

From 1964-2016, the city of Cleveland suffered through “the Cleveland sports curse”, where not one of their three professional sports teams won a championship for more than forty years, an entire generation of sports futility. It wasn’t until LeBron James came back to play basketball for the Cleveland Cavaliers that they finally broke through and won the NBA championship this year, and 1.3 million people flooded the streets of Cleveland to celebrate. LeBron ended decades of disappointment for his home state, his local team, by becoming one of them. Before re-joining the team, all of his influence, skill, money, and best wishes did nothing, but when he became a Cleveland Cavalier, he delivered them from this curse.

And I’m hoping that even if you don’t care about sports, you can see what a big deal it would be for a city to wait an entire generation for something that millions of people cared very deeply about. And the reason I hope you see how big a deal this was for Cleveland is because I want you to see how much bigger it is for you that Jesus broke the curse of death against the entire human race by becoming one of us.

Our text from Hebrews is a Christmas text because it focuses on why Jesus took on flesh and blood, why He became a man. The answer it gives us is that Jesus took on flesh and blood so that He could destroy the devil and deliver the people who were slaves to the fear of death. He did this, verse 14 says, *through death*, by having his flesh nailed to a cross and his blood poured out on the ground.

For you to understand the joy of Jesus’ birth, you need to see Christmas and the cross tied together, and this is exactly what Hebrews 2 does. Christmas without the cross would be like LeBron joining his hometown team, but failing to win the championship. A nice gesture, maybe, but ultimately a failure. Christmas is wonderful, because God came to be with us, but Christmas doesn’t break the curse. The cross breaks the curse, and Christmas is what makes the cross possible. Christmas isn’t good news without the cross, but because Christmas leads to the cross, we are set from the Devil, set free from slavery to fear, and set free from death itself.

Hebrews 2 answers the question why Jesus took on flesh and blood, but that answer raises a bunch more questions, too: why does the Devil have the power of death? Why do we need a high priest? Why can’t we defeat sin and Satan ourselves? Why do our sins need to be propitiated? What is propitiation, anyway? And as we explore these questions, what we are doing is understanding why the incarnation of Jesus was necessary, and why His victory is so wonderful.

Let’s start with the devil. Who put him in charge? Well, the sad truth is that we did. When Adam and Eve listened to Satan rather than God, death came into the world through the tempter’s lies and our sin. God has no pleasure in the death of anyone; Satan is a murderer from the beginning. Nevertheless, because God is just and holy, sin demands punishment, and the wages of sin is death. Satan enjoys playing the role of the accuser, listing off our sins to God and demanding that God carry out the death sentence.

Now, Satan doesn't have power over God, to make God do what Satan wants, but he is the bringer of death. Death comes by God's decree, but Satan acts as the executioner. Because we're Adam's children, we share in his sin, which places us under the dominion of death, and that's Satan's territory. Not even God can righteously snatch a sinner out of Satan's grasp without atonement, and that's where the idea of a high priest comes in.

Verse 17 says that Jesus had to be made like his brothers in every respect, that is, he really had to become human, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God. A high priest is one who acts as a mediator, a go-between for man and God. In Leviticus 16, we read about the aftermath of what happened when the High Priest Aaron's two sons came before God and died. They tried to come into God's presence as sinners, and were consumed by the fire of God's holiness. When you hear about the fear of death in Hebrews 2:15, this is the kind of thing we're talking about. When sinners get too close to God, they die. And so in Lev. 16, God tells Moses how atonement can be made so that God and man can be reunited: the High Priest needs to wash his body and wear special clean garments, and he needs to bring the blood of a sin offering before God once a year. When this happens, God's people do not need to fear death.

And this whole process of atoning for sins so that we can enter God's presence is what the idea of *propitiation* in Hebrews 2:17 means. Other translations might say "reconciliation" or "sacrifice of atonement", and since verse 17 is talking about the high priest's service to God, we should understand Leviticus 16 to be the background. The high priest was a man who stood between God and the people, and offered the atoning sacrifice that covered the people's sins so that God would not destroy them.

The book of Hebrews is going to unpack at length just how Jesus serves as the great High priest, better than all previous high priests because His offering is effective, once-for-all, and eternal, because He doesn't just offer the blood of an animal, but His own flesh and blood, which is the point of verse 14. He has to be human so that He can stand between God and men and make propitiation by offering the sacrifice, and He has to be flesh and blood so that He Himself can be the sacrifice. And just to make the point crystal clear, without Christmas, without the incarnation, none of this happens!

And notice also that Jesus is not just any sort of high priest. He Himself was condemned to death by a merciless and faithless high priest, but that's not the kind of priest that Jesus is. (Isn't that good news? *Caiaphas* isn't in charge of atoning for your sins; *Jesus* is.) Jesus is a *merciful* and *faithful* high priest. He loves the people enough to make atonement for them, which is mercy, and He loves God enough to make the atonement exactly in the way that God requires, which is faithfulness.

And notice how this happens: it isn't that He is born merciful and faithful. He becomes merciful by undergoing all the sufferings and temptations of being human, and He learns obedience (Heb 5:8), He is trained in faithfulness by walking with God as a man. It's not that He was ever *unmerciful* or *unfaithful*; the point is that by being human, by living a human life, His sharing in our experiences prepared Him to be a sympathetic High Priest.

His *birth* is important, because that's when He took on flesh and blood so that He could die. His *life* was important, because that's where He became merciful and faithful. And His *death and resurrection* are of *supreme* importance, because that's where He made propitiation for our sins by offering Himself as the sacrifice that reconciles us to God. That's how Christmas leads to the cross.

And here's what the birth, life, and death of Jesus mean for you. Are you afraid of death? You should be, and you shouldn't be. You should be, because all human beings are born sinners, enemies of God, and under a sentence of death and punishment. Even if those who don't believe in God are still afraid of death, and that fear enslaves them their whole life!

But because we refuse to take responsibility for death, because we don't believe that death is the result of sin, we fear death as this *inexplicable abstract thing* instead of as *God's judgment against sin*. People fear *death*, but they don't fear God. They think that their savior is whatever puts *distance* between them and death – medicine, doctors, exercise, technology, whatever. The world has a gospel of *postponement*; but the true gospel is a message of *atonement*. Jesus didn't put distance between Himself and death; He *drew near* so that He could die; so that He could defeat death *by dying*. Salvation is not found in *postponing death* but in an *atoning death*. You can run on for a long time, but sooner or later God'll cut you down. But if Christ has propitiated God on your behalf, if His blood covers over your sins, then you don't need to fear death. When you die, God will raise you up, just like He raised Jesus.

But because we've cut the link between sin and death, we don't see the necessary connection between Christmas and cross. Our cultural Christmas is all about love and peace and goodwill, and so people think that Christmas is the answer to loneliness or being a Scrooge or family dysfunction. But Christmas is better than that. Christmas is God's answer to *sin and death*. God sent Jesus to become a man because He needed to be able to die in our place. If you don't appreciate that about Jesus, then it doesn't matter how much you celebrate joy and peace and goodwill to men. Christmas does you *no good* without the cross.

But because Christmas leads straight to the cross, if you trust in Jesus, then you should not fear death. The reason Jesus took flesh and blood was so that by dying He could overthrow the devil and set you free. His blood covers you, so that you can walk right into God's presence like you have done this morning, and instead of being consumed by the fire of God's holy wrath, you are welcomed to sit down at God's table and share a meal with Jesus. Your merciful high priest has made atonement for you, and your sins are forgiven. Because your sins are forgiven, death has no more power over you. So don't be afraid!

And so practically, how should this affect your day? Well, think about this: your greatest fear is gone. The curse that hung over your head has been broken. Your massive debt has been paid in full. God will not destroy you; He welcomes you as His friend.

The city of Cleveland celebrated for weeks after waiting a mere forty years to win a basketball tournament. How happy should you be after waiting *thousands of years* to be delivered from death? A lifetime of praise sounds about right. A lifetime of unafraid living sounds about right. A lifetime of love for the one who took on flesh and blood to die in your place sounds just about right.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

*Let us pray:*

"O God, you make us glad in the yearly festival of the birth of your only Son, Jesus Christ: Grant that we, who joyfully receive Him as our Redeemer, may with sure confidence behold Him when He comes to be our righteous Judge, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from *The Worship Sourcebook*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, E.9.1.6, pg. 497.