

## **In the Days of His Flesh: The Son and Suffering Hebrews 5:8**

Johnny Clyde Long was honorably discharged from the Army in the fall of 1946. I know this because I have the discharge papers. He was my grandmother's first husband on my mother's side. A year prior he landed in France and served most of his time in the recently-defeated Germany, but only a few months in, he developed a severe case of typhus fever and had to be sent back. There are other eye-catching details on those discharge papers—the commanding officers listed, the vaccine information, the payout expected based on the time served, among other things.

My respect for those who have served in the United States military is due, in part, to my own family history of military service. Beyond my family, my best friend growing up gave 20 years of his life to the Army National Guard, and though he plays it off, I periodically express my admiration for his service, especially his two difficult stretches in Iraq.

But neither my family members nor my friend was unique in experiencing hardships while away at war. Indeed, being a soldier is to carry the expectation of difficulty. From the first days of hearing hard commands to the daily, grueling physical challenges, the freshly enlisted soon becomes enlightened—adversity is the path forward, and in many ways intentionally made so by those in authority. Why? Because the tested soldier is best equipped for present and future difficulties. That soldier has learned to pay attention to the hardest demands. That soldier has learned to trust those above him. That soldier has learned his place and his responsibilities. The soldier has learned the value of a life and, in many cases, learned that value in the face of death.

However, the principle of learning in the context of hardship is not consigned only to the armed forces. When it comes to life in Christ, we have promises from God conveying that suffering has a shelf life, but we have no promises touting our immunity from suffering. The world is ridden with sorrow and brokenness. Considering the technological advances and a plethora of past examples of the evil that often causes suffering, have we witnessed a decline in global misery over the past century? Many would say no, citing two world wars, and other significant conflicts. Whatever the answer, we know that every age and epoch has its share of the distressed and downtrodden. When Christ came into the world, there was more than a sufficient amount of anguish and grief to go around. And here's the astounding truth we'll consider from the text this morning: That during the days of His flesh, Jesus Christ didn't shield Himself from suffering, but willingly endured it to save others.

### **I. The Position He Possesses**

#### *“Although He was a Son...”*

It was within the scope of His power and sovereign right to shield Himself. *He was a Son*. And we're not to misunderstand the author here as stating that Jesus is one *Son* among many sons.<sup>1</sup> He is, as Peter confessed, “*The Christ, the Son of the Living God.*”<sup>2</sup> In Hebrews, we've picked up on the truth that Christ's Sonship was a point of distinction, privilege, and exaltation. Matt helped us

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<sup>1</sup> Though there are places where His followers are called “sons of God.” See Matthew 5:9. In Luke, Jesus called those who will be raised in the final resurrection “sons of God” (Luke 20:36).

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 16:16

worship with laying open this truth in chapter three. Moses was faithful *in* God's house as a servant-member, but Jesus was faithful *over* God's house as a Ruling-Son. Among other reasons, Christ as **Son** is what made Him superior to the angels—He is the uncreated Son; they the created who long to look into the multifaceted riches of the gospel.

But basic to this title, **Son**, with some of its theological baggage that many historical voices have brought to the discussion on Christ's identity, is the idea of relationship. In fact, Jesus speaks of God as "Father" right around 150 times in the Gospels. In the New Testament, Jesus is referred to as the "Son of God" around 80 times.<sup>3</sup> This relationship, existing in the Godhead, seems to carry great importance in the mind of Jesus Himself. The realities within it—love, mutuality, deference, unity—there exists in these something fundamental about our relationship to everything and everyone else.

When we think of the health and happiness, the growth and development of children, it's impossible to neglect the state of relationships around them as those things which might affect their health, happiness, growth, and development. If the child's mom and dad are exhibiting distrust, impatience, course-joking, backbiting, or worse with each other, then in every case that relationship will have some kind of ill-effect on their child/children, many times into that child's adulthood. As the genealogy of Matthew 1 revealed in our Sunday school hour, and as I can personally testify, the grace of God can interrupt a lineage with relational beauty. But generally, the health of the relationship between a husband and wife will find fertile soil in the lives of their children. "What is being planted?" then becomes the question.

When John writes of our "*fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ*" in 1 John 1:3, the relationship between this Father and this Son is not insignificant. We see the curtain drawn in John 17 where we learn about this bond between the Father and the Son, an eternal bond marked by infinite love. What does that look like? In that same chapter we see that what belongs to the Father also belongs to the Son; that there was mutual honor; that eternal life is rooted in knowing something of the Person of the Father and the Person of the Son; that they shared glory before the world began, and that Jesus longed for a return of that glory, which He now shares in once again post-ascension. Is there a more important relationship in all the universe?

So, what might we expect in light of the exalted status of this position of Christ? Surely, if anyone should be exempt from sufferings in this life, it is Him! That seems to be how the opening few words of verse 8 are leaning. **Although...a Son**—eternal, the glorious One for unending ages, too holy for the eyes of supernatural beings, Maker of galaxies and Mover of mountain ranges—He came down.

If these Jewish believers are putting themselves in the perilous position of walking away from the rest given in Christ, might they be drawn back by a reminder of His position as **Son**? If they are on the cusp of giving in to an unbelieving heart, losing their confidence in the work of the Priest of priests, drifting away from and neglecting the gospel they heard in the beginning, then who He is must be one important component which draws them back. But the pairing of Christ's position with what follows will only add to the persuasiveness to hold firm to Him. This perfect relationship

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Lewis, *The Glory of Christ*, 193-194.

between the Father and the Son was not sufficient in and of itself to atone for our sin. If we would know such mercy, a particular path by this particular **Son** needed to be taken.

## II. The Suffering He Embraced

*“Although he was a Son, he...suffered.”*

Yes, this exalted Son came all the way down to this place. A place where the curse has found quarters in every land, in every heart. So, would this exalted Son rise above the pain of this world, the misery we so often witness from one land to the next, the anguish that seems to mark humanity? Would this Son not come and exercise every right to stay at arm’s length? Aren’t we grateful, brother and sister, that we have come to know the answer to that question? How grateful we are that Christ came and *wielded* a human body in a way that was in no way advantageous to Himself. But He was the **Son**! He had rights and power and status and...nope. If for a one second, He leveraged His influence to get back at the Pharisees or utilized His divine power with Himself at the center, then this very hour is full of futility.

I played baseball from pee wee age until I was a sophomore in high school. One night in the late 80’s, I remember pitching a game in the middle of summer. As you can imagine, even at the tender age of a tweener, there weren’t many dry spots on the ‘ole uniform or hat. That was not unusual, but the unusual part was that after I worked up a full-on sweat, I realized that throwing a pitch after touching my wet cap made the ball curve a bit more. After this rules infraction went on for a couple of innings and after a particular pitch, the umpire rises from his squatting, calls time out, and points to my coach to meet him and me at the pitching mound. In no unclear terms, the umpire told me to stop touching my cap and forehead because it was giving me a leg up on the batter. I possessed something and exploited the situation for my own good.

This God-man had His own aces up His proverbial sleeve. He is the divine **Son** who walked on water, multiplied meals miraculously, and made the lame to walk. But as these references indicate, He used them for the advantage of others, not His own. This **Son** became a selfless Savior, and that selflessness shined brightest in His darkest hours.

We can appreciate the helps we receive from various creeds and confessions, whose framers mined the scriptures systematically to bring together truths worthy of trust and agreement. Many of them state something like this, that the Father, Son, and Spirit are one in essence, power, and glory.<sup>4</sup> But many of those framers saw in the Gospels, for instance, the distinction of persons in the Godhead. The Father did not suffer death. The Spirit did not suffer for our salvation. The person of Jesus Christ, who was robed in frailty, He suffered. He was the Shepherd who laid down his life for His sheep. He was the seed that fell dead in the ground and bore fruit. He was the sign of Jonah, lying 3 days in the heart of the earth. He told the disciples, multiple times, that He must bodily suffer, die, and rise again. Born into suffering (hunted by Herod to be killed), we learn that He was born for it (apprehended by authorities to be killed). We simply don’t have the language, nor can we string together the appropriate words to describe the distance from the nobility and the majesty of the eternal Son on the throne to the impropriety and dishonor of the cross.

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<sup>4</sup> The Westminster, The Baptist, and The New City catechisms to name a few.

What's more is that Christ's capability of escaping suffering and temptation makes Him staying the course for our good all the more glorious. What does it say of Jesus when He says, "*Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?*"<sup>5</sup> It at least says this: Jesus had every supernatural ability at His disposal, in His divine nature, to flee agony and elude death. We just considered Matthew 4 in our discipleship hour. Jesus didn't use His powers to turn stones into bread for Himself. Why? D.A. Carson answers that question, "Because that would have [compromised] His identification with human beings and in that way abandon His mission, for human beings do not have instant access to such solutions [in the midst of suffering]."<sup>6</sup> He did nothing, nothing to place Himself out of harm's way, and in fact, He chose to step into the tussles of the world, yes, to put away sin, but to also show over and over again that He identifies with us, even at our lowest points. Puritan John Brown stated it helpfully, "The dignity of our High Priest being the Son of the Father did not prevent Him from performing all the functions of His office, whatever degradation they might involve."<sup>7</sup>

And truly the whole of Christ's life could be considered a condescension inundated with degradation. How could it not? The Colossians read these immense words first concerning Christ, "*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.*" Imagine the chasm of difference in the experiences—speaking worlds into existence to babbling as a baby; incorporating equilibrium into the human body to stumbling about for months trying to walk; filling a world with the proper elements to sustain life to then being in need of that oxygen, water, and salt; enjoying the harmony of divine fellowship to dealing with disharmony at every turn; being eternally known, loved, and understood to being hated and misunderstood; and then the climax of His humbling, Peter expressed it best with searing irony, "*Men of Israel...you killed the Author of life.*"<sup>8</sup> Jesus came to do the will of His Father.<sup>9</sup> He came to do whatever His hand and plan predestined to take place.<sup>10</sup> And that plan climaxed into suffering, Christ paying the ultimate price.

### III. The Priest He Became

He suffered, but what was it that centered that suffering, that gave substance to that suffering? "*He learned obedience from the things which He suffered.*" We've already given airtime to the all-important prepositional phrase "*without sin.*" But it's worth repeating when we come to a place that may seem to imply something different. All that Jesus thought, said, did, every desire, every motive, and all of these in every circumstance, aligned to the divine will, even in His most trying moments. Jesus suffered, but He didn't suffer to no purpose. He *learned obedience* by way of suffering.

You might remember the rhyming word play Matt mentioned in this verse two weeks ago. In the original Greek text, the author of Hebrews writes *emathen* and *epathen*, *learn* and *suffer*. The idea is that suffering gives rise to the occasion for learning, especially in regard to the will of God. This link of *learning* through *suffering* was considered a general principle in the Roman world, but

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 26:53

<sup>6</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Farewell Discourse and Final Farewell of Jesus: An Exposition of John 14-17*, 36.

<sup>7</sup> John Brown, *Hebrews*, 251.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 3:12, 15

<sup>9</sup> Psalm 40:6, Hebrews 10:7

<sup>10</sup> Acts 4:28

more importantly it's a spiritual principle that plays out in God's kingdom, even in the King of that kingdom.

How did Christ learn? On the surface, it looks as if he has some kind of lack in doing what His Father commanded and that inside the trials of His life that lack was made up for, suggesting that He grew from a state of disobedience to one of obedience. But again, scripture is its best interpreter, Jesus is as Peter conveyed, "*a lamb without blemish or spot.*"<sup>11</sup> Any disobedience would have disqualified Him to be the eternal High Priest we needed before God's bar of justice. Instead, the idea is that inside of the trials of His life, He encountered fresh situations where His allegiance to His Father and His Father's Word was challenged.<sup>12</sup> Jesus learned to obey on the anvil of human experience, and that in ways He could have never experienced on the throne of heaven.<sup>13</sup>

Back to Matthew 4 and the wilderness temptation. The temptation dangled by Satan in Jesus' face happens partly because Satan understands on a fundamental level that Christ is a human being, and being so, surely He had weaknesses. Perhaps if Satan could capitalize on that, he might shake the heavens and tip the universe in his favor. But Christ conquered in those difficult moments, moments that He never experienced pre-incarnation. He could now know by experience what He had known in His omniscience since the fall of man—the plight of Adam's helpless race. The One who heard the cries of His people in Exodus 2 was now crying out in solidarity, not only *with* His fellow sufferers, but *for them* as well.<sup>14</sup> This is the Priest that the Son became.

At the very bottom of this humiliation was the unique suffering of the cross. Some scholars have asserted that in Roman society throughout the first and second centuries, the word *cross* was an obscenity, not to be used in casual conversation. So, when Paul ends the hymn in Philippians 2 with the phrase, *obedient unto death, even death on a cross*, it read like an exclamation meant to signal astonishment.<sup>15</sup>

Were other Roman criminals crucified? Sure, but none like Jesus. He who died made the situation unique. The One born of the Holy Spirit, co-Creator, Sovereign over all life and breath—He lost His breath in our place. How He died made the cross unique. In those few hours, Christ bore all the divine, just displeasure of the Father. No crucified Roman, or mere man ever experienced such weight. Why Christ died made the cross unique. In those few hours, Christ bore all of God's wrath so that sinners might be freed from its curse and be liberated to know the grace of God and all the mercies that flow from those loving wounds! Christ gave His perfect life for those who could only hold out a record of debt standing against them with its legal demands. That's the best we could do, and Jesus came to cancel it at the cross! In terms of ranking punishments, crucifixion was the most shameful, bottom-barreled sentences in the Roman empire, dedicated for the worst of the worst. Christ's obedience to the Father in dying on the cross—the shame of it all has become all of our glory!

He has walked in our shoes. He kept passing the tests, and in the final exam, as He closed His eyes a fellow sufferer for our sakes, He did not fail. A perfect record. A finished mission. A bought

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<sup>11</sup> 1 Peter 1:19

<sup>12</sup> Peter O'Brien, *PNTC: Hebrews*, 201.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *EBTC: Hebrews*, 164.

<sup>14</sup> Hebrews 5:7, Exodus 3:7, "*Then the LORD said, 'I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings.'*"

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, 252.

people. When we consider this **Son**, and the way He shared in our flesh and blood, we'll always have an occasion for joyful praise, for heartfelt thanks, for repentance and fresh trust.

You can imagine with me the global celebration that would take place if it was announced that a cure for all forms of cancer had been found. To reflect back on such a monumental achievement, nobody would say that those billions of hours in the thousands of laboratories worldwide were wasted, would they? No, the payoff made the analysis worth it. As we've considered these teachings on the incarnation over the past few weeks on the nature of Christ, the true payoff of the analysis is twofold: the assurance that these truths knead into our souls, and the glorious privilege to simply, from the heart, crown Christ afresh with hearts of worship and adoration.

But there is a last aim for us in seeing the obedient Priest Christ became and the suffering Christ embraced—God is at work in our lives to bring us into conformity with Him. Built into the providential tapestry of our lives, we too must expect adversity. Paul says to young Timothy, *“Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.”* It's the course charted by Him who works all things according to the counsel of His own will. “Lord, why this suffering?” We've all asked this along the way. If Christ bore such shame *“so as to become a high priest,”* are we excused to lay down the cross He called us to bear from the beginning? Aren't we to be the tested soldier who becomes better equipped for present and future difficulties? The tested soldier who has learned to pay attention to the hardest demands? The tested soldier who has learned to trust the One above him? The tested soldier who has learned his place and his responsibilities under His Commander?

## **Conclusion**

The Holy Spirit through this sermon-letter is impressing upon these Jewish converts the need to see their sufferings in the light of Christ's. Every experience of difficulty is a new occasion to draw near to God through His priestly work. Every hurtful event is an occasion to trust that Christ understands our deepest wounds. When all our strength falters and we run to Him, it is good to truly believe that the Hand that holds us has a nail hole through it.

Have you put your trust in this **Son** of God, this Suffering Savior? Jesus is the Priest who became what He was not in order that we might become what we could not become on our own—sons and daughters of the Living God, those whose road is long and difficult, but whose end will witness the end of all sorrow.