

Introduction

The Christmas season evokes all sorts of memories in folk. For many, there are fond memories of family getting together and exchanging gifts and enjoying time together. Many others, however, do not have fond memories. Holidays in my home, for example, were trying times filled with angst and hostility. I have no real fondness for Christmas *as a holiday* from my childhood. I've thoroughly enjoyed my kids at Christmastime, however. Their memories of Christmas are—I *think*—happy memories of family getting together and exchanging gifts and enjoying time together.

Whether Christmas holds fond memories for you or brings up a sense of loss for what could have been or *should have been*, one connection I am sure none of you will make is that of Christmas and “Operation Neptune”—better known as D-Day. D-Day was, of course, on June 6, 1944, when the Allied Forces landed in Normandy, France, which was then occupied by Nazi Germany. It was, in a real sense, the end of World War II in Europe, though it would take nearly a year for Germany to finally surrender.

I first heard this connection from New Testament scholar Don Carson. More recently I came across the connection between Christmas and D-Day from another New Testament scholar named Sigurd Grindheim. This surprised me until I discovered that he also teaches at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Chicago, and therefore likely got the idea from Don Carson.

You might be wondering how Christmas and D-Day are similar in any sense. Germany had invaded and conquered France rather quickly in the war and the German army was firmly entrenched there. France is, of course, just across the English channel from the United Kingdom. The UK stood as the last bastion against the Nazis in Europe so the Allied Forces knew Germany had to be stopped in France. On D-Day they launched an all-out assault on the beaches of Normandy, with extensive aerial and naval bombardment preceding an airborne assault and the landing of 24,000 Allied troops on the beach.

These men landed under incredibly heavy gunfire from the German positions. They were not successful at any of their intended goals on that first day. However! The Allied forces had established a foothold that would lead to victory, though some of the heaviest fighting was yet to come. Establishing a presence in France paved the way to victory.

See? Christmas and D-Day are similar! Make no mistake: the birth of the Son of God in human form was an invasion that could only lead to victory. He was born in hostile territory and intended to reclaim that territory for himself, though his means of victory would be quite unlike any other battle, for the Son of God came to this world as one of us in order to secure victory through his own defeat. Without the angels appearing at his birth, and without knowing that his mother was a virgin and therefore his birth was quite miraculous, no one would have known anything extraordinary had taken place.

The Lord Jesus was born in a stable and the first sights and sounds—and odors—he would have detected would have been that of animals. As we will see today, however, his

entrance into the world, as inauspicious as it may have seemed, guaranteed his victory.

Our text this morning is that great and well-known Christmas text in Hebrews 2. The author begins this letter by declaring that while God had formerly communicated to his people through the prophets, in these “last days” he has spoken to us by his Son, the Lord Jesus. He tells us he is “the exact imprint” of God’s nature, and he—Jesus—“upholds the universe by the word of his power”. This baby born in a stable was no mere baby but was God himself, now become one of *us*. Hebrews 2, verses 14–18.

Heb 2:14 Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. ¹⁷ Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Hebrews 2:14–18

Flesh and Blood

The author first says the children share in flesh and blood. That is, the offspring God promised Abraham were human offspring—physical beings made of flesh and blood. Flesh and blood are essential characteristics of being human. This is why “heaven” is not our final goal as followers of Jesus. For those with loved ones who died in Christ, yes, they are with the Lord, but our great hope for them is not that they remain in heaven, but that one day they will be resurrected and will have physical bodies once again. They will be *flesh and blood* and will live on a physical earth with the Lord for all eternity.

Flesh and blood is not characteristic of God, however. Verse 14 says the Son of God *partook* of the same things. He *participates* in physical humanity. The greatest miracle, the most inexplicable one, is God became human. God took on himself the form of physical flesh and blood humanity. He added these characteristics to himself so the Son of God will forever exist as God and man.

This is what Christmas is all about. As we saw last week, God determined to save people before he even created the world, and the means of this salvation is that he would become *human*. God walking on water? Yes, of course. He made the water. God healing the sick? Yes, of course. He has that power. God calming the wind and the waves and raising the dead? Yes, of course. Those miracles make sense. I don’t know *how* he did them, but they seem rather obvious. God becoming the very thing he created? Huh?

What is truly amazing here is the reason the Son of God partakes of flesh and blood: “that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil”. The great African church father Athanasius explained the Incarnation beautifully:

For the Word, realizing that in no other way would the corruption of human beings be undone except, simply, by dying, yet being immortal and the Son of the

Father the Word was not able to die, for this reason he takes to himself a body capable of death, in order that it, participating in the Word who is above all, might be sufficient for death on behalf of all, and through the indwelling Word would remain incorruptible, and so corruption might henceforth cease from all by the grace of the resurrection.

Athanasius, On the Incarnation 9.1

To defeat death, the Son of God had to die and then rise from the dead, and the only way he could experience death was to become what we are. This is why verse 14 says “since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things”. The goal was to destroy death by death. The destruction of death came when Jesus rose from the dead, thereby taking away its very power.

In the early church the resurrection was central to their gospel proclamation. In Acts 3 Peter declares God raised Jesus from the dead. Earlier in Acts 2 he said this:

Acts 2:24 God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

Acts 2:24

It was not possible for death to hold Jesus. How could it? Jesus is the author and giver of *life*. He is life itself! Later in Hebrews the author says that Jesus was a priest, but he did not serve at the altar in the temple for he is from the tribe of Judah and only those from the tribe of Levi could serve in the temple. Instead, Jesus is a priest in the order of Melchizedek. Melchizedek was a priest of God in Abraham’s day and is the man to whom Abraham gave a tithe. Later God declared David was a priest after the order of Melchizedek. Finally, Jesus is the fulfillment of that greater priesthood.

Heb 7:15 This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek,¹⁶ who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life.

Hebrews 7:15–16

Notice what qualifies Jesus as such a priest: the power of an indestructible life. He was born to die, and he knew death could never hold him. Though he *became* sin, he knew no sin and so death—the consequence of sin—could not hold him.

The Power of Death

The author continues to explain the purpose of the Incarnation of the Son of God. He took on flesh and blood that he might die and through death destroy death, but notice closely what he says: “that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil”. This is somewhat unexpected. Death is our enemy and it is destroyed, yet the author of Hebrews points to the *source* of death: the devil.

When he says the devil “has the power of death” he does not mean Satan has this power as some independent authority. The power of death is really the power of deception. Sigurd Grindheim puts it quite well.

In several sources, this evil enemy is seen as the agent of death. Hebrews goes a step further and identifies the devil as the one who has the power of death. As Satan is always constricted by the sovereign power of God (cf. Job 2:6), this power cannot be understood as an independent authority to kill. Rather, the power of death must be understood in a purely negative sense; it is the ability to deprive people of God's life-giving force. The devil exercises his power through deception, as in the case of Adam and Eve, who were led to defy God's life-giving instructions (Gen 3:1–7). In the literature of Second Temple Judaism, the function of God's archenemy is often to lead people astray to idolatry and a sinful life. The New Testament also shows that the foremost activity of the devil is temptation and deception.

Now, the devil is neutralized by Jesus.
Sigurd Grindheim, PNTC

He speaks of "several sources", meaning Second Temple Jewish writings. This was the understanding of the Jewish people prior to the coming of Jesus. Death, rather than a thing he possesses, is the denial of a thing. Death is the absence of life. Death is like cold; there's no such thing as "cold". There is only the absence of heat. We describe the absence of heat with the word "cold" but cold is not a thing. You can't have a bucket of cold. You can have a bucket of water that lacks heat, which we perceive as cold, but you can only make water cold by removing heat from it. You can't add cold to water because cold is not a thing.

So death is not a thing but the absence of a thing. It is not as though Satan has a warehouse full of "death" and goes around handing it out to people. It is the absence of life. The power of death, as Grindheim says, is in deception. In the garden it was the serpent's deception of Eve and then Adam's willful rebellion that cut them off from life. In a real sense Adam was deceived, too, for he watched his wife eat the fruit and not die immediately, which emboldened him in his rebellion.

Satan's deception is the power of death because he deceives people into being cut off from God's life-giving power. This is a willful act on the part of humans as they embrace the deception. Through this they are separated from God. Notice, however, Hebrews says the Son of God became human so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, or the power of *deception*.

The word translated "destroy" has the idea of neutralizing his power. It is to cause it to be unproductive, used up, exhausted. It is to cause Satan to lose his power and his effectiveness, but remember what this power was: the power *to deceive*.

Hebrews starts by declaring that God has spoken to us in these last days by his Son, who is the full and complete revelation of God. Everything that can be known about God can be known in Christ because he is "the exact imprint of his nature". Satan's power to deceive has been broken. This is why Revelation 20 speaks of the binding of Satan, "so that he might not deceive the nations any longer".

One of the most remarkable things Jesus said is found in Luke 10. He sent out his disciples two by two. There were 72 of them sent on this mission. When they come back they report something incredible.

Lk 10:17 The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons

are subject to us in your name!”¹⁸ And he said to them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.”

Luke 10:17–18

What a curious response! When they declare the power of Jesus’ name over demons, Jesus declares in response that he saw Satan fall like lightning. In that moment Satan was cast out of heaven and his power was being neutralized. This is why Jesus could send the apostles to make disciples of *all nations*. Satan’s power to deceive was being exhausted, made to be unproductive. He can no longer deceive entire people groups, for Jesus has come to save men and women from every tribe and language and people and nation.

Fear of Death

Not only did the Son of God take on flesh and blood in order to die, that through death he would destroy the one who has the power of death, he also did so, verse 15, to “deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery”.

Here we have another surprise. You’d expect the author to say that the Son of God partook of flesh and blood in order to deliver us from *death*, but he says “fear of death”. Yes, he delivers us from death as well. Death has lost its sting. His grace triumphs over the grave. We await resurrection. That’s not his point here. His point is Christ rescues us from the *fear* of death.

In the early church authors frequently wrote about Christians’ lack of fear of death. John Chrysostom wrote,

For those who are indeed worthy of being grieved for, are these who still fear and shudder at death, who have no faith in the resurrection.

John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews 4.7

This is why Paul in 1 Thessalonians speaks of Christians grieving the loss of loved ones, but not grieving in the way those who have no hope grieve. For us, grief is *temporary*, for death is temporary! The power of death has been neutralized, for Satan’s ability to deceive has been neutralized. For those of us in Christ, death itself is defeated, even if it claims one more victory before our resurrection. Death is like the German army after D-Day: it is only a matter of time before it realizes all is lost!

The deliverance from the fear of death has a remarkable effect on believers. In verse 16 the author says that Jesus helps the offspring of Abraham—those whom God has chosen before the foundation of the world. He doesn’t help angels, but fallen humans in need of rescue. This rescue is from the fear of death, for the fear of death resulted in *lifelong slavery*. Again Sigurd Grindheim is really helpful as he explains how this fear of death enslaves people.

In modern societies, the fear of death is kept in check by practically denying the existence of death itself. Whereas death and preparation for death were an integrated part of life through most of history, sickness and death have now been purged from public life. The dead are seen only by professionals with special training. Those who are elderly and are nearing the end of their lives are kept in

institutions, making sure they are isolated from the rest of society. In this way, people are shielded from having to confront the reality of death. When death has to be acknowledged, it is done with euphemisms, such as “pass away,” “depart,” and “kick the bucket.” Funerals are referred to as “celebrations” of someone’s life. One does not look death in the face.

Most of human endeavor may be understood as an attempt to quell the fear of death. To some, a hedonistic lifestyle numbs the angst by creating a sense of experiencing everything life has to offer and of living life to the fullest. Others use fame or wealth in an effort to leave a legacy that will outlast death. Religious rituals offer a dream of an afterlife. Perhaps the most prevalent attempt to thwart death is the desire to have children and see descendants that will carry one’s identity into new generations.

Sigurd Grindheim, PNTC

He says we mask our fear of death in a variety of ways. We pretend it doesn’t exist. How many of us have ever slaughtered an animal for food? For most of human history this was how one would eat. How many of us use euphemisms for death? How many of us, as he puts it, numb ourselves to the reality of death by pursuing pleasure or by consuming as much as we can? New cars and new houses and new clothes and such mask the reality of death.

Do you see his point? By delivering us from the fear of death and its consequent lifelong slavery to masking it and hiding from it, Jesus is saving us *in this life*. Again, we so often think of salvation as a purely future thing *after we die*, but here the author of Hebrews is indicating salvation is a present reality. We are free from the fear of death, which frees us from slavery to sin. In this way Jesus helps the offspring of Abraham. That is, he brings salvation to his people.

The Invasion

In verse 17 the author explains this salvation, this deliverance from the fear of death. He says it is the reason he *had* to be made like his brothers. The Son of God is the Savior of the world, and this required that he take on flesh and blood, that through death he would destroy death.

Being human, he is our high priest, and he made propitiation to God. Propitiation is the sacrifice that satisfies God’s holiness and justice. It is the expression of his mercy and grace. Jesus became a faithful high priest, that he would make propitiation for the sins of God’s people.

A priest is one who represents people before God. God the Son had to become human in order to represent humans before God. He had to become like us in every way in order to save us in every way. To represent us before God Jesus presented himself to his Father as the propitiating sacrifice. He died in our place, that he might save us. He was our substitution. Though we deserved death—separation from God—Christ endured that death for us. While we will experience physical death, it is temporary, for resurrection is coming. There may be a longer gap between our physical death and our physical resurrection than there was between Jesus’ death and his resurrection, but our resurrection is just as sure. It is coming!

When God chose to come to this world, he could have chosen to come as a mighty warrior. We know from the story of Hezekiah that God sent a single angel to defend them from the Assyrian army. In one night the angel killed 185,000 soldiers. *One. Angel.* In Matthew 26 Jesus told his disciples that he could easily call twelve legions of angels. A legion is about 6,000 soldiers. At a moment's notice he could call 72,000 angels. If one angel could handle 185,000 seasoned warriors, what could 72,000 do?

He didn't call for twelve legions of angels. He didn't call for help. The only call he made was, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" When Jesus came he came to reclaim this world and his people. Make no mistake: it was an invasion, but it was not an invasion with hostile intent. The Lord Jesus came with merciful intent.

Had he come with hostile intent he could have easily taken down the mighty Roman empire. Dave sang a song last night that declares Jesus could have marched into the heart of Rome. With just a word he could have caused it all to crumble to dust. Instead, he marched into a stable, reeking of animal urine and animal poo. He came as a tiny baby, completely reliant on his mother for sustenance.

This invasion was for the purpose of representation. He would represent God's people before God by offering himself as the propitiation that reconciles them to God. He came with merciful intent, not hostile intent—and we should be glad. Several years ago Tim Keller made a simple and profound statement about Christmas.

Christmas, like God himself, is both more wondrous and more threatening than we imagine.

Tim Keller, *Hidden Christmas*

Christmas is threatening to all those who remain hostile to God. He is holy, and this is dangerous to all who are not. To those who receive him, however, he is the propitiation, the sacrifice that satisfies God's holiness and justice, the sacrifice that brings mercy and grace and forgiveness. To those who receive Christ, he is life and salvation.

This is the incredible, wondrous news of Christmas. The Son of God made himself very tiny to fit inside Mary's womb. He made himself vulnerable so that he could take on a human body and grow and develop just like everyone else. He humbled himself that he might die for his people and so defeat death itself. In this life, however, he delivers from the fear of death.

Application

We live in the truth of God in Christ, for Satan's power to deceive has been neutralized. Christmas means we have the present experience of our salvation, for we have been delivered from the fear of death. Because we have been delivered from the fear of death, we no longer need to live in such a way that we mask the fear. We don't have to live for pleasure. We don't have to try to accumulate wealth for ourselves. We don't have to seek after popularity or influence or "success". We don't have to fear a medical diagnosis or the prospect of surgery. Most of all, we do not have to try to earn God's approval. We don't have to try to impress God with our piety, with our ability to read Scripture every day, our discipline to force

conversations about Jesus, our steadfast fight against sin. Through faith God delights in us, freeing us from even this.

The moment the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary and she, though a virgin, was made to conceive and the Lord Jesus suddenly appeared in her womb as a tiny embryo, in that moment the victory of God in Christ was assured. The moment he established even the tiniest foothold in this world, his victory over sin and death was inevitable. It was only a matter of time.

It may seem odd to focus on death so much during a Christmas sermon. Part of what makes it odd is we are so very shielded from death. We're shielded from death in a very different way than you may be thinking. Death is the absence of something. It is merely the absence of life. For those who are in Christ we have life. We have *eternal* life, and eternal life begins now.

More than gift exchange and family and black and white movies, Christmas is about victory—God's victory over sin and death and therefore *our* victory over sin and death. Christmas means we are free to live for Christ. It means we are free to give up our lives for him. We are free to deny ourselves, for the things that would otherwise capture our hearts do not define us. Money and pleasure and popularity and possessions do not give us our identity. God in Christ through his Spirit gives us an everlasting identity. Christmas was his means of rescuing us.

The moment the Son of God appeared in the virgin's womb, the war was decided. Yes, the Lord Jesus would go on to "lose" a battle, for he would die, but the moment he established a physical presence on earth, salvation was secure. Satan was defeated, long before he recognized he was. Satan thought he would win by bringing about the death of Jesus, but the truth is Satan got played. His "victory" was actually his defeat, for he was unaware that death could not hold Jesus.

The victory of Jesus was complete and total. As Paul himself put it in Philippians, he who began a good work in your will bring it to completion at the day of Christ. The moment Mary conceived your salvation was secure—all of it, from beginning to end.

When we celebrate his birth, we are celebrating all of Jesus—everything he did. He was born so that he could die, and he died in order to defeat death by rising from it. We cannot separate these things. From conception to resurrection, the victory of Jesus is total. This is what we celebrate when we celebrate his birth.