

In the Days of His Flesh: The Son's Perfection
Hebrews 5:9
December 24, 2023

Maybe I'd get more style points or Reformed street cred if I said this week's introduction was spurred by more of my meditation upon the writings of 4th-century theologian Athanasius. But the truth is that it was instead an internet meme that captured my attention. It read: "Not a single soul has said 2024 is gonna be their year. Y'all finally learned your lesson."

Maybe that doesn't resonate with you. You've *always* set expectations for yourself that were tempered, rightly taking into account a certain margin for error. Because of that, you've never had to reflect on the past with a degree of disappointment. Instead, as you recall, you set goals and then you met them. Then you set harder goals. And you met them too.

But, for the rest of us, one reason a meme like that is shared far and wide is because most of us dare not look at last January's journal entries too closely.

However, *that's* not the essence of that meme's genius. It wasn't written only for Christians that actually have categories for failure. The essence of its resonance is how it captures the milieu of the broader society. For most of our lives, *many* around us have entered a new year as if it were a new birth. They turn the calendar as if it's the beginning of their conquering campaign. As in, "Look out. Here I come."

Yet, the point of that meme is that something has shifted. What someone confidently declared in 2017 about taming January they might not whisper now. We've finally learned our lesson. Why? What's happened? Maybe the broader world has become aware that more is outside our control than we previously thought. Or maybe their past few years have convinced them that humanity is in fact distorted, or that creation does in fact groan, whether they've ever heard Romans 8 or not.

Why start with this stark reminder of humanity's significant shortcomings in this sermon on Hebrews 5 on Christmas Eve? In part because our text describes a Man as **having been made perfect**. As we'll see, that phrase does not mean that He came *close* to something He pursued—that He *almost* accomplished a goal—instead it emphasizes that what He sought He fully attained.

Further, the context in which this perfection occurred was **in the days of His flesh**. That's been the sense of this section and our teaching for a few weeks now. That which He aimed at was something He accomplished as One made *truly* human.

This is good news for those that know we fell short in 2023 for the same reason we will once again in 2024. Because that which He pursued—this **having been made perfect**—had a goal as well, that is, the deliverance of those that are much worse than imperfect.

1. Having been made perfect

To understand what verse 9 describes, and this perfection, it might help to first be re-situated in the context. The next section of Hebrews—going from chapter 5 to chapter 10—is *the* central theological argument in the book of Hebrews.¹ It concerns who Christ is—in particular His priesthood—and what He's done to give us access to God Himself.

That's the broader context. But to zoom in on the nearer context, the verses we've been looking at this month concern qualifications. In our day, we expect that certain vocations also have particular qualifications. Medical school *precedes* the surgery center. An ability to do math *precedes* working at the bank. In a similar way—and it'd be right to say in a *heightened* way—the priesthood

¹ Peter O'Brien, *God Has Spoken In His Son*, NSBT, 46, says 5:1–10:18 is this section.

demanded particular qualifications. As we've asked, and it'd be right to consider again: What qualifies one to mediate on behalf of humanity before God? Further, what qualifies one to do so if that humanity is sinful and that God is perfect in holiness?

The broader context is about Christ's priesthood. This particular section is about the qualifications of the priest.

So, having moved from the larger context to a more narrow context, we might *then* narrow even further to the verse that immediately precedes verse 9. Verse 8 tells us something about these qualifications: **Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered.** Again, to say He learned obedience is *not* to say He had to address some inadequacy.² It's instead to say that, having *now* put on flesh, He then learned what obedience looked like in the midst of suffering.³ The pre-incarnate Son dwelling in the heavens didn't suffer. Ever. He'd enjoyed perfect fellowship and unity with His Father from eternity past. But having put on flesh, and having lived in and among sinners, He learned in new, *starkly* new, circumstances what it meant to depend on the Father. He did it in *this* situation. And then He did it again. And **in the days of His flesh** He never stopped doing it.

With the broad, more narrow, and even more narrow context in mind, we can now read verse 9, **and having been made perfect.** If being qualified for the role or vocation of high priest demanded particular qualifications, and if those qualifications meant passing test after test that no one else had *ever* passed, then verse 9 is telling us that He didn't merely come close, that which He pursued He perfectly attained.⁴ **Having been made perfect** describes the flawless results of the Son's unflinching dependance and obedience.⁵

Which, again, He accomplished **in the days of His flesh** (v. 7). That which He aimed at He accomplished as One made *truly* human. We celebrate His birth for good reason. We rejoice that He didn't abhor the virgin's womb.⁶ In a stable, He was born. Then, as truly human, He underwent the normal process of human growth and development (Luke 2:52). He faced a full range of human experiences. He loved. He grieved. And then, like the rest of humanity, one day His heart stopped beating. As the pinnacle of His learning obedience *in* and *from* suffering, as truly Man He truly died.

And *in* the flesh, and in the *way* He lived during the days of His flesh—as the holiest of Men—He was made perfect, qualified, to serve as broken humanity's high priest. He could *now* represent them and mediate for them.

John Owen parallels what Old Testament priests underwent to render them fit to represent the people of God. What act made them qualified? If the priest didn't follow Exodus 29, that man would *not* be fit to serve as priest. He couldn't represent the people without being consecrated himself. *Before* they offered a sacrifice on behalf of the people, the priest would bring an animal who'd suffer on the priest's behalf. Owen parallels this and then contrasts that background with Hebrews 5, "But it belonged unto the perfection of the priesthood of Christ to be consecrated in and by His own sufferings."⁷

His learning obedience—as One made *truly* human—made Him qualified to serve as high priest on behalf of a sinful people.⁸ It wasn't a flawed representative we needed. That does us no good. His being perfected is why—and it's the *only* reason why—He might sit at the right hand of the Father interceding for sinners like us.

² Harold Attridge, *Hebrews*, 152.

³ O'Brien, 68.

⁴ It's *not* describing some existing imperfection in His character. Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 55.

⁵ Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT, 248.

⁶ "O Come, All Ye Faithful"

⁷ John Owen, quoted in A. W. Pink, *Hebrews*, 256.

⁸ Albert Mohler, *Hebrews*, CCE, 76.

And Him reaching that goal, being qualified in that way, is the cause of something else.

2. He became the source of eternal salvation

Chris rightly emphasized the first clause in verse 8 last week, **although He was a Son**. Chris asked, “Is there a more important relationship in all the universe than the relationship between the Father and this Son?” You know the answer. The book of Hebrews began by telling us that God has spoken to us **in His Son** (Heb. 1:2).

But, as we’ve attempted to emphasize during this series, what happened when the Son put on flesh is about addition, not subtraction. He *was* a Son. He *remains* the Son. But in verse 9 we read about something that He *became*. In fact, if we simplify verses 8 and 9, we can summarize the passage fairly easily.⁹ Verse 8: As a Son, He learned obedience. Verse 9: And having been made perfect, **He became**.

In terms of addition, He became something He *wasn’t* before. Verse 9 tells us what that is: **And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation**. Maybe when we say that the Son *became* something He wasn’t before, that makes us uncomfortable. Maybe it should on occasion. But, in this case, it ought to make us grateful. Because it was not until He came in the flesh and obeyed in our place—having been made perfect—that He *became* the source of eternal salvation for humanity. In other words, the eternal salvation offered us is *not* offered if He isn’t born.

Hebrews 10 doesn’t dodge the insufficiency of the day-to-day shadows that dominated Israel’s life in the past. The author writes without equivocation, **For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins** (10:4). That verse is not very nuanced, is it? Again, those reading this letter were being tempted to go back. Following Christ hadn’t always been smooth sailing. They had a comfort zone in the religion of their forefathers. So, as we’ve said, for those tempted to go back, much of the argument of Hebrews is contending that Christ is better. He’s better than the angels, better than Moses, better than Aaron, better than the priesthood, and on it goes.

But maybe when we say “better,” we’ve thought of the way *we* often use the word, “Well, this steak is better than that one, but the lesser one is edible.” Or, “clearly, this Christmas music is better, but the other isn’t terrible.” Or, “this book is objectively superior, but that doesn’t mean I can’t read the other.” If that’s how we read “better” in Hebrews, let’s be clear: what Christ offers is not better in *that* way, by way of degree, it’s better in essence. It’s not as if there’s a *better* salvation, but the old is acceptable. There is *no* salvation otherwise.

He became *the* source—the cause—of salvation. What does Hebrews 10 quote right after **it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins**? The author continues with a “therefore”: **therefore, when He comes into the world, He says**, (the One speaking is Christ, and consider, on this Christmas Eve, the setting of these words: *when* He comes into the world, He says . . .)¹⁰ **“Sacrifice and offering You have not desired, but a body You have prepared for Me; in whole burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You have taken no pleasure. ‘Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come (in the scroll of the book it is written of me) to do Your will, O God’”** (Heb. 10:5–8). *That’s* what He was saying **when He comes into the world!** “A body You have prepared for Me. . . I have come to do Your will, O God.”

What is that will He came to do? Hebrews 10:10: **By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all**. Hebrews doesn’t nuance the

⁹ In fact, the two main verbs in the passage are reflected in this summary: “learned” and “became.”

¹⁰ Cockerill, 434.

answer. The blood of bulls and goats could not take away sin. So, He came, in a body prepared for Him, and in and through that body He became the source of salvation.

And rather than this being something that had to be repeated, over and over again, Hebrews 10 tells us His body was offered **once for all**. Verse 9 of our text hints at that argument to come, not *only* telling us that He became the source of salvation, but using a phrase found nowhere else in the New Testament.¹¹ He became the source of *eternal* salvation. It's once for all!

The eternal nature of this salvation will be spelled out in more detail as we walk through the book. For example, in Hebrews 9:12: **And not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.** How can He obtain or grant eternal redemption? Hebrews 7:25: **Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, (why?) since He always lives to make intercession for them.** How can He save *forever*? His salvation is eternal because He *Himself* is.

We sing of His eternity in our hymnody: "Of the Father's love begotten, ere the worlds began to be, He is Alpha and Omega, He the source, the ending He, of the things that are, that have been, and that future years shall see, evermore and evermore!" To me that sounds almost *exactly* like Hebrews 1. But then there's a verse of that hymn, that we don't sing as often, connecting His eternity directly to His being born: "O that birth forever blessed, when a virgin, full of grace, by the Holy Ghost conceiving, bore the Savior of our race; and the Babe, the world's Redeemer, first revealed His sacred face, evermore and evermore!"

We sing of His eternity, even when we consider His birth, because that's what the angels said. Recall Gabriel's words to Mary: **He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end** (Lk. 1:32–33)

He's the source of eternal salvation because He is an eternal Savior.

This ought to be a comfort to us at the close of 2023. It's been a long time since **the days of His flesh**. However, if He's the source of *eternal* salvation, that means not *only* that He brought it into being, but as the ever-interceding forever high priest He *continues* to give and uphold it.¹² Hebrews 7:24: **Jesus, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently.**

2000 years ago, this letter was written. But for a people on whom He set His heart, thousands of years and thousands of miles away, He's not stopped interceding. We continue to *be* saved, we continue *being* saved, because His priesthood continues. And the eternal nature of His salvation means it will never cease.

So, when we blow it in 2024, again, His life for ours. Instead of our distracted mind, tossed to and fro, His perfect thoughts in our place. He represents us. He mediates for you. Instead of our weak will, failing on January 2nd, His holy drive. He represents. He mediates. Instead of our dull heart, driven by the slightest breeze, His flawless affections in our stead. He represents us. He mediates for you. Maybe your flesh is a mess. In the days of *His*, He loved the Father with all His heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Who do you trust with your forever? To represent you before a holy God?

You noticed I skipped a phrase in verse 9. Having been made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation, to whom?

¹¹ Leon Morris, *Hebrew/James*, EBC, 50.

¹² Cockerill, 249.

3. To all those who obey Him

We don't embrace the universalist overtones that often accompany this time of year. This eternal salvation is *only* for those that bow to Christ as King.¹³ Because to obey means to submit ourselves—*all* that we are—to the will of Another.¹⁴ And, as we've seen, one of the chief aims of the book of Hebrews is to awaken those that read it *from* a spiritual lethargy, drawing their *full* attention to that which God has provided in His Son.¹⁵

He speaks through Him to you. There is nothing better. Everything else in fact is lesser, not only in degree, but in kind.

Conclusion

He was born—He put on flesh—for a purpose: to save a sinful humanity. To do so, He had to become *like* One of us. But of course, He couldn't be *just* like us. A flawed representative would do us no good. But because the days of His flesh were marked by unyielding dependence upon the Father—what Hebrews describes as Him being perfected—He became the source of salvation.

Which is, again, why He was born. On day one the angels knew that's why He came. Which is why they declared to some shepherds, **Today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord** (Lk. 2:11).

¹³ Pink, 257.

¹⁴ George Guthrie, *Hebrews*, NIVAC, 191.

¹⁵ Cockerill, 250.