

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. ¹⁷ For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (Hebrews 2:14-18)

What is the True Miracle of Christmas?

A Christmas miracle – how popular is that idea? TV specials and Christmas episodes of our favorite shows are full of them. Loves are restored, things that were lost are found, families are rebuilt, Santa Claus turns out to be real after all. It’s such a common device that it’s often mocked on TV today. Of course, all of us here know that none of that stuff is the real miracle of Christmas. But even in the church, there is a tendency to multiply miracles at Christmas. Dogs talk and tell about the Savior. Little drummer boys get smiles from the baby in the manger. This has been going on since the Middle Ages and there are endless legends and stories about Christmas miracles. But we don’t need legends and stories, and we certainly don’t need Hollywood invented nonsense, because there are plenty of real miracles recorded in the Bible at the first Christmas. Angels tell shepherds their Savior has been born. Prophecies are fulfilled. A virgin gives birth to a son. But over all these miracles, one great miracle stands. We might call it the true miracle of Christmas. Do you know what I’m talking about? **What is the true miracle of Christmas?**

I.

That God’s Son took on the power to die. Now that seems like a strange way to put it, don’t you think? You all know what I’m talking about, right? The Son of God took on human flesh and was born as a real human baby. But why is that important? That’s what the book of Hebrews tells us this morning. **“Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil.”** Jesus shared our humanity so that he could die. God can’t die. He’s always been there and he always will be there. But we die. Now, we weren’t supposed to die. The way God created us we were supposed to live forever. But now, we all die because we’re sinners and death is the just result of our sin. So God the Son became a real human being so that he could die like we all have to.

This is where we get to one of the most difficult truths of Scripture. It’s a point that many people have dismissed as too confusing to ever understand. But it’s absolutely essential: Jesus had two natures, his Son of God nature and the human nature that he got from the womb of his mother. But when Jesus died, it wasn’t just the man part that died. Jesus had two natures, but he was one person, Jesus Christ. So everything that happened to one part of him, happened to all of him. Everything that one part of him had or did, all of him had or did. So, when Jesus did miracles, it was the God part that gave him the power to turn water into wine or walk on water or heal the sick. But it was the one Jesus who did the miracle and all of him took part in it. So the man part, too, did the miracles. In the same way, when Jesus died, it was the man part that gave him the power, the ability, to die. But all of our Savior laid down his life for us. So the God part died, too. God did a miracle here, the greatest miracle since creation. He joined himself to us. That is what Christmas is really about: God the Son makes himself man and he still is true God.

God did all that to save us from death. When he did that, Jesus defeated the devil, who has the power of death. The devil is the reason that we die. He tempted Adam and Eve to sin knowing that God would punish us with death and hell for that sin. This passage goes on to point out that all our lives, we were held in slavery to the fear of death. Think how much of our lives are dominated by being afraid of dying. There are people who will not go to visit someone in a hospital because those places just scare them. What are they afraid of? Death, whether they realize it or not. Think how many things parents do to make sure their children don’t run out into the road, or fall off a high place, or stick something into a socket and get electrocuted. We’re afraid of death taking those kids. Think how much time and money we put into wills and life and health insurance. We’re afraid of our own death. Now, in our society, we show that fear of death by avoiding the subject and by worshipping youth and health. But isn’t every attempt to leave a legacy behind nor to roll back the clock,

struggling with what death does to us? Without Christ, death has to be a terrifying walk into the darkness. Without Christ, the devil holds us in slavery to the fear of death.

But Jesus came to conquer death and free us from that slavery. Today, when we die, it is the doorway to eternal life. Because we're still sinners, sometimes we Christians are still afraid of dying. But we have the comfort of what Christ did for us and what he promises us. We have the gospel of Christmas and Easter to push those fears back. I can tell you from years of ministering to the elderly and the dying that many Christians have been set free from all fear of death. They look forward to life with Christ in heaven.

To defeat the devil and set us free from the fear of death, Jesus had to become a real man, who could die and then rise in our place. Yet, he had to remain true God for that death and resurrection to count for all people who will ever live. The true miracle of Christmas is that God became man in the womb of the Virgin Mary to give him the power to die for us.

II.

Of course, that miracle really began nine months before Christmas, when the Holy Spirit caused the Virgin Mary to conceive and God the Son entered her womb and assumed his human nature from her. But the miracle came to light on Christmas when the baby was born. God did all that because we needed it. God's love is a miracle all by itself. **The true miracle of Christmas is that God's Son stepped in to help us.**

This text really is a meditation on how God the Son helped us. He makes that brief comment, **"For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants."** There is no angel Christmas. The devil and all the demons in hell are fallen angels who sinned against God and are condemned to suffer forever. The Son of God did not take on an angel nature to free them. But he did come to free us, who are the children of Abraham because we share the faith of Abraham.

To do that, God says that Jesus **"had to be made like his brothers in every way."** All that we are, Jesus is. Everything that we are born with, Jesus was born with. The early church really struggled with this truth. They kept trying to fit the God part and the human part of Christ together. Sometimes, they imagined a mixture of God and human that was really something new. Sometimes, they thought that the God part of Jesus replaced his soul or his spirit or his mind or his heart or his reason. But every time they tried something like that, they stumbled across statements in the Scripture that just don't allow for that understanding. Finally, a great theologian named Gregory of Nazianzus came up a way of explaining it that clarified it for everyone. He said, "What Jesus has not assumed, he has not redeemed." In other words, if Jesus didn't have a human body, then our bodies would not be paid for and they could not rise on Judgment Day. If Jesus didn't have a human soul or a human heart or human reason, then he didn't pay for those things and we could not live with him in heaven. I imagine that Gregory was looking at this very passage when he had his "aha" moment and made it clear: Jesus had to be made like his brothers in every way. All that you and I are born with, except sin of course, Jesus was born with. All that we are (except for our sin) will rise and live with him because Jesus has redeemed it.

He has become a faithful high priest who made atonement for God's people. That's the way the Holy Spirit put it for us this morning. What does atonement mean? It means paying for sins. This is not a popular concept today, but it is the whole reason for the Christmas miracle. God sent his Son here to pay. God is a judge. He does demand payment for sin, for crimes against him. In our modern age, we've become so focused on reforming criminals that sometimes we forget that justice demands punishment. God's justice demands that sinners die and go to hell for every sin that they have ever committed. But God's love wants every sinner to be forgiven. So God himself, God the Son, took on human flesh so that he could step up and make the payment that takes away our sin. He suffered our punishment. That is a miracle all by itself: that the justice of God would allow God's own Son to be punished in our place. That baby who slept in the manger was born to die on the cross and pay for the sins of all mankind.

You could spend the rest of your life pondering the miracle that is Christ and you would never be done. This morning, God shows us another aspect of that miracle. That Savior knows what life is like for here and now, too. The writer to the Hebrews says, **"Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."** It hurts to wrestle with sin. It's painful to have the world in our face, constantly telling us to live in a way that defies God. The devil turns up the heat on us in all kinds of uncomfortable ways. Whether it's sex or alcohol or materialism, they constantly try to drag us away from God. And Jesus experienced the same thing. The devil and his society made living for God hard. Now, Jesus had an

advantage we don't have. He had no sinful heart. But he did have a real human heart and he had to fight against temptation. So he knows what we are going through. He knows how hard it is. Sometimes, when we struggle with something, it helps to talk to someone who's been there and understands. Certainly, when we need help with a problem, someone who doesn't understand it can mean well, but still make things worse. Jesus knows what it is to be human in a sinful world. Every day, he strengthens us to fight against sin. Every day, he stands with us and hears our prayers and runs our lives so that we can live for God.

All that is wrapped up in that great miracle that overshadows everything else about this day. Christ was born in Bethlehem. He is the true Son of God. He is the true, human child of Mary. He has taken on all that we are. He has paid for all our sins. He works every day to strengthen us and bring us home. It's kind of ironic that so many Christians in so many times and places have multiplied miracles for Christmas. What more do we need? It's more than sad that the world around us is so desperate to find some meaning that it takes a holiday that everyone knows celebrates the birth of Christ, and looks for some lesser miracle to celebrate. That baby in the manger is the Son of God and our Savior. That is the greatest miracle in history. God did that miracle for you and me. Celebrate it today. Amen.