

Pleased to Dwell: Why the Incarnation Matters

He was Tempted

Hebrews 4:16-5:2

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"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness." (Hebrews 4:16–5:2, ESV)

When I was a child, I thought everyone loved Christmas. After all, who would ever look at this season of the year with anything but excitement, joy, and happiness? From my childish perspective, all that I could see was a wonderful season where people gave each other gifts, baked each other cookies, had great meals at family members' houses, and even put together groups of people to sing songs in front of one another's houses, sometimes even those of complete strangers.

In my young mind, Christmas was, indeed, the most wonderful time of the year.

But as I grew up, it slowly began to dawn on me that underneath all the excitement and celebration, there was something else. I started to pick up on the fact that not every family gathering involved people who totally like each other. I started to notice that the shopping and gift-giving was actually really stressful on some people, especially in the years before gift cards. And while I remember Christmas celebrations that had lots of food and laughter, I also remember ones that were filled with pain because there was an empty place at the table or when my grandma seemed sad.

I experienced this profoundly the first few years after the loss of our stillborn daughter, as we would set up the Christmas tree and the kids would put their ornaments on it. Eventually we came to Sylvia's ornament, and the joyful excitement of the moment was suddenly eclipsed by waves of sadness. In the midst of our celebration, there was also pain.

For many of you, that is part of your experience this year or in the last number of years. In the midst of all the Christmas carols, celebrations, and "happiness," there are really tough and painful realities underneath. I was talking with one of our church members this week, and I asked her how she was doing. She said, "I'm trusting the Lord, but I really miss Don." Maybe this is a year where you've had a thought like: *Another Christmas, and I'm still single. Another Christmas, and we're not pregnant. Another Christmas, and I still hate my job. Another Christmas, and we're still broke. Another Christmas, and my son is still a mess. Another Christmas, and . . .* You fill in the rest.

Part of the challenge with this time of year is that while there is a great deal of celebration, there is also substantial pain and brokenness underneath. And part of the reason why the incarnation of Jesus (His coming to earth as a baby) is so important is because of what His birth means for this reality. In other

words, one of the reasons why the incarnation matters is because Jesus comes to us in order to help us walk through the brokenness of living as human beings.

During this Advent season, we are walking through a series that attempts to answer the question “Why does the incarnation matter?” Last week we looked at a biblical introduction of the birth of Jesus, how He entered the mess of our lives, was born under the law, and set in motion the potential for sinful people to be redeemed. This week we are going to look at the temptation to see how that relates to the birth of Jesus and what that means for us.

I want to expand your perspective of Christmas to help you understand that the birth of Jesus set in motion His ability to help you – right now. I want you to see that we have a sympathetic Savior who helps us endure by giving us confidence that He will help us. Or to say it very simply: Jesus can help you. And the birth of Jesus is the inauguration of that divine assistance. Allow me to show this by unpacking another great text, Hebrews 4:14-16, and looking at 1) the goal, 2) the resource, and 3) the hope of Jesus’ help.

The Goal: Your Endurance

The first truth that I want to highlight is the ultimate goal. What is the purpose of this text? Why is the writer talking about the humanity of Jesus? Why does he bring up such a loaded topic as the temptation of Jesus? Hebrews 4:14-16 is in the Bible for a reason. What is it?

One reason is because of the theme of endurance that runs through the book of Hebrews. The writer highlights the humanity of Jesus in order to encourage a group of people who need hope that they can make it to the finish line. Now there are a lot of other themes in this book of the Bible, but endurance appears a lot. Here are a few notable and fairly famous examples:

“Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” (Hebrews 6:9–12, ESV)

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.” (Hebrews 12:1–3, ESV)

But even closer to our immediate text, we find this theme of endurance or perseverance appearing:

“Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.” (Hebrews 4:1, ESV)

"Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience."
(Hebrews 4:11, ESV)

The writer of Hebrews is attempting to motivate a group of believers who are starting to face persecution. His aim is to help them hold on to what they believe as the pressures of life and temptations get stronger and stronger.

To make that point, the writer reminds us about who Jesus is and what He has done. In verse 14 he describes Jesus 1) by name, 2) as the Son of God, 3) as a great high priest, and 4) as having passed through the heavens. Now this is loaded with meaning and with a challenge.

By saying that Jesus is a great high priest, he is connecting Jesus to the Old Testament model where a high priest went into the Holy of Holies once year as a representative of the people in order to intercede for them. It was the most powerful image of redemption for the people of Israel. The writer is saying that Jesus did that for us and that He has passed into the heavens now. That is the glorious part.

However, there is a challenge with Jesus' ascension into the heavens in that He is no longer here. He's gone. So while it is spiritually meaningful, it requires some additional explanation as to why having an ascended high priest is significant.

The critical phrase in verse 14 is "let us hold fast our confession." That is his goal, and it is the charge that he is attempting to lay before these people. He is passionate that sin, persecution, peer pressure, discouragement, or anything else is not able to cause them to walk away from their belief.

What hope is there for you or me when we face pressures or temptations? The writer of Hebrews starts out by identifying that endurance or holding fast our confession is what God desires too.

We don't typically use the word "confession" this way in our modern day vernacular. Usually we think about confession as what we do in acknowledging our sinfulness. It is the same basic Greek word (*homologia*) which means to speak what is true, and in this context, it is used for a Christian's belief in the gospel through Jesus. So you could also translate this as "profession."

In Romans 10:9-10 the apostle Paul uses this word as clear statement of belief – that to confess is to believe and to be saved:

"... because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved." (Romans 10:9–10, ESV)

Do you see what the writer of Hebrews is aiming at? He wants to be sure that these believers are strengthened in their faith so that they can endure hardship and difficulty. He is pastorally concerned that the pressures of life not put them in a position where they throw their hands up, give up on following Jesus, and say "I'm done. I don't believe this anymore." He wants to prepare them for the moments that will come where the temptation to quit will be strong.

What's more, he wants to give them assurance as they anticipate this happening to them. When you are in the midst of suffering or when you get a sense that it is coming your way, there are a few fearful thoughts that run through your head and heart:

- "I don't know if I can take this anymore"
- "If I have to live like this for another year, I don't know what I will do"
- "This temptation is strong now, I cannot imagine fighting it much longer"
- "I'm scared of the emotions running through my heart, and I don't trust my ability to make it through this"
- "I've never felt this level of testing before, and I cannot imagine what will happen if it gets worse"

Now you need to know that those quotes are not theoretical. I've said them all, and I'm sure most of you have as well. One of the scariest things about facing hardship, temptation, or persecution are these questions. And it is not like caving under pressure doesn't happen.

My twitter profile picture is taken over a particular spot in Oxford where three well-known pastors were martyred. The first two were martyred together. Hugh Latimer and Nicolas Ridley were burned at the stake at this location in 1555 at the command of Queen Mary ("Bloody Mary"). Thomas Cranmer, who was the most influential Anglican pastor of his time, serving various kings and writing *The Book of Common Prayer*, was imprisoned at the time, and he was forced to watch the martyrdom of Latimer and Ridley. It shook him so deeply, and he was under such pressure, he recanted his Protestant beliefs. His persecutors used his recantation as propaganda against the Protestant Reformation. You can imagine what it would be like to hear that Billy Graham, D.A. Carson, John Piper, or Tim Keller no longer believed in faith alone by grace alone.

However, on March 21, 1556, Cranmer was giving another public recantation, and he deviated from his prepared and approved script. He denounced his persecutors, the Queen, the Catholic Church's teaching, and recanted his recantations. He was pulled from the pulpit and burnt at the stake in the same location as Latimer and Ridley. And in the midst of his death, he intentionally placed the hand that signed the recantations into the fire.

Hebrews 4 identifies that enduring to the end is something every follower of Jesus needs to consider. The pressures of life and the temptations around us could easily cause us to consider renouncing our confession entirely or temporarily as we give into unbelief or temptation.

Yet, as we will see, the hope that is offered to us is directly connected to the incarnation of Jesus. So, if you feel like you are hanging on by your fingernails today, listen closely. God is so interested in your endurance that He made the infinite Son of God a human. If you are scared today about your ability to make it one more year or one more day, read on in the passage. God is so passionate about your endurance that He tells you about Jesus' ability to understand, even in regard to temptation. We have a savior who understands.

The Resource: His Sympathy

The writer of Hebrews anticipates that we might be inclined to think that Jesus is so detached from our experience that He cannot really help us. That is why he makes a double negative statement in verse 15: “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness.” It is very clear that the sympathy of Jesus is a crucial aspect of endurance. Given the use of the word “for” in verse 15, these thoughts are linked. If you are struggling to endure, consider Jesus (Heb. 3:1, 12:3).

Let’s start with what the word “sympathize” means. The word means the ability to share the feelings or experiences of another person. The New Living Translation renders this as “understands.” Hebrews 10:34 uses the same word to describe the compassion that believers feel for those believers who are imprisoned. The focus of the word is on the emotional connection that one feels for another.

Jesus is not removed from our pain and struggles. This was radically different from the Greco-Roman world view at the time. The Stoics believed that the primary attribute of God was the inability to feel anything, because if the emotions of others controlled him, he would be less than God. The Epicureans believed that God dwelt in the spaces between the worlds, in complete detachment from the emotions and struggles of human beings.¹ No wonder the Greeks thought the gospel was foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). Jesus understands, because he became a man.

The next word helps us understand the nature of that sympathy. The text says that He understands our weakness. One of the helpful ways to figure out what a word means is by looking at different translations. Typically, if you look at the ESV, NASB, NIV, and NLT, you will get a sense of the meaning of the word, even if you don’t know the original language. But here that is not helpful because all four of those translations simply say “weakness.” That’s very interesting, and when that happens, it means that the word is hard to understand.

The translators leave it there because the word is meant to be a pretty broad category related to our humanity. You could put in words like incapacity or limitations, but those don’t give the full picture. The word is intended to be somewhat vague and then clarified with the next phrase, so think of the word “weakness” to mean that Jesus understands the challenges of being a human in a broken world, and He knows this not just because He sees it from afar or because He knows about it. Rather, He knows about it because He is it. He is human. Jesus was born as a child, and He lived where we’ve lived.

The text continues by telling us that His sympathy is connected to Him being “in every respect tempted as we are, yet without sin.” So what does that mean?

Let’s start with what it cannot mean. We have to balance this text with the rest of the Bible. It cannot mean that Jesus was tempted as a sinner and with a sin nature. Jesus was fully human and he was fully God. He obeyed perfectly, never sinned, and did not have a sin nature.

¹ Hughes, R. Kent. *Hebrews- An Anchor for the Soul*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 1993), 129-130.

Was it possible for Him to sin? I asked this question on Twitter this week, but it really is not a completely fair question, because it depends on what we mean by “possible.” If by “possible” we mean that Jesus had a brain and the capacity to know what a temptation was and to choose it, then yes, it is possible in that way. But from another angle, it was not possible for Jesus to sin because He is God, and there was no evil in Him such that He could or would choose to sin.² So “possible” can have different meanings.

Now some of you will immediately protest, “Well if He doesn’t have a sin nature and could not have sinned as God, then He can’t understand.” Here is what C.S. Lewis said about this theological challenge:

A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of the German army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of the wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives into 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. . . . Christ, because he was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is the only man who knows to the full what temptation means . . .”³

So we ought not assume that sinlessness, or the absence of a sin nature, make the temptation any less real or potent. In fact, it seems that Jesus understands the weight and pressure of trials and temptations at a level that we don’t even understand.

What’s more, the presence of divinity in Him did not necessarily give Him a “leg up” on winning the battle with temptation. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, He refused to use His divine power to make stones into bread. He felt the full force of His humanity, AND He felt the full force of not using His divine power to make His temptations easier. Jesus refused to rely on His divine nature to make obedience easier.⁴

Therefore, we never need to wonder if Jesus understands or can understand what it is like to be a human and to fight through trial and temptation. Even more, it means that we can by faith encourage our hearts that we have a living high priest who not only provided atonement for us by making the payment Himself, but we also have a Savior who knows what it is like to fight and fight and fight and fight and fight temptation while never giving in.

Think of it as holding 150 pounds over your head. How long could you hold it over your head? Five minutes? Twenty minutes? A day? And who knows the “feel” of the weight more? Or let’s say that you had a son who died, and you meet someone who also has had a son die. But what happens when you

² <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/was-it-possible-for-jesus-to-sin>

³ Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*, (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 124-125 as cited in R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews- An Anchor for the Soul*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 1993), 131.

⁴ Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1994), 539.

meet a man who has had three sons die? Does the father with three dead sons understand too and in a way that may be even more sympathetic?

Jesus understands – more than you'll ever be able to understand.

The Hope: Divine Help

Now that we understand how endurance is the goal and how sympathy is our resource, let's turn to the hope. The incarnation made everything that we talk about next possible. Without the advent, what follows in verse 16 would have no meaning and, frankly, would be a myth.

What are we told in this verse? What does the incarnation matter? It is important because we have a sympathetic Savior who helps us endure by giving us confidence that He will help us.

Based upon the sympathy of Jesus, based upon His identification with our temptations, and based upon His role as the great high priest, we are given help in three ways:

1) Confidence

The text tells us to come (draw near) to the throne of grace with confidence. The idea is simply that we can come before the throne of God or His presence without fear, but instead with boldness. The invitation is for us to pour out our hearts before the Lord with a level of assurance. We are invited to come before Him with our burdens, our fears, and our struggles.

But upon what is this assurance based?

2) Mercy

As we come we are reminded that our standing is based upon mercy. The Old Testament priest approached the mercy seat to make atonement. But we have atonement that creates mercy.

To come boldly through mercy means that we are assured that 1) God is for us and not against us, 2) that we have been invited to lay our burdens before Lord, 3) that God loves us and is concerned for us, 4) that we are forgiven and have a standing before Him as His children, and 5) that we are approaching the sovereign God of the universe. We come with confidence in what Jesus has done and in what God has said.

But there's more, and this relates to the theme of endurance.

3) Grace to help

In coming we receive the enabling power of God's grace. This means that we receive divine enablement to do His will. We receive what we need in order to follow Him. God pours out enough grace on us to help us deal with today's troubles, to deliver us from our temptations, and to help us follow Him one more day and through one more trial.

Now the text simply could have said “that you may receive mercy and grace.” But it is much more specific than that.

The text uses words like “find grace” and “to help” and “in time of need.” The idea is that there is a surprising discovery of God’s help in the midst of moments of great need. The tone here is one of desperation, and it is connected to the call for persevering endurance.

God wants you to be able to hold fast your confession until your very last breath. He wants you to keep fighting temptation, to keep trusting Him in your sadness, to keep praying when you are in pain, and to keep singing when you feel so sad. Because following Jesus in a broken world with broken hearts and with broken people is very, very hard.

And that is what makes Christmas so painful for some of you. All the singing, all the celebrations, all the “merriment,” while understandable, is really painful. It’s to sing “Joy to the World” when you feel like your world is falling apart or when you feel like the bottom has fallen out.

But the coming of the Christ child was for that very reason. He came into our world, entered the mess of our lives, redeemed us, and it is He who promises to help us. If you are a follower of Jesus, you belong to Him, and the devil cannot have you. Jesus bought you; your life belongs to Him. He will hold you fast.

Jesus came into the world so that when we are tempted, we can run to Him for help. Your temptations do not have to have another victory over you. Your past sins do not have to define you. And your hope for future freedom rests in Him, not you. Listen, He will hold you fast!

When you are fearful, lonely, despondent, depressed, and feel like giving up, come to Him! Pray to Him. Ask Him to help you. Lay your burdens before Him. He will hold you fast.

When you are struggling to even believe that any of this is real, take your unbelief to Him. It doesn’t surprise Him, scare Him, or threaten Him. Jesus can turn unbelief into faith, so ask Him, “Lord hold me fast!”

And as you pray, remember this: Jesus knows. Jesus understands. Jesus can help you. He will hold you fast.

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