JESUS OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST

Hebrews 2:1–18

Key Verse: 2:17

“For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.”

Have you ever met someone bi-racial? We all probably have. Half black, half white; or half Hispanic, half white; or half Asian, half white; or half Asian, half black. They’re called “halfies.” The generalization is that halfies are really cute and really smart. Sometimes halfies have an identity crisis, not knowing who they really are. In Hebrews we meet the most important “halfie” who ever lived. But he’s not really “half.” Jesus is fully God, and at the same time, fully human. In today’s passage we learn why Jesus, God the Son, also became fully human. It’s a unique explanation found nowhere else in the Bible. These aren’t just abstract ideas—who Jesus is applies to our real lives today. These truths about who Jesus is give us the greatest encouragement we could ever have. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

Read verses 1–4. This is the first of five warning passages in Hebrews (2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:12; 10:19–39; 12:14–29). Have you ever missed something really important because you weren’t paying the most careful attention? Maybe somebody was talking to you during class, or while you were driving, or maybe your mind was somewhere else while somebody was sharing their heart with you. It can be embarrassing, though usually we recover pretty well. But the further we drift away, the harder it can be to come back.

So what has this got to do with us? It touches on something deep. We may have heard about the Bible and Jesus all our lives, every Sunday, over and over. But it’s no guarantee that we have personal faith. We often see people who seemed to be Christians end up disillusioned and confused. Unbelief sets in. How does it happen? When we live out our day to day lives, we can start paying attention to other things or people. We can start following our own desires. We can start to forget how serious and how reliable the gospel message is. We can’t blame people or our situation if we start wandering spiritually. These verses tell us that it’s on us to pay the most careful attention to the message about Jesus. Read verse 1 again.

Next, in verse 5 the author comes back to this comparison of Jesus with angels (cf. 1:4–14). He says “the world to come” will be subjected to Jesus. When Jesus comes again, he will be Lord of all. To support this, the author quotes from a beautiful song, Psalm 8. In this psalm David ponders God’s awesome, majestic creation. He describes God’s glory in the heavens, including the moon and the stars, which God made with his own fingers and set in place. And then, in comparison to these profound wonders David asks God, “…what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?” (Ps8:4). Here, “mindful” means God remembers them. How amazing! Amidst all the wonders of his universe, God has a very special care for each human being. David goes on to describe humans at the beginning of creation: “…you have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet: all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea…” (Ps8:5–8; cf. Ge1:28). God created human beings in his own image and his plan was always to exalt them as rulers of his universe.

In verse 8b the author says, “Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them.” What’s he talking about? He’s talking about this cursed world. When sin came into the world, God’s intended creation order was broken. Human beings fell from their position as stewards of the world to a selfish state of personal survival and helplessness. In this fallen world we tend to be ruled by our sinful desires, by our situation, by money and our material possessions. God’s original intention for human beings seems to be lost. It’s bleak. But then the author goes on. Read verse 9. The author saw in these verses from Psalm 8 an astonishing prophecy of Jesus. Jesus is the “son of man” mentioned in verse 6. Son of Man is a title Jesus repeatedly used to refer to himself. It’s used most in the book of Ezekiel. God calls Ezekiel “son of man,” meaning he was a suffering servant. It’s also used in the book of Daniel to describe the Messiah whom God will someday exalt forever over all kingdoms, peoples and nations (Da7:13,14).

It tells us that Jesus fulfilled God’s original plan to exalt human beings over all things. How did he do it? It says here in verse 9 that he “suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.” Jesus the Son of Man is the true Suffering Servant (Mk10:45). He especially suffered death. He tasted it. But it wasn’t just a personal experience or tragedy. It says Jesus suffered it for everyone, including us. It tells us that his death was not the end, that there was a greater purpose in his suffering. Jesus who died also rose from the dead. Through Jesus’ death and resurrection anybody can receive the grace of God, his of forgiveness of sins. And through his death and resurrection we also experience the living hope of the kingdom of God. Through his death and resurrection we too will be exalted above all things; we get out of the power of the curse and of sin and death and share in his glorious kingdom as co-heirs with Christ (Ro8:17a). It may seem hard to believe, but God really wants to exalt each of us over all things through Jesus.

Read verse 10. The author first reminds us that God is the one “for whom and through whom everything exists,” emphasizing that God is above all (cf. 1Co15:27,28). But the author also repeats that God has a big plan. The world has been ravaged by sin and death and curse. But God’s overarching, master plan is to bring “many sons and daughters to glory.” He never gave up this original plan. It means many human beings, many believers—including us! Through faith in Jesus we become God’s sons and daughters (Jn1:12). Through faith in Jesus God promises he’s going to bring us to “glory,” meaning eternal glory in his kingdom. It’s another way of describing “the world to come” he mentioned in verse 5, the glory of being co-rulers of all things.

How did God accomplish his plan? God sent, it says in verse 10, “the pioneer of their salvation,” which is another reference to Jesus. Jesus is the “pioneer” of our salvation. In 12:2 the author repeats that Jesus is both “the pioneer and perfecter of faith.” In Greek “pioneer” means the leader or trailblazer who sets the example for everybody who follows. How did Jesus become our “pioneer”? Verse 10b says he became “perfect through what he suffered.” What did Jesus suffer? In verse 9 it says he suffered death. Jesus blazed a trail for us when he died on the cross. Philippians 2:8 says, “And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” In Hebrews 5:8,9 the author describes it: “Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him…” It’s fascinating that Jesus “learned obedience from what he suffered.” Jesus, our pioneer, our trailblazer, showed us through personal example how to suffer to take our own cross, to obey God’s will. Everybody likes grace and love and compassion. But we can’t take Jesus’ love and grace and compassion without also following his example and taking our own cross of suffering to obey God. Through sharing in his sufferings, we will also share in his glory (Ro8:17b). There’s no other way.

But what the author really wants to say here comes next. Read verse 11. Jesus is holy not only because he’s without sin (4:15; cf. 1Pe2:22; 1Jn3:5), but also because of his suffering to obey God. As we truly follow him, we share in his holiness. Through this common suffering to obey God we become bonded with Jesus like the same family members, like dear brothers and sisters. It’s like the show “Band of Brothers”—guys who became so close through suffering the same experiences of battle in war. Only when we suffer like Jesus to obey God do we get really close to him. Maybe this is why some people would rather keep their distance?

It says in verse 11 that Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters. Why would he be ashamed? There could be many reasons, but mainly it’s because of our sins. We all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Ro3:23a). We don’t come anywhere close to measuring up to God’s standards. In God’s sight our sinful nature makes us behave badly. When people have bad characters and behave badly we become ashamed of them. Likewise, in our sin it’s hard *not* to be ashamed of us. But Jesus is not ashamed of us. Why? Because he made us holy. We can’t make ourselves holy, but Jesus did. How did he make us holy? Jesus made us holy through sacrificing his own body (10:10, 14). Jesus made us holy through his suffering and shedding his own blood (13:12). Jesus is not ashamed of us because he took on our full humanity and became just like us, he suffered just like us, to make us holy. People can be ashamed of us, but worse than that, we can be ashamed of ourselves. Shame is like a deep stain on our souls. We all need to experience deeply that Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters.

It’s hard to believe, so in verses 12–13 the author adds quotes from Scripture to prove it to us. Even though Jesus is sinless and holy and exalted above all, he calls us his family, his dear brothers and sisters. He doesn’t treat us as underlings or as those always less than him, or as mere coworkers; he treats us as his dear brothers and sisters, as his equals. It’s mind-blowing! It’s amazing grace! It tells us that there’s no hierarchy in Jesus. In this world there’s all kinds of levels and status, but in Jesus there’s no hierarchy.

Ultimately, why did Jesus become like us? Read verses 14,15. Jesus became like us to break the devil’s hold on us. The Bible says that devil holds people all their lives as his slaves. How? By holding the power of death over us. We may think we’re doing well in life, but then we encounter death and the devil gets us. He makes us feel meaningless and afraid. When we’re afraid, we’re ready to compromise, to give in. With the power of death the devil gets us to commit sin and stay enslaved to him. Being enslaved one’s entire life, if we really think about it, is so miserable. It’s demeaning. It’s a total trap, and there’s no way out. But Jesus became flesh and shared our humanity to break the power of the devil over us. How did he do it? Not only did Jesus die, but also Jesus rose again. Through his resurrection Jesus crushed the head of Satan (Ge3:15). Through his resurrection Jesus destroyed death (2Ti1:10). Through his resurrection Jesus swallowed up death in victory (1Co15:54–57; cf. Isa25:8; Hos13:14). Through faith in Jesus we no longer live in the fear of death; we’re set free! We break free from living in slavery to fear and to our sinful nature. Through faith in Jesus we’re assured of final victory.

Read verse 17. This tells us even more about why Jesus became like us. It was so that he might make atonement for our sins. Atonement implies that we have a broken relationship with God. God is angry with us and we’re angry at God, due to our sins. But through his death on a cross Jesus turned God’s wrath away from us, and he melted our anger and hatred toward God. Through his death on a cross Jesus reunites us with our heavenly Father in an inseparable love relationship (Ro8:37).

Jesus also became like us so that he might be our merciful and faithful high priest. This is a major theme in Hebrews. It suggests that there are many kinds of high priests, but most are not merciful or faithful. Why not? Basically because they can’t relate to us. They don’t really understand us. They don’t know what we’re going through. They’re self-righteous and quick to despise us for our struggles, shortcomings, weaknesses and sins. Frankly they’re pretty intolerant. But Jesus is so merciful and faithful to us because he was fully human in every way. Verse 18 says he himself suffered when he was tempted. He knows what it’s like to be tempted. He gets us. He identifies with us. He’s our true friend. And as our high priest, he always lives to pray for us (7:25). Some people think being spiritual is no longer being human. But that’s not really Biblical. Jesus our Lord was made like us, “fully human in every way.” God doesn’t despise us for our humanity; our humanity is his glory. Because Jesus is our high priest who is merciful and faithful, we can always come to him, no matter what.

Read verse 17 again. Through this Hebrews study may we really come to Jesus our high priest and experience the grace and the glory he wants to give us.