

Jesus and Death

M. W. Bassford, 1-26-14

Mankind has lots of problems. If that weren't true, then every news broadcaster on the planet would go out of business. However, of all of the ills to which we are heir, the greatest is death. This world would be a dramatically happier place if no one did die, and if no one could die. However, exactly the opposite is true. Barring the return of Christ, every one of us is going to die, and unless we're mentally ill, none of us regards the prospect with pleasure.

Death is a foe that we can't overcome on our own. However, when our Savior Jesus came to earth, He came with the intention of fighting and defeating this implacable enemy. Indeed, this is precisely what He accomplished, and for us who are His disciples, His victory is the source of our joy and hope. This morning before the Lord's Supper, then, let's reflect on our Lord's great triumph. Let's see what the Bible says about Jesus and death.

Hebrews 2:5-15

Before we go on, allow me to note that this is a huge topic. I could preach an entire series of sermons on what the Scripture reveals about Jesus' victory over death. In one segment of one sermon, I can barely scratch the surface. Nonetheless, let's zero in this morning on one passage in particular, the middle section of Hebrews 2

This text begins with a discussion of **THE EXALTATION OF CHRIST**. Read with me from Hebrews 2:5-8. In context, the Hebrews writer is concluding his argument that our revelation through Jesus is superior to the revelation which came through angels, simply because Jesus is superior to angels. The final portion of this argument is that Jesus is superior to angels because God has subjected the world to come to Jesus, but not to angels.

As evidence for this, the Hebrews writer cites Psalm 8. If we were to go back to Psalm 8 this morning, we would see that its first application is general. Here, it speaks of man generally, poetically describing us as the sons of men and proclaiming the dominion of man over the works of this physical creation. We have the right to use birds and beasts and fish and trees for our own purposes, because God gave us control over these things.

However, the Hebrews writer reveals that Psalm 8 doesn't merely speak of the lower-case sons of men, but of the upper-case Son of Man. Christ was made lower than the angels for a little while, but now, by implication, He is higher than the angels. He has dominion over everything that God has made, not merely over the birds and the beasts and the trees, but over mankind, and even over the hidden things of the spirit world. If God made it, it now belongs to Jesus. Of course, as the writer observes, death is not yet subject to Christ, but the day will come when even death will be defeated.

From here, though, the writer moves in a new logical direction. He explains the significance of Jesus having been made **LOWER THAN THE ANGELS**. This is set out in Hebrews 2:9-10. Logically speaking, the writer's argument here begins with the observation that even though Jesus is great, the Father is still greatest of all. Before the foundation of the world, God had an eternal purpose. He wanted to bring many sons to glory. He didn't just want Jesus in heaven with Him. He wanted all of us there too. In His infinite wisdom, God concluded that the only being in heaven or on earth who could bring us to heaven was Jesus. However, before the foundation of the world, Jesus wasn't yet suited for that purpose. Before He could carry out that work, He had to be perfected, perfected by His own suffering.

That is why Jesus had to be made lower than the angels. Angels can't die, but in order to bring many sons to glory, Jesus had to be able to die like those sons do. What is more, He had to actually die, so that through the suffering of His death, He could die for all of us. It didn't have to be that way, but because God was looking for a way to save us all along, He decreed that by His grace Jesus in tasting death tasted it for us. Only then, after Jesus had perfectly obeyed God, to the point of suffering and death, was He crowned with glory and honor and given dominion.

This discussion leaves us with a very important question. Why would Jesus die for us? What did God's eternal plan offer Him? The answer to this question lies in the sympathy felt for us by **CHRIST, OUR BROTHER**. The Hebrews writer elaborates on this in Hebrews 2:11-13. Before I go on, let me point out a translation issue. I normally use the New American Standard, and I'm generally pleased with its renderings, but I'm not a big fan of the way it deals with v. 11 here. For those of you who have NASB's, you'll notice that v. 11 says that we and Christ are "all from one Father", with "Father" in italics. The italics indicate that "Father" is a word supplied by the translators, and I think they made a mistake in so doing. In context, this verse describes Jesus before He came to earth. God was always Jesus' Father, but that term indicates relationship, not origin. If Jesus "came from" the Father originally, He would be a created being.

Instead, I like the way the old American Standard puts this. It says that we and Jesus are all "of one". That makes a lot more sense. Let me explain. Because Jesus is divine, He has a divine spirit. It is eternal and indestructible. However, even though we are all much lowlier than Jesus, our spirits have a spark of the divine too. God breathed the breath of life into the nostrils of our ultimate father Adam, and we have all inherited that divine spirit from Him.

That makes a huge difference. Unless we have been adopted, it's easy for us to see that we have a whole bunch of traits that we share with our families. I personally have a nose that looks a lot like my Aunt Carol's, I have a sense of humor that's a lot like my Cousin Jim's, and so on. All of those similarities resonate with us. We say to ourselves, "That

person looks like me and acts like me”, and so we are drawn to one another as a family. Jesus looks at us and sees similarity too, but what He sees isn’t our noses or our senses of humor. He sees our spirits, like God’s own spirit. Because of that, He feels a kinship for us, and was willing even to die for us.

Finally, the Hebrews writer explains what Jesus did to give us **FREEDOM FROM DEATH**. Look at Hebrews 2:14-15. In our essence, we were like Jesus, and He was like us, but there were some dramatic differences. He wasn’t flesh-and-blood. We were. He wasn’t subject to death. We were. He wasn’t in the power of the devil. We were. In order to help us, Jesus became what we were. He became flesh and died like we die. In doing so, in dying even though He had never sinned, Jesus defeated the devil and broke the power of death over us.

Once we understand what this means for us, our lives can never be the same. We don’t think about it much, but so much of our temptation to sin comes from fear of death. We are tempted to commit immorality or fornicate because we only have a little time in this life for pleasure, and then we’re dead, so we don’t dare waste the opportunity. We behave selfishly because this life is all we have, so we’d better push back before death comes to take it all away. Jesus, though, takes that fear away. We don’t have to submit to sin any more. We don’t have to act like this life is all we have, because in Him, death isn’t the end. Death is just the beginning. We’re freed to do right, even to surrender our lives themselves, without having to worry about the consequences here. Death and the devil are no longer our masters.

Before the Lord’s Supper, then, let’s think about what a difference Jesus has made in our lives. Without him, we would be enslaved by the fear of death too, but because He died for us, we can have life in Him.