

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 7, 2008**

A LITTLE LOWER THAN THE ANGELS

Hebrews 2:5-18

INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE

I think I mentioned at our Thanksgiving Service that I love the Letter to the Hebrews with its message of the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ. I love *all* of God's Word – let me be clear about that. But I understand some parts of the Bible better than others. That is true for all of us. For me, I find the Letter to the Hebrews particularly rich in theological depth and inspiring in its call to endurance in faith as followers of Jesus Christ. Not only that, its exaltation of Christ – its convincing presentation of His supremacy and sufficiency – prompts in me a response of grateful worship and awe. I hope that is true for you as well.

Interestingly, we don't know who the human author of this letter was. There have been a number of suggestions over the centuries – such as Paul or Barnabas or Luke or Apollos or someone else. But in the end, it is probably best to agree with Origen, the 3rd century church father, who said: "Who actually wrote the epistle, only God knows." And that is OK, since we know that God is behind it and that God inspired its human author to write His infallible, unerring Word.

Let's look together at God's Word, then, from Hebrews 2:5-18 (page 846 in the pew Bibles). In this passage we are given insight into the meaning and purpose of the incarnation of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, which we celebrate once again this Christmas season. Hear the Word of God.

Leith Anderson is the pastor of a church in Minneapolis and also serves as president of the National Association of Evangelicals, of which we in the EPC are a part. Anderson tells of an experience he had while in the Philippines several years ago. He was in Manila, and he was taken, of all places, to the Manila garbage dump. What he saw there, he said, was beyond belief. Tens of thousands of people actually make their homes on that dump site. They have constructed shacks out of the things other people have thrown away. And they send their children out every morning to scavenge for food out of other people's garbage, so they can have family meals. There are people who have been born and grown up right there on the garbage dump. That is the world as they know it. They have had their families, their children, their shacks, their garbage to eat, finished out their lives, and died there without ever going anywhere else, even in the city of Manila. Can you believe that?

But they are not alone. There are others who also live on the garbage dump. They are missionaries. They are Christians who have heard the call of God to leave their own country – America – and to take the message of Christ's saving love to people who would

otherwise never hear it. Isn't that amazing? That people would leave what we have here in America to go and live on a garbage dump?

It *is* amazing. It is astounding. But not as amazing or astounding as the journey the Son of God made from heaven to earth. Most of us are so familiar with the Christmas story that we have domesticated it. We have sanitized it. We have done it, in part, because the greatness and glory of life in heaven – and the greatness and glory of God the Son in heaven – are beyond our ability to understand or imagine. Way beyond. But Jesus made the journey from heaven to earth, a distance far greater, in more ways than one, than the distance from a life of abundance in America to the garbage dump of Manila. And, even more than those missionaries who went to Manila, Jesus knew what He was doing. He knew the reason for which He came. He understood His mission. He knew what the sacrifice would be. He came from heaven to earth on a mission to save His people from their sins. (Adapted from Leith Anderson, “A God-s-Eye View of Christmas.”)

As I said, this passage in Hebrews 2 gives us valuable insight into the incarnation of the Lord Jesus and its purpose(s). Using the language of David from Psalm 8, the author of Hebrews says that Jesus was “made a little lower than the angels” (2:9, NIV). Other translations say that “for a little while (He) was made lower than the angels” (ESV). Whichever is the better translation, the writer is talking about the incarnation of God the Son. It is another way of saying what we read in John 1:14, where John says: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The very Son of God took on our flesh and blood and shared in our humanity (Hebrews 2:14). He who was fully God became fully man. He set aside the glories of heaven and came to live among us. That is the unmistakable message of Christmas: The Son of God, who is greater than the angels and is worshipped by the angels in heaven, became for a little while lower than the angels when He took on our flesh and blood, and was born of Mary in a stable in Bethlehem.

Lower than the angels, yes. But only for “a little while.” Having completed the mission of the incarnation, it says in verse 9, He is “now crowned with glory and honor.” Jesus voluntarily experienced the humiliation of our humanness from His birth in Bethlehem to His death on the cross. But having won the victory over sin and death in His death for us and His resurrection from the dead, He has been exalted “to the highest place” (Philippians 2:9). He has been crowned with glory and honor in heaven. And we eagerly await the day when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10-11). Amen? Lord, let it be so!

But let's be careful not to skip over the purpose for which Jesus – the eternal Son of God – was made lower than the angels and became fully man. There are at least six reasons given for the incarnation in these verses in Hebrews 2. We'll look at the first three this morning and come back to the remaining three next Sunday.

1. TO EXPERIENCE DEATH IN OUR PLACE

First, it says in verse 9 that Jesus came to “taste death for everyone.” Very simply, this means that the purpose of Jesus' birth at Christmas was to die. That was the purpose for

which He came. His death was purposeful. It was vicarious, which is to say, He took our place. He offered Himself as a substitute for you and me, bearing our sins in His body on the cross (1 Peter 2:24).

We still experience death, it is true. But Jesus has taken the sting out of death by taking on Himself the judgment of God upon our sins. The punishment we deserve He took in our place. This is the first and foremost reason for the incarnation: He who is above angels in rank and authority and glory became for a little while lower than the angels to suffer death for us. And we must not fail to see that His sacrifice for us on the cross is an expression, a visible manifestation, of the grace of God. It was grace – free, unmerited favor and kindness – that prompted God to send His Son into the world to suffer and die for us. What we could never deserve – the gift of salvation – we received. What we did deserve – spiritual death and separation from God – we did not receive. As John MacArthur says, “That is grace. And what prompts grace? Love.” So, the coming of Jesus into the world was an expression of God’s love and grace.

2. TO BRING MANY CHILDREN TO GLORY

Second, it says in verse 10 that the purpose of the incarnation was to “(bring) many sons to glory.” Jesus is described in verse 10 as the *archegos* of our salvation. The word *archegos* means “author” or “founder” or “pioneer.” The same word is used in Hebrews 12:2, where Jesus is described as the “author (*archegos*) and perfecter of our faith.” Like Lewis and Clark and other pioneers who opened up the American West, Jesus blazed the trail of salvation for us by taking our flesh and blood upon Himself, in order to bring many sons (and daughters) to glory. The perfect Son of God – how could there be any imperfection in Him since He was fully God? – became the perfect Savior of His people, opening the way for them (for us!) to be reconciled to God and rightly related to Him. In order to become our perfect Savior, Jesus had to endure suffering and death. Listen to the words of John MacArthur: “(Jesus) came to die because His death, and only His death, could accomplish man’s salvation. Those tiny hands fashioned by the Holy Spirit in Mary’s womb were made to take two great nails. Those little feet were made to climb a hill and be nailed to a cross. That sacred head was made to wear a crown of thorns, and that tender body wrapped in swaddling clothes was made to be pierced by a spear. For this Christ came to earth. His death was the furthest thing from an accident. And, despite the malignant evil that crucified Him, His death was the furthest thing from a tragedy. It was God’s ultimate plan for His Son and His ultimate gift for mankind.”

As the author or pioneer of our salvation, Jesus was made “perfect through suffering” (2:10). In a moral sense, Jesus has always been perfect. There is no sin in Him. In coming to save us, He became like us in every way (2:17) – except that He was and is without sin. For Jesus to be made perfect, then, does not suggest that there is some kind of moral failing or deficiency in Him. What it means in this context is that Jesus became fully qualified by virtue of His experience of suffering to be the author of our salvation. His experience of suffering and death was necessary to accomplish our salvation and to bring many sons and daughters to glory. Which is the reason He came.

3. TO SHOW HIS SOLIDARITY WITH US

A third reason Jesus was made lower than the angels in the incarnation was to demonstrate His solidarity with those He came to save. Don't you think it is remarkable – maybe astounding is a better word – that Jesus is not ashamed to call us His brothers, as it says in verses 11 and 12? Don't let the familiarity of the gospel – if it is familiar to you – rock you to sleep. Wake up and let this truth take hold in your heart: The eternal Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, the promised Messiah, the Lamb of God who came to take away the sin of the world, the perfect and all-sufficient Savior – the One who is all of this and more than human language can express – is not ashamed to call us His brothers and sisters. (I know the text doesn't say "sisters," but I am confident the word "brothers" is used here in an inclusive way to apply to both men and women, and boys and girls as well.)

In *The Message* it says that Jesus doesn't hesitate to treat us – and all who believe in Him – as family. Then in verse 13, where a quote from Isaiah 8:18 is applied to Jesus, He speaks of us as "the children God has given me." Let me say it again: The eternal Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, the promised Messiah, the Passover Lamb of God who causes the judgment of God to pass over us, our perfect and all-sufficient Savior, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords is willing to identify with us in all our fallenness and futility. He was willing to be made lower than the angels for a season to show His solidarity with us, His communion with us. Why? Not because we are worthy. Not because we deserve it. Not because we measure up to the standard of His perfection and glory. But simply because of His love. His love for you and me.

Back in the days of Pope John XXIII (which takes us back about 50 years), on the day after Christmas one year, the pope visited one of Rome's worst prisons. It was the first time in almost a century that a pope had gone to a prison. When he greeted the prisoners, the pope said: "You could not come to me, so I have come to you."

Brothers and sisters, that is what Jesus has done for us. We could not go to Him, so He came to us. There is more in this passage, and we will come back to explore it more next Sunday. But I want you to rejoice in your hearts today that the Son of God, whom the angels in heaven worship and adore, was made for a little while lower than the angels in His incarnation in order to:

- Experience death in our place as an expression of His grace
- Bring many sons and daughters to glory as the Pioneer of our salvation
- Demonstrate His solidarity with us and include us – and all who trust in Him for salvation – in His family.

The Gospel of John says it so powerfully: "He came to His own, but His own did not receive Him. Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:11-12). Children of *God*. Members of God's family.

Aren't these reasons to rejoice? You bet they are! Come back to discover more reasons next Sunday. Lord, let it be so in us, to the praise and glory of Your name. Amen.