

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 27, 2014**

## **OVERCOMING THE FEAR OF DEATH**

**Hebrews 2:5-18**

### **INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE READING**

The Letter to the Hebrews is a repository of spiritual riches. Its exhortations to persevere in the Christian faith are as relevant today as ever. Hebrews was written to a group of 1<sup>st</sup>-century Hebrew (Jewish) Christians who were in danger of giving up on following Christ. Facing fierce opposition, ridicule, discrimination, and even persecution from both Romans and Jews, many of these Jewish Christians were tempted to throw in the towel, renounce their faith in Christ, and go back to Judaism. The Letter to the Hebrews sends a loud, clear, and persuasive message to persevere in the faith, to hold fast to the hope we have in Christ, to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, to stand firm in the faith, and not to turn away from following Him. This call to persevere in faithfulness to our Savior is one that is needed in every generation, including ours.

The overarching, magnificent theme of Hebrews – I am not exaggerating or engaging in hyperbole at all in using the word “magnificent”; it really *is* magnificent – is the *superiority* of Jesus Christ, the final and absolute *supremacy* and *sufficiency* of Jesus Christ over everyone and everything that came before, and over everyone and everything else that will ever come down the pike. If you read through the Letter to the Hebrews, you will see that it reads more like a sermon – a pretty long one – than a letter. The identity of the human author is hidden from us. We don’t know for sure who it was. What we do know is that its true author is the Holy Spirit, who inspired the unnamed human author to compose this magnificent message laying out the supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ and its implications for the lives of His followers. In successive waves, the writer of Hebrews shows:

1. That Christ is superior to the angels who serve God faithfully and unceasingly (Hebrews 1:1-2:18);
2. That Christ is greater than Moses, the revered liberator and leader of the nation of Israel (3:1-4:13);
3. That the priesthood of Jesus, His priestly ministry of Jesus on our behalf, is superior to the Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament (4:14-7:28);
4. That the new covenant Jesus instituted through His life, death, and resurrection is superior to the old covenant rooted in the law and all its requirements (8:1-9:10);
5. That the sacrifice Jesus offered on our behalf – the sacrifice of His own life on the cross as our substitute, dying in our place – is not only superior to the sacrifices offered under the provisions of the Old Testament law, but is absolutely sufficient – a sacrifice offered once for all, never to be repeated, to pay for all our sins, past, present, and future (9:11-10:18);
6. That the way of faith in Christ, the life of following Him by faith, regardless of the hardships and obstacles one may encounter as a result of following Him faithfully, is better than all the alternatives put together, and is the only way to “run ... the race

marked out for us” (12:1) and experience the fullness of God’s blessings in this life and in eternity (10:19-13:25).

Because of the finality and supremacy of Christ, because of the sufficiency of His saving work for us, because He is sovereign, because He is Lord and there is no other, to turn back from following Him would be a tragic mistake. It would be a folly of monumental proportions. So, if you should find yourself in a hard place or you get in trouble because of your faith, don’t give up. Don’t give in. Don’t go along to get along. If you are pressured or tempted to turn away from following Christ, to compromise or renounce your faith, don’t do it. Don’t turn away. Stand firm in your faith. As Paul says at the close of his dissertation on the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, “Let nothing move you” from your allegiance and devotion to Christ (15:58). Stay true to the Lord Jesus Christ, because He is *superior*. Period. Because He is *supreme*. Totally. Because He is *sufficient*. Completely. Because He is *Lord*. And we are more than conquerors through Him and His unconquerable love for us. Not even all the troubles and hardships and persecutions and famines and nakedness and dangers and weapons of war in the world put together can ever separate us from His inexhaustible love and redeeming power.

This last part, of course, is taken from Romans 8 (verses 35-39). But all of it taken together is the heart of the message of the Letter to the Hebrews, to Christians in every century, in every culture, in every place and time, including ours, who must be reminded that Jesus is not merely one of many ways to God, but rather that He is, by God’s own decree and provision, the only way. He is the only way to eternal life. Jesus is the final and perfect revelation of God. He is the final, complete, and perfect sacrifice for sins. He is the perfect high priest, uniquely qualified to stand before God the Father on our behalf. And He is all we need. Everything we need for salvation and life is ours in and through Christ. In the words of Tullian Tchvidjian, Jesus plus nothing equals everything. JESUS + NOTHING = EVERYTHING.

I know this is a long introduction to today’s Scripture reading from Hebrews 2. I have taken this time because I want you to see these verses we are about to read in the context of their place in the big picture of the message of the letter as a whole. Today’s Scripture passage is part of the author’s explanation of the superiority of Jesus to the angels, which, as you will see, actually involved Jesus being made, for a time, in His incarnation, “a little lower than the angels ... so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone” in order to bring “many sons (and daughters) to glory” (2:9-10). You will see that His death on the cross was not an accident or a stroke of “bad luck” but the very purpose of His incarnation.

So, let’s get to it. Let’s give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word from Hebrews 2:5-18.

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## **WHY JESUS CAME**

I want to zoom in this morning on what these verses tell us about the reason(s) why the Son of God became a man, why Jesus took on our flesh and blood and shared in our humanity, becoming like us in every way, except that He was without sin (4:15). The first and primary reason He did so was, as we already noted in verse 9, “so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone.” To “taste death,” as it says here, is not like having a sip of a certain wine to see if you like its taste. It is not like tasting a sauce you are preparing for a specific meal to see if you have just the right proportion of each ingredient. It is not like that at all. When the author of this letter speaks of Jesus “tast(ing) death for everyone,” he means that Jesus fully experienced the fullness of death’s fury and power in His suffering and death on the cross for us. Why did Jesus come? So that by the grace of God – it is all by grace, an act of sheer grace – He might take our sins upon Himself and die on the cross for us. In our place.

That is why Jesus came. He came to die. In his commentary on this passage, F. F. Bruce writes that our salvation was procured for us by Jesus who, by means of His suffering and death, “blazed the trail of salvation” for us, in order to bring us to glory. The perfect Son of God, he writes, became His people’s perfect Savior, opening up our way to God once and for all. The *archegon* (2:10) – the trailblazer, the pioneer, the author or founder of our salvation – willingly chose to suffer and die for us. His death was the purpose of His incarnation.

This truth is reinforced in verse 14, where the death of Jesus is again identified as the reason for His coming to live among us as a man. He shared in our humanity, it says, “so that by His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is, the devil.” The purpose of Jesus’ coming was to die – to die for us, voluntarily and vicariously (as our substitute), to give His life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins and to reconcile us to God. To do for us what we could never do for ourselves. That is why Jesus gave His life for us.

But there is more to it. Maybe a good way to say it is that there are more layers to it. The Scripture tells us here that the purpose of Jesus’ death – at least in part – was to deal a death blow to the power of the devil, who uses death or the fear of it to keep people in his stranglehold. In His death and resurrection from the dead on the third day, Jesus dealt a death blow to death itself, and by absorbing the full sting of death for us, He took the ultimate sting out of death.

## **THE PARADOX OF JESUS’ DEATH**

F. F. Bruce points out the enormous paradox of Jesus’ death: “If ever death had appeared to be triumphant, it was when Jesus of Nazareth, disowned by His nation” – rejected by the world He came to save – “abandoned by His disciples, executed by the might of imperial Rome, breathed His last on the cross .... If ever a cause was lost, it was His; if ever the powers of evil were victorious, it was then. And yet –” following His resurrection from the dead and His ascension to heaven, the same followers who had abandoned Him at His arrest would “exultingly proclaim the crucified Jesus to be the conqueror of death” and would assert “that by dying He had reduced the erstwhile lord of death to impotence .... This sudden

change from disillusionment to triumph can only be explained” by the message they fearlessly declared – “that their Master rose from the dead and imparted to them the power of His risen life.”

“Jesus,” Bruce continues, “broke the devil’s grip on His people” – on us – “when in death He became the death of death. Only by becoming man could the Son of God conquer death, which (we) without Him could never have done. Until His conquest of death, death seemed to have the last word.” Though the resurrection of Christ is not explicitly mentioned in this passage of Scripture, it is, says Bruce, “implied none the less. If death had had the last word with (Jesus) too, how would anyone have supposed that through death He had disabled the prince of death?”

Elsewhere in the New Testament, in 1 John 3:8, we are told that “the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.” To do so, it was necessary for Him not only to die but to rise again from the dead. If Jesus is still dead, if He did not rise again from the dead, the devil wins. But death did not have the last word with Jesus. And because Jesus won the victory over death by means of His own death and resurrection, death will not have the last word with any of us, if our hearts are settled in Christ and trusting in Him.

Where it says (verse 14) that by His death Jesus would “destroy the one who holds the power of death – that is, the devil,” the word translated “destroy” (*katargeo*) means “to render inoperative or ineffective.” The devil, we know, has not yet been completely destroyed. He is still very much active in the world today. He continues, as it says in 1 Peter 5:8, to prowl around like a roaring lion looking for someone to terrorize and devour. The devil is not yet destroyed. But He is a defeated enemy. His final doom is assured. What the devil thought to be his ultimate triumph, when the Son of God was put to death on a Roman cross, turned out to be the devil’s worst nightmare. By means of His death and resurrection, Jesus nullified the power of the devil to hold people hostage to death and fear.

### **THE STING OF DEATH**

There is no doubt about it: Death still stings. We feel the sting of death whenever a loved one dies or a tragedy results in a loss of life. A South Korean ferry sinks and more than 200 lives are lost. A Malaysian airliner with more than 200 people aboard disappears somewhere into the ocean. A Christian doctor serving at a hospital in Afghanistan and two visiting Americans, father and son, are shot to death by an Afghan security guard. Cancer claims the life of a family member or close friend. Children get caught in the crossfire of gun violence. Death still stings.

And yet, for believers in Christ, the ultimate sting of death has been removed. Yes, we must still die. Until Jesus returns, death remains the destiny of every person (Ecclesiastes 7:2). But we know – this is more than just a wishful hope, it is a settled confidence and certainty in our hearts – that death is not the end. Death does not have the last word. It is not the end of the story. We know it because Jesus died and rose again from the dead. We have God’s promise of life eternal with Him on the other side of death. And God always keeps His promises.

Jesus came to die. He came to die for us. He took on our flesh and blood and identified with us in our humanness. By the grace of God, He dealt a death blow to death itself in His sufferings, death, and resurrection from the dead. He dealt a death blow not only to death, but to the devil, the prince of darkness, as well. The devil remains a formidable foe to be taken seriously. But he does not have the power he wants you to believe he has. His ultimate fate is sealed. The atoning death and bodily resurrection of Jesus guarantee it.

### **THE FEAR OF DEATH**

I wish I had enough time to delve into one more reason the author of Hebrews gives for the incarnation. It is right there in verse 15, where he says that Jesus came to die and, through His death, to “free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.” The fear of death can tie you up and hold you hostage. It can enslave you. It can imprison you. It can paralyze you. But Jesus, in taking our sin upon Himself and absorbing the sting of God’s righteous wrath in our place, took the sting out of death. For all who trust in Him, He took the fear out of death, too, since we know that our Savior is stronger than death. Because He lives, we can face tomorrow. Because He lives, all fear is gone. Do you believe it?

Are you held hostage by fear of death today? By any kind of fear? Let me leave you with the testimony of South African bishop and Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu. When he came under scrutiny by the South African government during the days of apartheid, he said: “There is nothing the government can do to me that will stop me from being involved in what I believe God wants me to do. I do not do it because I like doing it. I do it because I am under what I believe to be the influence of God’s hand. I cannot help it. When I see injustice, I cannot keep quiet, for, as Jeremiah says, when I try to keep quiet, God’s Word burns like a fire in my breast.

“But what is it that they can ultimately do? The most awful thing they can do is to kill me, and death is not the worst thing that could happen to a Christian.”

Death is not the worst thing that could ever happen to you or me. Because death does not have the last word, Jesus does. Jesus defeated death by His death and resurrection. Give your fear of death, or whatever fears you may be harboring in your heart, to Jesus. And live fearlessly, live courageously, live dangerously by faith, trusting at every moment in the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of the Lord Jesus Christ. In all things. For all things.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.