

Communion weekend- The Grace of Jesus Christ: Merciful Sympathy

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- [0 : 00] Well, I've sung that hymn hundreds of times and never seen that fourth verse. It wasn't written by Horatius Bonner. Good words, but I'm pretty certain they weren't penned by Horatius Bonner.
- There are two questions that lie at the very heart of the cosmos. The first great question is, who is God?
- Everyone knows that God is. However hard people seek to deny that God is, they know that God is.
- We're made in the image and likeness of God. And that image, though defaced by sin, has not been eradicated by sin. Paul reminds us in Romans chapter 1 that the invisible things of God are revealed throughout creation.
- But people hold down the truth in unrighteousness. Truth is inconvenient. And the great question is, well, who is God?
- [1 : 07] And the whole Bible, the Word of God, God has given us this Word that we might be able in measure to answer that question. Who is God?
- We cannot answer it comprehensively. But we can answer it apprehensively. We cannot contain God. We cannot place Him in some kind of container and analyze Him.
- He is the Lord. But in His Word, He has set forth something of who He is that we might not be strangers both to His nature and to His character.
- But there's a second question that lies at the very heart of the cosmos. And it's this. Why did God become man?
- About a thousand years ago, a very renowned, famous Christian called Anselm wrote a little book, the Latin title, Cur Deus Homo.
- [2 : 09] Literally, why God-man? Why did God become man? Why the God-man? Why did God become man? Why did God become man? It's almost oxymoronic. God becoming man.
- How could it be? Well, of course, the Bible does not try to explain how this could be. But it does tell us why it needed to be.
- And this is what the writer to the Hebrews is impressing on these Hebrew Christians to whom he is writing. You'll know perhaps the context of this letter.
- It's written to Christians who are in terrible danger of turning back from Jesus Christ. They have experienced hardship and suffering and persecution.
- In chapter 10, we read that some of them had experienced dispossession of their property. Some had been thrown into prison. Some coming to faith in Jesus Christ had proved hard and sore and costly.
- [3 : 13] And they were being tempted to turn back from Jesus Christ to avoid any more of the cost and the suffering and the persecutions. And the whole letter is written to encourage them to stand fast.

In fact, in chapter 13, towards the end, the writer says, Bear with my brief word of exhortation. Thirteen chapters is brief, he says.

My brief word of exhortation. And what the writer to the Hebrews does throughout his letter is essentially two things. He first of all warns them of the awful danger of abandoning Jesus Christ.

The letter to the Hebrews is punctuated with a series of warning passages. passages that tell these Hebrew Christians and any other Christians who are contemplating abandoning Jesus Christ.

Telling them, look at the tragedy that awaits you. How shall we escape? As chapter 2 begins, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?

[4 : 33] And throughout these chapters, he regularly says to them, Have you considered the consequences of turning back from Jesus Christ?

Do you know what awaits you? Ultimate separation from God? Casting out from his presence? Do you know that God is a consuming fire?

And so he's seeking to awaken them to the dread danger of turning back from Jesus Christ.

But that's not the primary concern of the writer to the Hebrews. Because his main weapon is not warning passages.

Though they are there to be warning passages. His main concern is to lift up Jesus Christ. And to say to them, see how great he is.

[5 : 37] How could you contemplate for a moment turning back from this great Lord Jesus Christ? And so the writer to the Hebrews begins by the writer showing these hard-pressed, persecuted, suffering Hebrew Christians that Christ is greater than all the angels.

And then he goes on to tell them that Christ is greater than great Moses. Moses was great in God's house as a servant. Chapter 3. But Christ is over God's house as a son.

And then he tells them that Christ is greater than Aaron. Aaron, the first great high priest who would offer sacrifices to God. Symbolizing the need of atonement for sin.

Symbolizing and signifying that we cannot dare to approach God without atonement being made for our sin. And the writer says, Aaron, Jesus Christ, is infinitely greater than Aaron.

For he does not bring the blood of goats and bulls into the presence of God. He brings himself into the presence of God. He is the Lamb of sacrifice.

[6 : 53] He is the one who has made propitiation for sin. He is the one who has come from the glory. And who has expended himself to the uttermost.

To rescue you and redeem you and reconcile you to God. And bring you to the glory of God when you die. How can you turn back from such a saviour as this?

You see, the great weapon of the word of God is not to simply warn us of the dangers of turning back from Christ.

The greatest weapon is where the word of God lifts up Jesus Christ and says, see how great he is. See how glorious he is.

How good he is. How full of grace he is. How rich in mercy he is. How kind and forbearing and gentle and forgiving and generous. And all else as it is found in Jesus Christ.

[8 : 01] And that's why in chapter 13 the writer says, bear with my brief word of exhortation. Now this word exhortation is almost impossible to translate from Greek.

If I use the word exhortation, it conveys the idea of, you know, strong entreating. Well, that's part of what the word means.

But it also has this other nuance of gentle alongside encouragement. In other words, the best way to encourage Christians to go on is not to say to them, go on.

But to say to them, behold, your Savior Jesus Christ. So in these verses at the end of chapter 2, this is what the writer is seeking to do.

He wants to unpack for them the riches of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. And he does so by answering the question, why God, man?

[9 : 21] Cur Deus homo. Why did God become man? What brought the Son of God from the glory of heaven into the fallenness, the darkness, the putrefaction of this fallen world?

What on earth made God become man? And he tells them it was essentially for two reasons.

He says, first of all, verse 14, Why did God become man?

So that through death he might destroy the one who had the power of death. That is the devil. And set free from Satan's thralldom and captivity all those who were in bondage to the fear of death because they belonged to the evil one.

Jesus Christ came into the world to deal a death blow to the prince of hell and to set free a multitude of captives who were held in his thralldom.

[11 : 01] He became man. He took to himself flesh and blood. Because it was flesh and blood that had first failed against Satan in the garden.

It was flesh and blood that had fallen under the assaults of the enemy. But here is another. Paul calls him in 1 Corinthians 15, The last Adam and the second man.

Martin Luther calls the Lord Jesus Christ God's proper man. Here is one who will come and who will stand in our place as one with us.

Doing for us what we could never do for ourselves. We could never vanquish the prince of hell. We were held in his thralldom and captivity. We could never overcome him.

But here is one who has come and who has taken the frailty of our flesh to himself that he might rescue us.

[12 : 13] Not just from sin and sins, but from the one behind sin and sins, Satan himself. But the question is, well, how is he going to do that?

How is he going to do that? Well, this is what the writer tells us in verse 17. 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, now the NIV says, to make atonement for sin.

Better, I think, to make propitiation for sin. To propitiate means to turn aside wrath and condemnation by the payment of a price.

How is God in Jesus Christ going to vanquish the prince of hell? By delivering us from all that he had against us.

Our sins had brought us into captivity to Satan. And to be set free from that captivity, we needed someone to deal with the sin that had brought us into the captivity.

[13 : 32] We needed someone to come and do for us what we could never do for ourselves. We could never make amends to God. We could never make atonement for sin. We could never propitiate God.

Sin had rendered us utterly incapable of doing anything to help ourselves. We were dead in trespasses and sins. That's the uncomfortable truth the Bible confronts people with.

But we hold down the truth in unrighteousness. We don't like to admit it or even consider it. It's so inconvenient. It's so demeaning. Dead in trespasses and sins?

Well, who's perfect? Dead in trespasses and sins? That's your condition by nature and mine also before God. We can do nothing to help ourselves.

Dead men and dead women can't do anything. They are incapable of doing anything by virtue of being dead. But here is one who was holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners, as the writer will say in chapter 7.

[14 : 45] Here is one who has come into the world untainted by sin. Here is one who has come from the womb of the virgin sanctified by the Holy Spirit, unblemished, and who is able to take that unblemished life and offer it as a sacrifice on Calvary's cross, taking upon Himself as our covenant head.

The liabilities, the condemnations, and the judgments that belong to us, they now belong to Him by virtue of Him being who He is.

The covenant head, the representative head, the appointed head of all who believe in Him. He is the shining white knight who has come to our rescue. Now, we understand representative headship, don't we?

We might struggle with it at times. We might not agree with everything that Theresa May, the prime minister, does, but she represents us. It's the same principle with members of parliament.

They represent us. And here is Jesus Christ and He has come to represent us and to stand before God in our place and for our sake.

[16 : 11] And He takes upon Himself the liabilities that had brought us into the captivity of the prince of hell and He pays the price of every single one of our sins.

And Satan's got no hold on us, no longer any claim upon us, because all the claims He had upon us were laid upon our Savior. That's how He delivers us from the fear of death.

That's why we can sing, O death, we defy Thee, a stronger than Thou hast entered Thy palace. We fear Thee not now. He was made like us in every respect, that He might truly represent us as one of us.

And so the writer is saying, how can you turn back from such a Savior as this? How can you turn back from the One who has made propitiation for sin, who has rescued you from the enthrallment of the devil?

How can you consider turning back from Him? You see, theology, doctrine is the great application. You know, Christians are often saying, oh, I wish my pastor would be more practical in his sermons.

[17 : 35] I actually wish ministers would be less practical and more theological. You think, well, is that not a bit strange? No. John Owen, the great English Puritan, I had to give some lectures on volume one of John Owen's works in the States recently and so it's fresh in my mind.

He has this magnificent passage where he says, if you find Christians who are struggling with obedience, who are being besieged with temptations, here's what you need to do.

Proclaim the glory of Christ to them. And you think, what? Don't you want to tell them that if they don't obey Christ, they'll grieve God?

Well, yeah, there's a place for that, of course. No, it's his own. Their great need is to behold the glory of Jesus Christ. Why? Because when you behold the glory of Jesus Christ, the last thing you want to do is grieve him and sin against him.

I remember some years ago, a young, very fine Christian came to me in Cambridge and he had fallen into the seductive entrapment of internet pornography.

[18 : 52] It's rife. It's a vile thing. And I had really not great experience of this. I'd been a pastor for over 30 years, but it was quite new to me and I was thinking, well, Lord, how can I best help?

And I thought, this is what I need to do. And I remember my young friend, and he's a very fine, very fine Christian man now. I said, we're going to spend these next weeks and months looking at the person of Jesus Christ.

And it was remarkable just to see almost before my eyes the penny dropping. And this is what the writer to the Hebrews is doing.

He's saying, do you see how great your Savior is? Do you see who he is and what he's done? How can you turn back from him? But there's a second reason he gives in answer to the question, why did he become flesh and blood?

Why did God become man? What possessed him if I can use such language? In the Son of God to leave the glory of heaven and to come into the darkness, the stench, the vileness of this world.

[20 : 12] Holy humanity, walking the dust of a fallen world. What possessed him? And he tells us here in verse 18, for because he himself suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

You're being tempted tonight. Temptation isn't sin. Succumbing to temptation is sin. Every Christian is tempted. The Son of God was tempted.

Remember how he begins his public ministry. Matthew records it, chapter 4. No sooner has he been baptized than the Jordan and the heavens are opened and the Father says, this is my beloved Son when he's thrust into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

The Son of God was tempted. Temptation is a reality we can't escape from, this side of glory. But God cannot be tempted.

James, chapter 1. God cannot be tempted. God is beyond temptation. But God in Christ was tempted.

[21 : 32] God became man, came into the arena of temptation so that he might when tempted suffer and be thereby able to help those who were being tempted.

Jesus Christ suffered when he was tempted. You're not to think that the humanity of our Lord Jesus was of a different kind of humanity from ours.

You're not to imagine that when the evil one came, the Lord, as it were, sat back and thought, do your worst. No sweat. Do your worst. I can take it all.

I can take it this moment, this day, every day. No. In fact, we're told in the Garden of Gethsemane, he sweated, as it were, great drops of blood. It was an agony for the Son of God because his humanity was a holy humanity.

If he hadn't suffered when he was tempted, it would mean his humanity was of a different order from ours. And if it was a different order from ours, he couldn't represent us before God and make atonement for our sin.

[22 : 55] What must it have been like for the Holy Son of God to be tempted to sin? In chapter 4, the writer to Hebrews puts it dramatically when he says, we do not have a high priest who's unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are yet without sin.

Tempted in every respect as we are. those are some of the most daring words in the whole Bible.

In every respect, if I told you some of the temptations that assail my mind, you would think, goodness me, and you're a minister of the gospel, and maybe you could say the same to me.

If you knew some of the temptations that assailed me, you just would wonder if I was a Christian at all, the Son of God was tempted in every respect just as we are.

Why? That he might be able to help those who are being tempted. Now here we come into deep waters.

[24 : 18] The writer is telling us that he is able to help us not because he is omnipotent, which he is, not because he is the Son of God who with the Father and the Holy Spirit is the triune God.

He's able to help us not because he knows everything about us and has the power to constrain the whole cosmos to come to our aid if need be.

No, he's able to help us because he suffered when he was tempted. In other words, he's able to help us because he knows from the inside what it is to be truly human.

He knows what it is to be truly human. He understands personally, palpably, viscerally, existentially, he understands what it is to be tempted.

Think of it like this. When we are tempted, when you and I are tempted, we resist for a time and sometimes by the grace of God we are enabled to stand our ground and Satan comes in another way and we succumb and we resist for a time but then, as it were, we snap.

[25 : 42] But the Lord Jesus Christ never snapped. Satan was never able to bend him or break him and he has been to the uttermost of temptation.

We don't know the full force of temptation but he does. We give in long before the full force of temptation exercises its power upon us but the Saviour who faced the unleashing of hell upon him.

He knew what it was to stand and therefore he is able to help those who are being tempted and back in chapter 4 he says, let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need because we have a Saviour who knows not by observation but by personal experience.

He knows what it is to be you. He knows what it is to be me.

And the word that's used here in chapter 4 he is not unable to sympathize with our weaknesses.

[27 : 10] This word sympathize is the idea of coming alongside us and ministering to us in our deepest need because he has been where we have been but when we fell he stood.

the humanity of Jesus Christ is a true humanity and it is a tender hearted caring humanity.

We rightly defend the deity of Jesus Christ but with no less vigour we ought to defend the true humanity of Jesus Christ.

If he had not become bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh he couldn't have made propitiation for our sins and he wouldn't be able to come alongside us and say I know what you're going through.

I've been there. And you think Lord Jesus do you really know the vileness of my temptations been there? do you really know by experience the unspeakable wickedness of the temptations that come to me been there?

[28 : 38] Can you really understand the sheer horror of some of the temptations that Satan presses upon me?

Been there. He was tempted to deny God the greatest of all temptations. He became flesh to be our helper to be our saviour absolutely but at the right hand of God there is glorified dust there is dust on the throne of heaven dust that has walked the grime of this world dust that has experienced the testings and the trials and the temptations of this world there is dust on the throne of glory and that dust is our dust not a different kind of dust dust it's the dust of true humanity why did

God become man well if you want a good read you could read Anselm's Kur Deus Homo it's not too long it's in English get translated or you could read the letter to the Hebrews it's just astonishing you couldn't dream this up could you you couldn't dream it up it's so out of this world God become man was this to show us something of his prowess no it was to show us that he loved us and that he had come in person to save us and to help us he doesn't just save us and leave us and say get on with it I've come to help you the Lord is my helper and when we say that we should be taking the words of the psalmist and giving them their true biblical trajectory and saying the Lord is my helper that is to say the Lord

Jesus Christ bone of my bone flesh of my flesh representative covenant head the one who has entered the arena of this world and who has endured with suffering the indignity of creatures tempting him and all for me and all for me so that he'll be able to tailor his help precisely to my specific temptations isn't it a great thing to think that we have in the Lord Jesus Christ one who never faltered or failed and who says to us be of good cheer yes the temptations pressing hard but I've been there and I stood my ground and I'll help you stand your ground glorious sympathy from a glorious saviour amen may God bless to us his word this evening asçao her

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