

CHRIST OUR BROTHER

Flying for a brother

When I was a college student in Southern California, my brother played on the basketball team of a high school here in the Santa Clara Valley. My mother would send me press clippings in the mail, so I was able to follow his progress. The team did fairly well and made the playoffs. I decided to fly up for the weekend to watch the first and — as it turned out — only playoff game. Some people were surprised that I'd go to all that trouble just for a basketball game. But it wasn't just a basketball game. It was my brother.

If any of us have had similar experiences of being moved to do something for a sibling, or have watched a sibling be moved to do something for us, we can begin to understand the brotherhood of Jesus. Jesus is our brother. Because he is our brother, he acts. Because he is our brother, Jesus became human to liberate us from fear by removing our sin.

Chapter 1 of Hebrews focused on the divinity of Christ. Chapter 2 focuses on his humanity. Emphasis on the divinity and humanity of Christ is part of the writer's grand scheme to portray Jesus as the perfect high priest. Nowhere is his solidarity with humanity more clearly seen than in Hebrews 2:10-18.

Brotherhood of Jesus (2:10-13)

Hebrews 2:10-13:

(10) For it was fitting for him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings. (11) For both he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father, for which reason he is not ashamed to call them brothers, (12) saying,

“I will proclaim your name to my brothers,

In the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.”

(13) And again,

“I will put my trust in him.”

And again,

“Behold, I and the children whom God has given me.”

Verse 10 begins with the word “for,” offering an explanation for Christ's suffering and death, which was spoken of in verse 9. This whole concept of a suffering savior had been considered offensive to the Jewish readers of this book earlier in their lives, and they are no doubt entertaining such thoughts again. The writer says that it was “fitting” for God to subject his Son to sufferings. He explains the reason for that in verse 11. But the first thing to note is that God deemed Christ's sufferings on our behalf not only necessary but appropriate. It was an outrageous thing for God to do, but our worth to God is so great that he considers such an outrageous act “fitting.”

All things are both “for” God and “through” God, but all things aren’t functioning according to design, because sin was injected into creation by humanity. But God wants to restore all things to their intended purpose and place mankind as king over all things, according to his original plan (Genesis 1:28, 2:15), and to do so, he has to reconcile mankind to himself. The writer just described Christ’s reign over all creation, which will be complete in the next age (Hebrews 2:5-9). Jesus is “crowned with glory and honor” (Hebrews 2:9), and God is “bringing many sons to glory,” the place of dignity in which they reign over the new creation. The word “sons” introduces a family theme that runs through this section.

In order to reconcile humanity to himself, God perfected the author, or leader, of our salvation through sufferings. Jesus is our leader in the sense that he leads us out of slavery to fear (Hebrews 2:15) and into the glory of the next world, where we reign with him. He himself was “perfected.” This doesn’t mean that Christ was ever imperfect; it means that he became qualified to be the leader of our salvation based on his sufferings, which the writer links with his death in verse 9. He became qualified to be “he who sanctifies.”

The writer explains the reason for the appropriateness of the Son’s sufferings in verse 11, which begins with the word “for.” Both Jesus, the one who sanctifies, and men and women, those who are being sanctified, share the same Father. Therefore, it is appropriate that they share the same things — flesh, blood, sufferings and death. Jesus “sanctifies” us — he sets us apart for our intended purpose, to enter into the kingdom of God and reign with him in glory.

Because both Jesus and those he sets apart share the same Father, the writer comes to this mind-bending conclusion: “he is not ashamed to call them brothers.” The evidence the writer cites for this are the words of Jesus in verses 12 and 13. The words were originally spoken by David (Psalm 22:22) and Isaiah (Isaiah 8:17-18), but the writer understands Jesus as saying the same things. David is envisioning himself praising the Lord before others after being delivered, and Isaiah, along with his children, is expressing trust in the Lord despite foreign oppression. David speaks of his “brothers,” and Jesus speaks of his brothers; Isaiah speaks of his own children, and Jesus speaks of God’s children who have been entrusted to him. So in both cases, he’s speaking of his own flesh and blood — his brothers.

David in Psalm 22 states his intention to praise the Lord publicly. He will “proclaim,” or announce, the name of the Lord to his brothers, and “in the middle of the assembly” he will sing the praises of the Lord. The “assembly” was Israel gathered for worship. The word used in Hebrews (*ekklesia*) is the same word that is translated elsewhere as “church.” The worshiping “assembly” of Israel is now the worshiping “church” of Christ. And insofar as the writer of Hebrews is concerned, it is a public setting, in which Jesus “is not ashamed to call them brothers.” And the “them” of the assembly is now the “us” of the church, those whom Christ has sanctified. The church comprises each of us, so when it is said that Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers, it also means that he is not ashamed to call “you” brother.

Who is this “he” who calls you brother? How has the writer described him thus far? Let’s return for a moment to the first chapter of Hebrews. In the first four verses, the writer describes the Son as the heir of all things, the creator of the universe, the

embodiment and expression of God, the one who sustains all creation with a simple word and the one who is seated at the right hand of the Father. In the rest of Chapter 1 the writer expands upon these attributes. Jesus, the Son of God, is God — absolutely sovereign, righteous, eternal and unchanging. That’s who “he” is who calls you brother. He is God. He is your savior and Lord, but he is also your brother.

Perhaps even more astoundingly, he is no the least bit ashamed of you. This sovereign, righteous, eternal, unchanging absolutely holy God-who-is-man does not turn away from you in shame. You cause him no embarrassment or disgrace. In fact, quite the opposite is true. If he is not ashamed, what is he? The writer here is not using a negative to point out a neutral. He’s not saying that Jesus is not ashamed of you in order to point out that Jesus has no feelings for you whatsoever. He’s using a negative to point out a positive. He’s saying Jesus is not ashamed of you in order to point out that Jesus is proud of you. How can this be? How can this not be! He’s our brother! We share the same Father. And he has sanctified us, cleansed us from sin and set us apart for eternity’s purposes.

More astoundingly still, he’s not ashamed to “call” you brother. He doesn’t just think it; he speaks it. He doesn’t just speak it when no one is listening; he speaks it in the middle of the assembly. He not only wants you to know he’s proud of you; he wants others to know as well.

All this means we can picture Jesus walking into the middle of our gathering, asking each of us to stand one by one, looking us each in they eye, embracing us and calling us brothers. It also means we can picture him looking around to those gathered, pointing to each of us individually and announcing to the rest, “Do you see this one? This is my brother.” All the while he’s bursting with pride and joy.

He’s like our big brother, the senior in high school at the beginning of the school year. We’re the incoming freshman. In this public setting, where he is king and we are nobodies, we’re wondering if he will disown us. But he is that loving Big Brother, proud of all us little brothers, who stands by us, sticks up for us and takes joy in doing so.

This is a different way to think of Jesus, isn’t it? If we can envision Jesus calling us brothers, if we can hear him doing so, it will change the way we think about him, about ourselves and about God. In other words, it will change the way we live.

Because he is our brother, he acts on our behalf, as the writer explains in Hebrews 2:14-18.

Liberation from fear (2:14-16)

Hebrews 2:14-16:

(14) Since then the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death he might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, (15) and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. (16) For assuredly he does not give help to angels, but he gives help to the descendants of Abraham.

The two sentences in these verses and the two sentences in verses 17 and 18 can be seen as two related sections with the same literary structure. Each begins with a

conjunction that draws a conclusion (“since then,” “therefore”). Each speaks of Christ’s becoming human for a purpose (“that” in verses 14 and 17). Each concludes by offering an explanation for Christ’s becoming human that concerns the help he gives (“for” in verses 16 and 18). Each section follows this structure:

Since then ... / Therefore ...

He partook of flesh and blood / He had to be made like his brothers

That ...

For ...

Verse 14 begins with the words “since then,” offering an explanation for Christ’s brotherhood in a way that puts forth a conclusion. Because he is our brother, Christ “partook” of flesh and blood. Why did his brotherhood with us cause him to become human? Verse 16 says it was to “help.” We needed help, so our brother became human for us. Verse 17 says Christ was obligated to become human, that he “had” to be made like us. In verse 14, however, no obligation is implied. Here, he is not obligated to become human; he chooses to become human. He doesn’t have to partake of flesh and blood; he wants to. At this point, this is an important distinction. This is an absurd thing that Christ does, giving up heaven for earth. It’s ludicrous. Who would do such a thing unless he absolutely had to? Christ didn’t absolutely have to. Such is our need, and such is Christ’s love for us, that he wants to give up heaven for earth. He leaves heaven because he wants to be with us. He wants to be with his brothers. So much of what we do, it seems, is because we have to do it, and it’s easy to impose our human experience onto the experience of God. But Jesus is not like this.

The purpose for his assuming flesh and blood was to liberate us from the fear of death. The instrumentality of this liberation was his own death, which rendered powerless the devil. The devil here is seen as an evil tyrant who has people enslaved. Christ is seen as the warrior who defeats the tyrant and sets the captives free.

At one time the devil had “the power of death.” What power did he have? He had the power to intimidate people with the prospect of death. Death is inevitable and uncontrollable. It is out of our hands; it can happen at any time; and no matter what time it happens, it will happen. So the big question looms in each mind: “After death, then what?” The question inspires fear, and the devil uses that fear to keep people in bondage.

What are we afraid of? Topping the list is judgment. If there’s a judgment, if there’s a God to face at the end of it all, if there’s an accounting to be given, we’re afraid that we’re going to be weighed in the balances and found wanting. We’re afraid that the way we’re living is going to merit judgment, or we’re so afraid of judgment that we live tight, narrow, restrictive lives in constant fear of doing even one wrong thing, making one wrong decision or taking one wrong turn. That’s slavery, and that’s what the devil does to us.

Timothy Leary, the former Harvard professor who came to prominence in the 1960s for his experimentation with psychedelic drugs, was diagnosed with terminal cancer in January 1995. He then turned his impending death into a celebration of sorts, announcing that he would commit suicide on the World Wide Web. He was going to show America that death was not to be feared but enjoyed. But as death drew near, the act

wore thin. Ram Dass, an original partner in Leary's psychedelic research, recalls "looking for long periods into his eyes and seeing no one looking back," and he remembers "seeing how far back he was behind/beyond his theater piece of dying." Leary didn't commit suicide, and he died privately. Carol Rosin, who was with Leary when he breathed his last, writes that he "shook with fear and sobbed with regrets and loneliness. He became nasty, hateful." In the tragic final act of Leary's life, fear stole the show.

Christ's death, though, liberates us from fear of death, the ultimate fear, and all other fears. How exactly his death does this is taken up in verses 17 and 18, so we'll save that discussion for then.

The enslavement of his brothers is a condition Jesus cannot tolerate. Verse 16 begins with the word "for," explaining Christ's motivation for becoming human. He came to help. Again, no obligation is implied; he came because he wanted to come. He wanted to help. The writer states the obvious: He did not come to help angels. The writer up to this point has used angels as a point of comparison with the Son; now the comparison is with humanity. Earlier, angels were used to show the significance of the Son; now they are used to show the significance of the Son's brothers. Jesus gives help to, literally, "the seed of Abraham," a term that would strike a chord with the Jewish audience. God promised to bless the seed, or descendants, of Abraham (Genesis 12:7). Those who belong to Christ, both Jews and Gentiles, are the true descendants of Abraham (Galatians 3:29).

The word translated "give help to" is more literally translated "take hold of." It is the same word the writer uses in Hebrews 8:9, where he quotes from Jeremiah 31:32. The Lord says of the Israelites that he "took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt." Just as the Lord led the former-day seed of Abraham out of bondage, Jesus leads the latter-day seed of Abraham out of bondage. Jesus, our brother, invades enemy territory and takes us by the hand to lead us out of danger. Our big brother is not only proud of us; he comes to rescue us. And when he does so, he grabs hold of us and takes us by the hand!

Having stated that a purpose of Christ's becoming human was to liberate his brothers through death, the writer proceeds to explain how that death was effective.

Removal of sin (2:17-18)

Hebrews 2:17-18

(17) Therefore, he had to be made like his brothers in all things, that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. (18) For since he himself was tempted in that which he has suffered, he is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.

Verse 17 begins with "therefore" and then proceeds to tell us that Christ "had to" become human. Verses 14 through 16 imply volition but no obligation in Christ's decision to become human. No one, not even the Father, forced him to do it. He came because he wanted to help. Now the writer tells us that he was obligated to come. He was obligated to come because he wanted to help. The best way for him to help was to

become human, so Christ became human, no matter the cost. Thus we understand his “obligation,” which is fueled by desire.

What he did was ludicrous, of course — exposing himself to suffering, torture and death. But for him, it was a no-brainer. If his sanity were called into question, perhaps we can picture him answering this way: “You don’t understand. These are my brothers. I had to do it. You see, I just had to do it.”

In the previous section, his purpose for coming was to render the devil powerless and liberate his brothers. Here, his purpose for coming is to become a high priest and make propitiation for the sins of his brothers. The two purposes are related, as we shall see.

The writer for the first time directly introduces the main theme of his book, which concerns the priesthood of Christ, though he has been implicitly treating it all along. What primarily distinguished the high priest from other priests in Israel was his ability to on the annual Day of Atonement enter the Most Holy Place in the temple to offer sacrifice. Jesus came not only to become a high priest but a particular kind of high priest, one who is both merciful and faithful.

The Israelite high priest was one of the people, one who identified with them in all things, even their sinful state. When the high priest went into the Most Holy Place to make atonement, he went as one of the people, one of the sinners. Therefore Jesus became a human high priest, himself taking on our sins and fully identifying with us. In this ritual sense, he became merciful. But in becoming fully human, he is also able to sympathize with us. He participated in the deepest agony of human experience, including the worst kind of death imaginable. There is not a human tear that can be shed but that Jesus cannot gently embrace us and whisper softly in our ears, “I understand.” This is an amazing thing, really, when we consider what he endured for us. He is not resentful for having to endure the cross on our behalf, as we might be. Rather, he is merciful, full of compassion.

He not only became a merciful priest, one who could identify with us, but he became a faithful priest, one who is trustworthy. The Lord said regarding Christ in 1 Samuel 2:35, “But I will raise up for myself a faithful priest who will do according to what is in my heart and in my soul.” Jesus was perfectly faithful to God. Because he was perfectly faithful to God, he can be trusted. Who else can be trusted, really? Only one who is perfectly responsive to God can be fully trusted, and Jesus is that one. So there is no question that the offering of Jesus, our high priest, is acceptable to God.

Because he is both merciful and faithful, our high priest is able to “make propitiation for the sins of the people.” He is the only one qualified to be “he who sanctifies” (Hebrews 2:11). In making propitiation for sins, he gets them out of the way. This explains how his death liberates us from fear of death. There is an unbreakable cause-and-effect link between sin and death. Sin leads to death (Genesis 2:17; Romans 5:12, 7:9). Sin, which is rejection of God, begets death of the body but also death of the spirit, which is designed to be God’s dwelling place in man. In dying the death we deserved for our rejection of God, Jesus broke the link between sin and death. As Paul says in Romans 8:2, Christ “has set you free from the law of sin and of death.”

For followers of Jesus, then, sin no longer holds forth the prospect of ultimate death, death of the spirit. That means death of the body — and what lies beyond it —

need not be feared. Because Christ carried away our sins, we need not fear judgment. And because we need not fear judgment, neither do we need to live tight, narrow, restrictive lives in constant peril of doing the wrong thing, making the wrong decision or taking the wrong turn. Jesus, through his death, freed us from the fear of death. Rather, he freed us from needing to fear death. We may entertain such fears, but they simply aren't necessary. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

And if Jesus through his death made it possible for us to be free from the fear of death, the greatest fear, the biggest thing we can't control, he certainly makes it possible for us to be free from fear of everything else we can't control (which pretty much covers all of human experience!). Simply put, we can be free — free to live.

Verse 18 begins with the word "for." It further explains the mercy and faithfulness — and therefore the ability — of our high priest. Like us, Jesus was "tempted" to reject God and God's word. The devil, as he tempted Eve, tempted Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11). Jesus is merciful, having been tempted just like us. Yet he didn't reject God, though he suffered greatly. He was faithful, having trusted God fully, unlike us. Therefore, he is able to help. This is not like so many offers of help which really turn out to be no help. He, then, is able to "come to the aid of those who are tempted." Who are those being tempted but all of us? We are being tempted in the same way Eve was and in the same way Jesus was. We are being tempted to reject God and his word. All of us give in. That's where Jesus comes in. He's able to help. First, as already noted, he helps us before God, having offered an effective sacrifice. Second, our knowledge that he has done so helps us again and again when fear grips us as we consider death and all the other uncontrollable aspects of life. He helps us by the reassurance that there's nothing to fear.

Jesus, then, disarmed the devil, who wants to keep us in bondage through fear of death and all its related fears. The chief weapon in the devil's arsenal was fear, and Jesus, through his death, took that away from him and showed us that there's nothing to fear. The devil will roar in an effort to intimidate us, but he is a lion without teeth.

Don't forget it

This Jesus — this God who became man, this warrior who freed us from fear, this high priest who mercifully and faithfully broke the link between sin and death — is our brother. He is many other things as well, but from this day on, never forget that he is your brother.

Questions

1. Picture Jesus walking into this room right now. When he looks at you, how does his face appear? What are your reactions to these images?
2. Picture Jesus with a look of pride on his face as he looks at you. Also picture him standing up, pointing to you and saying to everyone else, "Do you see him/her? That's my son/daughter!" What are your reactions to these images?

3. How do you think fear has influenced your life?

4. The death of Christ means that we do not need to fear death, the ultimate thing we can't control. What do you think that means for fear concerning all the other things we can't control?

5. Picture Jesus as your big brother who takes you by the hand to rescue you from danger. What's your reaction to this image?

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