



CONSIDER JESUS

CHRISTMAS IN HEBREWS

ERIC C. SMITH
ADVENT 2023

For Ray and Tammie Van Neste

Merry friends who help me
fix my eyes on Jesus all through the year

December 2023
Savannah, Tennessee

DovePress



... occupied with the word [Acts 18:5]

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INTRODUCTION

Let's say you drive past Sharon Baptist Church this first week of December and find me furiously wafting a blanket over a campfire. Rolling down your window, you ask if everything is OK. Still wafting with all I've got, I tell you that I have an urgent message about the upcoming Christmas program I need to get out to the church, so I'm sending up a smoke signal as fast as I can. Now, you may appreciate a good western as much as the next person, and you may admire my mastery of the ancient message system. You agree that the practice undoubtedly served Tonto and the Lone Ranger well, back in the day. But you can't escape the feeling that a smoke signal is a pretty inefficient mode of communication in 2023—especially when there's an iPhone in my pocket! When something so much *better* comes along, it just makes no sense to go *back*.

This is the message of Hebrews. Don't let its more exotic features—the copious Old Testament references, the lengthy argument-chains, the occasional terrifying warnings—intimidate you. The main point is clearer than a smoke-signal on a cloudless day: *Jesus is better*.

The original readers were Jewish Christians who have grown weary and discouraged in following Jesus. It has cost them much. They are cut off from the familiar people, places, and routines that had been central to their lives. The early excitement has faded, and Christian discipleship is now an unglamorous grind. Many are considering just going back to those old Jewish ways; wouldn't life be easier?

So the writer (his or her identity is unknown to us) travels great lengths to show them *Jesus is better*.

The Greek word for “better” occurs more in Hebrews than in all the rest of the New Testament put together! The writer parades past us a star-studded cast of Old Testament messengers and mediators: angels, Moses, Joshua, the priests, the sacrificial system, the tabernacle. After each passes by, he declares Jesus to be better. Though wonderful in their time, God always meant for them to serve a temporary purpose. They were shadows that pointed ahead to the real thing, when Christ would come. Now they had something far better! Turning back would be foolish—and disastrous!

While preaching this single message, Hebrews also unpacks the Christmas message to a greater depth than any New Testament book. It does not recount Mary and Joseph’s journey to Bethlehem, or the visit of the shepherds or the wise men. It *does* explore the mystery of God becoming a man, and all of the glorious, ongoing consequences for our lives. We will learn in these pages that having a fully *human* Savior is essential for our salvation, and a source of incredible practical comfort. Among other things, it means that right now, at God’s right hand in heaven, you have a sympathetic friend, a merciful high priest, and an anchor for your soul. These gifts: this Friend, this Priest, this Anchor, all enter our lives because God’s Son came down to us at Christmas.

These first ten chapters of Hebrews all carry a single application: ***consider Jesus*** (3:1). Let’s slow down our busy minds and focus on him. For ten good minutes each day, stop fidgeting with that phone and give sustained thought to the Son of God who became a man for you. Ponder this priest who is even now pouring out for you the prayers that will keep you to the end. It may be the one thing we frantic Christian folk find most difficult in the Christmas season. But *considering Jesus* will keep us joyfully, fruitfully, enduring all month. So before we begin, let’s ask for grace to consider Jesus.

Pastor Eric

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DECEMBER 1

DECEMBER DRIFT

Hebrews 2:1-4

I grew up visiting my grandparents at Pickwick Lake—about twenty-five minutes south of where I now live in Savannah, Tennessee. My grandmother never learned to swim, but no one ever loved the lake more. Every day that it was humanly possible, she tied on an old-fashioned ski belt, eased onto some inflatable lounge chair, and launched out into the cove. She loved to *float*. Granny went home to heaven in 2017, but her nearly year-round devotion to floating is still the stuff of legend in North Winn Springs.

Here in Savannah, most of my neighbors tend to choose the closer Tennessee River for water recreation over Pickwick Lake. It didn't take me long to see that my grandmother could not have survived life as a river rat. Try to "float" on the river, and you'll wind up somewhere near Paris, Tennessee! A powerful current is always pulling at you in the river. Sometimes it is dramatic, like when the TVA is letting extra water through the gates of the dam. Other times, the current is so subtle that you are barely aware of it. But that river is *always* pulling you. If you don't watch out, you will drift away.

This brings us to the mission statement of Hebrews: "*Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it* (2:1)." All of us are susceptible to spiritual drift. We can be quickly carried away from the gospel message we have heard and embraced. We can slowly fade from a committed walk with the Lord. We can decline in loving God and living for his glory. It can even happen during the Christmas season, when we are devoted to the coming of Jesus himself.

How does spiritual drift occur? The same way you drift in the river: by doing *nothing*. You don't have to deliberately swim after ungodliness to grow distant from the Lord; just neglect to tie yourself off to Jesus. Simply fail to "pay close attention" to him and to his word, and the current will do the rest. You'll look up one day and find yourself miles from where you want to be. It's been known to happen among God's people.

The writer here is thinking back, as he often will, to God's Old Testament people Israel. They enjoyed incredible spiritual privileges! They received a word from God, the Law, "declared by angels!" That word proved reliable: when Israel obeyed it, life was beautiful; when they fought it, they "received a just retribution." Whether on the wilderness journey, in the land, or in exile, if Israel's story teaches us anything, it is that drifting from what God has said carries a steep cost.

Hebrews will show us that this is even more true for us, believers in Jesus. God has given us a *better* word than the Law: the good news of God's grace in Christ! We experienced a *greater* salvation than the Exodus: Jesus delivered us from sin and death! God delivered the gospel to us not by angels, but by the Lord himself, followed by his apostles. Our spiritual privileges are far greater than Israel's! The consequences for neglecting them will be even greater, too.

That is why we are spending December fighting spiritual drift. We will actively anchor ourselves to Jesus, "paying much closer attention to what we have heard." As we busily attend to shopping and celebrating, we will not "neglect such a great salvation" that our God brought to us that first Christmas.



DECEMBER 2

OVERCOMING EVERY BARRIER

Hebrews 1:1-2

I love that scene in *Miracle on 34th Street*: all the children lined up at the department store to tell Santa what they want for Christmas.

Eventually, one mother lifts her little girl onto Kris Kringle's knee and half-apologizing, says, "She's deaf. You don't have to talk to her. She just wanted to see you." Kris looks tenderly at the silent little girl for a moment. He then proceeds, in perfect sign-language, to tell her how beautiful she looks and how loved she is. Then he asks her what she wants for Christmas. The girl's eyes light up as she excitedly talks back! The mother is a puddle of emotion, and the store employees are awed. How can this Santa-for-hire show such personal care for each child? How can he overcome every communication barrier to express love?

The scene provides a faint echo of what God did for us at Christmas. He has made himself known in a variety of ways before: through prophets, dreams, visions, angelic messengers, and the Law. In each case, God revealed a little more of himself. We were getting to know God bit by bit—as if he were slowly turning up the lights in a dark room. At Christmas, God flipped the switch and made himself fully known! How?

If you wanted to know what I am like, you might start with the brief bio on our church's website. You could learn more by reading my words in this book, or by listening to one of my sermons. But if you *really* want to know what I'm like, just sit down with one of my three kids! They have had unique access to me, seeing and hearing things out of

the public eye that no one else has. They can reveal me like no one else (and I'm sure they would not hold back)! *When God wanted to reveal himself fully, he sent his Son!*

As God's Son, Jesus has had unique access to God the Father for all eternity. He was there in the beginning, the One through whom God created all things. He will also be at the Father's side in the end, as the heir who receives all things from God as his reward. But beyond his unique access to God; Jesus actually *is* God: "the exact imprint of his nature!" The image here is the stamping of a coin: the image left in the soft metal is an exact representation of the stamp. Jesus, unlike any prophet or angel, shows us God *exactly* and *perfectly*. Never again do you have to wonder or worry about who God is or what he is like: just watch his Son, Jesus (see John 1:14–18; 14:1–8)!

Jesus is also the "radiance of God's glory." We learn as children that we can't stare directly at the sun: its brightness would blind us! The sun is also far too hot for us to touch! But as overpowering as the sun is to us, we can receive its warmth and light when its radiant beams travel down to our level. You and I also cannot gaze directly upon God: his sheer perfection, his holiness, his glory would overpower us. But at Christmas, God sent us the radiance of his glory: his Son traveled all the way down to us, and became one of us! We sing about it in our carols: "Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see!"

Jesus at Christmas brought God's glory down to our dark, cold world: not to blind us or burn us up, but to warm us and to light our way. Even lowly shepherds were not afraid to draw near to God when he came as a baby, wrapped in rags in a stable. For all our sin and weakness, you and I don't have to run and hide from God, either. Through Jesus, we can draw near. His love has overcome every barrier.



DECEMBER 3

DIRTY JOBS: CHRISTMAS EDITION

Hebrews 1:3-4a

Hebrews opens with *the* most glorious description of Jesus in the entire Bible (1:1–3a). We learn here that Jesus is God’s Eternal Son. He is the Father’s full and final revelation of himself to humanity. He is the radiance of God’s glory, the exact imprint of God’s nature. Jesus is the Creator, Upholder, and Heir of all things! It does not get any higher or more glorious! Then, in the middle of v3, we stumble into the spectacular scandal of the Christmas gospel. This glorious Jesus has also “*made purification for sins.*”

The phrase “made purification” sounds fairly dignified; it’s actually describing one filthy job. It reminds me of the popular TV show, *Dirty Jobs*. Each week, the host, Mike Rowe, took his sheltered, modern viewers inside the hardest, grossest jobs being done across the country on a daily basis. He cleaned out septic tanks, removed roadkill from the highway, and butchered animals. The show celebrated the hard-working men and women of America, the folks who take on the tasks needed to keep the country running—ones that most folks try to avoid or have never even considered. In the Bible, no job is both dirtier and more necessary than “making purification for sins.”

This is one of the loudest messages of the Old Testament, as the first readers of Hebrews knew well. God travels great lengths, especially in a book like Leviticus, to teach us that our sin not only puts us in the wrong: it *defiles* us. It makes us “unclean” and unfit for his holy presence. It disqualifies us from getting close to him. Yet even in our

filth, God still loves us, and provided a way for us to draw near. He appointed a special group of people called “priests” to make purification for the people’s sins. It may sound like an exalted position, but being a priest was really a very dirty job. Each day, he butchered a variety of bulls, goats, and lambs. He burned their bodies on the altar. He collected their blood and sprinkled it before God. Being a priest was hard, bloody, smoky, messy work—and it was never done! Day by day, year by year, they carried out the endless, dirty job of purifying sinners who just got dirty again.

Until Christmas! That is when God’s glorious Son volunteered for the dirtiest job in the universe: he would make purification for our sins. It meant taking on our human nature: Jesus had to be born just like any other baby, and in a dirty stable. It drew him into the messy lives of sinful people like you and me: the lepers and other “untouchable” people Jesus embraces in the gospel provide a picture of how he involves himself in our uncleanness.

Finally, it drove him to the cross. There, he did not simply *bring* a sacrifice; Jesus *became* our sacrifice! The ‘radiance of God’s glory’ covered himself in the guilt and defilement of our sin. *He* is slain. *His* blood is sprinkled. *He* is consumed in the fire of God’s judgment. But when God raised him from the dead on Sunday morning, he had *made purification*! The dirty job was finally done, once and for all!

We know Jesus got the job done, because he did what no priest had ever done before: “he sat down!” Of all the various furnishings in the Old Testament temple, not a single chair could be found; a priest’s work was never done! But when Jesus offered his sacrifice on the cross, *it was finished*. By faith in him, we can be purified before God, once and for all. And it all started at Christmas. You don’t want to drift from him!



DECEMBER 4

JOY TO THE WORLD!

Hebrews 1:4-14

Sometime this December, you will likely find yourself belting out the carol, “Joy to the World!” If you make it to verse 3, you’ve reached one of the best—and the biggest!— explanations of why Jesus came at Christmas: “No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found!” That tiny baby in the manger came on an enormous mission!

“Joy to the World” is not based on the Christmas story of Luke 2, but on Psalm 98. It is a song of hope for God’s Old Testament people, Israel, looking forward to the day God will return to his creation and put things right. On that day, all the nations will recognize Yahweh as the one, true God. He will rescue his people from their enemies, including the curse of sin and death. God would restore his blessing as it was in that “very good” world he first made! Even the seas roar, the rivers clap their hands, and the hills sing for joy as the world’s true Lord comes, bringing the promised restoration. It sounds great, but why sing it at Christmas? This is when “The Restoration” began—very, very *quietly*.

At Christmas, the Lord *did* come down, as promised. God’s Son re-entered the world he had made. Only no oceans roared. No rivers clapped. Not a single hill sang for joy. No one in Bethlehem even got out of bed to come and see! That’s because the Lord didn’t arrive as we expected. He was born as a fragile baby to poor Jewish peasants in a stable. He grew up without ever being recognized as the world’s true King, and ended his life nailed to a cross under a rain of taunts and curses. It doesn’t sound much like Psalm 98! But God had not forgotten

his “Joy to the World” plan. The King was simply coming in stages, so that you and I could enter into the celebration.

If God had shown up at Christmas as a conquering King, none of us would have been clapping or singing; we would have been trembling and running away, because we would still be in our sins. But Jesus came first to be our priest, as we saw yesterday. He didn’t come to shed *our* blood, but his own, to make purification for our sins. After God raised his Son from the dead, he seated him at his right hand in heaven, to rule as the world’s true King (Heb 1:3–4). Now we, along with all the angelic host, worship this King. One day, Jesus will return in glory, Psalm 98-style, to complete the Restoration that began at Christmas. *No one* will miss his entrance on that day! The renewed earth will rise to welcome its rightful Lord, and all who trust in him will join the party.

Christmas is the first move in this series of events. C. S. Lewis called the birth of Jesus “the Invasion!” It may not be how you think of that nativity scene on your coffee table! But at Christmas, God’s Son landed in enemy-occupied territory to launch the great Restoration of his world; it was like the Allied forces hitting Normandy Beach to liberate France on D-Day. We need Hebrews 1:3–14 at Christmas because it reminds us where the story is headed. Jesus is no longer a baby in a manger, but the Priest-King at God’s right hand, awaiting the day when he will put all his enemies under his feet. Today we still see plenty of sin, sorrow, and thorns in our world, but the Restoration began at Christmas! The King reigns even now, and he will return soon. Joy to the world!



DECEMBER 5

ANGELS AMONG US?

Hebrews 1:5-14

Christmas is a good time of year to be an angel! They show up on our cards and in our carols, at the tops of our trees, and sometimes even in our yards as giant inflatables. I've devoured many an angel-shaped Christmas cookie, and through the years have cheered on countless little church girls dressed in white for Christmas programs. There is a major uptick of angels among us each December, because they play such a prominent role in the Christmas story; you can't get far in Matthew 1-2 or Luke 1-2 without bumping into one. Today, Hebrews reminds us that while angels are vital to the Christmas story, they are always there as supporting cast members for Jesus.

Don't be intimidated by the string of unfamiliar Old Testament verses in our reading. The writer of Hebrews is weaving them together to make a simple point: *Jesus is better than angels!* This, in fact, is the message of all of Hebrews 1:1-2:18: while angels are amazing, Jesus is in a class all by himself. He's the eternal Son of God who became a man at Christmas to be our Savior, Priest, and King. The highest angel can't hold a candle to that (Heb 1:1-4)! Let's work quickly through the comparisons:

Angels are called God's messengers; Jesus is called God's Son (4-5). The name angel means "messenger." God sends them to earth with a variety of announcements, as in the Christmas story to Mary, Joseph, and Zechariah. To be called one of God's trusted "messengers" is a magnificent honor! But the name of Jesus is far superior: God calls him "my Son." God has seated Jesus at his right hand as the King who shares

in his own glory. In the Father's heart, Jesus is the name above every name!

Angels are worshippers; Jesus is worshipped (6). Angels are so glorious that their appearance often prompts humans to fall down in worship. But whenever this happens in the Bible, angels always haul the person back up: "Don't worship me! I'm just a fellow worshipper like you (Rev 19:10; 22:9)!" We don't worship angels; we join them in worshipping Jesus. As the shepherds learned, God commanded his angels to worship his Son when he came into the world: "Glory to God in the highest! (Luke 2:14)"

Angels are created; Jesus is the Creator (7–12). Angels in the Bible aren't like goofy "Clarence" in *It's a Wonderful Life*: God made them to be "winds" and "a flame of fire" as they minister for him. But that's just it: God *made* angels. To be more precise, Jesus the Eternal Son of God made the angels (Heb 1:2; John 1:1–3; Col 1:15–16)! Hebrews quotes Psalms 45:6–7 and 102:25–27 to remind us how superior Jesus is: "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever...you laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning...you are the same, and your years will have no end." Jesus is far greater!

Angels are servants; Jesus is the King (13–14). Angels are hustling all over the place in the Christmas story: to Mary in Nazareth, Zechariah in the Temple, the shepherds in Bethlehem. They deliver news, issue rebukes, provide comfort, sing praise to God, and do whatever else the Lord tells them. Angels are *servants*. They serve him a lot better, more faithfully, and more joyfully than you or I do! *But Jesus is the King they serve*. I believe there are angels among us. I'm thankful for the various, unseen ways they may be serving me even now. But as any angel will tell you, there's only one King Jesus!



DECEMBER 6

GLORY RESTORED

Hebrews 2:5-9

When I got a call at 5 AM last Christmas Eve, I knew something was wrong. When I stepped into a foot of water inside our church building, I realized just *how* wrong. The zero-degree temperatures had finally convinced two couplings on our sprinkler system that it just wasn't worth it anymore. In fifteen minutes' time, enough water poured out of that broken pipe to turn our sanctuary into a lake. Services that night and the next day were canceled. Four inches of water stood in our offices. It looked like it would take months to recover (it did). My socks were soaked. I had an ingrown toenail that throbbed with each step as I lugged chairs out of the lagoon. Family from New York and Florida would be arriving at my house soon. About that time, I remembered that I had written a Christmas devotional that month about staying "merry and bright."

Things don't always go our way in this world. In my life, the world likes to save up all its dysfunction and crazy all year long, so it can really show out in December! That's why I love the reminder that there is, in fact, "a world to come (2:5)!" God will renew our fallen world from top to bottom! Even more amazing, he's assigned redeemed human beings like me (not angels) to *rule* that perfect new world (2:5). As I picture me sloshing and grumbling through that icy water last Christmas Eve, this does not seem like a great personnel move for God! But the truth is, God *made* human beings to rule his world. If we don't understand that, we'll miss a vital part of the biblical Christmas message.

Adam and Eve were not just cartoony zoo-keepers: they were the king and queen of God's creation. God made them in his image and gave

them dominion over all things (Genesis 1:26–31). Hebrews 2:6–8 reminds us of this by quoting Psalm 8, which is all about the royal glory God intended us to have: he “crowned them with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection to them.” This helps us grasp how far short of God’s glory we have fallen (Romans 3:23). Instead of exercising godly dominion in the world, you and I are *dominated*—by everything from the weather to germs. We can’t manage our relationships or control our desires or words. Made for glory, we are now a mess.

But at Christmas, God took drastic action to change that! When God’s Eternal Son took on our humanity and entered our world, he accepted, for a little while, being “lower than the angels.” Then, Jesus lived out a perfect human life, beautifully displaying the image of God. Finally, Jesus obediently laid down his life on a cross. God himself tasted death for us, bearing in himself the curse that had gripped our world for so long. But here is the key to the story: when God exalts Jesus to his right hand, the Son did not return to pre-Christmas conditions. Jesus reigns in heaven as our fully-God-AND-fully-human Savior! For the first time since Adam’s fall, a human being has dominion! Jesus fulfilled God’s purpose for humanity, just as Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 talk about!

When Jesus returns at the end of history, we will stand together in that glorious “world to come.” At last, my very un-glorious self will no longer be subject to floods, in-grown toenails, disrupted family time, holiday stress, or a grouchy and sinful heart. Jesus will restore *me* to reflect the glory of God! I will rule with him, merry and bright, forever!



DECEMBER 7

THE ARCHEGOS

Hebrews 2:10-16

I get the sense that church “banner ministries” are not as active these days as they once were. But there was a time when no Christmas Cantata was complete without a procession of banners streaming down the aisle, lovingly sewn by the seamstresses in the fellowship, each declaring one of the biblical names for Jesus: “Immanuel,” “King of Kings,” “The Lamb of God.” One banner that I never saw: “The Archegos.” That’s the title Hebrews 2:10 gives to Jesus: it is one of the Lord’s richest, and least-known.

The Greek word *archegos* (ark-ay-gos), has been translated a variety of ways through the years: “the *founder* of our salvation (ESV);” “the *author* of our salvation (NASB);” “the *captain* of our salvation (KJV);” “the *pioneer* of our salvation (NIV);” “the *perfect leader* of our salvation (NLT).” A similar passage, Hebrews 6:20, will call Jesus the “forerunner,” or the “trailblazer (great SUV names!).” Each of these vivid terms is getting at the powerful meaning behind *archegos*: someone who goes in first so that others can follow. This image takes us to the heart of why God became a man at Christmas.

I once heard the Scottish preacher Sinclair Ferguson explain the meaning of *archegos* by picturing a marine captain, leading his platoon to their objective through a jungle. As they hack their way through the undergrowth, they arrive at a huge ravine the men can’t cross. But it just so happens that the captain is also a world-class long-jumper. He ties a rope to his waist, takes a running start, and leaps over the gorge. After he scrambles up the other side, he ties the rope to a tree and makes a bridge that his men can use to cross to the other side. Once

they all join their captain, they move forward to safety. The captain is an *archegos*: by going in first, he made a way for the others to follow.

This is what God's Son did for us by becoming a man at Christmas. God made us for a glorious destiny: to relate to him as sons and daughters, to reflect his character in all its beauty and holiness, and to rule with him forever as kings and queens. In our sin, we have all "fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23);" we can never hope to reach this objective on our own. But in his great love, God wants to lead us back to our destiny, "to lead many sons (and daughters!) to glory (2:10)!" How? By sending his Eternal Son to take on our flesh and blood, to act as our *archegos*.

Jesus became one of us so that he could blaze a trail back to glory for us. He lived the perfect human life before God that you and I have failed to live. At the cross, he went down into death for us, bearing our sin under the judgment of God. On Easter Sunday morning, the Pioneer of our Salvation came out into resurrection life! The Captain of our Salvation had made it safely to the other side of death and judgment, blazing a trail that we can now follow!

Hebrews 2:14–15 shows us one of the practical results of knowing that we belong to Jesus, the *archegos*: he frees us from the fear of death. Deep down, whether we realize it or not, every human being is naturally afraid of death and of the personal judgment that will follow (see Heb 9:27). Furthermore, the devil uses this fear to control our lives in a multitude of subtle ways. Instead of living in the liberty of God's children, we can cringe and shuffle through life as slaves of fear. This changes when I belong to Jesus, the *archegos*! My fully human Savior has already gone through judgment and death on my behalf! He now waves me over to follow him in freedom, confidence, and hope!



DECEMBER 8

OUR OLDER BROTHER

Hebrews 2:11-15

I was visiting another city a few months ago when I ran into a crowd of people, all wearing matching t-shirts. As I looked closer, I saw that they all belonged to a huge family! “Tyson Family Reunion 2023” their shirt-fronts announced; on the back: “It’s a Tyson thing; you wouldn’t understand!” I don’t know why the sight warmed my heart like it did. Maybe I just know so many families that wouldn’t be caught dead putting on a shirt like that—and not for fashion reasons. Or maybe it reminded me of today’s text.

If you scan these verses, you will see a lot of “family” words, including “sons (10),” “brothers (11, 12, 17),” and “children (13, 14).” You and I were made to be children in God’s family, sons and daughters who share his family likeness. But in our sin, we *rebelled* against God and became very much *unlike* him. You might say we brought “shame” to the family name. That’s what brings us to one of my favorite Christmas truths. At our worst, God the Father was not *ashamed* to claim you as his children, and God the Son was not *ashamed* to call you his brother, or his sister. At Christmas, he did what any loving older brother would do when his little brother or sister has gotten into a mess: he came after you, to bring you back home.

I’ll never forget listening to Tim Keller talk about this in a sermon about the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. When the foolish younger son went off into a far country to squander his inheritance and dishonor his family in reckless living, his older brother did not love him enough to go after him. He was too ashamed of him. Later, when the younger son *did* drag back up to the family home, the older brother did not

celebrate; he sulked and resented and condemned. As Keller pointed out, Jesus told that story knowing all along that he had come to be the true older brother we need!

When you and I had been foolish and reckless in our sin, Jesus was “not ashamed” to identify with us as his brothers. At Christmas, he left his Father’s house and took on our human nature. He came down after us into the filth of our Far Country. Jesus was unashamed to pursue his sinful brothers and sisters all the way to the cross, where he laid down his own life for us and paid our full debt! Even now, as we continue to do all kinds of embarrassing things, Jesus is *still* not ashamed to stand before the Father and call us his brothers. That’s the beautiful picture that Hebrews 2:10–14 paints for us.

Our text invites us to imagine the risen Jesus, standing before his Father in heaven, surrounded by a sea of happy people. Jesus is also smiling broadly. The massive crowd is made of all the prodigal brothers and sisters the Father sent after in the far country. Now, at the cost of his own life, Jesus the Elder Brother has led us all back to glory. There is no trace of shame in his eyes as he stands there with us. There is no resentment in his heart about all the grief we put him through.

It might be a bit much to suggest that we’re all wearing matching t-shirts, but I don’t believe God’s Son would be embarrassed to do even that! He motions to us all, and takes the words of a couple of Old Testament passages (Psalm 22:2, Isaiah 8:17–18) on his lips to identify with us: “Here we all are, Father! All of your beloved children. All of my brothers and sisters! I brought every last one of them home to you, just like you asked!” And there, before our Father, our older brother Jesus rejoices over us! This is why he came at Christmas.



DECEMBER 9

WHY GOD BECAME A MAN

Hebrews 2:16-18

Years ago, I read a theology book by an 11th Century monk named St. Anselm of Canterbury. The book's title is *Cur Deus Homo*? I realize that this may not solve your last-minute gift needs! But that Latin title raises a question we all need to think about at Christmas: "Why the God-Man?" We're so used to celebrating the baby Jesus that we forget just how outrageous the whole idea is! Eternal, all-powerful God is birthed as an infant. Suddenly, the Maker of the Universe must be cleaned up, have his umbilical cord cut, and be rocked to sleep. Charles Wesley grasped at the mystery when he wrote: "Our God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man." He upholds the heavens, yet now fits in Joseph's hands? Incomprehensible! *Why?* Why the God-man?

Hebrews 2:5-18 has been answering this very question. In the middle of explaining why Jesus is superior to all the angels, the writer underscores that only a God-man (not an angel!) could be qualified to save us. God's Son "had to be made like his brothers in every respect (2:17)." Jesus becomes one of us so that he can: restore us to our original glory (2:5-9), be the Captain who leads us out of death (2:10-16), and the older brother who brings us home with joy (2:11-16). Finally, because God's Son became a man to serve as our faithful and merciful high priest (2:17-18). The priesthood of Jesus for us is a vital truth for understanding Christmas and for living the daily Christian life.

In the Old Testament, a priest is an appointed representative between sinful man and holy God. No one comes before God without one! The priest had to be "like you:" he had to come from among the brothers of

Israel, just as my state representative has to come from Tennessee, like me. But the priest also had to be *different* from you: he had to be clean, holy, and with access to God that you lacked.

A good priest was *faithful*: he was always available for you to dump your sins and sorrows on. A good priest was also *merciful*. His heart went out to your struggles. He understood your temptations, failures, and suffering. He wanted to relieve your burden! He carried your sins before God, prayed for you, and offered a sacrifice to propitiate God's wrath (turn it aside). After all that, the priest would lay a hand on your shoulder and say, "Your sins are forgiven. May the Lord bless you and keep you and make his face shine upon you." A good priest was the best friend that you could have!

At Christmas, God became a man to be your perfect priest! Jesus is *different* from you: he is God's Son, with total access to the Father. But Jesus also *became like you*! The eternal Son became your human brother. He experienced the same suffering, sorrow, and temptation in this world that you do. At the cross, he offered *himself* as a propitiation for your sins. His death forever removed God's anger from you! At this very moment, Jesus is at God's right hand, serving as your priest. He is *faithful*: always available, always eager to serve and help. He is *merciful*: your sin-struggles don't disgust him and your sorrows don't drain him. He always receives you as you are. He reassures you that you are not condemned, and you are not alone. He is your brother! What a friend we have in Jesus! This is why God became a man at Christmas.



DECEMBER 10

CHRISTMAS CONSIDERATIONS

Hebrews 3:1

A lot of “considering” goes on at my house in the Christmas season. We consider: what gift we will buy for each family member, what food we will bring to the party, how we will sleep all these family members staying with us, how we can fit all these activities into our calendar, and whether we will stick to that diet or push it till January!

Hebrews 3:1 calls us to another important consideration at Christmas: what Jesus’ coming means for us. Instead of rushing past that Christmas theology we learned, let’s “ponder these things in our hearts,” like Mary. In light of what we learned in chapter 2 (“therefore” in 3:1 connects the chapters), consider how Christmas changes our lives.

The first thing the writer urges us to consider here in 3:1 is the new life Jesus has given to us. Remember, these readers are not having a merry Christmas. These Jewish believers lost it all when they followed Jesus. Their families disinherited them. Their employers fired them. They are now cut off from the familiar places of Jewish worship. As they look at their lives, they are depressed! But in vi the writer reminds them of the new life Jesus gave them at Christmas: “*Therefore holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling...*” Your present circumstances don’t tell the full story of your life!

Jesus has given you a new position. “Therefore, holy brothers...” You may feel like a forgotten, unloved nobody. But if you belong to Jesus, the Son of God has made you his brother! We saw this on December 8:

how God's Son saw us in our slavery to sin, death, and Satan. How this loving older brother put on our flesh and blood, and came down into our Far Country to bring us home! Everyone in your life may be ashamed to identify with you, but Jesus is not! He calls you "my brother" and rejoices over you! Your earthly family may be badly broken and full of drama. But you're in *God's* family!

Jesus has given you a new purity. "Therefore, *holy* brothers..." At Christmas, God's Son became a man to be our priest. When our sin made us unclean before God and cut us off from his presence, Jesus stepped in. At the cross, our priest offered one, perfect sacrifice on our behalf. His death not only makes us forgiven before God, but *holy*! There is no ritual we must perform. No law we must keep. No monastery or convent we must join to be "holy." By simply receiving Jesus' finished work by faith, God sees me as holy. I don't have to run, hide, or pretend. I have full access to God!

Jesus has given you a new purpose. "Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a *heavenly* calling..." The writer of Hebrews is steeped in the stories of the Old Testament. He loves to compare our Christian lives to Israel's journey to the Promised Land. Like Moses, Jesus delivered us from sin at the cross, and now Jesus is leading us home to our heavenly calling! The writer will say that Jesus is leading us "to glory," to our ultimate "rest" and "inheritance," to "a better country" and our "true home!" All of these images remind us that Jesus is leading us somewhere wonderful—to be with God and to be made like God—and that this current life is not all there is. He compares it to Israel's pilgrimage, to Abraham's sojourn, and to a race of faith. But he's always reminding us to look beyond the plane of this world to that heavenly call.



DECEMBER 11

OUR GREATER MOSES

Hebrews 3:2-5

In Hebrews 3:1–6, we are pausing to “consider” the practical difference that Christmas makes for us. Yesterday, we considered how we received a new *life* because the Son of God came down to us. Today, we consider the new *leader* we received at Christmas.

He begins by reminding us of Moses, the Old Testament’s greatest leader. If you remember the story, God sent Moses as his *apostle* (which means “sent one”) to get his brothers out of slavery. No matter how scary Egypt was, or how stubborn Pharaoh got, Moses stayed *faithful* to his calling. Through 10 Plagues, the Passover, and all the way to the Red Sea, when Egypt’s armies were bearing down and the people were losing their minds, Moses stayed faithful! He stretched his arms wide to heaven, parted the waters, and got those people across! What a faithful leader! But his job was only beginning!

Now he has to lead his brothers across the desert to the Promised Land. For 40 years, Moses guides them, feeds them, and prepares them for their new home. The people do not make it easy on their leader! They repeatedly whine, wander, rebel, and bring down God’s judgment on themselves. But Moses is also a faithful priest. He begs God to show them mercy. He even asks God to judge *him* instead of his sinful brothers! Those clowns wouldn’t last two days on their own, but faithful Moses gets them all the way to the Promised Land. A leader like this is an incredible gift from God.

If you are still with me, then you are ready for our next Christmas consideration: at Christmas, God gave *you* a better leader than Moses.

Jesus is the One Moses is patterned after! Moses is part of God's house of faith; Jesus built the house! Moses is a servant in the house; Jesus the eternal *Son* who inherits the house! And at Christmas, he came to be *your* Moses! Jesus is the ultimate *apostle*: God sent him to deliver his brothers from slavery. On the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses appeared to Jesus to talk to him about the "Exodus" Jesus was going to accomplish for his people (Luke 9:31)! Jesus is *faithful* to his mission all the way to the cross, where he offers *himself* as the Passover Lamb! He asks God to judge *him* instead of us! He stretches his arms to heaven, and tears the Temple veil in two so we sinners can cross into God's presence!

Of course, Jesus' job with us was just beginning! If you are his, then every day, the risen Jesus is *leading* you through the wilderness of this world. Providing. Protecting. Preparing you for your reward, until he gets you safely home to God. We do not make it any easier than that bunch Moses had to deal with, but Jesus is a faithful high priest! He ever lives to make intercession for us at God's right hand. When we sin, and forget our calling, Jesus is pouring out prayers for us before God!

Even faithful Moses finally got fed up with his sinful brothers—remember when he struck the Rock instead of speaking to it? It kept Moses out of the land. Jesus never grows weary or impatient. When we are faithless, he is faithful! He will not quit until he leads every last one of his little brothers and sisters home! This is the 24/7 leader God gave you at Christmas.

Consider Jesus today (3:1, 12:1, 12:3)! We spend time pondering many things, yet find it so hard to focus on Jesus. But considering *him* fuels our faith, joy, and endurance!



DECEMBER 12

THE CLAUSE

Hebrews 3:6-19

When I was young, my siblings and I went to the theater to watch Tim Allen in *The Santa Clause*. I didn't get it as a kid, but the title was playing off the word 'clause' with an 'e,' like an article in a contract. In the movie, the 'Santa Clause' refers to a special rule: by putting on Santa's suit, Scott Calvin accepts all the responsibilities of being Santa! You gotta read that fine print! There's a far more important clause for us in 3:6.

After talking about how wonderful it is to belong to God's household, Hebrews 3:6 drops one of those life-altering clauses on us: "*And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.*" That's a big "if!" Believers in Jesus receive the amazing inheritance of God's household...*if* we hold fast our confidence and boasting in our hope. This ominous "if" is one of many warnings in Hebrews. The first readers were so beaten down by life, so distracted by their troubles, so weary of the cost of following Jesus, that they had lost their confidence and joy. They are paying less and less attention to what God has told them in the gospel. As their grip on God's promises slip, some even consider going back to their old, pre-Jesus lives.

So in 3:6-19, the writer tells a warning-story. Many folks in Moses' day started the journey to the Promised Land. They left the Red Sea with joy, enthusiasm, and praise. Then they hit the wilderness. Suddenly, they did not understand or like how God was leading them! They grumbled. They hardened their hearts to God's word. They even tried to go back to Egypt. They did not "hold fast their confidence and

boasting and hope.” They also did not enter the Promised Land! God judged them for unbelief.

This sobering story carries an urgent message for us: the Christian life is a long game! God is leading *us*, like Israel, on a journey of faith. But God has spoken to us a *better* message (the gospel), promised us a *better* inheritance (a New Heavens and a New Earth), and given us a *better* leader (Jesus). If God judged Israel for bailing on *their* journey, what will he do if we abandon *ours*? The consequences for our unbelief will be *more* severe, not less. The phrase we often use, “once-saved-always-saved,” can be very misleading. It is wonderfully true that all who God saves will stay saved. But the people God saves to the end do not harden their hearts to his word, rebel against the leadership of Jesus, or abandon the life of faith. *If* you are saved, you will *show* it, by *persevering*. You won’t be perfect, but you *will* press on. You will hold fast to Jesus.

This may not be the most coziest Christmas message, but it is the most important. How does your relationship with Jesus stand *this* Christmas, compared to *last*? Are you as close now as you were then? Are you still walking by faith, holding fast to him? If we want to press on, here are three action steps. 1) Watch your heart (vi2). Spiritual drift is a silent, subtle phenomenon: pay attention to what you are loving these days, and keep close to Jesus. 2) Stay in community (vi3). You need regular, ongoing contact with those fellow believers in your local church a whole lot more than you think. The life of faith is a group project! 3) Receive his Word (vi5). As you read God’s Word in this book and hear it preached, don’t harden your heart! His voice is lovingly leading you home!



DECEMBER 13

DREAMING OF A WHITE CHRISTMAS

Hebrews 4:1-11

The best-selling music single of all time, by several millions, is Bing Crosby's "White Christmas." Released in 1942, the song spoke to the fears and longings of a nation at war, as military service separated thousands of families at the holidays. Crosby tried to avoid the wistful song when entertaining the troops, but they always demanded "White Christmas" in the end. The room grew silent and reflective as each soldier dreamed of a Christmas "just like the ones they used to know." The song was about a lot more than snow! It was about a desire for restoration: of home, of family, and of peace.

This is close to what our passage means by "the rest remaining for the people of God." This future "rest" that God has promised his people is much more than just ceasing to work or lying down for a nap. "Rest" is the biblical idea of *shalom*, of wholeness, of a world where nothing is broken and nothing is missing. "Rest" speaks of a day when God's people are finally home with him, in a new heavens and a new earth, forever. God taught his people about that ultimate rest throughout the Old Testament. For instance, on the seventh day of each week, God told Israel to observe the "Sabbath," which means "rest." Yahweh was no Pharaoh, grinding slaves into the ground 365 days a year; he was a rest-giving God! By Jesus' day, the Pharisees had twisted the Sabbath into a rigid, anti-fun-day of nit-picky rules and rituals. But originally, the Sabbath provided a preview of that sweet, eternal rest that God planned to give to his people one day.

For the wilderness generation of Israelites, the land of Canaan also came to represent God's promised "rest." For forty years, these pilgrims dreamed of laying down their burdens in the Promised Land: no more slavery, no more desert wanderings, no more enemy attacks. It meant settling into a "land flowing with milk and honey" with their families before the Lord, in the inheritance God promised their fathers. Canaan was a recovery of the Garden of Eden. It was "home." It was life as God intended. Moses led the people to Canaan's borders, but the warrior Joshua delivered the promised rest.

Today, our passage emphasizes that the ultimate rest still awaits God's people (4:1, 6, 8–11). Both the Old Testament Sabbath days and the land of Canaan were previews of the true *shalom* of God. As great as Joshua was, the rest he gave to the people in Canaan did not last. We needed a greater leader for the *eternal* rest our souls long for! This is just the rest-giving Savior God sent to us at Christmas. We have already seen that Jesus is the greater Moses, but he is also the greater Joshua! He fought all our battles at the cross, bearing our sin and defeating death. When we turn from our sin and our self-righteous works to trust in Jesus, we rest in *his* finished work for us!

This is just a foretaste of that ultimate rest that Jesus is leading us to, day-by-day. In the new heavens and new earth, we will finally be home with God. He will wipe away our every tear, and banish every aspect of the curse. In resurrection bodies, we will always be with the Lord, satisfied in him, forever. This is the true "White Christmas!"

This leaves us, finally, to the practical application of our passage. If you want to enter *that* rest, don't harden your heart to the voice of Jesus. Keep holding fast to him!



DECEMBER 14

A BLADE FOR CHRISTMAS

Hebrews 4:12-13

I know I don't *need* anything for Christmas, but something comes over me when I walk into Williams Lumber here in Savannah. I see that vintage Christmas display of Case knives. I glimpse the beautiful, gleaming blades (I'm a committed single-blade man). I study those cool, peach-pit style handles. I'm sucked into the aura of that tall, wooden display case like something out of my grandfather's childhood. The next thing I know, I'm pressing my face against the glass like a kid at a toy store. No matter how old I am, or how many knives I may already have, I suddenly know I need a blade for Christmas!

The writer of Hebrews thinks that we could all use a blade, too. He just has something larger and more dangerous than a Case knife in mind! The blade that you and I need is a sword, so big and so deadly-sharp that it can cut you in two before you know what happened. We learn about this blade in a verse that every Southern Baptist among us probably associates with a children's memory verse. But Hebrews 4:12-13 is not just for a line of youth group kids scrambling to find verses during a "sword drill;" it's about the life-altering, life-saving power of God's Word for us this Christmas.

These famous verses conclude the mini-sermon of Hebrews 3-4. He has been warning us from Israel's story not to give up following Jesus before we reach the final "rest." The wilderness generation of God's people started off well when they left the Red Sea. But they hardened their hearts to God's voice. They stopped listening to their leader, Moses. In the end, they failed to enter God's rest. David used this cautionary story

to warn his own generation in Psalm 95: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” Hebrews now passes on this same warning to us. When we trusted Jesus, we started off on a long journey of faith. On the way, life may get difficult, or busy, or confusing. But whatever happens, *don’t* harden your hearts to God’s word. *Don’t* let go of your confidence in your leader, Jesus. *Don’t* stop striving until you enter that promised rest. But what does this have to do with God’s Word and Hebrews 4:12–13?

Hebrews 3–4 teaches that it is possible to fake our way through the Christian life. In the wilderness generation of Israel, many thousands physically followed Moses, while their hearts longed for Egypt and disbelieved God’s Word. In the same way, we can *look like* we are following Jesus, while our hearts are far from him. We can go through religious motions with God’s people—including all the motions of celebrating Christmas!—when in reality we love the world, we live for everything *but* Jesus, and we long to be free to just do what we want.

The uncomfortable message of Hebrews 4:12–13 is that *God’s word finds us all out in the end*. When we stand before God to give our final account, there will be no faking and no hiding. The reality of our hearts, in all their secret thoughts and intentions, will be revealed. What we really love and trust will be known.

This should prompt us to ask for a blade for Christmas! Let’s ask God to use his word to open us up *now*. Pierce through all my hypocrisy. Separate the real from the fake in my life. Let me see myself as God sees me. If this sounds painful, I can testify from experience that it is! But when Jesus wields the blade of his word in us, he cuts to heal. We may not want this blade for Christmas, but it’s exactly what each of us needs.



DECEMBER 15

A MOST PRACTICAL GIFT

Hebrews 5:1-10

Every kid knows there are two kinds of gifts under the tree. There are the *fun* gifts you want, and the *practical* gifts you need. You probably aren't as excited about those undershirts, socks, and church shoes as you are for that new drone or video game! But a wise person knew you needed them; later, you'll be glad you have them. Hebrews 4:14–5:10 is about a practical gift God gave us at Christmas. You did not ask for it, and may not be excited about it at first. But God knows how much you need a priest.

In 5:1–4, the writer explains the qualifications of a priest. First, there are his *actions* (1). A priest's main job was to represent sinful people before a holy God. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest entered God's presence on behalf of the people of Israel. He wore a breastplate decorated with twelve stones, representing the twelve tribes, because the people were on his heart. The priest confessed their sins, offered the sacrifice, and secured their forgiveness.

The priest's attitude was also essential (2–3). A priest dealt with the most sensitive parts of your life. He knew all about the sin, failure, and weakness you hid from others. You told him how ignorant and wayward you've been. I don't want to be that vulnerable with *anybody*! That's why a priest could not be harsh, or uncaring, or impatient, or self-righteous. He had to be *sympathetic*. He dealt *gently* and *patiently* with weak people, because he *understood* how hard it is to walk with God in this world. A good priest gently *invited* you to pour out your heart without embarrassment or fear.

But a priest also needed an *appointment* from God (4). You can't just "volunteer" to act as a priest; you need authorization to come before God. When Old Testament people took it on themselves to do a priest's work without "official access" (like Korah, Saul, Uzzah, and Uzziah) it never ended well!

Moving into 5:5–10, we see how Jesus, as the Son of God made man, perfectly fulfills every qualification to be our priest! First, God *appointed* Jesus to the task, when he raised him from the dead and exalted him to his right hand (5–6). We don't have to worry about Jesus' security clearance: no priest has ever been so close to God!

Jesus also has the *attitude* of a priest (7–8). As God's Eternal Son, he is so high above us that we might be afraid to show him our weakness. But at Christmas, he came down and became one of us. Jesus shared our struggles and sorrows. He was tempted in every way that we are, and "*learned*" by real, human experience what it means to trust and obey God through suffering.

These verses invite us to think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, facing the cross. Under intense pressure, Jesus threw himself on the ground, sweat pouring off him like blood, crying loudly to God through tears. This is God in the flesh! Yet he then gets up, goes obediently to the cross, and trusts God even as death sweeps over him. This priest *understands* us.

And so Jesus now performs the actions of a priest for us (9–10). We will explore this more thoroughly tomorrow. But after being "made perfect" for the job in his incarnation, God's Son now serves as your perfect priest in heaven. He represents you. He presents his sacrifice for you. He prays for you. There is no more practical gift!



DECEMBER 16

THAT'S WHAT IT'S FOR!

Hebrews 4:14-16

I don't claim to be the greatest gift-giver. But a few years ago I stumbled onto a present for Candace that stands as one of the great practical gifts in Smith history: a monthly subscription to Southern Shine Car Wash. For the price of two car washes per month, we get a little sticker inside our windshield that admits us to *sixty* washes a month! Pull up with a filthy car and drive away sparkling clean, never leaving the vehicle! Since the pass is essentially unlimited, you don't worry about it raining that afternoon getting the car dirty. Just go back and get clean again, as many times as you need. *That's what it's for!* Our van now stays cleaner than ever, all the time, so we're *both* very happy.

I think about that gift as I read Hebrews 4:14–5:10, which is all about our need for a priest. The original readers, Jewish Christians, understood a priest's value much better than we do. They came to our passage discouraged, because they thought they no longer *had* a priest. Following Jesus got them kicked out of the Jewish places of worship. They are now cut off from the priestly ministry they had always relied upon. Who now will bear their sins and sorrows? Who can pass through the temple curtain into God's presence for them? Who can offer the sacrifices that make them clean?

To these sad Jewish Christians, the writer of Hebrews says: "You don't understand what you *have* in Jesus! God has not only given you *a* priest; he has given you 'the Great High Priest' all those earlier priests were patterned after! Jesus, the Son of God, hasn't just passed through a curtain; he has *passed through the heavens*. He doesn't come before God once a year; he *lives* in God's presence all the time!

And Jesus is not just a *heavenly* priest; he is also a *human* priest. He is one of us. He lived in this world and was tempted and buffeted in all the ways that you are. That means he sympathizes with sinful and suffering people like you. His heart is tender. Your sins don't disgust him. Your weaknesses don't wear him out. Your struggles make sense to him. Your sorrows move him. And since Jesus himself never sinned, he is able to go before God and *help* you! His death has forever secured your forgiveness. He is now eager to pour mercy and grace into your needy life, just when you need it most. You *have* a priest!"

And if you have trusted in Jesus, then you have a priest, too. The application for our lives is simple. If you *have* Jesus as your priest, then hold on and draw near! Imagine if, after getting that car wash subscription, we never used it. We rode around town each day in a filthy vehicle, passing by Southern Shine multiple times, but never pulling in. Maybe we didn't realize it was already paid for. Or we preferred to lug out the hose and buckets and brushes ourselves. Or we were embarrassed that our car kept getting so dirty. We did not understand the gift we had! We would need to draw near and use it!

Most of us don't understand the gift we have in Jesus as our priest. Hold fast to him! Don't let your heart drift from him. Draw near to him! You don't have to wonder what Jesus thinks about you: *he loves you!* Not the photo-shopped, Christmas card "you." He loves and understands the *real* you, in all your sin, weakness, and need. What grieves him most is that you doubt and withdraw from his love. So come as you are to his throne of grace. Stumble in guilty and receive mercy. Show up needy and find help. Come in dirty and come out clean, again and again and again. That's what it's for!



DECEMBER 17

MATURITY

Hebrews 5:11-6:12

Several Christmases ago, the internet exploded with a rash of videos featuring children disappointed with their gifts. After hyping the kids up for some epic surprise, parents gleefully filmed them opening such intentionally lame gifts as toothpaste, toilet paper, and school supplies. Confusion, indignation, and despair ensued. Of course, the most dramatic reactions went viral! Millions laughed at the videos, because children have not learned to mask their raging ingratitude when things don't go their way. We don't condemn them too harshly; we assume they will grow up and grow out of it with time.

On the other hand, say I don't get that Travis Tritt poster I want this Christmas. If I lay down in the wrapping paper and throw a fit, I doubt that my loved ones will find it "cute." Behavior that is understandable at age five is unacceptable at 37! My family expects more from me, because I should be grown up by now! That's our text today.

At the end of 5:10, the writer of Hebrews makes a comparison between Jesus and Melchizedek, the mysterious king-priest of Genesis 14. At this point, the writer wants to treat his readers to a deeper discussion of these matters—spiritually speaking, it would be like serving them a juicy steak. But steaks require serious chewing, and he knows his readers can't handle solid food; they're still on a milk-only diet. Of course, this would be fine if they were infants in the faith. But they're not!

They have known Jesus so long that they ought to be *teachers* by now! Regretfully, the writer considers these readers to still be "unskilled in

the word of righteousness.” They should have long ago been able to stand on their own two feet as Christians, with their “powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish between good and evil.” But instead of living mature, independent, fruitful Christian lives, they depend on their teachers to do everything for them, spoon-feeding the same “elementary” teachings again and again. It’s not a flattering picture! It stung these first readers. It stings us.

More serious, of course, is the warning the writer lays on us in 6:4–8. If you honestly never develop a taste for and a delight in the things of God...you might have more than an immaturity problem. You may have an *unbelief* problem. An *unsaved* problem. And here’s the scary part: after you dabble in the gospel and the life of the Spirit and then reject it, it is difficult for you to ever be recovered. Something happens to your heart—it hardens, it sears—leaving you more resistant to the gospel than someone who has never heard. “Could that be happening to some of you?” the writer asks.

It’s not a very jolly thought in this week before Christmas, I know. Tomorrow, we’ll think more happily of Jesus as the anchor of our souls. But today, it would be wise to let this sober warning do its work in us. God uses both parts of his Word—yesterday’s tender portrait of Jesus, *and* today’s scary warning about falling away—to keep us. The thing for us to do is follow 6:10–11: keep on going with Jesus! Follow him as earnestly now as you did at the beginning. Don’t grow weary in loving and serving his saints. When the way gets hard, or even a little boring, don’t let your heart grow sluggish. Find someone who has patiently trusted Jesus year-in and year-out, and imitate them. That is real spiritual maturity.



DECEMBER 18

OUR ANCHOR IN HEAVEN

Hebrews 6:13-20

One of our all-time favorite Christmas gifts is the old ski-boat our family bought a few years ago. On a cold day, I drove down to inspect it. It was the right size, and I liked the color. It was almost twenty years old, but the owner had taken care of it; it was clean, and the motor started right up. Finally, as I looked through the compartments, I came across the anchor. It was an unassuming little thing, tucked out of sight, never mentioned by the salesman. I knew that nine out of ten times out on the water, I would never even think about it. But if I ever really needed to stay put, that anchor would become the boat's most essential piece of equipment.

Every boat needs an anchor; so does every soul. And that's just what God provided for us when he sent Jesus. Hebrews 6:19 is the only time the Bible calls Jesus our anchor, but once is all that we need. This wonderful image provides immeasurable comfort for storm-tossed folks like the original readers of Hebrews, and like us.

Most anchors go *down*, sinking far beneath the surface of the water and into the mud below. The winds may blow, the rains may pound, and the waves may crash against you, but a good anchor will hold you safely in place. The Christian believer's anchor goes *up*! It stretches all the way into heaven, where Jesus our priest has gone "through the veil" into God's presence as our "forerunner"—there's another wonderful image!

We obviously can't see Jesus our anchor, dug deep within the veil of heaven. When our lives are calm and pleasant, we may not think much about being tethered to him. But let a storm begin to batter your little

vessel down here on earth, and you will find what an essential piece of equipment this anchor is. Trials, disappointments, crushing cares, and my own sin can all cause me to flail around down here on my end of the cable. But the immovable Jesus still holds me firmly to God. Because the Son of God became a man at Christmas, and now stands in Heaven for me, I am *tethered* to a glorious destiny. So I can face every storm with hope, assurance, and patient endurance.

Our model for this life of faith is Abraham (6:13–18). In Genesis 12, God promised to bless Abraham and to multiply his offspring. Since Abraham was childless and already old, that promise was pretty hard to believe from the start. But after years passed without receiving the promised child, it became much harder for him to keep going. So in Genesis 15, God sent down an anchor for Abraham: he swore an oath that he would keep his promise. God swore by himself, staking his own reputation as God, that he would do all and exactly what he had said. This gave Abraham “strong encouragement” to keep trusting God! Though he still didn’t have the child, his faith now rested on *two* unchangeable things: God’s promise and his oath. Since it is “impossible for God to lie,” Abraham “held fast” to his hope. No matter how much time passed, or what challenges arose, Abraham “patiently waited.” He was anchored.

In all his dealings with Abraham, God was also thinking of *us*, the “heirs of the promise (6:17).” We can have greater confidence than Abraham did in our own faith-voyage: we not only have God’s promise and God’s oath—we have God’s Son! If we have fled for refuge to Jesus, we have a sure and steadfast anchor for our souls in heaven. It may have been awhile since you thought about this anchor; why not thank God for it now?



DECEMBER 19

TO THE UTTERMOST!

Hebrews 7:1-28

Tom sat in the crowded living room, trying to keep up with all she was telling him. He was spending Christmas with his fiancée's large family for the first time and finding it all a bit overwhelming. Meanwhile, Caroline was trying to explain who each person was and how they were related to her. To Tom, it was an impossible swirl of aunts, cousins, brothers-in-law, step-siblings, and old friends. But to Caroline, it was all very simple: each person was connected to her family, and she could tell you how. Patiently, she started all over again. That's how it was for these early Jewish Christians as they read their Old Testaments. They could explain the genealogy of just about every major figure in the book. Except for one, that is: the mysterious *Melchizedek*.

Melchizedek shows up in Genesis 14 like a total stranger at the family Christmas party. We don't know where he came from, who his parents are, when he was born, or when he dies. All we know is that he is *very impressive*: Melchizedek is *both* king *and* priest of Jerusalem. This was forbidden in Israel: priests came from Levi's tribe and kings from Judah's. Melchizedek belongs to some "higher order!" Abraham recognized Melchizedek's greatness by humbly paying him a tithe and receiving his blessing. Then, faster than Santa can disappear up a chimney, Melchizedek vanishes from the story. David was puzzling over this character hundreds of years later, when God suddenly gave him an insight about the coming Messiah: "He won't just be a king like me," David cried. "He will also be a priest, like Melchizedek! And *he* will serve forever!"

Here in 7:11–24, the writer of Hebrews wants to show us how Jesus fulfills David’s prophecy in Psalm 110. As we have already learned, the original Jewish Christians have been moping around because they no longer have access to the Levitical priests. But they have a much greater priest in Jesus! True, he can’t trace his genealogy back to Aaron or Levi, like Israel’s priests did (Jesus descended from the Kingly tribe of Judah). That’s because Jesus is from a higher order: the Melchizedek order! He alone is great enough to *both* rule us as our king *and* cleanse us as our priest.

Furthermore, the old kings and priests all served temporarily, because they eventually died and had to be replaced. But Jesus holds his office “by the power of an indestructible life (15–16):” he will be our Priest-King forever! When God raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him to his right hand in heaven, God swore Jesus in with the oath David talked about in Psalm 110: “You are a priest *forever*, after the order of Melchizedek (17).”

This incredibly good news is vital for our daily Christian lives! Because the risen Jesus serves as our forever Priest-King, “he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him (7:25).” It’s one of my most cherished Bible verses. Jesus has taken full responsibility for saving me! He has already offered the only sacrifice I will ever need for my many sins at the cross (7:26–27). And now, at every moment, he is standing before the Father, interceding for me (7:25)! *God’s Son* is praying for *me*!

When he is the furthest thing from my mind, Jesus is pouring out prayers on my behalf. He is constantly shielding me from a thousand invisible forces that attack my soul (see Luke 22:31). When I grow tired of living for him, he never grows tired of living for me, making sure that I get home. He is saving me to the uttermost, right at this moment. It is the least-appreciated aspect of Jesus’ ministry to us: stop and thank him for it now!



DECEMBER 20

NEWER AND BETTER

Hebrews 8:1-13

Throughout the year, I like using hand tools for woodworking: hatchets and planes, mallets and chisels, rasps and files. It's a quiet, unhurried, calming experience that other woodworkers have been enjoying for thousands of years. But when Christmas rolls around, and I'm trying to quickly produce a lot of gifts for friends and family, I put those old hand tools away and plug in the 220-volt table saw! No one appreciates old things and old ways more than me; but if you need efficiency, newer is better!

That's the message of Hebrews 8: Israel's Old Covenant relationship with God was wonderful in its day. But God had always planned to replace the Old Covenant of Moses with something far better: the New Covenant of Jesus! To consider going back to the old ways, like the discouraged Jewish Christians reading this letter, shows that you don't yet understand just how much better the New Covenant of Jesus is.

The priest of the New Covenant is better. Under the Old Covenant, Moses the priest ministered to the people from the tabernacle. This earthly tent was a tiny model of God's presence in Heaven; it was amazing! Still, Moses in the tabernacle could not save the people. In the New Covenant, Jesus the priest stands in God's *actual* presence in Heaven! He is interceding for us now, saving us to the uttermost (7:25)!

The promises of the New Covenant are better. The Old Covenant relationship rested on conditional promises: God would bless Israel as their God *if* they obeyed his law. It's a perfectly reasonable condition; Israel just failed miserably to meet it! If Israel's story teaches anything,

it's their total inability to remain faithful to God. That's why they ultimately lost the Promised Land! But the New Covenant is built on far better promises: God's *unconditional* commitment to save us, no matter what! "For I will be merciful toward their iniquities and I will remember their sins no more (8:12)." Jesus purchased this unconditional forgiveness for us at the cross! Praise God!

The people of the New Covenant are better. Old Covenant Israel did not have an *information* problem; they had a *transformation* problem! God clearly explained his expectations in the Law. He sent them scads of prophets and priests. They knew just what they needed to do...they just didn't *want* to do it! They might obey for a while, when God punished them or a prophet yelled at them. But it never lasted; their problem was in the heart. The New Covenant of Jesus is better, because God makes us new people! He does not just *tell* us to obey; he gives us the desire to do it! When we are born again, God puts his law *inside* us, writing it on our minds and in our hearts. We still fight with sin and unbelief, but God makes us new people, who *want* to live for him!

The permanence of the New Covenant is better. The Old Covenant was doomed to failure. It was built on conditional promises, to sinful people, served by imperfect priests. But all along, God was planning to replace it with a covenant that was built to last! The New Covenant of Jesus is permanent because it ultimately does not depend on us, but on God. He has made unconditional promises to transformed people, who are served by a perfect priest! What security! When you enter the New Covenant of Jesus, you *will* continue it. God himself has seen to it that you will, for his glory!



DECEMBER 21

CHRIST OF CHRISTMAS PAST

Hebrews 9:1-26

My own Christmas celebration is not complete until I have read Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. You know the story. Ebenezer Scrooge is forever changed by the appearance of three spirits: Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Future. I thought of that story as I read through Hebrews 9, because it also speaks of three “appearings”—not of three ghosts, but of Jesus Christ. In the *past*, Christ appeared as a baby in Bethlehem (9:26); at *present*, he appears in heaven as our priest (9:11); in the *future*, he will appear on earth again as the King who saves (9:27–28). We need to understand all three of Christ's appearings to grasp the full message of Christmas.

We begin today with that first appearing: why did God's Son appear as a baby in Bethlehem on that first Christmas? Hebrews 9:26 gives the answer: “But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.”

Jesus appeared at Christmas to bring an end to the age. The arrival of God's Son on earth was so momentous, it brought everything that came before it to a crashing end. His appearing ushered in an entirely new era in history, which we acknowledge in our own calendars. Something either happened B.C. (before Christ) or A.D. (*anno domini*, ‘the year of our Lord’). Some of our favorite Christmas carols sing about this massive shift that Jesus brought to our world: “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight!” and “A thrill of hope! A weary

world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn!" But what did Jesus do to that changed everything?

He appeared at Christmas to put away sin. Christmas comes with some seemingly impossible tasks: like me trying to neatly wrap my wife's Christmas gift or us trying to keep our house clean for company with three kids still living in it. But "putting away sin" is the truly impossible task! Hebrews 9:1–11 describes Israel's endless routine of sacrifices: they may have put sin off, but they could never put sin away! At the same time, God spoke of a day when he would deal with sin fully and finally, once and for all. That is exactly why Christ appeared at Christmas! "Call his name Jesus," the angel told Joseph, "for he will save his people from their sins (Matt 1:21)." He came as the Lamb of God who *takes away* the sin of the world (John 1:29)! How would he do it?

He appeared at Christmas to sacrifice himself. Jesus would not put away sin by *bringing* another sacrifice; he would *become* the sacrifice. As Isaiah 53 prophesied, God himself would offer himself in our place, as our substitute, to bear the judgment for our sin. Jesus' sacrificial death is actually woven throughout the Christmas time story: we see it in his rejection in Bethlehem; in the way he is bound in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger; in the arrival of shepherds who were raising lambs for the Passover; in the magi's gift of myrrh, an anointing oil for burial. God could not stay in heaven to put away our sin; he had to appear among us, and sacrifice himself! The sin-bearing death of Jesus is what *makes* Christmas a sweet and joyful season for us. By his sacrifice, Jesus has sanctified all who believe in him "once and for all." Apart from anything that we do, Jesus has put away our sin and *made* us holy before God, forever.



DECEMBER 22

CHRIST OF CHRISTMAS PRESENT

Hebrews 9:1-26

“What are you doing this Christmas?” Many people have an ironclad set of Christmas traditions they follow each year. Others might alternate which side of the family they travel to each Christmas. Some spend the day on the road, racing from one gathering to the next. Other families make a point of staying in their own house all day; anyone is welcome to come by, but they won’t be leaving the driveway. I don’t know what you plan to do this Christmas, but today’s reading is about what Jesus will be doing.

Hebrews 9:11 tells us of that second appearing of Jesus: not in Bethlehem as a baby, but in heaven as “a high priest of the good things that have come (9:11).” We are far more familiar with Jesus’ first appearing at Christmas, and his final appearing at the end of history. But this middle appearing tells us what Jesus is doing for us *right now*!

First, we must appreciate what life was like *before* Jesus appeared as our priest (9:1–10). To draw near to God, you stood outside a special tent called the tabernacle. A group of priests would go inside the tent to serve God for you, into “the holy place” where you were not allowed. But even these servants could not pass through the large curtain that separated them from the “most holy place.” This innermost room was an earthly copy of God’s heavenly dwelling place: it was covered in gold and housed the Ark of the Covenant. God allowed only the *High Priest* to enter this most holy place once a year, on the “Day of Atonement.” After offering a sacrifice for his own sins, the High Priest sprinkled the

atonement blood for the people on the Ark, covering the people's sins for another year. This arrangement was of course better than having no atonement at all, but it still came with serious flaws. After all of that ritual, the worshiper remained at a distance from God, way outside the tent. While the priest had secured your atonement, you knew all along that you would soon have to come back and go through it all over again. It was never done! You were forever managing your sin, never really dealing with it. You never truly felt close to God or clean before him.

All this changed when Christ appeared before God as "a high priest of the good things that have come." When Jesus offered up his own life for us at the cross, he dealt with sin once and for all. Risen from the dead, he ascended into heaven and entered "through the greater and more perfect tent," the real presence of God! Jesus appeared in heaven for us "once for all;" no other sacrifice would ever be necessary to cover our sin! Jesus the priest came presenting his own precious blood on our behalf. He made that old way of relating to God "obsolete," because what he brought is new and better.

The present, priestly work of Jesus has brought so many good things into our lives on this Christmas! He has "secured an eternal redemption" for us: it is secure and lasting! He has finally "purified our conscience from dead works." We don't have to skulk around in shame and low-grade guilt over our sin; Jesus has cleansed us within! This frees us not to hang back in fear but "to serve the living God:" now *we* are the Lord's royal priesthood! This is what Jesus' priestly work is securing for you this very Christmas. He is presenting his once and for all sacrifice on your behalf. He is interceding for you and he is keeping you. As we sin and struggle our way through this holiday season, he sends to us an endless supply of mercy and grace so we can serve him.



DECEMBER 23

CHRIST OF CHRISTMAS FUTURE

Hebrews 9:27-28

It only happened one December, but we still talk about it every year. On our route to church, a man had projected onto the side of his house a clock that counted down to Christmas by days, hours, minutes, and seconds. With my three young children, I did not think we could get more excited for Christmas, but somehow this ticking clock took us all to a new level of expectation. Each time we drove past, the large, glowing numbers sharpened our focus and renewed our energy: “Look! It’s getting closer! We’re almost there!” Soon, we were talking about all our holiday plans again—the gatherings we would attend, the family we would see, the gifts we hoped to receive. We drove on, reminded that a wonderful event lay in our future. We were now “eagerly waiting” for it!

In the final verse of Hebrews 9, this is how the writer describes our attitude toward that third “appearing” of Jesus Christ. In the past, he appeared at Christmas on a mission to put away our sin (9:26). In the present, he appears before God in heaven as our priest, where even now he presents his perfect sacrifice to cover our sin (9:11). In the future, Christ will appear once more to bring his ministry to its electrifying conclusion: “So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him (9:28).”

The word “salvation” is a lot bigger concept than we give it credit for. We often speak of someone “getting saved,” and mean by that the

moment when someone trusts in Jesus to forgive their sins. This is a momentous event! But it is also just the beginning of biblical salvation. Through Jesus Christ, God has promised to recover, restore, and renew what was lost, damaged, and corrupted by sin, for his own glory. I see the beginning of God's salvation on a tiny scale when I believe the gospel and Jesus enters my life. But I won't see full-scale salvation until Jesus "appears" once more.

At Jesus' return, he will complete the salvation-work he began at his first coming. The world's rightful King will banish every last vestige of sin's curse from his domain. He will liberate this earth we love to become a breathtaking "New Heavens and New Earth." He will swallow up death, raising his people from the grave and transforming our lowly bodies to be like his own. We will struggle with sin no more; Jesus will conform us to his image, and we will shine like stars. The King will wipe the tears from our eyes, and the memory of every sorrow and evil will fade from memory. Then we will "enter into the joy of our master," launching the great adventure of eternity with the Lord; each day will be more thrilling and awe-inspiring than the last. God and his glory will be the center of it all. This is biblical "salvation!" We should be eagerly waiting for it!

The knowledge of Christ's third appearing changes my perspective about everything, but especially those future events described in 9:27: "Just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment." By itself (as it is often read), this is one of the Bible's most chilling verses! The reality that I will one day die and receive God's evaluation of my life should sober me as I go about my life today. At the same time, if I keep reading into 9:28, I remember that my Judge is also my Savior! I belong to the Christ who appeared to put away my sin at the cross, who appears in heaven now as my priest, and who will appear again to save me. I can wait eagerly for that!



CHRISTMAS EVE

‘T WAS THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

Hebrews 10:1-10

It was Christmas Eve in 1822, and the biblical scholar Clement Moore had just purchased a turkey for the Christmas basket his family was preparing for the poor. As he rode home through New York City's snowy streets, he studied the plump, bearded Dutchman driving the sleigh. His mind turned, naturally, to Santa Claus. By the time he arrived home to his six children, Moore had composed what would become the most famous Christmas poem in history: "Twas the Night before Christmas." For 200 years, reading this classic story has been a Christmas Eve tradition for millions of Americans.

This year, I want to suggest that we bring in another reading alongside Moore's iconic verse. Hebrews 10:5-7 is the original "Twas the Night Before Christmas." These verses are not nearly as familiar as traditional Christmas readings in Matthew 1-2 or Luke 1-2. But Hebrews 10:5-7 takes us behind the scenes of Bethlehem, providing the perspective of God's Son as he is about to enter the world. In this "Christmas Eve according to Jesus," we overhear the Son speaking to his Father in heaven, before he embarks on this wild and dangerous mission. He is almost like a young soldier saying his final goodbyes at the train station. He speaks the words of Psalm 40: 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said 'Behold I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'

As Hebrews has reminded us many times, the idea of “sacrifice” runs through the biblical story like a scarlet thread. From the animal skins God uses to cover Adam and Eve, to Abraham’s offering on Mount Moriah, to the slaying of the Passover lambs in Egypt, to the entire system of sacrifices that control Israel’s daily life...God has left no doubt that sacrifice is important.

The ocean of blood spilled on the Old Testament’s altars drive home to us that God is holy, our sin is costly, so atonement is necessary. And yet, after *all* those sacrifices, Jesus can say to his Father on Christmas Eve: “that’s never been what you’ve desired. You’ve taken no pleasure in them.”

Of course, in one sense, it *did* please God when his people brought those sacrifices in his obedience to his command. But in another sense, those sacrifices did nothing for him. As 10:1–4 explains, it’s *impossible* for the blood of bulls and goats to remove a human being’s guilt against God! Deep down, the thoughtful Old Testament worshiper knew it: *This isn’t working!* That’s why they had to keep offering sacrifices over and over—it was never *done!* Instead of leaving *clean* before God, they felt more *conscious* of sin than ever! Just read David’s prayer in Psalm 51, after making every sacrifice in the book.

On Christmas Eve, God’s Son steps forward. “*A body you have prepared for me.*” The Eternal Creator would become a small, helpless baby in the womb of a virgin. “*I have come to do your will, O God as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.*” It’s what the story had been about all along! All those sacrifices had been shadows of the work that Jesus would now accomplish in the fullness of time: God himself would satisfy his own holy demands by sacrificing *himself* in our place! By this once-for-all offering of the body of Jesus, we would finally be clean! Finally sanctified! Finally, we could draw near! No more sacrifices, no more guilt, no more fear! With that, Jesus entered our world.



CHRISTMAS DAY

HAVE A SEAT

Hebrews 10:11-18

Margaret stood in the kitchen, staring straight ahead. She had been in motion since the day before Thanksgiving. She had planned and budgeted and shopped and wrapped. She had decorated inside and out. She had shuttled kids to rehearsals and attended their performances. She had worshipped and served and caroled and volunteered with her church. She had coordinated with extended family and invited and cleaned and hosted. She had not stopped. She could not stop. The list seemed to go on forever. Even when she lay down at night, her mind remained in motion; there was just so much to do. And now, at 2 pm on December 25, she suddenly realized that it was all *done*. Every gift opened. Every meal eaten. Every dish cleaned and put away. Soft music now played behind the laughter of children and the chatter of family in her house. Her husband handed her a mug of cider and guided her into the living room. Letting out a long breath, Margaret sat down. The feeling was indescribable.

I don't know if you can relate to Margaret on this Christmas Day. But the blessedness of sitting down after completing a long, tiring job is the controlling image of this last study in Hebrews. Once more, the writer draws a dramatic contrast between life under the old priesthood and life under the priesthood of Jesus. He describes the old priest in VII: "standing daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins." The picture is one of busy, constant, anxious, unending, futile labor. Day after day, year after year, he offered sacrifices that do not work, but left everyone feeling dirty and distant and defeated. The tired priest stood and toiled on, knowing

that his work would never be done. It is an absolutely exhausting thought.

We find quite a different picture of Jesus in vi12–13: “But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet.” The momentous Greek word at the heart of this picture is *hapax*, which appears seven times in Hebrews 9–10 (more than anywhere in the New Testament). *Hapax* means “once and for all.” In the sharpest contrast imaginable to the old priests’ endless, nervous, ineffective sacrifices...Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross is “once and for all!” It will never be repeated, because nothing further will ever be needed. His death in our place fully satisfied every demand of a holy God from sinful people. His single, supremely-valuable sacrifice has now “put sin away (9:26),” and “secured an eternal redemption (9:12).” That means Jesus’ work is finished. Complete. Final. Sufficient. Perfect. Nothing else is required to make us clean or to draw us near. There is nothing more to do. And so, his job forever done, the risen Jesus ascended into heaven and did what no other priest had ever been able to do: Jesus had a seat. He *sat down*. Our happy Priest-King now waits at God’s right hand to return for the thrilling *finale* of this salvation story.

So where does all that leave us, we who belong to Christ, on this Christmas Day?

Like our Savior, we can have a seat. We can let out a long breath. We can lay down our shame over the memory of sins past, the guilt and embarrassment over present failures and shortcomings, the anxiety of pretending that we are doing better than we really are, and that nagging sense that we should really stand up and do something. We can choose, by faith, to lay hold of the once-and-for all sacrifice of Jesus-in-our-place. We can bask in the wonder and relief and joy that Christ’s single offering for us on the cross *has already perfected us for all time* before God, even as we are still *being sanctified* in our real, imperfect

lives each day (10:14). We can listen to Martin Luther's admonition to a tense, unhappy Christian: "*What is it about your own miserable works and doing that you think could please God more than the sacrifice of his own Son?*" On this Christmas Day, we can dare humbly to believe in the finality of the gospel for us. We can relax and rejoice in the grace of God, for the glory of Jesus. Have a seat.

If you are a Christian, then go and make merry today. Eat the cinnamon rolls and the extra helping of macaroni-and-cheese. Drink the boiled custard and the afternoon coffee. Exchange gifts with people you love and enjoy the fire out of them before the Lord. Delight in the euphoric hyper-activity of the children racing around your house, smile at the storm of shredded wrapping paper they leave behind, clip the zip ties and install the batteries at their request with a glad and generous heart. Savor any second you may get in the presence of an older loved one, and thank God for the memories of those no longer with you. Play a round of dominoes, read the Christmas story aloud, and fall asleep on the couch watching *It's a Wonderful Life*. Overlook any selfishness, pushiness, laziness, thanklessness, pettiness or other annoying qualities of the people in your life; magnanimity wears well on Christmas. If you catch yourself sliding into grouchiness, ingratitude, or worry, then quickly confess it to God, shake it off, and get back in the game, knowing that Christ's once-and-for-all sacrifice covers this, too. Pitch in with the cleaning, thank your hosts and hostesses profusely, tell lots of old stories, and laugh as much as you possibly can. And if you get the slightest chance to sing a Christmas carol, then belt it out with all of your jolly, forgiven heart.

This is a day for Good Christian men and women, boys and girls, to rejoice—with heart and soul and voice. Now we need not fear the grave; Jesus Christ was born to save! He has opened Heaven's door, and man is blest forevermore! He calls us one and calls us all, to gain his everlasting hall! Christ was born to save! Christ was born to save!

So let's all have a seat—Merry Christmas!

DovePress



... occupied with the word [Acts 18:5]



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