

“Lower than the Angels”

Introduction: Tim Keller tells the story about a murder in NYC that took place in 1964. A 28-year-old woman named Kitty was coming home after working the night shift at her place of employment. She was just a block away from her apartment when an assailant accosted her and began to stab her. “My God he stabbed me; please help me” she cried out. Lights went on in the apartments above her and windows were opened. The assailant withdrew and watched what would happen. What happened was nothing! It was later documented that 38 individuals saw and heard this woman’s cries but not only did no one come down to help, no one even called the police. So, the assailant came back and finished the job.

Over the last couple of weeks we have seen the author of Hebrews place Jesus in the heavenly realms, identifying him as the radiance of God’s glory, the exact representation of his being, as the creator, heir, sustainer and purifier of all things, as the one seated at the right hand of the majesty in heaven, and as one who is superior to the angelic beings.

But, lest we be inclined conclude that this Jesus is a remote, distant being who hangs out on a mountaintop dancing with maidens, glancing our way only when he feels like it, our author now goes on to bring Jesus to earth. Jesus, we’ll see, is the one who has heard our screams and has come to our rescue, choosing to make himself vulnerable at the cost of his life. The King of the universe is not only superior to the angels, as our author has already demonstrated, but he has been made lower than the angels; he has become our brother, as our author will now explain.

Therefore, as we fix our eyes on Jesus, not only his exaltation (superior to angels), but also his incarnation (lower than angels), are important truths for us to grasp if we find ourselves drifting, growing weary and losing heart (2:1; 12:1-3) as we live a life of faith.

To highlight this human, brotherly aspect of Jesus, our author focuses our attention on three questions: What were we made to be? What happened to us? What is God doing about it? [READ]

I. What were we made to be? (vv. 5-8a)

A. Before turning our attention to Jesus, our author makes a rather dramatic statement about us, about who human beings are and about what God has created us to do. To do so he turns to Psalm 8. In this psalm, as David ponders the brilliance and beauty of the night sky, he marvels at the incredible role and responsibility that God has bestowed upon mankind. God has crowned us with glory and honor, placing all things into our responsible care. David’s thoughts echo the early chapters of Genesis in which God declared about human beings:

Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. [Ge. 1:26]

B. Incredibly, we have been given a place just a little lower than the angels. From there we are to rule, which means to cultivate, nurture, and care for all of God’s good creation, stewarding with justice and servant leadership. There is nothing that is not “subject to them,” nothing that is not under our care. Creation was designed to take care of us and we were designed to take care of it. As the text in Genesis goes on, we learn that we were also designed to take care of each other, all under the loving care of God.

II. What happened to us? (v. 8b)

A. Well might we ask, “God, what were you thinking?!” Because as our text continues, we read: “Yet, at present, we do not see everything subject to them” (v. 8b). There is much that is chaotic and out of control in our world, much that we humans are not doing a very good job of stewarding and caring for. We don’t see peace and justice and harmony and prosperity but warfare and inequity and poverty and pandemics. Our relationship with God, with one another, and with creation, all became damaged and disordered. This is not just in our own generation but in every one there ever was.

So, what happened to us?

B. The problem stretches back to the explanation we’re given in Genesis 3. There, when God invited us into a relationship of trust with him, calling us to rule and reign under his direction, our ancient ancestors decided that they didn’t like that idea. One called the tempter, or Satan, or the devil, or the deceiver – who constantly stands against God’s good purposes – convinced them that God did not have their good in mind but was holding something back from them. If they ignored God, they could become like him, it was promised.

C. It’s a lie that human beings have been believing ever since. It became all about us, about serving ourselves and not the other. The sad irony is that by living for and serving ourselves, we became not kings but slaves. “Rule” became an oppressive, rather than a creative, word. Our stuff, the things of this world, and our desires, began to rule over us instead of us ruling over them. It’s a form of slavery because it keeps us searching for something other than God, a something that will never truly satisfy. It leads to individual frustration and global disorder. Ultimately, it leads to death.

III. What is God doing about it? (v. 9)

A. Fortunately, God has not left us to our own devices. He loves his world, and he loves us, too much to leave us in a state of disrepair. Our author begins to explain it in this way: “But we do see Jesus.” To clarify and sharpen this vision, our author goes back and reads Psalm 8 through the lens of Jesus, “who was made lower than the angels for a little while.” Jesus, our author wants us to see, did not remain a distant, exalted being but came and walked among us. He came to heal this disease with which we are infected, called sin, and to restore us and to show us what a truly human rule is to look like, what servant leadership looks like.

B. We might say that he started a resistance movement against evil, teaching us a better way to live, and giving us the power to overcome evil in us and around us. And the way he did this is described by our author with a whole package of descriptive words and phrases: suffered death, pioneer of our salvation, makes us holy, calls us brothers and sisters, frees us from slavery and fear, fully human in every way, merciful and faithful high priest, make atonement, help those who are being tempted. An entire book could be written on what just those few verses communicate!

C. We’ll come back to each of those as the letter goes on. For now, in a big picture kind of way, what our author seems to want us to grasp hold of is that time when Jesus was indeed made a little lower than the angels and walked with us, fully sharing in our humanity. He did this in order to become like us so that he could die for us, the prescription needed to deal with our sin and our death. We needed one to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. We need an older brother who knows our struggle, who goes before us, who has overcome, and who can lead us on.

Illustration: Rama tells many stories about her older brother, one off which was when he was 12 and she was 10 and they were attending a family event. He was standing next to her with his arm draped lovingly around her shoulders, or so it seemed. The next thing she knew he had stuck out his foot, given her a shove, and she found herself face down on the ground...all recorded for posterity on the family VCR!

Gratefully, Jesus is not that kind of older brother. While he is now highly exalted above all things, he became near and approachable. While he could shove us down, he is more about sharing our life and picking us up when we fall.

Ever felt abandoned or lonely? Jesus was rejected and put to death by his own people. Ever felt the grief of losing someone you love? Jesus wept at the death of his friend Lazarus. Even been lied about? Jesus was betrayed by a close friend and falsely accused by numerous officials. Ever been tempted to take the easy way out? Jesus was tempted to give in while fasting in the wilderness. Ever had financial problems? Jesus was poor and had nowhere to lay his head. Ever felt misunderstood by a family member? Jesus' family thought he was out of his mind. Ever felt highly stressed? Jesus was so stressed in the Garden of Gethsemane that his sweat was like drops of blood.

As author Max Lucado puts it:

For thirty-three years [Jesus] would feel everything you and I have ever felt. He felt weak. He grew weary. He was afraid of failure. He was susceptible to wooing women. He got colds, burped, and had body odor. His feelings got hurt. His feet got tired. His head ached. He may have had pimples. He may have been tone-deaf. It could be that his knees were bony. . . One thing's for sure: He was, while completely divine, completely human.

So, when we find ourselves growing weary and losing heart, drifting and tempted to walk away, no one can go to Jesus and say, "You don't understand my life." It's, perhaps, us that need to go to him and say, "Help me Lord, gain a deeper understanding of yours so that I can be both encouraged and empowered to rule and relate rightly to all that you have given me, for your glory and the good of others."