

THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD

What if God was One of Us?

Hebrews 2:10-18 (EHV)

¹⁰ Certainly it was fitting for God (the one for whom and through whom everything exists), in leading many sons to glory, to bring the author of their salvation to his goal through sufferings. ¹¹ For he who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified all have one Father. For that reason, he is not ashamed to call them brothers. ¹² He says: I will declare your name to my brothers. Within the congregation I will sing your praise. ¹³ And again: I will trust in him. And again: Here I am and the children God has given me. ¹⁴ Therefore, since the children share flesh and blood, he also shared the same flesh and blood, so that through death he could destroy the one who had the power of death (that is, the Devil) ¹⁵ and free those who were held in slavery all their lives by the fear of death. ¹⁶ For surely he was not concerned with helping angels but with helping Abraham's offspring. ¹⁷ For this reason, he had to become like his brothers in every way, in order that he would be a merciful and faithful high priest in the things pertaining to God, so that he could pay for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Indeed, because he suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

For Christmas, we have been celebrating God's gift of the incarnation. This is a fancy theological word used to describe the fact that God Almighty, God from all eternity, God with no beginning and no end, took on human flesh and blood. "The Word became flesh and dwelled among us." (John 1:14) Simeon held the incarnate God in his arms as he proclaimed, "My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." (Luke 2:30-32) The fact that God took on human flesh to save all people of all nations of all time was proclaimed by Simeon and is bolstered today by the fact that the Magi came and worshiped the Christ.

So, why did God do this? Why did he share the same flesh and blood that all humans do? Was it that he felt too aloof, too distant from us normal people, almost as if he had to take a page out of *Undercover Boss*? Did he need to relate better to the human experience and human condition and so he tried out what it would be to be human – to worship with people, sing hymns and psalms with them? Did he do this so that he could be our chum or our homie?

The author of this letter to the Hebrew Christians tells us the main reason why God became incarnate: "Certainly it was fitting for God (the one for whom and through whom everything exists), in leading many sons to glory, to bring the author of their salvation to his goal through sufferings." (verse 10) He shared our flesh and blood so that he could suffer.

That's pretty bleak and dark reasoning, isn't it? We're still basking in the afterglow of Christmas and we're already thinking about Good Friday and pain and suffering? That's pretty messed up that God took on human flesh just so that he could suffer. If I were God, I would have figured out a different way to save the world, a way that didn't involve a person having to go through all that horrible suffering and then death because I don't think that anyone should have to go through those things.

If these thoughts run through your mind, you're not alone, but you're also imposing your thoughts as superior to God's. If we think that God could have done this in a different way without suffering and death, then I don't think we realize what the cost to take away sin, any sin, is. The only way that sins can be paid for and taken away is with blood. That means that every single mistake you or I have ever made, every white lie, every negative and mean thought, every time we lose our tempers, every time we turned a blind eye to someone asking for help, every time we've complained about serving others, every time we've wished to be lazy instead of doing our responsibilities, every single one of these required blood to be shed. Since the wages of sin is death, life had to be paid to get rid of the debt of sin. A life must be given to pay for another's life. It's horrible, but there is no other way to take it away. This is what our sins cost: blood, suffering, death. Jesus shared our flesh and blood to pay the price for us.

Every day, every single one of us is tempted to disobey God in some way, shape, or form. It's a never-ending barrage from Satan. We suffer through it. And too many times we fail to resist. We give up on suffering through temptation and instead give in. Through this pandemic, how many good things that we know we should be doing have we stopped because we're sick of the restrictions, sick of looking at screens, sick of all the hassle and harassing we get in trying to get together with other people? As stoic as we think we are, as people who are supposed to muscle through suffering, we all eventually give up and give in.

We should be ashamed before God, embarrassed by how we have lived our lives, how many times we have folded in the fight for our soul, in our fight against temptation. We are so far from being perfect, so far from ever being God, let alone to think like him. It's impossible for us. What's worse is that God should be so very ashamed of us as his creation. We've made grand messes of our lives. We passed on suffering through temptation so many times and just given in.

This is why God chose to share our flesh and blood. As a spirit, he would never suffer through temptation. Without flesh and blood, he would not live under his own law and be tempted to disobey it. He became incarnate to help us, to deliver us from our impossible situation. "For surely he was not concerned with helping angels but with helping Abraham's offspring." (verse 16)

Now, you may think that Jesus has a big, unfair advantage in his fight against temptation since he is God Almighty. Temptation wouldn't even be a second thought to him. He can whisk it away every single time with barely a thought, right? But this is why we talk about Christ's sharing our flesh and blood as his time of humiliation. Not that it somehow demeaned him to do it, but because he did not make full use of his divine power. He suffered temptation in the way that we do, under the law as a person instead of above it as God.

This was not easy. It was more like weightlifting. He had to push through the pain. He suffered as he was tempted even though he resisted every single time and remained without sin. Think of all the times he could have thrown in the towel and been done. People reject him in his hometown. Well, you're not worth this, and Jesus walks away. 40 days without eating. Just turn these stones to bread. Why not? It doesn't hurt anyone. Bow down to the Devil and you don't have to suffer on the cross. Who would know? Avoid the cross, avoid suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane in prayer that the Lord would take this cup of suffering away from him. Yet, he went on and suffered. In the end, he was tempted in every way that we are and yet he committed no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth.

"Because he suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." (verse 18) The incarnate God can and does relate to how hard it is for us to deny ourselves through temptation, to suffer while resisting sin. So he prays for us. He stays by our side through each of these temptations even though we don't see him. He suffered through all temptation so that we are no longer shackled to sin or bound to it, having to obey it.

But he didn't share our flesh and blood only to help us through temptation. The writer to the Hebrew Christians also says: "Since the children share flesh and blood, he also shared the same flesh and blood, so that through death he could destroy the one who had the power of death (that is, the Devil) and free those who were held in slavery all their lives by the fear of death." (verses 14-15)

All of us live with the fact that one day we will die, unless Jesus returns before then. We cannot cheat death. It comes for all of us because we all sin. Death is an unknown experience that hangs over our heads. As a spirit, God could never die. So he chose to share our flesh and blood in order to suffer and then die. The immortal made himself mortal in order to bring immortality to all us mortals.

"He had to become like his brothers in every way, in order that he would be a merciful and faithful high priest in the things pertaining to God, so that he could pay for the sins of the people." (verse 17) He is the great high priest who didn't just offer sacrifices of other things but offered himself as the ultimate sacrifice after he had spent his whole life suffering while resisting every temptation. He gave up himself as God made flesh and blood in order to pay for the lives of all people. Only God in the flesh could do such a thing. We can't even save ourselves, let alone anyone else. With his innocent death, he paid for all our sins of all time. They were wiped out. God the Father raised the incarnate God back to life and by doing so made it evident to all that the Devil had been defeated along with death. By suffering death, the incarnate God destroyed the Devil and freed all of us from the slavery of death. He has now made us holy and set us apart to live with him forever. "For he who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified all have one Father. For that reason, he is not ashamed to call them brothers." (verse 11)

God shared our flesh and blood not just so that we could relate to him or so that he could understand the human experience and condition. He shared our flesh and blood, became incarnate, to suffer every temptation for us and to suffer death for us. This is what it means that he is our brother. He will lead us to glory everlasting with him because he made us holy when God became one of us. Amen.