

The Humanity of Christ

Hebrews 2:5–18

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Introduction: A Glorious Purpose

You have a glorious purpose. Your purpose encompasses all of creation — the stars above, the plants, the mighty oceans, the vast forests. You have been given authority, dominion, stewardship over everything that God has made. The Lord has made you to rule and to be crowned with glory and honor. Your purpose, truly, is as vast as the stars.

I realize that sounds like something a self-help guru or prosperity preacher might say. The difference is what comes next. If I were one of those preachers, I would tell you that you can know and possess this glorious purpose by following five easy steps — buy this product, try harder, join this movement, learn these secrets. I wish it were that simple. It is not.

And yet — we do have a glorious purpose. We have been given authority and rule over everything God has made. We are God's image bearers in this world. That is our calling, our design, our dignity.

The evidence I point to is that longing, that ache, in the human soul for something more. We are wired for something great, and much of the restless discontent that so many people experience in life is the feeling of falling short of that sense of glorious purpose. We sense that we were made for more than this, and we are right. We were.

But we have fallen short — not because we lack some secret knowledge, and not because we have not tried hard enough. We have fallen short of the glory of God because we are broken. There is something fundamentally wrong, a radical corruption — what theology has long called *total depravity*. The evidence of this corruption is all around us and within us: sin, death, and bondage to things that are not God. These realities give witness that something has gone terribly wrong, and that we are failing to live out the glorious purpose for which we were made.

The Glorious Purpose Declared — and the Honest Diagnosis

Everything I have just described is voiced in Hebrews 2:5–8:

For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. It has been testified somewhere, “What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him? You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet.” Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him.

The writer of Hebrews is quoting Psalm 8, and when we read those words — *crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet* — we encounter the glorious purpose of humanity stated in the most exalted terms imaginable.

But a question immediately presents itself: who exactly is the “man” that the writer of Psalm 8 has in mind? Is this a general reference to all of humanity — men and women together — or is it a pointer toward the Messiah, toward Christ? The answer is both. The “man” of Psalm 8 is inclusive of all humanity, because it names our purpose, the purpose for which we were created. And the “man” of Psalm 8 is also Jesus, because he is fully human — and that is precisely the point of this chapter.

The crucial difference, however, is that the glorious purpose described in Psalm 8 is fulfilled in Jesus, not in us. Notice the honest admission at the end of verse 8: *at present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him*. At present, men and women fall short of the glory of God. At present, we sin and we die. At present, we struggle under bondage to things that are not God. The longing is in us, but the fulfillment is not.

The Man Who Fulfilled It

And then comes verse 9, one of the great pivots in the New Testament:

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

We see Jesus. We do not yet see the glorious purpose of humanity lived out in us — but we see it lived out in him. Jesus is the one who fulfills what God designed for humanity: not through a rod of iron, not through conquest and domination, but through suffering and death. He is crowned with glory and honor precisely *because* of the suffering of death. He has tasted death for everyone. In Jesus, the glorious purpose of humanity has been achieved.

Verse 10 presses further:

For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source.

There is a note worth pausing over in verse 11. Many translations, including the ESV, insert the word *source* — “all have one source” — but the Greek is more simply rendered *all are of one*. The point the author is making is that Jesus, the one who sanctifies, the one who has pioneered our salvation through suffering, is one with us. He is of the same kind. He is fully human. He who sanctifies and we who are sanctified are of the same nature — human.

And because of this, verse 11 continues, Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers. He calls you brother or sister because he *is* your brother. He is fully man, and because he is fully man, we are included — we are represented in everything he does.

The Crucifixion Psalm and the Family Reunion

In verse 12, the writer quotes Psalm 22 as prophetic evidence for how we are represented both in Christ’s death and in his resurrection. Before reading that verse, it is worth remembering what Psalm 22 is: it is the crucifixion psalm. A thousand years before Jesus walked the earth, King David wrote a psalm that describes the crucifixion with haunting precision — Jesus being pierced, his strength draining from him, being mocked and gloated over, his clothing divided by lot, and above all, the cry from the cross: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Even Jesus’ death is foreshadowed in Psalm 22:15 — *you lay me in the dust of death*.

But then the psalm turns. Verse 21 is the cry: *Save me* — and immediately the answer comes: *You have rescued me*. Jesus rose from the dead. And it is here, on the resurrection side of Psalm 22, that we find the verse quoted in Hebrews:

“I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.”

Do you see what the author of Hebrews is pointing to? Jesus, risen from the grave, calls us his brothers — and he is describing a family reunion on the other side of death. Because he rose, so too shall his family. His resurrection is not a solitary event; it is the firstfruits of a harvest that includes all who belong to him.

Immanuel: God Among Us, Sharing Our Flesh

Not only does Jesus fulfill the glorious purpose of humanity through his obedience to the Father, but through his victory over death he secures our victory as well. And yet there is still more to the meaning of his full humanity.

In verse 13, the writer quotes twice from Isaiah 8:

“I will put my trust in him.” And again, “Behold, I and the children God has given me.”

To grasp why this is so remarkable, we need to understand the historical context in which those words were first spoken. The background of Isaiah 8 is the impending destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel. After the reign of Solomon, the united kingdom of David had fractured along a fault line of civil war into two kingdoms — Israel to the north and Judah to the south. In 722 BC, the Assyrian empire swept in and obliterated the northern kingdom. In the days just before that catastrophe, while Israel was still threatening Judah, God gave a prophecy through Isaiah to King Ahaz: a child would be born, and his name would be Immanuel — God with us. *Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel* (Isaiah 7:14). Before that child was old enough to know good from evil, Ahaz was told, Judah would be safe.

I do believe that a child was indeed born as a sign and promise in Ahaz’s own day, a prophetic pledge that Judah would be delivered. But then in Isaiah 8, after Assyria has done its worst and Judah has been spared, we are told that the child Immanuel is a sign pointing toward a *future* child. Isaiah 8:18 reads: *Behold, I and the children whom the LORD has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the LORD of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion.* The child born in Ahaz’s day was a foreshadowing. The true Immanuel was still to come.

And Isaiah 9 describes him:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. ... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

When the writer of Hebrews quotes Isaiah 8:17–18, he is declaring that Jesus is this child. He is Immanuel — God with us. He is the son who is given, the child who is born, whose government shall increase without end and who shall break the rod of the oppressor.

And Hebrews 2:14–15 tells us exactly what that rod of the oppressor is:

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

The rod of the oppressor is death itself, and the one who wields it is the devil. Jesus, by sharing our flesh and blood, entered the domain of death — and destroyed it from the inside.

Let us gather what the text has shown us. Jesus is the man who shares with us flesh and blood. He is the man who fulfills the glorious purpose of God for humanity. He is the man who tasted death for us all. He is the man who destroyed the rod of the oppressor, breaking the power of death and the devil. And he is Immanuel — the child born among us — who delivers us from slavery.

The Offspring of Abraham

Verse 16 adds a brief but important clarification: *For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham.* Hebrews chapter 1 has shown us that Jesus is fully God. Chapter 2 has shown us that Jesus is fully man. Because he is both, he has fulfilled the purpose of God, defeated death, and delivered us from bondage — not merely as God acting upon us from without, but as man acting *for* us and *with* us from within. We are included in him, represented by him.

Verse 16 tells us who the “we” is. Who are those who are saved? Using the language of the Old Testament, the author calls them *the offspring of Abraham*. As we continue through the book of Hebrews, we will come to understand what this means in its fullest sense — and the answer is those who believe upon Christ through faith. When I speak of “we” and “us” throughout this study, that is who I have in mind: those who trust in Christ.

A Merciful and Faithful High Priest

We come now to the great *therefore* of chapter 2. The *therefore* of chapter 1 was a call to attentiveness — listen to him, do not drift away, do not neglect so great a salvation. The *therefore* of chapter 2 is different in character. It flows from Christ’s humanity rather than his divinity:

Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

The title *high priest* is drawn from the heart of the Old Testament. In Exodus 19, the nation of Israel was called by God to be a kingdom of priests — a people who would represent all nations before God. Within Israel, the twelve tribes were represented by the tribe of Levi, set apart for priestly service. And within the tribe of Levi, one man — the High Priest — was chosen to represent all of the others before God himself. Jesus is this High Priest. He is the one who stands before God on our behalf.

And he is described in two ways. He is *merciful* — which means he sees our suffering and pain and brokenness and enters into it, and does something about it. He is *faithful* — which means he is faithful to everything the Father has directed, and faithful to every promise he has made. You can trust him.

As this merciful and faithful High Priest, Jesus acts *to make propitiation for the sins of the people*. Several weeks ago, we traced how Jesus fulfills the Torah — the first five books of the Bible — and saw how the center of those books is Leviticus, and the center of Leviticus is the Day of Atonement, and the center of the Day of Atonement is the moment when the High Priest makes atonement at the mercy seat. Leviticus 16:15–16 describes it this way:

He shall bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it over the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. Thus he shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins.

When Hebrews speaks of Jesus making *propitiation* for the sins of the people, it is pointing directly to this passage — the very heart of the Torah.

The English word *propitiation* comes from Latin and means “to make favorable.” But the Greek word the author uses is *hilaskomai*, which carries within it the very image of the mercy seat — that place where the High Priest made atonement. And wrapped up in this one word are three things happening simultaneously.

First, there is forgiveness — a removal of sin. Second, there is the averting of wrath — divine judgment is turned aside. But third, and perhaps most easily overlooked, *hilaskomai* also speaks of becoming a treasured possession, of being dearly loved, of a relationship renewed. To make propitiation is not merely a legal transaction; it is the restoration of intimacy.

Consider a human analogy. Among the most intimate bonds a person can experience is marriage — a covenant of faithfulness and love in which two people promise to cherish one

another. Suppose that covenant is shattered by an act of betrayal. How does the wronged spouse feel? There is anger, pain, jealousy, and shame — and often, at the top, there is wrath. What frequently follows? Divorce, and sometimes revenge.

But it does not have to end that way. The marriage can be saved, and that saving begins with forgiveness. Yet forgiveness is only the beginning. The consequences of the betrayal — the anger, the wounded trust — must be dealt with. And even beyond that, there is something still more delicate: even when there is forgiveness, even when the anger has subsided, that sense of cherishing — the feeling that the other person is your most prized treasure — may still be lost. The sparkle is gone.

When Hebrews 2:17 speaks of Jesus as the High Priest making propitiation for sins, it encompasses all three layers. Yes, it is about forgiveness. Yes, it is about the averting of God's just wrath. But even more, it is about you being God's treasured possession — about God turning to you and saying, *I love you. I cherish you.* That is the covenant. That is the relationship that has been restored.

He Is Able to Help

And because Jesus authored our salvation through his own suffering — because he has tasted death, broken the power of the grave, and been made like us in every respect — he is able to help us when we suffer and are tried.

We tend to focus on the suffering Jesus endured in the final hours before the cross, in the beating and the crucifixion. But his entire life was marked by suffering, and in that suffering he has walked every path we walk. He knew what it was to bear the social shame of a cloud hanging over his birth — his parents were not married when he came into the world, and people did not let that pass unremarked. He lost his earthly father, Joseph, at a young age, and almost certainly carried the weight of being the primary support of his family through manual labor. He was overlooked and underestimated. He knew the depths of loneliness more profoundly than any of us could imagine. He felt the sting of slander, the pain of being misunderstood, the particular agony of having his motives questioned and twisted by those who should have known better. He was rejected by his own family. He was abandoned and betrayed by his closest friends. He suffered under a system of false justice that condemned the only truly innocent man who ever lived.

Whatever you are walking through — whatever suffering, whatever trial, whatever darkness — Jesus knows it. He has been there. He has faced it too.

And the great news is that he is merciful and faithful to help. He is not a distant high priest who handles the paperwork of our forgiveness from a safe remove. He is your brother, your

representative, your Immanuel — God with you — and he is able to give you strength and hope in the middle of whatever you are facing right now.

Therefore, trust him. Give yourself to him.