is clear. There is only way to the Father in heaven, and that is through Jesus, the pioneer. Luke puts it this way in Acts 4:12, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”

III. Jesus Sanctified His People (2:11-13)

Third, Jesus’ death was not a tragedy because through his death he sanctified his people.

Hebrews 2:11-13 says, “**Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. He says, ‘I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises.’ And again, ‘I will put my trust in him.’ And again he says, ‘Here am I, and the children God has given me.’”**

The thrust of these verses is that Jesus is holy, and that he makes his own holy too. That is seen in verse 11: “**Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family.”**

The greatest theological dilemma of all time was resolved at the cross. The question is: how does a holy God enter into a relationship with unholy persons such as us?

On the one hand, God loves sinners and does not want to punish sinners. But, if he simply accepted us as we are and ignored our sin, his own holiness would be tainted.

On the other hand, God is holy and just, and therefore must punish sin. But, if he simply dished out justice, not one of us would be saved because every single one of us deserves to be punished because of our sin.

God resolved this dilemma by sending Jesus to take our punishment upon himself. God the Father brought love and justice together at the cross—and satisfied the demands of both.

Jesus died on the cross and took our sin upon himself. And he also credited us with his perfect righteousness and holiness, so that

when God the Father looks at us he does not see our sin but he sees the perfect holiness of Christ.

The amazing thing is that when God imputes—or credits—Jesus' holiness to you, then nothing in the world can take it away! That is why the writer goes on to make the remarkable statement in reference to those who have been saved by Jesus, "**So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers**" (2:11b).

On my son Jon's first birthday our family went to the courthouse in Beaver Falls, PA to complete the adoption process. Jon came into our family two days after he was born. There were some tumultuous and very uncertain months when we did not know whether or not we would be able to keep Jon. Nevertheless, things finally worked out, and we stood before the Judge on Jon's first birthday. The Judge took pains to make sure that we understood that when we adopted Jon he was as fully our child as was Lauren, our natural-born, three-year-old daughter. At one point the Judge even asked Lauren if she knew that Jon really was her brother.

Well, when we are saved by Jesus he makes us part of his family. And the glorious truth is that he delights to call us his brothers. And there is nothing that can separate us from that relationship with him—if we belong to him!

IV. Jesus Conquered Satan (2:14-16)

Fourth, Jesus' death was not a tragedy because through his death he conquered Satan.

Hebrews 2:14-16 says, "**Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants.**"

Satan **holds the power of death**. That is a remarkable thought, isn't it? Satan's great aim is to keep every person under

his control in slavery to sin so that he can ensure that they die without receiving Christ and eternal life.

But Jesus came into this world to destroy Satan and death, which is exactly what he did when he died on the cross. The apostle John writes that “the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8).

And because of Jesus’ victory over death, we can say with the apostle Paul, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:55).

When I was a student at the University of Cape Town a childhood friend of the family was also a student. We did not have much contact, mainly because I was a Christian and he was not, living the life-style of a campus jock. However, sometime during his third year he was converted to Christ. I asked him what had changed in his life. He said to me, “Freddy, before I was a Christian I had nightmares, night after night, because I was terrified of dying. But now that I am a Christian, my sleep is undisturbed. I have this incredible peace because I am no longer afraid of death.”

Friends, this is what Jesus came to do. Jesus came to this earth **so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.**

V. Jesus Became Our High Priest (2:17-18)

And finally, Jesus’ death was not a tragedy because through his death he became our High Priest.

Hebrews 2:17-18 says, **“For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”**

This is one of the most remarkable passages in all of Scripture. In order to fully and completely represent us to the Father in

heaven, Jesus became like us in every way, except for sin. Jesus **was made like his brothers in every way** so that he can understand us and all our struggles.

Tim Keller, Pastor of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, notes that Christianity does not so much offer solutions to the problems of suffering, but rather provides the promise of a God who is completely present with us in our suffering. Only Christians believe in a God who says, “Here I am alongside you. I have experienced the same suffering you have. I know what it is like.” No other religion even begins to offer that assurance.

After the World Trade Center tragedy, between 600 and 800 new people began attending the Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. The sudden influx of people pressed the question, “What does your God have to offer me at a time like this?”

Dr. Keller rightly preached, “Christianity is the only faith that tells you that God lost a child in an act of violent injustice. Christianity is the only religion that tells you, therefore, God suffered as you have suffered.”³

Because Jesus suffered, he knows exactly what we go through when we suffer. And it is in that sense that he is able to represent us to the Father as our sympathetic High Priest.

Conclusion

Friends, this is the marvel of Christmas! Jesus’ death was not a tragedy because ultimately he was born to die.

Through his death Jesus became our substitute. Through his death Jesus pioneered our salvation. Through his death Jesus sanctified his people. Through his death Jesus conquered Satan. And through his death Jesus became our sympathetic High Priest.

Let us rejoice this Christmas that Jesus was born to die—for sinners like you and me. Amen.

³ Tim Keller, “Preaching Amid Pluralism,” *Leadership* (Winter 2002), 34-35.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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