

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 14, 2008**

**A LITTLE LOWER THAN THE ANGELS
PART 2**

Hebrews 2:9-18

INTRODUCTION

In case you missed it last Sunday, I want to begin today by reviewing what I said last week about Jesus, and the reasons the eternal Son of God, He who is far above the angels of heaven in rank and authority and glory, and who is rightly worshipped and exalted by the angels, was for a little while made lower than the angels when He took on our flesh and blood and dwelt among us in His first advent. Here are the reasons for His incarnation that we saw last Sunday.

1. Jesus came, as it says in Hebrews 2:9, to “taste death” for us. The purpose of Jesus’ birth at Christmas was to die in our place, to bear our sins in His body on the cross. And His sacrificial death for us is an expression of God’s amazing grace.
2. As it says in the next verse (verse 10), the reason Jesus came and gave His life as a sacrifice for us on the cross, was to bring many sons (and daughters) to glory. Jesus pioneered the way of salvation for us. By taking our flesh and blood upon Himself and becoming like us in every way – except that He was without sin – and undergoing suffering and death in our place, Jesus blazed the trail of salvation for us. His experience of suffering and death was necessary to accomplish our salvation and to bring many sons and daughters to glory. Which is why He came.
3. Jesus was made lower than the angels in His incarnation in order to show His solidarity with us. As it says in verses 11-13, Jesus – the eternal Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, the Savior of the world, the King of kings and Lord of lords – is not ashamed to call us His brothers and sisters. He is willing to identify with us, and to call us and all who trust in Him for salvation “family.” Not because of any merit or achievement on our part, but because of His sovereign love.

That was last week. Today, as we continue to explore this passage in Hebrews 2, I invite you to consider three more reasons for Christmas, three more reasons Jesus was made lower than the angels.

1. TO DESTROY THE DEVIL

First, He came to destroy the devil and to liberate us from the fear of death. Isn’t that good news? That is what it says in verses 14 and 15: “Since the children (that is us) have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity so that by His death He might destroy

the one who has the power of death – that is, the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”

Why did Jesus come? Listen to 1 John 3:8: “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.”

Some people today take Satan – the devil – too seriously. And some people don’t take him seriously enough. Maybe you recall what C. S. Lewis wrote in *The Screwtape Letters*: “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They (the devils) are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist (a person who does not believe in the existence of spiritual beings at all) or a magician with the same delight.”

Here in Hebrews 2 it is not “devils” plural but “the devil” – Satan, our chief adversary, the prince of devils – that the Bible has in view. And the Bible makes no bones about the fact that Satan is real and personal. Evil is not just some kind of impersonal force out there somewhere in the atmosphere. The devil is real. He is nothing to trifle with.

Too many people today dismiss the devil and his work, choosing to disbelieve in his existence and power. Which is just fine with the devil. He is happy to have us think he doesn’t exist as he goes about his work of lies and deception and the destruction of souls.

Do you remember what Jesus said about him? Listen to John 8:44: “He (Satan) was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

So when Satan tries to convince you that he is just a figment of your imagination, or, conversely, that he is so powerful there is nothing you can do to resist or defeat him, don’t believe him. He is a liar, and always has been.

He is clever, yes, and resourceful. Don’t take him lightly. God Himself has provided the protection and the weapons we need. He has given us the whole armor of God so that we can take our stand against the devil’s schemes (Ephesians 6:11). It is true that the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. But if you resist him in the power of God the Holy Spirit and stand firm in the faith, the devil will flee from you. He will run for his life. He will not gain victory in your life (1 Peter 5:8-9; James 4:7).

Satan *is* powerful. But he is not all-powerful. He is not equal or superior to God in power. His power is limited. And the reason Jesus came was to destroy him. In *Robinson Crusoe*, at one point Friday asks Crusoe: “Why doesn’t God destroy the devil?”

Crusoe gives him this answer: “God will destroy him.”

Yes, He will. God *will* destroy him. Of that you may be certain. Why? Because in the incarnation and death and resurrection of His Son, God has already defeated Satan. The

devil's grip on the power of death has been loosed. From the time of the fall until Christ's victory over death, death seemed to have the last word. *Until* Jesus came and took the sting of death for us. And He will, when He puts all things under His feet, destroy the devil and his work forever.

Death, it has been said, is the king of terrors. It is the thing we humans tend to fear more than anything else. Or we do our best to avoid thinking about it. A couple weeks ago, I mentioned *The Bucket List*, the movie with Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson which was released about a year ago. During an interview promoting the movie, Jack Nicholson made this revealing comment about death: "We all want to go on forever, don't we? We fear the unknown. Everybody goes to that wall, yet nobody knows what's on the other side. That's why we fear death."

But not everybody fears death. And we don't have to fear death, if our hearts are settled in Christ. Why did Jesus come? Verse 15 says that He came to "free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." Jesus came to liberate those whom Satan had enslaved. Through His death and His resurrection victory over death, Jesus has set us free from the power and fear of death. He has taken the sting out of it.

During the time of apartheid in South Africa, when he was under scrutiny by the racist government there, Anglican Bishop and Nobel Prize winner Desmond Tutu said: "There is nothing the government can do that will stop me from being involved in what I believe God wants me to do. 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 happen to you or me, because we know it is not the end. We know death is not the final word. We know that the power of Jesus, the Son of God who was made a little lower than the angels and took on our flesh and blood, is greater than the power of the devil. And greater than the power of death.

You can break down the teaching of verses 14 and 15 into four steps:

1. The Son of God became human – He took on our flesh and blood.
2. He did it in order to die for us.
3. Through His death He has defeated the devil and nullified the devil's deadly power.
4. He did it to free us from our slavery to the fear of death, so that we can live in "the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).
(Four steps adapted from John Piper, "Jesus Is Able to Help Those Who Are Tempted," June 23, 1996.)

2. TO MAKE ATONEMENT FOR OUR SINS

A second reason Jesus came is found in verse 17: "For this reason He had to be made like His brothers in every way, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make atonement (or propitiation) for the sins of the

people.” Jesus was the perfect high priest, able to enter the presence of God the Father on our behalf and to present to God the perfect sacrifice for our sins – the sacrifice of Himself – to make atonement for our sins.

Why was Jesus made a little lower than the angels? To make atonement for our sins. Atonement involves the act of making amends or paying for a wrong. The word comes from an old Anglo-Saxon root which means “to make at one.” Hence, the word atonement, or “at-one-ment.” It is about reconciliation or restoring harmony in a relationship where there has been discord or conflict.

The word used here in verse 17, *hilaskomai*, is sometimes translated as “propitiation,” which refers to the removal of wrath (in this case God’s wrath) by means of an offering. Paul uses this same word in Romans 3:25, where he says that God presented Him (Jesus) as “a sacrifice of atonement (or propitiation) through faith in His blood.” The problem of sin (*our* sin) is so serious that it requires a payment or atonement for it. In His death on the cross, Jesus paid for our sins and satisfied the righteous demands of a holy God. Notice how God’s requirement was met: In His grace, God Himself provided the means of taking away His own anger toward us for our sin. Think of it as a Christmas gift to you from God. Because it is.

Listen to 1 John 4:9-10: “This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him. This is love: Not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice (a propitiation) for our sins.”

The atoning work of Christ is an expression of God’s great love for us. In the movie *Luther*, there is a scene where Martin Luther stands before his congregation in Wittenberg, Germany, and says in a sermon: “Terrible. Unforgiving. That’s how I saw God. Punishing us in this life, committing us to Purgatory after death, sentencing sinners to burn in hell for all eternity. But I was wrong.

“Those who see God as angry do not see Him rightly but look upon a curtain as if a dark storm cloud has been drawn across (their) face. If we truly believe Christ is our Savior, then we have a God of love, and to see God in faith is to look upon His friendly heart.

“So when the devil throws your sins in your face and declares that you deserve death and hell, tell him this,” Luther says, his voice rising in a crescendo. “I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? For I know one who suffered and made satisfaction in my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, Son of God. Where He is, there I shall be also.”

Do we deserve death and hell? Yes, we do. Every one of us. But we have a merciful and faithful high priest to represent us at the throne of our heavenly Father, and He has offered the perfect sacrifice – His own sinless life – to make atonement for our sins. Jesus took our place, doing for us what we could never, ever do for ourselves. That is why He came.

3. TO HELP US IN OUR TRIALS AND TEMPTATIONS

Third, and finally, Jesus took on our flesh and blood, experienced temptation and endured suffering in His life, in order to help us when we are tempted. Look at verse 18:

“Because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted.” The Son of God was for a little while made lower than the angels in order to help us in the trials and troubles, the tests and temptations of this life.

Jesus understands temptation. Jesus experienced temptation just like we do. Only Jesus faced the full force of the tempter’s power, because, unlike us, He never gave in to it. Not even once. Here is what it says in Hebrews 4:15: “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one (Jesus) who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin.”

C. S. Lewis had this to say about temptation in *Mere Christianity*: “No one knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good.” That’s true, isn’t it? It isn’t until we make a sincere heart commitment to be good and to do what is right that we discover how bad, how sinful, we really are. Here is Lewis again: “A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of the German army by fighting it, not by giving in.” (Lewis wrote this as a citizen of Britain during the Second World War.) “A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it.”

I have some good news for you today. (Actually, I hope you sense that this message has been full of good news.) Here is another piece of good news: You and I don’t have to fight against temptation and the evil impulses within us on our own. If it is up to us, we will fail. But we have a high priest and Savior who is available and able to help us when we are tempted. His power is enough to give us victory over temptation. Though temptation may come to us in a thousand different guises, in the resources of God’s grace, there is help that is more than sufficient to enable us to resist it and overcome its lure – whatever it may be in our lives. So we are given this invitation in Hebrews 4:16: “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

Temptation is real. And it can be powerful. But mercy and grace are available. And the overcoming power of our faithful Savior. Which is what we all need.

J. C. Ryles, a 19th century British preacher, said: “We are too apt to forget that the temptation to sin will rarely present itself to us in its true colors, saying, ‘I am your deadly enemy, and I want to ruin you forever in hell.’ Oh no! Sin comes to us like Judas, with a kiss; like Joab (the commander of David’s army), with outstretched hand and flattering words. The forbidden fruit seemed good and desirable to Eve; yet it cast

her out of Eden. Walking idly on his palace roof seemed harmless enough to David; yet it ended in adultery and murder.

“Sin rarely seems (like) sin at first beginnings. Let us then watch and pray, lest we fall into temptation.”

When temptation comes – and it comes to us continually, in one form or another – remember that we have a friend, a merciful and faithful high priest, a Savior and Lord, who is able and more than able to help us in all the temptations and trials and troubles and tests we experience in this life. Not only to help us, but to give us victory over temptation, as we yield our hearts to Him and trust in Him. Are you leaning on Him moment by moment?

Jesus understands temptation. He has experienced the worst of it. And He understands suffering, too. Whether it is physical or emotional, the suffering of a pain-racked body or the pain of being hurt by the words or actions of others, the pain of rejection or loss of some kind, there is nothing you and I will ever experience in life that is worse than what the Son of God went through when He suffered and died on the cross in our place. For our sins. As the great hymn-writer Isaac Watts expressed it (in the hymn *Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed*): “Amazing pity! Grace unknown! And love beyond degree!” That is the kind of Savior we have.

CONCLUSION

Here is what God’s Word says: The One who rules over the angels in heaven, the Son of God who is worshipped and adored by the angels of heaven, became for a little while lower than the angels when He took on our flesh and blood and dwelt among us. Why did He do it?

1. To experience death in our place, as an expression of His grace.
2. To bring many sons and daughters to glory, as the Pioneer of our salvation
3. To show His solidarity with us.
4. To destroy the devil and liberate us from our fear of death.
5. To make atonement for our sins as our merciful and faithful high priest.
6. To help us when we are tempted or undergo suffering.

What a great Savior! Let these truths sink into your hearts, my dear friends. Don’t forget them. Let them move you to honor and magnify and exalt His name with both your lips and your lives in this season of Advent and Christmas and always – until He returns or calls you home, and then for eternity.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.

