



THE IMPORTANCE OF SANDALS

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Is it just me, or was there a lot of road construction around here this summer? Everywhere you go you seem to bump into people in orange vests. I've been trying to take something positive from all this, and here's the lesson I've come up with: Sometimes, to get where you're going, you have to think in the opposite direction.

That was true a couple weeks ago when I was trying to get to the freeway during Federal Way Days. There was an endless backup every street I tried, until finally I just decided to head back the way I came and go down over the tide flats to the freeway.

That was definitely a case of thinking in the opposite direction. Another construction zone where I found this principle to be true was over by Brooklake Church. They don't put you on a detour. A flagger stops you for a while, then redirects you into the lane of oncoming traffic. You always hope the flagger at the other end has actually stopped those cars. So for a brief time, even though you are headed the same way, you are in reality traveling in what should be the opposite direction. The only way to move forward is to be open to switching your thinking about how the lanes work. Those of us who are rule followers really have to stretch ourselves.

The author of Hebrews is about to flag us over to the other lane. We've been saying for the past two weeks that Hebrews is all about lifting Jesus up. We've been looking at his eternal qualities and seen how he is so much bigger than we ever imagined.

Today, the author is going to continue lifting Jesus up, but it's going to happen by looking in what seems to be the opposite direction. We're going to talk about Jesus' humanity. You wouldn't think his being brought down to earth is part of lifting him up, but it is. The destination hasn't changed – we're just coming at it from a different way than we would expect.

What the writer of Hebrews is doing is sharpening our Christology. Christology is the fancy word for how we think about Jesus. We can live with some pretty fuzzy ideas in our head about what he's really like. And maybe you're thinking to yourself, "No offense, but I don't really care if my thinking's fuzzy. I love Jesus and I don't really want to get hung up on intellectual stuff about him."

I agree -- I don't want to get all academic about Jesus either. But this isn't trying to get technical – this is about knowing who we have a relationship with. Any time you love someone, you want to know them better, because knowing them better deepens the love you have for them.

I'm so glad that our relationship with God doesn't depend on us being smart or knowing all the facts. That means that the choice I made as a kid to follow Jesus counted. It was every bit as legitimate as an adult decision. Anybody can respond to God from the heart at any stage of life, regardless of how well you know the Bible. That's the beauty of his invitation.

But there are depths to discover about Christ after we meet him. Hebrews challenges us to dig deeper and find even more reasons to love Christ. This morning, we find that's true as we reflect on what it meant for Jesus to become human.

Last week the author paused to emphasize how important it is to not drift away from the truth about Jesus. Now he's going to return to sharing more of those truths.

My sister has decided to go back to school and finish her degree. When she was in town recently, she brought her math book with her. I was kind of giving her a hard time about making sure she got her homework done, so I decided to take a look at what she was doing. That was a mistake. I saw numbers and letters that I recognized on the page, but I had no clue how to make sense of them. It was just a sea of information that I couldn't quite take in.

I'll be honest with you as we get started: This section of Hebrews may feel like that to you on our first read through. It's heady stuff. It may lose you as you stare at the screen. But we will go back and look at it in sections, and I think you'll find it covers some very powerful concepts.

Hebrews 2:5-18

It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. But there is a place where someone has testified:

"What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor and put everything under his feet."

In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.

Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. He says,

*"I will declare your name to my brothers;
in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises."*

And again, "I will put my trust in him."

And again he says, "Here am I, and the children God has given me."

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil -- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

There are a few perks to becoming a pastor. There are a few things I really don't like about the job. I don't like being singled out by the title, feeling like that's what defines me. It's a real conversation killer when you meet strangers. You'll be talking with someone and eventually they ask, "What do you do?" so you say, "Oh, I'm a pastor" And there's this instant look of blank horror as they quickly review in their mind what they've said to you so far, and then they don't really know what more to ask, because it's foreign territory to most people.

But on the flip side, some really good opportunities come out of having this role. When people know you're a pastor BEFORE you get together for a conversation, they don't mind if you talk about spiritual things with them. After all, that's what you do. So I've been able to use that to get into some deep talks with people that I might otherwise not have felt so free to do.

This week I met a friend for coffee who is not a Christian but who knew what he was getting into when he agreed to sit down with a pastor. We had a terrific discussion about the gospel. But he had a question. He said, "Why does Jesus coming to earth matter? When I'm stressed out I go to the beach or the mountains and I just try to be still, and I can sense that there's something bigger than me. I connect with God and worship him in that way. Are you saying that that experience isn't genuine?"

Without knowing it, my friend had asked what our writer of Hebrews sought to answer: What difference did it make that Jesus came to earth? Was his humanity necessary? If God is all powerful and loving, why did it take his Son dying on a cross to deal with the sin problem? And how does one man living in one particular time and place have the ability to affect us when we're not in that same time and place? Or, put another way, why would the eternal God restrict himself to the confines of history to solve this problem?

It's strange to think very long about God taking on a body. In his book, *God Came Near*, Max Lucado captures the uncomfortableness of it:

Angels watched as Mary changed God's diaper. The universe watched with wonder as The Almighty learned to walk. Children played in the street with him. Jesus may have had pimples. He may have been tone deaf. It could be that his knees were bony. For thirty-three years he would feel everything you and I have ever felt. He felt weak. He grew weary. He got colds, burped and had body odor. His feet got tired. And his head ached.

To think of Jesus in such a light is – well, it almost seems irreverent, doesn't it? It's not something we like to do; it's uncomfortable. It is much easier to keep the humanity out of the incarnation. Clean the manure from around the manger. Wipe the sweat out of his eyes. Pretend he never snored or blew his nose or hit his thumb with a hammer.

If we wonder why God's Son chose to live a human life, it's equally perplexing to figure out why he had to die a human death. I think about Jesus praying in the garden before his death, saying, "Father, if it's possible, let this cup pass from me. If there's any other way to do this, let's do it." But for some reason, this was the only way. The author of Hebrews says it was "fitting" for God to let Jesus suffer, it was appropriate and in line with God's character. Why is that?

To take us inside God's thinking, the writer of Hebrews begins by going back and quoting from Psalm 8:

Psalm 8:4-5

*What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?
You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor
and put everything under his feet.*

Then he goes on to say,

In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him.

In other words, God has given humanity this incredible place of honor. He told Adam and Eve to "fill the earth and subdue it." He put them in charge of maintaining the garden. Then they sinned and that God-given place of glory and honor was vacated.

Today we would hardly say that everything has been put under our feet. Look around. As a species, we're struggling. We're fighting each other, suffering from disease, overpopulation and disasters. We're sure not in control of the elements, as all the hurricanes and earthquakes remind us. And whenever people do get a measure of dominion or control, they seem to turn it into a power trip.

We're not living the dream. That's why the author says "at present, we do not see everything subjected to him." And then he turns around and says four fantastic words:

But we see Jesus...

That melts me. I know so many people in crisis or pain. I get so wrapped up trying to solve problems, because I'm a fixer. I want to do something. But most of the time there is nothing I can do. The problem is too big and I feel helpless and inadequate. And then I catch a glimpse of Jesus who is doing the work himself, giving somebody supernatural strength, or grabbing hold of somebody's heart, or speaking words of comfort only he can give.

We might not see an end to suffering, *but we see Jesus*, healing wherever he goes. We might be overwhelmed by the storms, *but we see Jesus*, who still calms the wind and rain. We might feel beaten down and worthless, *but we see Jesus*, who turns shame into glory.

God gave us Jesus in a human body to see truths about him we wouldn't discover any other way.

The human Jesus shows us God's vision for humanity.

The Psalm that we read laid out God's intentions for us – honor, glory, responsibility, a place to belong, a close relationship with him. Jesus fulfills that vision.

Think about him, moving through life without ever sinning. Everything WAS put under his feet. He exercised control over disease and pain. He walked on water. He could turn water into wine. He could make food expand. All of nature was subject to him. And he was in constant communication with God the Father. He had that connection because he was God's son, but it was also an example for us. Jesus redefined what it means to be truly human, bringing it back to God's original design.

The author of Hebrews says he was bringing many sons to glory, to take us out of our current condition into something new. In order to do that, he had to enter into humanity himself.

I had a dentist appointment this week, and the news wasn't good. Apparently, I'm a clencher. My teeth crunch down against each other at night and are wearing themselves out. I guess I'm a little more uptight than I thought. Now, the dentist can create a special night guard for me, but since that's somewhat expensive, they recommended that first I go to the drugstore and try one of those plastic mouth guards you can mold yourself.

So the instructions say you boil this thing in water, then stick it in your mouth and shape it around your teeth. Then you can fine tune it a little by putting it back in the water. Well I was doing my fine tuning, when my finely tuned fingers lost their grip on the plastic and it stayed in the water longer than it should have, so it lost its shape completely. It practically turned to jelly. The only way to get it back to the right form was to put it back in my mouth and start over. My teeth had to get back in there and reshape it.

God created the first people in his own likeness. They quickly bungled that likeness and we've been damaged goods ever since. It's like we've been in the boiling water too long

and we've lost our original shape. The only way to get us back to the original was for Jesus to come and refashion humanity in a new mold based on himself.

In the 4th century A.D., Gregory of Nazianzus said this: "What has not been assumed cannot be redeemed." He is using the word "assumed" there in the sense of someone who has assumed a role. God took on a physical body to redeem and restore the physical side of humanity as well as the spiritual.

Look – Jesus becoming flesh shows God's care for our material lives. We're not disembodied spirits. Your aches and pains matter to God. Your whole life matters to him. God has a vision for humanity – one where people are honored, one where people are trusted with responsibility, one where people have dignity and value, one where people have meaning and a place to belong. We don't see that yet. But we see Jesus.

Another thing the human Jesus shows us is **God's street credibility**.

Remember Vanilla Ice? Back in 1990, he shot up the charts as a rap artist. He tried to pass for someone who had come from the hood, but the truth was he was just a white kid from the suburbs. When people found out his real background, they quit buying his music. Why? Because he had no credibility. He couldn't rap about a life he had never lived and expect to be believable.

Street credibility is when you can speak from experience. It's when the average person can relate to you because you've gone through what they've gone through.

When God made the move to become a human, it gave us a new way to see him. Now we were able to look at him as a God who truly identified with us and our plight. Our text said this:

Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers...Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity...

By identifying with us in our humanity, God showed us three sides of his character that I'm not sure we would have seen any other way.

First, his identifying with us demonstrated true **humility**.

Had God forgiven us without Jesus becoming human, we might have always viewed him as kind of patronizing us, doling out charity the way an elderly upper class multimillionaire writes a check for the boys and girls club. It feels more like pity than love, kind of a condescending, judgmental gift that says, "You're way beneath me, so I'll help you out."

God would have been perfectly justified to adopt that stance. But there's no way we can see him in that light when we talk about Jesus coming as a baby and living an earthly life.

God put himself in our shoes. That's true identification with us that demonstrates an amazing kind of humility.

Philippians 2:8

Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death — and the worst kind of death at that: a crucifixion.

God's identifying with us also is what introduces us more fully to his **compassion**.

When you break down the word compassion, it means to suffer with. It means feeling what someone else is feeling. God doesn't just show us mercy – he knows our struggle from the inside. He knows what it's like to be us.

In the movie, *The Queen*, we learn some of what happened at Buckingham Palace right after the death of Princess Diana. The entire nation was in mourning, but the queen was silent. It was upsetting to people, because they didn't feel she shared in their grief. There was no sense of identifying with her, no sense of compassion coming from her. She seemed separate and distant.

Contrast that with the image of Rudy Giuliani after 9-11. Regardless of your take on his current run for president, in those days after the tragedy, he won the respect and affection of people across the country because as a leader, he was right down at ground zero with the firefighters and the families of the victims. He was going through everything they were going through, crying with them, hugging them, experiencing the loss and the devastation and the helplessness. That's compassion.

Without a physical Jesus, we could imagine that God is more like the queen, sitting off somewhere separate from us, aloof and unfeeling. But Jesus brings God right down to ground zero. Taking on a body like us means he felt the aches and pains and sorrows that go along with it. Identifying demonstrates compassion. How else could God show us how deeply he cares for us and connects with our suffering?

We can no longer get away with saying, "God doesn't understand my hurt." We can no longer say, "God must not love me." To say that is to mock the one who suffered with and for us to the point of death. He stands right here alongside us, weeping with us and embracing us. His compassion is complete.

God's identifying with us gives us one more thing, which is **hope**. We see a Jesus who lived this life, died and stands on the other side of death, alive again. He's shared our experience, which gives us hope that we can experience his.

I spoke with someone this week who counsels juvenile drug addicts and their parents. He said that as a counselor, one of the most valuable assets he brings to those sessions is the fact that he was a juvenile drug user himself. Parents cling to everything he says. Here's someone who has been there, who has gone through their horrible fears and fights, and

who now is a healthy, productive member of society. He is a beacon of hope that helps families believe they can make it.

That's really the gift of Jesus, isn't it? As we read his story, see all the agony he endured, then get to the end and find he holds out a spectacular "happily ever after," we find hope for our own stories. The author of Hebrews called Jesus the "author" of our salvation, but that word can really be translated as pioneer. He went first and blazed a trail for us to follow. He gave us hope that it can be done, And it's a hope for something that is so dazzling and bright that it overwhelms the darkness of this life.

It's like the closing words in C.S. Lewis' book, *The Last Battle*. The children from *The Chronicles of Narnia* find themselves finally in heaven, and Lewis writes, "All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."

That's the hope we have – a future that only gets better and better. And it is a secure hope, because we've seen Jesus achieve it.

The human Jesus shows us God's vision for humanity and it shows us his street credibility, his identification with us. The author of Hebrews tells us it also shows us one more thing, which is

God's victory over the death keeper

...he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil -- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

God, being eternal, never had to worry about death. When your very nature is life, dying is a foreign concept. So if there's one power Satan could attach himself to, it would be the one that's opposite of God, opposite of life. And he has terrorized humanity with it for all time.

Death is about endings – nothing seems more final. It's about separation – being torn from those we love. It's about failure – what we have to leave undone. It's about decay – nothing more sustaining the body.

Endings, separation, failure decay – that can creep into all areas of life. Is there a part of you that feels like it's dying? The devil loves to drain the life out of us in every realm possible.

Death is a powerful thing because it feels so inevitable. We all die. So how could it be overcome? The only way to show that it isn't all-powerful is to go through it and conquer it from the other side. That proves death isn't permanent. Death doesn't get the

last word, because Jesus has now added a postscript – the resurrection. Life beyond death. Beauty from the ashes.

And in doing that, God not only destroyed death – he broke the back of Satan as well. Death was Satan’s last, best trump card, and without it, he has no other way to gain control over us. God knocked the legs out from under him.

It’s those great words from Paul:

1 Corinthians 15:54-57

Then the saying will come true:

*Death swallowed by triumphant Life!
Who got the last word, oh, Death?
Oh, Death, who's afraid of you now?*

It was sin that made death so frightening and law-code guilt that gave sin its leverage, its destructive power. But now in a single victorious stroke of Life, all three — sin, guilt, death — are gone, the gift of our Master, Jesus Christ. Thank God!

Thank God. The worst that can happen to us – death – is now no longer a threat. Because of Jesus becoming mortal, we can now become immortal.

Could God have chosen a different way to save us? Probably. He’s God. But he knew that no other means would show us so clearly his vision for humanity, his humility, his compassion and his total victory over death

When our kids were younger, we would read them the book, *Guess How Much I Love You*. It’s the story of a young bunny and his dad competing back and forth the way kids like to about who loves who more. Here’s how the story ends:

“I love you all the way down the lane as far as the river,” cried Little Nutbrown Hare.

“I love you across the river and over the hills,” said Big Nutbrown Hare.

That’s very far, thought Little Nutbrown Hare. He was almost too sleepy to think anymore. Then he looked beyond the thornbushes, out into the big dark night. Nothing could be farther than the sky.

“I love you right up to the moon,” he said, and closed his eyes.

“Oh, that’s far,” said Big Nutbrown Hare. “That is very, very far.”

Big Nutbrown Hare settled Little Nutbrown Hare into his bed of leaves. He leaned over and kissed him good night.

Then he lay down close by and whispered with a smile, “I love you right up to the moon – and back.”

Jesus becoming human is God’s way of saying, “I love you all the way from heaven to earth – and back.” Hands down, he always wins the who loves who most game.

For him, it meant temporarily stepping out of his glory, but from our view, is there anything that could be more glorious, more precious than seeing how far he was willing to go to reach us?