

## One of Us Hebrews 2:14-18

“If only he lived close by; a three-hour talk would exceed a hundred letters.”<sup>1</sup> Maybe you’ve had similar longings about a good friend or a family member far away. I’m sure we could modernize Calvin’s sentiment somehow, i.e. FaceTime, but it would be difficult to improve on the power behind it. Yes, sin curves us inward and drives us to isolation, but there is no compelling argument against the need for true, face-to-face companionship. In fact, from a purely theological angle, we could probably voice a few sound arguments on the spot for being created with the need to share life with others.

We might come at the idea from another angle. The past two weeks have been a nightmare for Israel. I’ll refrain from speaking of the graphic atrocities we’ve heard coming out of the region, but “sheer evil” is the appropriate language for what has and keeps occurring there. There’s no need to make the case for the worth, importance, and beauty of close-knit relationships when the loss of human life comes into focus. The deep sorrow which follows in the trail of being torn apart from a loved one testifies well enough. But it also testifies, not only to the transient nature of relationships in this life, but that we were made for a relationship with One who never changes, who cannot develop Alzheimer’s, or succumb to war, or grow bitter based on some relational misstep. In fact, the human experience has cried out in every age and in every place for a companionship which cannot fail. A cursory inspection of the top 100 musical hits in any culture and country will easily uncover the longing for eternal, unending love in close proximity.<sup>2</sup>

Last week was another section of the author of Hebrews doing exposition. His content: Christ’s work and the effects of His achievements. And through last’s week’s text we learn something of His heart for companionship with us—that Jesus is unabashed in his brotherly love—end of verse 11, *He is not ashamed to call them brothers*. And He proved it by *tasting death* for his brothers. And perhaps it was this shameful death that served to draw some new believers away from the gospel. “He suffered and died. Is that our lot, too?” At least, in their own history with the angelic hosts, there was consistently a record of rescue and help in times of trouble! (We’ve still not moved off Christ being compared with angels) Perhaps these new converts interpreted “death by crucifixion” as a great love worthy of initial trust, but the life of taking up a cross daily was repelling them from persevering. Whatever the case, according to 2:1, some were drifting away from this faith defined by a cross. It was a perilous move away from grace. An angel can appear with a measure of glory.<sup>3</sup> An angel can minister to God’s people.<sup>4</sup> An angel can alleviate suffering in temptation.<sup>5</sup> But an angel was never given the task of taking on a human body and paying for the sins of the nations by the death of that body. For that to happen, God had another plan. He must come close, gloriously close.

### I. Jesus became one of us...

***<sup>14</sup> Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same...***How else would it be possible for Christ to style Himself our brother unless He enters the human predicament?<sup>6</sup> Perhaps you have a sibling or two. Physically, what speaks to your kinship is your DNA. That shared DNA sometimes reveals itself in appearance. I look like my mom. My wife

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Michael A. van den Berg, *Friends of Calvin*, 115.

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 20:6, “Many a man proclaims his own steadfast love, but a faithful man who can find?”

<sup>3</sup> Luke 2:9, “And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.”

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 91:11, “For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.”

<sup>5</sup> Even to Jesus in Matthew 4:11, “Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and were ministering to him.”

<sup>6</sup> Theodore of Cyr, *Nicene-Post Nicene Fathers, Series 1, Vol. 14, The Homilies of John & Hebrews*, 385.

looks a little bit like her sister. Relationally, however, it's less cut and dry than a DNA swab. You have shared parents, shared relatives, shared joys, shared pain, etc. When we scan verse 14, we understand that Jesus came and indeed clothed Himself in human *flesh* just like what you're wearing, but He also came to share Himself with us in ways which far exceed DNA strands.

In fact, the Gospels reveal to us a Savior that is fiercely human. He was conceived and grew in a womb. He experienced birth. The heir of all things, having no needs as LORD of all before that birth, He arrived on the stall-scene with needs. He needed air for His lungs, water for His thirst, food to sustain, and sleep for renewal. He exerted His body by walking—a lot. He learned a thing or two about carpentry. He was moved to tears by the death of a friend. He shared His life with crowds and a deep friendship with the disciples. He loved His mama. He welcomed little ones to Himself. He was tempted to sin and ridiculed by enemies. He was abandoned, betrayed, misrepresented, and punished unjustly in a kangaroo court. All of us can insert ourselves into many of those sentences. He experienced being human. The Gospel writers took great lengths to show us what verse 14 is saying.

But there's something utterly mysterious about Christ sharing in our human nature. When pondered for any length of time, the mental exertion eventually gives way to worship. Paul wrote a similar thought to Timothy as a kind of confession, "*Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh [same word as our text], vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels...*"<sup>7</sup> We can't quite wrap the whole of our minds around Christ coming down, sharing in the *flesh* we wear and the *blood* coursing through our veins. If Gnosticism, which states that the physical is inherently evil...if that's swirling anywhere near these Jewish congregations, then it's can't bear the weight of this text. Further, if these Jews addressed throughout Hebrews are dabbling with or entering headlong into believing angels to be a superior revelation, then this is the place where idolatries and heresies come to die—the radiance of divine magnificence, the eternal King of kings—He was garbed with the frailty of humanity! The King of the universe became a son of Mary. A true human, beset by physical weaknesses and plagued with mortality which characterize the entire human race, He became, yet without sin.<sup>8</sup>

This word *partook* shows us the voluntary nature of Christ sharing in our humanness. Unlike us who had no say in the matter, Jesus condescended/stooped/stepped down from the riches of glory, knowing full well what He was undertaking. Our text goes on to answer the question, "Why did He share in our humanity?" but to get at that question with a broad stroke, considering the whole of today's text, there were obstacles needing to be removed in order to save us and sanctify us. To say it another way, Jesus became man to square up to the very worst enemies of humanity.

#### A. To Destroy the devil's works

***<sup>14</sup> Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil...*** We know from the very beginning of the world that the devil has been permitted to exercise power in the realm of death. Sin came into the world, in part, through his cunning. And with sin, God kept His promise when Adam and Eve disregarded the prohibition to not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—they came under death's curse. Of the Gospel writers, John is most vocal about Satan's identity. "*The whole world is under the sway of the evil one,*" we read in 1 John 5. In John's Gospel, he writes twice that Satan "*the ruler of this world,*" echoed by Paul who states that

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<sup>7</sup> 1 Timothy 3:16

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 103.

Satan is the “*god of this age.*” The *devil* still exercises some muscle in the realm of *death*. That word *power* nears the idea of authority.<sup>9</sup> But to God’s praise and honor, verse 14 says that through another *death* Satan’s authoritative power is *rendered powerless*.

The “death of death,” have some rightly called the death of Christ.<sup>10</sup> I can’t express this *rendering* any better than Colossians 2:13–15, “*And you, who were dead in your trespasses... God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.*”

Notice the reference to the cross. I’m taken to the moments when Christ sat in the quiet with His disciples, took bread, broke it, handed it to the disciples and then He said to them, “*This is My body, which is given for you.*” To destroy the devil’s works, a human body was required. A body was required to absorb the punishment of death we deserved, and when Christ’s death is applied to us, death, because of sin, no longer has its vice grip on us. Satan can only dangle death over our heads so far as our sins are still ours to pay for. But if they’re paid by Jesus, then Satan’s tactics and accusations are just flurries of deceptions and half-truths. The whole truth for the devil must be staggeringly outrageous—that Christ, who looked so powerless and shameful hanging on a cross, was actually disarming and putting Satan to open shame, along with his demonic cohort. The realities of the gospel sometimes offer ironies that are meant lead us to a sense of victory. We’re meant to believe, declare, and feel Christ’s triumph over the darkness.

So again, since our text doesn’t come off the subject of angels, the fixation on angelic beings was foolhardy. Spirit-beings were insufficient and unworthy of meeting our need for redemption and reconciliation. The body of Jesus, fashioned in our likeness and sharing in our weakness, was the means of our release from the jaws of spiritual death.

Jesus tells us clearly who He is, “*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. ...*” And then comes His simple yet straightforward question, “*Do you believe this?*” The Author of life has broken the power of this custodian of death through His own fatal wounds in our stead.

#### *B. To Deliver us from the fear of death*

***...That through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil...<sup>15</sup> and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.*** I don’t need to tell you that the vast majority of the world is running feverishly from the very thought of death and dying. The prospects of death can feel slavish. Death, being no respecter of persons, issues, as it were, a set of mind-chains and emotional stocks to all. But in vain we’re trying to find ways to break free. Perhaps near the top of this escapist mentality revealing the underlying fear of death is the gazillion-dollar, world-wide effort to distract ourselves so that we don’t have to ever think about our own mortality. It’s hard to find quiet places and public spaces that are free from the spirit of amusement and triviality. Maybe I’ve gone a step too far to some by putting an eight-inch coffin replica on my bookshelf, right below a picture of my late mother, who would have been 69 this past Friday. But I’ve

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<sup>9</sup> Schreiner, 104.

<sup>10</sup> John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*.

figured that it's just what I need periodically to remind me that death is coming, and to spur me to think about Christ, and that because of Him "sin's curse has lost its grip on me."<sup>11</sup>

Here's how one theologian expressed this prevailing fear, "The fear of dying is so natural for sinful people who are not ready to meet God, that it rules them like a silent master who takes many forms. The main form is the dream world of denial. Most people simply do not let themselves think about what is inevitable, namely, their own death. They are driven, consciously or unconsciously, to shut their eyes and close their ears and blank their minds to every thought that they are going to die and give an account to God."<sup>12</sup>

I witnessed the freedom of verse 15 a few days before Pernie Hester's heart procedure in January of 2016. I sat in her living room as she made it a point to let me know, with such courage, faith, hope, and joy, that she was ready to see Christ if the surgical procedure didn't work. The words have never left me, "I'm not afraid to die, Chris. I'm ready to see Jesus if that is His will." Pernie's heart did give way during surgery on that following Thursday. I imagine Pernie answered that question posed by Jesus in the affirmative, "*Do you believe this?*" many times over in her Bible reading through the years. Jesus became one of us to ensure that Pernie wouldn't live under the slavery of fear, and she didn't. Through Christ's death and empty tomb, death is now His servant which ushers us to glory. Does this mean we won't have our fearful moments? Of course not. But God is so working in His people that they grow in their courage to face the inevitable.

### C. To Die as a sacrifice for our sins

***17 Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.***

This is the first mention of Jesus being a *high priest*. What kind of human would Jesus be? One who would *be made like His brothers in all things*. And it *had* to be this way. We needed human representation in the divine sanctuary, before God's presence. This is the connection to our redemption and Christ's taking our flesh onto Himself—we needed Someone to take away the enmity/antagonism/rancor from our direction to God (for the mind set on the flesh is hostile to God—Rom. 8), and we needed that Someone to take away the beef God had with us (we were by nature children of wrath like the rest—Eph. 2). We needed a man. We needed God. We needed a God-man, One who would have "links with both sides in order to identify with and maintain the interests of both and represent each to the other..."<sup>13</sup> This was partly the role of the priests in the Old Testament. Casual visitors inside the holy of holies was unthinkable. It was a space that ever-reminded Israel that she had fallen short of God's glory, and God couldn't just wink at what she had done contrary to His Word. The high priest, and him only, once a year, on the Day of Atonement, entered that space to offer sacrifices for the people and (this is important) *for own sins also*. Therefore, the priest's solidarity in God's direction was always imperfect, until a *merciful and faithful high priest* was born in Bethlehem. A man who would be the priest of priests was our need. Why? Because of this all-important word *propitiation*.

*Propitiation* means to appease or to satisfy God's just wrath towards sin. This is why Christ put on flesh. His priesthood was unlike all others because **He**, not an animal, would become the offering for sin. Paul mirrors this idea to the Corinthians, "[God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in

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<sup>11</sup> *In Christ Alone* by Stuart Townsend

<sup>12</sup> John Piper, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/jesus-is-able-to-help-those-who-are-tempted>

<sup>13</sup> J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, 131.

*him we might become the righteousness of God.*"<sup>14</sup> If Christ were anything but a true man, a real transfer of our pollution to Him and His spotless righteousness to us, would have been impossible.

Peter Lewis rightly asks, "How could God, who is Spirit, suffer for the sins of man, who is flesh? How could God take upon Himself...the penalty for sin...without entering human physiology and human psychology and human spirituality? It was a human penalty He had to bear; therefore, it was a human nature He had to acquire. The sin-bearer must be a true member of the race that fell."<sup>15</sup> Jesus came to bear the penalty we deserved at God's hand, "*in His body, on the tree.*"<sup>16</sup>

The truth is that before we trusted in Jesus, we were on the road to meeting a more fearsome enemy than Satan. We were under divine condemnation in our unbelief. We were headed to that place sanctioned by God's justice where the fire is not quenched, and the worm does not die. But Christ became human precisely so that he could die in our place. And might I add, that all that heavy atonement theology given to us in this section boils down to this—this is what love does—it embraces suffering and death for the life of others.<sup>17</sup>

This text is calling all who have yet to believe that Christ's death is enough for your deadly sin problem. See His love in His death for others. See His commitment to go all the way into the grave for your sin. See God's requirement for absolute perfection not compromised—the spotless Christ and His flawless record can be your record for eternity if you would only trust Him. I realize it sounds too good to be true, but this is the gospel of Jesus Christ. God forgives sins, He justifies sinners based on the merits of Jesus, not our pitiful, best attempts at earning grace.

## II. Jesus became one of us to help us...

### A. Based on His long-standing promise

Back up to verse 16, ***For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham.*** This verse seems almost parenthetical (almost), but notice how it fits within the overall theme of Christ's incarnation. Jesus didn't stoop to become one of the angelic race, or to show them grace, but He came to ***help the descendant of Abraham.*** The verb ***help*** is the same verb in Hebrews 8:9, "*Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant...not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt...*" Again, the main draw to esteem angelic beings was most likely because the Law of Moses was mediated through them according to 2:2, and they are being tempted back into law-works by false teachers. The author wants these Jewish converts to see that the true exodus from sin's enslavement is in Christ, not in obedience to the law. To use Bunyan's image, the law is like a wiry broom which only stirs up the dust of sin, always unable to remove the dust and its choking effects.

While these believing Jews were exalting angels, they should have been exalting the One who delivered them from the curse of the law. Jesus came down to deliver from death's grip and its gripping fears. There was no better ***help***, and as the offspring of ***Abraham*** (revealed in a *human* genealogy in Matthew

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<sup>14</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21

<sup>15</sup> Peter Lewis, *The Glory of Christ*, 142.

<sup>16</sup> 1 Peter 2:24

<sup>17</sup> John Piper, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/jesus-is-able-to-help-those-who-are-tempted>

1), Jesus became the source of blessing for every person who would call upon Him for grace. Through Him “*all the families of the earth*” can know His saving mercy.<sup>18</sup>

*B. Because He is able*

<sup>18</sup> ***For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.*** In what way was Christ tempted? Matthew 4 is a sufficient place to consider Christ’s temptations. As Jesus fasted in the Judean wilderness, the devil comes to tempt Him to break His commitment by suggesting that Jesus turn the stones into bread. Jesus resists. Satan then uses God’s Word against Jesus, suggesting that He throw Himself off the temple roof. Again, Jesus rejects the appeal with a proper usage of God’s Word. Lastly, the devil offered the world’s kingdoms before Jesus in exchange for a moment of literal devil-worship. Met with the truth from Jesus’ lips that only the worship of the true God was acceptable, Satan went away. Jesus was tempted with bodily cravings to break the fast, with a false promise of rescue (which toyed with God’s miraculous provisions), and with idolatry to sell Himself out by gaining kingdoms and losing His sight of God’s glory alone. The idea is that Christ led the way, and now, in becoming man, He lends a sympathetic hand.<sup>19</sup>

We can’t read the book of Hebrews without seeing that these Jewish converts were suffering. They were being publicly shamed for their faith, probably by both Jews and Gentiles. Their properties were being seized, they were thrown into prison, and some of them were disowned by their larger families, not unlike what happens in our own day. The temptation in their sufferings to turn back to normal Jewish life and belief was no small pull. Here, the author reminds his readers that Christ is able to help them moment by moment, because that’s the kind of Savior He is and has always been. We don’t relegate Jesus becoming one of us to something which happened two-thousand years ago. The eternal postscript to the record of His life in the Gospels is that Jesus is still, this very day, God in the flesh—glorified flesh, but still human.<sup>20</sup> His human body in heaven speaks to His solidarity with us. And it speaks to His strength made perfect in our weaknesses. Jesus became one of us to help us, and He is able to do so in whatever temptations and conflicts you are facing.

## Conclusion

God came among us. This hallowed proximity was foretold in the 39 books of the Old Testament, but, to echo Calvin, the “letters” of the Law and the Prophets were relationally insufficient. A human was needed to fulfill those writings. A physical body, with flesh and blood, was needed. A human body—tempted, weakened, susceptible, broken, dead, and risen—was required for us to have forgiveness, fellowship, and a place by His side one Day. The humanity of Jesus is meant to endear us all to Him. He came to earth, not to serve Himself, but to give Himself for us in every way possible. So when we cry helpless tears, and face strong temptations, and belt out hearty laughter, our experience simple pleasures, He gets it. He understands your aching feet at the end of the day, and your aching heart at the ending of a life. But what He understood before we ever understood...the need for a Savior with flesh like yours and mine and blood like yours and mine.

And this He is, for you.

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<sup>18</sup> Genesis 12:1-3

<sup>19</sup> Harold Attridge, as quoted by Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: Hebrews, James, & Jude*, 161.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis, 148.