



⁵ It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. ⁶ But there is a place where someone has testified:

“What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?”

⁷ You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor

⁸ and put everything under his feet. ^b

In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. ⁹ But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

¹⁰ In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. ¹¹ Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. ¹² He says,

“I will declare your name to my brothers;

in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises. ^c

¹³ And again,

“I will put my trust in him. ^d

And again he says,

“Here am I, and the children God has given me. ^e

¹⁴ 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.

I am the furthest thing from a celebrity hound. I don’t read the gossip pages or follow the latest Hollywood debacle. But like most of you, I can find it rather exciting to see someone famous in person. Take President Bush for example. Why did I not care to watch him on television but

when his bus came roaring through our little town, I stood on the street just to catch a glimpse? (Please remember that this was *before* his second term. I don't think I would have gone to see him *after* his second term!) We are all a bit enamored with famous people even if it is a Christian musician or favorite preacher.

This is why it was kind of exciting to have seen Mel Gibson in person when he was promoting his film, *The Passion of the Christ*. I watched the film at Willow Creek Church and then Bill Hybels interviewed Gibson after the movie was finished. You could tell by the audience that I was not the only one who was fascinated by seeing him in person. However, it did not take long for that positive feeling to wear off when I quickly realized that Mel Gibson has a very wrong idea of the passion of Jesus Christ. This is how Gibson described Jesus' sacrifice. "Jesus could have paid for our sins with a prick of his finger—one drop of blood—but he chose to go all the way."

It was bad enough to have heard him spout this heresy, but it was much worse to listen to the roughly six thousand evangelical pastors in the room applaud this statement as if he had said something profound. They should have known better! You do spot the heretical nature of this statement, don't you? Gibson understood the blood of Jesus to be some sort of magical potion—all that was needed was a single drop—as if Jesus' blood was the thing that saves us. If a drop of blood would do the trick, why not a single red cell? Or maybe the white blood cells contain the salvific properties—or is it the plasma? If that were true, why didn't Mary prick Jesus' foot the minute he was born and use that drop of blood to secure salvation for the world? Jesus could have gone back to the Father at that point and had avoided decades of human suffering. But in Gibson's understanding, "Jesus chose to go all the way."

I do believe that Gibson was somehow attempting to applaud Jesus' sacrifice—that he went beyond the call of duty motivated by his love for mankind, but his view has the effect of grossly diminishing the work of Christ. If Gibson's view is true, why did Jesus take on flesh and blood? Why did he have to live a perfect life? Why did he have to face temptation? Why did he have to die and be raised to life? All of these aspects of the work of Christ are completely unnecessary in Gibson's view. And sadly, I think too many Christians don't have a full grasp on why they are necessary and what difference it makes in our daily lives.

To start off, I want to jump ahead to verse seventeen where it says, Jesus *had to be made like his brothers in every way*. This verse unequivocally declares that Jesus had to become human and had to die. This raises the question—did Jesus have to die? Was it absolutely necessary? Was there any other way? Before we answer that question, I want to establish the principle of aseity. Aseity is the doctrine that states that God does not need anything. He is self-existent. This is described in Acts 17. *The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands.* ²⁵ *And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.* Simply put—God does not need us. God did not need to create us because he was fine all by himself. God has always existed in a Trinitarian relationship and nothing could add or subtract from this perfect existence.

We must be rid of the old notion that God created us as a hopeful daddy. He created us hoping and can we say “praying” that everything would turn out alright. God’s decision to create us would be like our decision to become a parent. There is no guarantee that our children will turn out alright. Let’s face it—being a parent is like buying a stock—you can put a lot of effort into helping things turn out for the good, but you do not have ultimate control of the outcome. Our children may turn out alright or they may go astray. Some of it is under our control and some of it is not. We are hopeful that all will be well, but we can’t be sure.

But this is not how God created us. He was not surprised by Genesis chapter three. God’s jaw did not drop to the ground when he watched Eve take a bite of the forbidden fruit. God did not scream from Heaven, “What are you doing! Look, I made this perfect garden for you to live in and you went and ruined it. Just look at the mess you’ve made. Now what am I going to do?!” The fall of the human race into sin did not surprise the Creator.

We could say that God did not need us—that is, he did not need to create us. But once he created us, was it necessary that he redeem us? Was God bound by his own holy character to bring about redemption for his creation? Once again the answer is “no” and this chapter helps us understand why.

The book of Hebrews mentions angels a great number of times. Chapter two also has several mentions of angels, including the start of our passage in verse five. *It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking...* We can guess that the Jewish Christians to whom this was written had some confusing ideas about angels. But this is what we do know. The Son is superior to the angels in every way, as chapter one clearly teaches. However, verse six tells us that mankind was made lower than the angels and specifically, that Jesus “for a little while” was also made lower than the angels. This was true because in God’s economy, human were of a “lower” sort than angels. Angels were created to be heavenly beings who exist at all times in the presence of God, so there is a very real sense in which we are lower than the angels and Jesus was also lower than the angels while he was on the earth.

Despite this heavenly hierarchy, angels are not able to be redeemed. Jumping ahead to verse sixteen we read, *For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants.* The help in question is redemption and salvation. Jesus was came to help Abraham’s descendants, which is all of the human race, but he had no plan to redeem fallen angels who chose to abandon God’s domain and cast their lot with Lucifer. These fallen angels that the Bible calls demons are forever lost. They will be thrown into the Lake of Fire along with Satan. What this means is that God is not under any obligation to redeem any of the members of his creation. If he was not obligated to redeem fallen angels then it follows that he was not obligated to redeem fallen humans. Therefore God did not have to save us.

Why then does it say in verse seventeen that he *had* to be made like his brothers in every respect? Why does it say in verse seven that the Father *made* the Son a little lower than the angels? The language almost sounds like a type of obligation—Jesus had to be made like his brothers. In other words, redemption was something that Jesus had to do—it was somehow necessary for him to save us. If God was not required to save us—otherwise his gift of salvation would not be the ultimate gift of mercy, it would be something that we deserved—why all this

language about the necessity of Jesus becoming a man? God was not obligated to redeem mankind, but once the decision to redeem was made, Jesus had to become a man.

That begs another question—just when did God make the decision to redeem mankind? Of course that decision was made from all eternity. There never was a time in the mind of God that creation and redemption of man was not a part. Redemption is not merely the pinnacle of human history it is the pinnacle of all eternity. So there is a sense in which God did have to become man. In order for God to remain faithful to his own character, he had to redeem mankind. Please understand that he did not have to do this because we deserved it in any way. He had to do it to remain faithful to his holy and merciful character.

This helps to answer a common question by skeptics. I am sure you have heard the question, “Can God create a rock that is too heavy for him to lift?” This is supposed to be some sort of ultimate *gotcha* question because either way you answer it, you will be claiming that God cannot do something, that his power is therefore limited in some way. Can I tell you how to answer questions like these? Your response to that question should be a simple “yes.” Of course there are things that God “cannot” do. God cannot sin. God cannot be the cause of evil. God cannot deny himself. God cannot change, improve or evolve. God cannot be fickle. God cannot be faithless. Yes, there are all kinds of things that God “cannot” do, if you want to use that word.

This is also a good way to answer people who don’t like all of the “rules” about Christianity. I am sure you know people who do not want to become a Christian because they cannot submit to all of God’s standards for righteous behavior. Likewise there are countless believers who also do not like being bound to these same standards. Christians may not voice their opinions like a skeptic would, but they hold them deep within their heart when they think, “I don’t know why I can’t _____ (fill in the blank, whatever that might be).” Such a person might even admit that they know this behavior is “wrong” but they wished that it wasn’t wrong. They look out onto the endless choices of behaviors and decisions that they *could* make and they’re like a cow looking over the fence always thinking there is greener grass somewhere else. You can give the same answer to these people that you give to skeptics—even God cannot do the things that he himself forbids. God limits himself by his own character. He can’t do some of the things that you are thinking you would like to do.

Now let’s get back to God’s eternal plan of redemption. There never was a time in all of eternity that redemption of mankind was not part of God’s plan. In order to redeem mankind, Jesus had to be made like us. It was a necessity, not an option. He didn’t become a man so he “could go all the way” as Mel Gibson put it. The explanation begins in verse fourteen. *Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity.* The author of Hebrews lists four reasons that Jesus took on flesh.

1. *so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death* (14-15)

What does it mean that the devil has the “power of death”? How many of you had been to the passion play in Richland Center called The Keys? Thousands of people enjoyed this passion play for the ten years that it was performed. My son Ryan credits the power of this medium with helping him to get saved. As wonderful and edifying as this play was, there was as serious

theological error at the end. Those who saw it will no doubt recall that Jesus descended into hell and stole the keys from Satan's hand. This is why it was called *The Keys* and that was the part of the play where everyone cheered and called for joy. . I know that this was what the author of the play intended because I personally called him to clarify this point. He told me that they believed that Jesus actually descended into hell and stole the keys from Satan.¹

The only problem is that there is not an ounce of Biblical support for this idea. Most of us probably took the idea of Jesus taking the keys away from Satan in a symbolic sense, but even that is not correct because Satan never possessed the keys of Heaven and Hell. This is a very commonly held belief in some circles. Some of the people who hold this view take it a step further and claim that Jesus not only went to hell, but he suffered in hell for our sins. They believe that the cross was not sufficient to atone for sins. Here is a quote from Joyce Meyer. "There is no hope of anyone going to heaven unless they believe this truth I am presenting. You cannot go to heaven unless you believe with all your heart that Jesus took your place in hell."²

We must reject this heretical belief in no uncertain terms. Please note—I am not suggesting that *The Keys* also believed this false message, it's just that the two are commonly held together. Jesus did not take our place in hell because his atoning work on the cross was fully sufficient.

Matthew 10:28 clearly teaches that Satan does not have the keys of Heaven and hell. *Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.* In this verse we are told to fear the Lord precisely because he possesses both the power to kill the body and throw the soul into hell. Men can only kill the body. The devil can kill and destroy but the devil does not possess the power of death in an eternal sense. Satan does not send anyone to hell. God alone does that. Furthermore, Jesus said to the thief beside Him, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). Jesus could not have suffered for our sins in hell since he was taken to paradise to be with his Father. The devil does have power and influence in the realm of death. He makes us fear death and is a roaring lion roaming about seeking to devour. He has power but his power is not absolute. Satan cannot do anything that the Lord does not allow him to do. Moreover, for all who trust in Christ's atoning work, they are released from the slavery of the fear of death.

2. The second reason Jesus had to become a man was *in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God* (17). Jesus served in a threefold manner as prophet, priest and king. Jesus' role as High Priest gets a lot of attention in the book of Hebrews, so I won't spend a lot of time on it right now. A High Priest is the ultimate mediator between God and man whose job was to make atonement for sins. Here is the description from Leviticus 16.

"Aaron shall bring the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household, and he is to slaughter the bull for his own sin offering.¹² He is to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense and take them behind the curtain.¹³ He is to put the incense on the fire before the LORD, and the smoke of the incense will conceal the atonement cover above the Testimony, so that he will not die.¹⁴ He is to take some of the bull's blood and with his finger sprinkle it on the front of the atonement cover; then he shall sprinkle some of it with his finger seven times before the atonement cover.

¹⁵ “He shall then slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain and do with it as he did with the bull’s blood: He shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it. ¹⁶ In this way he will make atonement for the Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been. He is to do the same for the Tent of Meeting, which is among them in the midst of their uncleanness.

Jesus was faithful in this role because he perfectly completed the task given to him. He performed this task as a sinless human. Jesus died once for all and his role as priest is perfected. Jesus was merciful as our High Priest in that suffered through this role as a man. He didn’t become a High Priest to prove that he could “go all the way.” He did it because he had to. He was bound by his own eternal faithfulness. He had to become like one of his brothers.

3. The ultimate reason that Jesus became a High Priest was so *that he might make atonement (propitiation) for the sins of the people* (17). We all assume we know what the word atonement means, but let’s make sure that is the case. The word atonement comes from atonement cover which was the covering over the ark of the covenant. The Law was placed inside of the ark. The purpose of the Law is to make us aware of our sin and the purpose of the atonement cover is to cover over our sin. The atonement covers the perfect demands of the Law.

Only the NIV has the word atonement and if you look carefully at the footnote by that word, you will find this note: *Or and that he might turn aside God’s wrath.* This note is highlighting a more common translation of this Greek word. If you have an NASB or an ESV, the word atonement is replaced with the word propitiation. Propitiation comes from the Latin word for this covering of the ark—*propitiatorium*, which means *to appease*. Propitiation, then, appeases or turns aside God’s wrath. Propitiation satisfies the wrath of God.

We sing about this in the great hymn, *In Christ Alone*.

In Christ alone, who took on flesh
Fullness of God in helpless babe
This gift of love and righteousness
Scorned by the ones He came to save
’Til on that cross as Jesus died
The wrath of God was satisfied
For every sin on Him was laid
Here in the death of Christ I live

But why would God need to be appeased and his wrath satisfied? Because his wrath and anger was a righteous form of justice toward our sin. Our sin is an infinite offense against an infinitely holy God. This wrath is detailed in many Scriptures.

John 3:36 “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.”

Romans 5:9 “Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him!”

Ephesians 2:3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

The Bible clearly states that we deserved and were objects of God's wrath until we were saved from God's wrath through Christ. Those who are recipients of God's wrath will have their souls destroyed in hell. This is why Jesus said that we should be afraid of God. When we rightly understand his wrath, we should be very afraid. Therefore, Christ's propitiation appeases and satisfies God's righteous wrath because Jesus took our sins upon him. God's wrath was poured out on Christ instead of upon us.

This is another reason why Mel Gibson is so wrong in his understanding of the cross. If you have seen the movie, you know that it is incredibly bloody and now you know why—because Gibson was caught up in the blood of Jesus. The blood of Jesus was not a magical potion sprinkled over us. His blood is a symbol for his death. The blood atones for sin and propitiates the Father because it caused Jesus' death. Had he merely suffered and bled, there would have been no atonement or appeasement of wrath. And what was ultimately more painful—the whips and nails of the Roman soldiers or the bearing of the wrath of the Father?

4. *Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted* (18). He suffered when tempted. He suffered when beaten and killed. He suffered when he became an object of God's wrath. All temptation is a desire to have something other than Christ be chief and all consuming in our lives. The Law speaks to us and tells us we must obey, but we cannot. The gospel comes alongside and helps us obey. It reminds us that the demands of the Law have been fulfilled in Christ. It instructs us that our sins have been atoned for by the blood of Christ. The gospel of Christ meets us in our weakness and says, "You are not able to beat this temptation, but I am able." We are not able, but God is able. But you have to ask him to help you fight. You have to invite Christ into your temptation.

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^b Psalm 8:4-6

^c Psalm 22:22

^d Isaiah 8:17

^e Isaiah 8:18

^f *Or and that he might turn aside God's wrath, taking away*

¹ I made this call in the weeks leading up to the final year of production for *The Keys* and spoke to Pastor Mike Breiningner.

² Joyce Meyer, *The Most Important Decision You Will Ever Make*, ©1991, p. 36.