

**Born to Save
Hebrews
Christmas Eve 2023**

Consider the dates we remember, or the days we rejoice in. Generally, we celebrate beginnings. It's not the seventh date with our spouse that's jotted on the calendar. Central BBQ doesn't put a random year on its t-shirt or website; instead, it uses up valuable marketing space to remind us of the year they opened. While exceptions exist, *generally* we celebrate the beginning of something: a founding, a birthday, an anniversary, the launch.

However, we don't celebrate *all* beginnings. For example, if nothing came of something begun. We don't choose to remember *every* first date, do we? Or, a business idea twenty years ago that never came to fruition? We don't throw a party for those "beginnings." And a beginning *certainly* isn't celebrated if it then led to something adverse.

The point is that we rejoice in beginnings, but often because of what that beginning *led to*. And that actually informs *how* we celebrate this or that beginning. When St. Jude celebrates its founding, they don't focus on 1962 alone. They acknowledge the number of patients they've served since then. 1963–2023 stirs gratitude for what happened in 1962.

So, we remember, give thanks for, and celebrate beginnings. But we celebrate beginnings in a broader historical context. By considering what happened *after* a beginning, we pile up reasons to rejoice in what became.

I trust you can see where this is going. Sometimes there's the temptation this time of year to celebrate God becoming Man, but to do so *without* considering what happened after.

Tonight, to work toward rightly and *fully* rejoicing in Christ's first Advent, we'll consider three purpose statements and then three "if" statements. Lord willing, the purpose statements will show what His birth led to and the "if" statements will show the necessity of each step. By considering it in this way, my hope is that we'd rejoice in this quote, "beginning" all the more.

1. He's born that He might die (Heb. 2:14; Hebrews 5:7)

How do we know this? It's what Hebrews 2:14 says: **Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same.** We're flesh and blood. He *too* put on flesh. And then, as verse 14 goes on, the writer pens a purpose clause behind God becoming Man. *Why* did He put on flesh? **that through death He might render powerless Him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.** He took on flesh for a purpose, a purpose to be brought about *through death*.¹

Hebrews 2 isn't the only passage to draw this direct line from birth to death. Philippians 2:8 does the same: **Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death.** And it's not only the epistles that make this connection. It's also what *He Himself* said in the Gospels. In Mark 10, for example, He tells us *why* He came: **the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many** (Mk. 10:45). Or in John 12, when considering His upcoming death (Jn. 12:33), He said, **Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, "Father, save Me from this hour"? But for this purpose I came to this hour** (Jn. 12:27).

The passage we've been considering over the past few weeks agrees. If He, **in the days of His flesh**, Hebrews 5:7, **offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death**, that assumes a number of things. As we've said, this

¹ Purpose clause is "that through death," Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 59.

doesn't mean He asked to be saved *from* dying. It means to be saved "out of" death.² And of course to be saved "out of" death implies that death was *expected*.

He was born to die.

2. He dies that He might also rise (Heb. 10:12; Hebrews 5:7)

Though Hebrews uses the term "resurrection" sparingly, His rising is quite clear in the verse we just considered: **He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard** (Heb. 5:7). The One to whom He prayed was able to save Him "out of" death. And His prayers were heard. He walked out of the tomb.

In Hebrews, the resurrection isn't neglected; instead, it's often considered *within* the category—under the umbrella—of His ascension/exaltation. And this actually makes quite a bit of sense. He *can't* ascend if He hasn't been saved "out of" death. Or, said yet another way, He *can't* be at the right hand of the Father if He's *still* in the tomb.

So, how does Hebrews show us the connection between His death and His resurrected life? Hebrews 10:11: **Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God.** As the one-time sacrifice for sins, He dies. His heart stopped beating. His lungs didn't fill with air. And, *then*, He sat down at the right hand of God? Did something happen *between* His death and Him sitting down? Of course.

Recall the *why* behind His death in Hebrews 2: **that through death He might render powerless Him who had the power of death, that is, the devil** (2:14). *How* might we know that His death rendered powerless Him who had the power of death? How do we *know* that His death is *unlike* all the other deaths? We know this because He's seated at the right hand of the Father. The One that was once *truly* dead is now *fully* alive. Athanasius wrote, "Death having been put to death by Him, what else should happen than that the body should rise and be shown as the trophy over it."³

He dies that He might rise.

3. He rises to restore (Heb. 5:9; 4:9)

The Gospel isn't a ghost story. The Kingdom of God isn't *merely* spiritual. The Christ sits at the right hand of the Father in a resurrected *body*. He was born a Man. And in His humanity, He rose, in order that He might restore humanity.

That's what Hebrews 4 described. There *remains* a Sabbath rest for the people of God (Heb. 4:9) What is this rest? It's the restoration of God's image-bearers. It's the peace of Genesis 2, God dwelling with His flesh and blood people in a creation unbroken, an unending day blessed and made holy by God Himself. What Christ came and accomplished—being born, living, dying, and rising—is nothing less than the fulfillment of the original purpose of God in creation.⁴

Adam brought death upon us. The Second Adam is born, dies, and rises that man no more may die. We read poet George Herbert's words last week, "In Christ two natures met to be your cure."⁵

² Peter O'Brien, *God Has Spoken in His Son*, NSBT, 68; Harold Attridge, *Hebrews*, 150.

³ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 115.

⁴ Richard Gaffin, "A Sabbath Rest Still Awaits the People of God," 40.

⁵ Quoted in Jonathan Gibson, *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*, 141.

With these first three points, we see that each step leads to another. He's born for a purpose. He dies for a purpose. He rises for one as well. But with these *next* three points we'll look at each step somewhat in reverse, hoping that in doing so we might better see each step's necessity.

4. He does not restore if He does not rise (Heb. 2:9–11; 10:14)

In one of the New Testament's pivotal passages about the incarnation, the author of Hebrews writes: **we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels** (Heb. 2:9). The eternal Son, whom the angels worship (1:6) was *for a time* made lower than those angels. He was made *like* us. But, as that passage goes on, it quickly states that He did not *stay* there. **We do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor.**

That last clause—crowned with glory—very well could've been used earlier to say that He dies that He might rise. *Because* of the suffering of death, He is crowned with honor. But it's used *here* for what the following verse says.

In verse 10 the author of Hebrews calls the One crowned with glory the “author” of our salvation. As we saw a couple months back, the word “author” is actually the combination of two smaller words, the *first* being the word for “first,” and the *second* the word for “lead.” It's for that reason that many like the translation, “pioneer.” But it's not *only* the word *itself* that points to that “pioneer” translation, it's the context. Because what does this “first leader” do? Hebrews 2:10: He was **bringing many sons to glory** (2:10). He went first, from suffering to glory, from death to life, that He might then bring others. By rising, He restores.

I live close enough to a church that I can clearly hear church bells in my back yard. Yesterday, when the clock struck noon, I was out back and heard multiple verses of “Joy to the World.” Earlier this week I happened to read the story behind “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.” As you might know, that hymn was written by poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Some of the story behind it is that less than two years before he wrote the hymn, his wife Fanny tragically died in a fire. That was 1861. Then, in late November 1863—at the height of the Civil War—his son Charley was shot in a battle. Henry received contradicting reports on his son's prognosis. So, in the midst of not fully knowing the extent of his son's injuries, and grieving the pain he was personally experiencing, on December 25th, 1863—sitting in Cambridge, Mass., hearing the church bells—he wrote that hymn.

The first verse sets the scene: “I heard the bells on Christmas day, their old familiar carols play, and mild and sweet their songs repeat of peace on earth, good will to men.” Then, a later verse shows us the dissonance in Longfellow's heart, while living in the midst of a groaning creation: “And in despair I bowed my head, “There is no peace on earth,” I said, “for hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men.” Maybe you've been there. Maybe you're there now. But then, in a final verse, Longfellow reminds us of the Psalmist. Even though he felt what he felt, he sings truth: “Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: ‘God is not dead, nor doth He sleep; the wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, good will to men.’”⁶

Maybe this season rings with the dissonance of that middle verse. What's his comfort? Why might he hope in peace to come? God is not dead. If so, neither is hope.

He does not restore if He does not rise. But He did.

Yet,

⁶ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/the-story-of-pain-and-hope-behind-i-heard-the-bells-on-christmas-day/>

5. **He does not rise if He does not die** (Heb. 1:3; 2:9)

This is as simple as Hebrews 1:3: **When he had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.** Or it's as simple as the verse we just read: **because of the suffering of death He's crowned with glory and honor** (Heb. 2:9).

6. **And He does not die if He is not born** (Heb. 5:7-10)

If He does not rise, there is no restoration, no salvation. And if He does not die, there is no rising. And, this is as simple as I can make it: He does not die if He is never born. That means that the salvation offered us is *not* offered if there is no Bethlehem.

That's one reason why we celebrate. And might we celebrate rightly by reminding ourselves that He was born in order to save.

Conclusion

Generally, we celebrate beginnings.

But we don't celebrate *all* beginnings.

We celebrate beginnings because of what that beginning led to.

Tonight, we zoom *out* for a purpose.

By considering what Bethlehem made possible, we pile up reasons to rejoice.

That's why we'll share this meal together.