

# Being Human

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## **Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-9**

*The book of Hebrews forcefully argues for the superiority of Jesus and all that is associated with him. Jesus is superior to angels and to Moses and to the levitical priests. Jesus offers a superior sacrifice under a superior covenant and then enters a superior sanctuary. But in the midst all this superiority, there is another note, a note that is struck again and again. Jesus is like us: a human being.*

Long ago, in many ways — a little here, a little there — God spoke to our ancestors by the prophets. But in these last days he spoke to us by a son, whom he appointed heir of everything, and through whom he made the worlds. The radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of God's being, the one who carries everything along by his powerful word, the one who made a purification for sins — he sat down at the right hand of the exalted Majesty, as far superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

You see, God did not put the coming world in subjection to angels . . . But someone has testified somewhere,

*What is a person, that you should remember,  
or a human being, that you should keep a watchful eye?  
Though they were made lower than the angels for a little while,  
you crowned human beings with glory and honor,  
putting everything in subjection under their feet.*

When he put everything in subjection to them, God left nothing outside their control.

For now we don't see everything in subjection to them. But we do see the one who was made lower than the angels for a little while, so that by the grace of God he could taste death for everyone — Jesus, who is crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death.

## **Children's Story**

Once upon a time, on a steep river bank, there was a tree. It was young. And it was small.

Day after day went by. The river flowed to the ocean. The tree was not so young any more. But it was still small – so small that you might have called it a bush instead of a tree.

Year after year went by. The river flowed to the ocean. The tree was getting old by now. But it was still small – so small that, unless you knew better, you might never have called it a tree.

Then there was a flood. Water climbed higher and higher up the river bank. It started to pull and tug at the roots of the tree.

Those roots were all tied up in a tight ball. No wonder the tree had never grown up!

By the time the floodwaters had finished pulling and tugging, those roots were unknotted. And they stretched out in every direction into abundant, moist soil.

The next spring, the strangest thing began to happen. The tree that looked like a bush stretched its branches up toward the sky. It reached for the sun. And it grew and grew.

It grew so big that you would never have called it anything but a tree, which was all it was ever meant to be.

## Sermon

From time to time on Sunday mornings we say the Nicene Creed together. We confess *God, the Father almighty*, who made heaven and earth, who made everything there is, whether we can see it or not. We confess *God the Holy Spirit*, who proceeds from God the Father and from God the Son, who is the source of life, including the life that animates the holy catholic and apostolic church. And, of course, we confess *God the Son*, our Lord Jesus Christ, who, at the center of time by the action of the Holy Spirit and the hospitality of the virgin Mary, became a human being.

God the Son became a human being. That's usually depicted as an act of condescension, as a humiliation. And I suppose it was: God, who is above all, coming down as low as dust and ashes. And yet there's more to it than that, isn't there? After all, when God made human beings, they were called "very good" (Genesis 1:31). Whether the stress is on "dust and ashes" or on "very good," the question is: Why did God the Son become a human being?

**That's a question with many answers.** One main answer runs like this: God the Son became a human being in order to save human beings from the mess we got ourselves into. That's the answer that lays the foundation for Christian theology and doctrine. That's the answer that locates Jesus center stage in the drama of history.

After that main answer, many more questions spring up. What sort of mess did we get ourselves into? How did we get ourselves into that mess? Can't we get out of the mess ourselves? Did God the Son have to become a human being? Couldn't there have been a simple snap of the divine fingers? Couldn't God have rebooted the operating system? (There had to be a way for God to put things right without getting mixed up with all the dust and ashes.) All sorts of questions! The church has been asking and answering those questions for ages. But I want to ask a question that comes a little bit later.

**What did Jesus have in mind for us when he rescued us?** Part of the answer to that question, at least, is suggested by the use of Psalm 8 in Hebrews 2. A primary concern of the letter to the Hebrews is to argue for the superiority of Jesus. First, that Jesus is superior to angels. He was made "lower than the angels," Hebrews 2 says, only "for a little while." (The ancient Greek translation of the psalm is used to make the point.) But there's more to Psalm 8 than the relation of human beings to heavenly beings. And, in fact, Hebrews 2 quotes a significant portion of the Psalm (from the Greek translation):

*What is a person, that you should remember,  
or a human being, that you should keep a watchful eye?  
Though they were made lower than the angels for a little while,  
you crowned human beings with glory and honor,  
putting everything in subjection under their feet* (Hebrews 2:6-8; Psalm 8:4-6).

So, according to the Psalm, there is a "glory and honor" to being human, a glory and honor that Jesus would have us embrace, a glory and honor that Jesus would have us embody.

You see, the Christian tradition has long recognized a multi-layered significance to Jesus' becoming human, a significance beyond his rescuing us from the mess we're in. His being human, his engaging in human activities, his being in human places – all of it has a sanctifying effect, all of it makes what is commonly, ordinarily human somehow holy.

It is said that Jesus' presence at the wedding in Cana honored and affirmed human marriage (cf. the liturgy for Christian marriage in the *Psalter Hymnal* of the Christian Reformed Church). It is also said that Jesus' burial sanctified the grave for us (cf. the liturgy for Holy Communion in the *Psalter Hymnal* of the Christian Reformed Church). No doubt his birth sanctified the pushing and sweating of child-bearing. And his labors with wood and stone put a seal of holiness on hard work.

What did Jesus have in mind for us when he rescued us? That we would be human, that we would be fully human, with all that that implies. His becoming human reaffirmed the holy goodness of being human.

**So, what does it mean to be human?** That's another big question! I'll attempt only a very partial answer. Let's first listen to what Psalm 8 and the creation stories have to say:

*You made human beings a little lower than heavenly beings  
and crowned them with glory and honor.*

*You made them rulers over the works of your hands;  
you put everything under their feet (Psalm 8:5-6).*

*Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (Genesis 1:26).*

*The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it (Genesis 2:15).*

These texts add up at least to this: Human beings are somehow God's representatives on the earth – God, who is the giver of life; God, who directs all things toward the fulfilment of their purpose. Human beings are somehow God's representatives on the earth. How so? Human beings are caretakers and stewards of a world that belongs to God. It's not our world. It's not our land or our water or our air. Our world belongs to God, every corner, every creature. We represent God in the world by looking after the world.

In our evangelical conceptions, we see Jesus returning one day as our judge. He will judge us, we are sure, according to our faith. Did we have faith? Did we live our faith? Did we express our faith – in prayer, in good deeds? Did we lead others to faith? Were we faithful to the church? Were we faithful to husband or wife? Were we honest? Were we fair? Were we generous?

All of these are important questions. But there's more, isn't there? Jesus did not rescue us so we can be good Christians. He did not rescue us so we can sing hymns, read the Bible, and pray for missionaries. He rescued us so we can be human, so we can be decent human beings, so we can be in approximation what Jesus himself was in perfection. Jesus was not a Christian. But he was (and is) human. Our being Christian is a means for us one day to become as fully human as Jesus and, along the way, to be decent human beings.

Now this is not irreligious. Decent human beings do honor and glorify God. Decent human beings do give thanks to their maker. Decent human beings do listen to God, sing to God, pray to God. And Jesus Christ rescues us and gives us faith to be that kind of people. But there's more to being decent human beings than that.

I began my undergraduate work at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, an engineering school in central Massachusetts. The curriculum at WPI was known as *The Plan*. The focus was on math, science, and engineering courses. The goal was to make us engineers, after all. But there was another piece to the curriculum. All of us were required to complete what was called a *Humanities Sufficiency*. Apparently it was not enough for us to be engineers. At least in some sufficient amount, we needed to be human beings, too! Just so, it's not enough for us to be good Christians who sing God's praises. There is also for us the more basic work of being decent human beings.

Among other things, decent human beings work to provide for themselves, for their families, and for their communities. Decent human beings love their children and give them a good upbringing. Decent human beings care about the homeless. They offer emergency help, and they work to change the "system." Decent human beings don't treat the oceans as open sewers. Decent human beings don't turn the air into an unnatural chemical stew. Decent human beings don't bury nuclear waste as if the tomorrow of 1000 or 50,000 years from now will never come. Decent human beings treat animals well and don't turn a blind eye to species going extinct, especially when it's our fault. Decent human beings are all that and more.

And so, decent human beings will be ready. Ready when the Lord returns to see what we've done while we've been house-sitting on his good earth. Ready when the Lord returns to see how we have looked after land, water, and air. Ready when the Lord returns to see how we have looked after plants and animals. Ready when the Lord returns to see how we have looked after one another.

To be human, truly human, is to be very good in God's eyes. It may have been a humiliation for God the Son to become human – to abandon the glories of heaven for the fluid and filth of human birth and life and death, to lose the limitless possibilities of divinity within the narrow restrictions of human muscle and mind, to trade away purity and perfection to become Sin itself, the embodiment of every human impurity and imperfection, in order to rescue us from the mess by being swallowed by the mess.

It may have been a humiliation for God the Son to become human. But by becoming human, Jesus exalted us. He returned to humanity its lost glory and honor. And he put us on the path of becoming, ourselves, fully human – which starts with our being decent human beings here and now.

May God help us.