

Purposes of the Incarnation (Heb. 2.14-18)

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Pastor Ostella

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<sup>14</sup> 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, <sup>15</sup> and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. <sup>16</sup> For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Introduction

The packed reasoning continues in our section for today in Hebrews 2.14-18 (v. 14, **Since therefore**; v. 16, **For**; v. 17, **Therefore**; v. 18, **For because**). We have to keep our thinking caps on if we are going to follow the brief but compressed thoughts of the writer of Hebrews.

Verse 11 of chapter 2 gave an implication of covenantal union, lack of shame: **That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers**. The point of union between Christ and the children of whom He is not ashamed is reiterated in 14a *with expansion*: **the children share in flesh and blood**. Children here refers to the children God gave to Christ in the eternal covenant: they are the many sons that make up one family in union with Christ (2.10); they are the sons bound for glory with such certainty that Scripture speaks of their arrival in glory as a past fact (v. 10, *having brought* many sons to glory). Like Romans 8.30, their glorification is more than a sure thing; it is for all intents and purposes a present reality. These children are the heirs of salvation (1.14).

The expansion comes in the explicit mention of their humanity (**the children share in flesh and blood**) and then in the implication that the author makes: **therefore ... he himself likewise partook of the same things**. The humanity of the covenant children of Jesus necessitated His incarnation. Furthermore, the fact that He helps His covenant brothers (and not angels) also necessitated His incarnation: <sup>16</sup> **For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham**. <sup>17</sup> **Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect** (16-17a). The humanity of His covenant children and having ability to help them, necessitated the incarnation, and both have more purposes attached to them; hence, the writer opens up his thoughts like a blossoming flower.

Therefore, the outline for today covers two purposes of the incarnation: the saving purpose and the sustaining purpose. Eventually, by reflection on the attached purposes we will see the color and shape of the incarnation full blown.

1A. The saving purpose of the incarnation (2.14-15)

When we speak of Jesus as God the Son *incarnate*, we are referring to the fact that as God the Son, He became a man. He is truly God and truly man, fully God and fully man, and we must recognize that He is one person with these two natures. Therefore, we must hold these things in such a way that we do not divide the person nor confound the natures. This is the great mystery of the redeemer that the Westminster Standards explain pointedly and helpfully. For example, the Westminster Shorter Catechism states: "The only Redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, became man and so was, and continueth to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, forever" (WSC Q21). The Westminster Confession adds some important comments in section 8:

The Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon Him man's nature, with all the essential properties, and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin; being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man (WCF.8.2).

In our text (Heb. 2.10b), the partaking of **the same things** refers back to the humanity of the children (v. 10a, **the children share in flesh and blood**). Therefore, taking flesh is obviously a reference to the incarnation.

Why then did He become incarnate? It is because His children by covenant share in flesh and blood. He is truly the redeemer of the elect that God gave to Jesus *before* the creation of the world. This text in Hebrews and its similarity to Romans 8.30 seem to be in the minds of the framers of the Confession as indicated in this quote: It pleased God, in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, His only begotten Son, to be the Mediator between God and man, the Prophet, Priest, and King, the Head and Saviour of His Church, the Heir of all things, and Judge of the world: unto whom He did from all eternity give a people, to be His seed, and to be by Him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified (WCF.8.1). It appears that the framers of the Confession did a lot of reading in the book of Hebrews.

Now we are ready to consider the single but twofold *saving* goal of the incarnation.

The purpose of His incarnation in general was to identify with the humanity of His covenant children so that He could die, *as their mediator-priest*, in order to save them by destroying the work of the devil. This is a coin with two sides because destroying the work of the devil unpacks the goal of delivering His covenant children. Again, the death of Jesus is prominent.

1) One side of the saving coin

Jesus took flesh and blood to destroy the work of the devil by death as incarnate Lord.

In verse 14, focus is on the destruction of the devil by the death of Christ: **that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil**. However, the main point is that the defeat of the devil relates specifically to the power of death that he holds in his hands. The defeat of the devil is a defeat of the one who is diabolical in accusing sinners to be worthy of death and in bringing death upon them. Notably, he is the prince of death in a secondary sense under the sovereignty of God. We are to fear God when we consider death as a consequence of sin (Mat. 10.28, **And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell**). In Matthew 10, Jesus is talking about the Father. Therefore, the devil has the power of death *in an instrumental way* that surfaced in the garden when he tempted Adam and Eve to disobey and bring death into the world (Rom. 5.12, **Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned**). Remarkably, by death, Jesus defeated the one who has the power of death. That means that the death of Jesus brought about the death of death. This brings us to the more ultimate goal in the defeat of the devil.

2) Other side of the saving coin

Jesus took flesh and blood to save His children by death as incarnate Lord.

It is not sufficient to simply say that He became incarnate (sharing in flesh and blood) so He could defeat the devil and death by His death. Moreover, it is not sufficient to say that He became incarnate to die for sinners. Instead, we should say that He partook of flesh and blood so He could die for the children, His children, His brothers and sisters by eternal covenant. The death of Jesus was the death of death *for the children* identified here as people subject to an enslaving fear of death (**through death... [in order to] deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery, 2.15**). In other words, in the realization of the gracious saving plan of God, Jesus experienced death in our place so that we would no longer experience the fear of death that rules over people for their entire lives. Fear of death is something that unbelievers experience but suppress; it is something that believers in Christ once experienced (and suppressed), but now they can face that enslaving fear squarely, admit the fear that surrounds this dark reality, and experience relief and freedom from the fear of death. He endured our death, so fear has no basis.

2A. The sustaining purpose of the incarnation

**For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham (2.16).**

Verse 16 gives more support for the necessity of taking human flesh (partaking of the same things, v. 14). The fact that He does not help angels but the offspring of Abraham is the reason that supports the conclusion that **“Therefore”** (2.17a) introduces: **Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect.**

Of interest here is the reference to the offspring of Abraham. This is surely parallel with the heirs of salvation (1.14), sons brought to the kingdom (2.10), the covenant children of Christ (2.13), and so forth. How should we understand this reference to the “seed” of Abraham? It is totally foreign to the flow of thought to see in this phrase a reference to Israelites according to the flesh. The reference must be figurative. In some way, the new Israel is in view; that is, the writer directs our thoughts to the spiritual children of Abraham. He calls the sons bound for glory the offspring of Abraham.

Now, we should enquire as to why he does this, “why does the writer refer to the heirs of salvation and the sons bound for glory in the metaphorical language of the offspring of Abraham? Surely, our answer must come from the strong covenantal current of thought that is present in our context from 1.2 to 2.18. In this light, *the Hebrews preacher speaks of the eternal covenant in terms of its historical manifestation in the covenant with Abraham.* The covenant with Abraham is a way in which the inter-trinitarian plan of salvation (agreement, covenant, or pact of salvation) came to realization (comes to realization) in history (in the history of the fallen world). Thus, the saving of His covenant children who were His from the very beginning of creation came about through God’s covenant dealings with Abraham. Accordingly, Jesus is the son of Abraham, the greater Isaac (Mat. 1.1, **The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham**). To Abraham, God promised the world and blessing on all families of the earth. Clearly, this comes to pass through Jesus the incarnate descendent of Abraham. The promise to the world becomes clear to us from Romans 4.13 (**For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith**). The promise of blessing on all families of the earth is clear from Genesis 12.3 (**in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed, v. 3**). In more than one way, God’s children are His covenant children (by eternal covenant brought to realization through the Abrahamic covenant).

The mention of Abraham leads to the theme of temptation and to the need of help. Just as Abraham faced temptation, likewise, his descendents that follow his footsteps of faith experience temptation. Thus, Jesus had to be made like His brothers in every respect in order *to sustain them* as sinners subject to many temptations. In this connection, the purpose of the incarnation was to become like His brothers, so that He could become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God. In that capacity, he is able to make propitiation for the sins of the people *and thus to sustain them* in their temptations in life. We can cover propitiation first, then His helping.

#### 1) Propitiation

Part of His *sustaining* purpose in becoming incarnate was **that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people** (2.17). Propitiation means to satisfy the wrath of God. He satisfies God’s wrath against “the people.” That is, Jesus had to become a man to become a priest in order to make the mediatorial offering to God that would turn His wrath away from the heirs of salvation, the sons and daughters bound for glory. No amount of trial, temptation, or torment turned Jesus aside from making propitiation by enduring the wrath of God on the cross. He became incarnate to display His mercy and He drank every drop of the bitter cup of God’s wrath in display of His covenant faithfulness. It is covenant faithfulness because He made propitiation for the sins of His people **in the service of God** (2.17, literally, “with reference to the things of God”). Thus, Jesus put the foundation in place to *help* us face temptation. Let us therefore look more closely at the idea of helping.

#### 2) Helping

Jesus became flesh to die by suffering in temptation to gain the ability to be a merciful and faithful high priest. He did all of that in order to help those who are being tempted (**he is able**

to help those who are being tempted, 2.18). What a marvelous chain of purposes! Now He can help His children through temptation because He went through the fire, blazing the trail ahead of them (because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted). To be tempted is to be put to the test and we fall into sin when we fail the test (Hughes, *Hebrews*, 123).

God put Jesus to the test throughout His entire life and especially in the priestly offering of Himself on the cross. Facing temptation (being put to the test), Jesus suffered unspeakably. That is a profound fact of the incarnation; again note the words, He **suffered when tempted** (2.18). The fact of His suffering reoccurs in this context (9, 10 and here again in 18). Even more profound is the fact that His suffering of eternal death has the marvelous goal of not only delivering us from eternal death, but it also has the goal of equipping Him to help us through our trials, temptations, and sufferings in our journey over the pathway He blazed in front of us: **because he ...suffered ... he is able to help those who are being tempted** (2.18).

In His incarnation, He attains these goals (to destroy the devil and his works, to deliver his people, help the offspring of Abraham, to become a merciful and faithful high priest, especially to help those who are tempted, that is, His children, the true children of Abraham, His sons and daughters bound certainly for glory). He attains all these goals *by suffering* Himself through temptation because suffering has dimensions beyond the physical pain of the cross.

## Conclusion

Jesus became the incarnate God, truly man and truly God, to save and sustain His covenant people. He did this for you who cling to Him as your prophet, priest, and king. Thus, the incarnation is like a carnation, like a flower, that blossoms and reveals the color and shape of God's plan of salvation.

If you consider what Jesus did for you, then you have much to take home from this text, particularly, about the suffering of death and suffering on the way to death.

### 1) The suffering of death

Jesus suffered in order to deliver you from the fear of death, from the reality of death, and from the suffering of death in enslavement in fear. He suffered in your place to take the sting out of death, which is sin highlighted by the law. Now you can say with the apostle Paul that death has no sting in it for me: **For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.** <sup>54</sup>When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." <sup>55</sup>"O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" <sup>56</sup>The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. <sup>57</sup>But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>58</sup>Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain (1 Cor. 15.53-58).

### 2) Suffering on the way to death

Another thing you can say is that suffering in this world, that being put to the test of the refiner's fire is not worthy to be compared with the great salvation Jesus secured for me by His suffering: **For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us** (Rom. 8.18). This is an astounding claim that has its anchor in the gospel of Jesus as our faithful and merciful high priest. Being covenantally obedient, He suffered in temptation for your sins and He washed them away; there on the cross, He drank the cup of God's wrath to the last bitter drop, so you will never taste a single drop of God's wrath. Being covenantally merciful, He suffered many temptations so He could blaze the trail ahead of you and then take hold of you and lead you every step of the way home to glory.

**Let us therefore fall down before the majestic holiness of our God with heartfelt recognition of our sins and let us bow at the feet of Jesus and worship Him in thanksgiving, praise, honor, respect, reverence, love, and obedience. To the triune God be glory now and forevermore, amen.**