

Strength for the Journey

How the Incarnation should Grow Us in Our Sanctification

The Christmas season is upon us once again, and once again we'll be reminded many times of the old familiar story of God who became man, who was born of a virgin in the little town of Bethlehem and was laid to rest in a manger. It's a story we are all familiar with.

The Bible offers many reasons why God had to take on human flesh. The most prominent of which was to be a proper substitutionary sacrifice on behalf of his people. However, we are also told that God, in the form of his son Jesus Christ, had to be made fully human in every way so that he could be a "merciful and faithful high priest", so that through his sufferings and temptations he would be able to sympathize with our weaknesses (Heb 2:17-18; 4:15).

In his humanity, Jesus experienced every conceivable range of human emotion and suffering. When he was twelve-years-old he was lost for three days by his parents due to no fault of his own. When they finally found him they scolded him for frightening them half to death—a *victim of injustice*. But this was just the beginning.

While being tempted by the devil in the wilderness, he fasted for forty days. The Bible makes perfectly clear he experienced genuine hunger pains. So much so that using his power to turn stones into bread was a real temptation. I cannot imagine what it would be like to go without food for nearly six weeks.

In the Gospel of Mark we are told his family thought he was out of his mind (claiming to be the Messiah and all) and attempted to take him home (3:21). How many of us really know what it's like to have our family consider us laughable or to strongly disapprove of our behavior or lifestyle? It would be painful to know you're doing your best, only to have your parents shake their heads in disappointment.

Furthermore, the Bible recounts that in Jesus' hour of greatest need his closest friends turned their backs on

him and dropped him like a used shoe. I have been told stories many times of people being greatly hurt by someone they considered to be a close friend, only to have that friend abruptly end the friendship for minor infractions or for no obvious reason at all. I've been told the pain of having a close friend turn his or her back on you and push you to arms length without warning is almost unbearable. And yet, in one night all twelve of Jesus' closest friends did just that—*those whom he had opened his heart to and poured his life into for three years*. One of them betrayed him for thirty pieces of silver, one of them denied to his face that he even knew him, and the rest ran and hid.

Then to make matters worse, he was arrested on trumped up charges, ran through a mock trial,

beaten to within an inch of his life, and then sentenced to die for crimes he did not commit. This is every person's worst nightmare. We have all heard stories of men who spent ten, fifteen, twenty years in prison, only to be exonerated by some new evidence. Our hearts break for them and their family. Yet Jesus was sentenced to die for crimes he did not commit by means of one of the most tortuous forms of execution ever devised by humans. And yet somehow, as he hung on the cross he found it in his heart to pray for the forgiveness of those who put him there.

Still, it gets worse—*much worse*. As he hung on the cross, his father turned his back on him. At that moment, Jesus, the son of God, experienced something he had never before experienced—*rejection by his own father*. Because the sins of the world had been cast upon him, he had to endure the full wrath, displeasure, and rejection of his own father. It is for this reason Jesus cried out from the cross in anguish, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" How many of us really know what it is like to be best friends with your dad, to

have a father-child relationship that could not possibly be any closer, and then one day have that same father completely turn his back on you? Just the thought of such pain seems unbearable.

Yet despite all the suffering Jesus experienced, so often when I have counseled people who are going through difficult situations or are having trouble forgiving someone they have been hurt by, when I point them to Christ as an example for us to follow their response is '*yes, but Jesus is God! I'm not God!*' As if to say that because Jesus is God this somehow made his suffering less difficult, less painful, less genuine, and somehow less relevant to our own suffering. Jesus could put up with unjust parents—*he's God—I'm not*. Jesus could handle being in physical pain—*he's God—I'm not*. Jesus could handle being slandered by his family, being dropped by his closest friends, being unfairly treated, being able to forgive those who hurt him, and being rejected by his father—*he's God—I'm not*.

On the contrary, the fact that Jesus is God should bring us greater comfort. Because we are human, when we suffer at the hands of circumstance or other people we have no choice but to suffer. This is not to say that we cannot pray or seek ways to improve the situation. It is to say that we cannot wave our hand and miraculously change the situation—*but Jesus could have*. Jesus chose to suffer on behalf of his people—*he did not have to*. Jesus chose to forgive his friends who had turned their backs on him and to forgive those who nailed him to the cross. God chose to become a man, to suffer all these things for us, and to die on a cross for sins, and he didn't have to do any of it. On the contrary, indeed, that God became man should bring us greater comfort in knowing he can fully relate to our pain. But it should also give us greater encouragement and strength for the journey to follow in the footsteps of Christ.

Merry Christmas.

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(Photo by Carlo Maratta)

