

Hebrews

Hebrews 2:3-11 - Why do Christians suffer?

Part 4 ended with strong admonition to the Christians in Hebrews 2:1-4 to wake up and get with the program. Had they forgotten already what God had revealed and confirmed by “signs, wonders and various miracles” forty years earlier? It was clear proof that he was speaking through his Son now, and not through angels or prophets anymore.

It was high time, therefore, that they “paid more attention” to the basic but vital message God spoke through his Son, because in **Hebrews 2:3** there was **no escaping the consequences if they didn’t**.

Well, that must’ve been a shock to those Christians in Hebrews: You mean, there were consequences for not focusing on what God had spoken through his Son? Yes, there were, just like the Israelites felt the sting of punishment when they disobeyed the law “spoken by angels” in the Old Testament (verse 2). There was a sting in the tail here, which must have given the Christians in Hebrews a bit of a jolt, because they’d been drifting **back** to the law spoken by angels, as if God was still operating by that old administration.

And there were consequences to that? Oh yes, one very obvious one being that their confidence and trust in Jesus had been slipping away, like a boat in a storm slipping its moorings and drifting off with the tide. And there was an obvious consequence to that too, of losing touch with the “great salvation” Jesus had revealed and made possible. And the unfortunate consequence of that was losing all sense of purpose and meaning **when suffering came**, which is exactly what had happened to the Christians in Hebrews.

And it was true, they had suffered. The rapid and influential spread of Christianity had really scared people to the point that even fellow Jews and family members wanted Christians out of their lives and far away, resulting in many Christians in Hebrews losing their homes and jobs. And that raised the obvious question, asked by Christians all through the ages, “**Why does God let Christians suffer?** We’re Christians for heaven’s sake, so surely our lives should be getting better and happier, not worse and more miserable. And shouldn’t our lives be full of peace and joy and great health too, to show people that God is real, the salvation he’d sent his Son to bring us is true, and the Kingdom of God that Jesus came to announce really is in operation on this planet?”

To suffer as a Christian, then, can really be confusing. So this too was a challenge the author of Hebrews had to face, as to why Christians suffer, and why God doesn't intervene with all those exciting "signs, wonders and various miracles" and "gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will" in **Hebrews 2:4** that would surely make life as a Christian way more attractive to people - and make what God spoke through his Son really come alive too.

Think how alive and exciting life would be if we had all those gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:7-10, for instance, like the "gifts of healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in different kinds of tongues," along with extra special knowledge, wisdom, teaching ability and faith? Having all those miracles and gifts had certainly helped the church in the beginning to grow like crazy, so why not continue them at full bore all through the ages too?

But here we are in Hebrews, only thirty years later, and we find a church being told off and warned about the consequences of losing sight of what God had sent his Son for. So even if those gifts and miracles WERE still in full operation, they weren't having their desired effect. Quite the opposite, in fact, because instead of those Christians loving the "new and living way" of salvation God had sent them in his Son, they were turning back to God's old and now "dead and gone" administration of the law and angels.

Clearly, then, there was a major problem here that even Spirit gifts and miracles could not solve. So, being a good pastor, the author of Hebrews goes right to where his congregation is at - their fixation with angels - and straight out he says in **Hebrews 2:5**, "It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking."

It's another "waker-upper" moment, because he's saying, "Come on chaps, what God is speaking to us in his Son is subjection - or rulership - of the world to come. It's not about being a nation under the rule of angels like it was in the Old Testament. It's about getting us ready for the future."

And the reason he's charging off in this direction in verse 5 is because the future rulership of the world has everything to do with why Christians suffer, as we're about to see. So, to get that thought rolling around in their heads he starts off in **verse 6** with King David's famous passage in **Psalm 8:3-6** - "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, (I ask) **what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?**"

But why quote that verse? How did it help those Christians in Hebrews with their suffering and thinking God was ruling through angels still?

Well, it took their minds back to what God had in mind when he created humans in the first place. And it certainly wasn't to be ruled over by angels, because quoting Psalm 8 again in **Hebrews 2:7**, "You (referring to God) made him (man) a little lower than the angels." The word "angels" in that verse is actually the word "Elohim" in the original Hebrew, a word used for GOD in the Old Testament, so that verse should be translated: "**God made man just a shade lower than himself.**"

To answer David's question, then: "What is man that you are mindful of him?" - that's how "mindful" God is of us. His mind is FULL of us, because his purpose in creating us - as Genesis 1:26 clearly states - was to make creatures **just like himself** to rule over his creation. He literally created us to become like him, also clearly stated in Genesis 3:22, after Adam and Eve ate off the Tree of Knowledge, when "God said, 'The man has **now become like one of us**, knowing good and evil.'"

They needed more than just a knowledge of good and evil for rulership of the Earth, however, so God stopped them from living forever by eating from the Tree of Life as well. But it doesn't take away from the amazing fact, as David also stated in Psalm 8, quoted now in **Hebrews 2:7-8**, that "you (God) crowned him (man) with glory and honour and put everything under his feet."

And the word "him" in that verse is clearly referring to us humans, because in the next verse in Psalm 8 David writes about God putting "flocks and herds and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air and the fish of the sea" under human rule, which is an exact repeat of the rulership God gave humans over all his creation in Genesis 1:26.

So the author of Hebrews is taking his congregation right back to the beginning, to the amazing reason **why God made humans in the first place**. God wanted to set us up as his royal family in his royal palace in the Garden of Eden, from which we would rule as kings and queens over the entire creation. And we'd be in charge of "everything" too, **Hebrews 2:8**, because "God left nothing that is not subject to humans" - including angels, therefore. So it wasn't God's intent for us to be ruled over by angels, because he gave the rulership of the Earth to us, not to them. That was our potential in Genesis and it's still our potential today - but "at present (in this age right now) we do not see everything subject to man," **verse 8**, because in our present state we can't even rule ourselves yet, let alone rule the planet.

We've got a ton of things to learn before God crowns us with glory and honour, but notice how he's never taken away the desire in us to become like him. All through our history we've dreamed of having God-like powers. It spills out in men like Hitler and Alexander the Great wanting to create vast empires ruling over entire nations, or in brutal dictators wanting to rule like gods in pomp and luxury, or in explorers seeking new worlds they can exploit and conquer, or in the creation of worldwide corporations that monopolize the distribution and price of goods, or in bullies who make life miserable for their families, other kids at school, and even their congregations.

It all stems from us humans wanting God-like power, which God intended us to have, but because we didn't want HIM teaching and training us how to rule we twisted rulership into something ugly and destructive. After centuries of human rule, for instance, what have we actually accomplished? We've done marvellous things with the Earth's resources, yes, but our attempts at ruling the planet are constantly hindered by selfish motives and by people who have no conscience. So we've never managed to make humanity able and ready to rule this planet in love and peace. And even if we did manage to create schools all over the Earth inspiring or forcing people to be moral, upstanding, peace-loving people, we all still die, so none of us get to enjoy what we create or develop the fruits of our labours forever. It's so frustrating.

We're also stuck with our morals never improving as well, so no matter what age we live in there is always corruption by those in power. We've learnt that humans cannot be trusted with power, because in rejecting God we lost the ability to rule. We want dominion but we have no idea how it works.

Take the food supply, for instance. We've managed to feed the extra billions of people being born, but at what cost to our health? To control the weeds and insects we pour lethal chemicals onto the very plants we depend on for life. We've also created a vast network of transportation that provides us with food from all over the world all year round, but at what cost to the atmosphere and the air we have to breathe to stay alive? We can't make anything work, it seems, without harmful and even deadly side effects.

Imagine being God, then, and having to deal with our pathetic belief that we know what we're doing and we can rule this Earth without him. But it still stems back to God creating us to want rulership and want to have God-like powers, because it's always been his will and purpose that we humans rule this planet. But there are other things we must learn first, which is why for a little while "we do not see everything subject to humans." This is our training period, which is where suffering fits in, as we're about to see.

The Christians in Hebrews, meanwhile, in their frustration at the futility of their own lives, and their Christianity only bringing them more troubles and problems, were going back into their past and looking to angels and the law for help. They still believed God was ruling the world through angels, and that God was still using angels as “mediums” to communicate his will to humans, just like he had with their Israelite ancestors all through the Old Testament. And it was true; God had used angels as mediums ever since Adam and Eve ignored his instructions and hid from him when he wanted to talk to them. And it was also true that - because Adam and Eve had abdicated their royal posts - God had given the reins of rulership of this planet to the evil angel Satan who still holds his post as “god of this age” (2 Corinthians 4:4).

But it wasn't meant to be that way in the beginning. And it's not meant to be that way now either, because God now has his Son at the helm of his Kingdom as head of all principalities and powers, and in this new era and new administration of God's Kingdom he doesn't need angels as mediums passing on messages and contacting humans personally; he needs angels as “ministering spirits,” functioning in much the same way as our heartbeat and breathing, which tick away dutifully and quietly to keep us alive, without us even having to think about them.

In other words, I don't need to know what angels are doing for me. All I need to know is that Jesus is directing his angels to exactly where my needs are to keep me functioning in whatever way he thinks best. So I just thank him and get on with life, knowing he's provided that for me, just like he provided me with lungs that automatically breathe for me to keep me alive physically. And we can leave it at that, because our focus as Christians - and Jesus' focus too - is on what God created US for, not angels.

And it's about time we focused on what God created us for because we've made a horrible mess of God's amazing purpose for us, and for thousands of years we've suffered the devastating consequences. At what point do we say, then: “If only we'd listened to God in the Garden of Eden”? But listening to God has never been our strength. It's a weakness we've always had, and we've never been able to overcome it.

And if anybody knew that, the Christians in Hebrews did, because they knew their own tragic history as the nation of Israel. Their ancestors had never properly listened to God, either to his prophets or to Jesus, which had landed them in the mess they were now in, of being ruled over by Rome, a brutal pagan power, and being hounded by their own Jewish countrymen who'd killed Jesus and now hated Christians.

Compare that to what God had chosen the nation of Israel for in the first place, and it is a tragedy beyond words. Instead of ruling the world as God's people, making God's creation flourish under the rule of the Kingdom of God, the Jews had been reduced to a powerless, pathetic vassal nation. And here they were as Christians too, drifting around helplessly and turning to rules and regulations and spirit manifestations for help, but not to the one God had sent to save them from their pathetic state and lift them into the joy and peace of the Kingdom of God, so from experience they could teach others about it too.

“But” at last, **Hebrews 2:9**, onto this sad scene came Jesus, “who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honour.”

And the word for “angels” here really does mean “angels.” It establishes the fact that Jesus the human may have been lower than the angels, but the word “little” in that verse can also mean “for a little while,” according to a note at the bottom of my Bible translation. It's just for a little while, then, that Jesus was made lower than the angels, but “now,” **Hebrews 2:9**, he is “crowned with glory and honour,” showing he's the one ruling now, not angels.

This is the first time the author of Hebrews uses the name “Jesus” too, instead of calling him “the Son” of God, because there's this other side of the Son of God that also explains why he is so great, and why he has rightfully been crowned with glory and honour and why, therefore, those Christians could have total confidence in his leadership and care for them, despite their suffering.

First and foremost, though, he's still the mighty Son of God, which is where the author of Hebrews begins in Chapter One. And that's where Genesis Chapter One begins as well, with Elohim, the mighty Creator and Sustainer, speaking our world into being. But Genesis then switches in Chapter 2 from using the word “Elohim” for God and using the name YHWH (Yahweh) instead. And Yahweh is pictured as a person, talking to the man, giving instructions face to face, and bringing animals and birds to the man to name.

We're now seeing the other side of God in Genesis, which is willingly and happily coming down to our level to talk to us and get us involved in what he's up to. And the author of Hebrews follows that same pattern, picturing the Son of God in all his glory and his immense power and authority in Chapter One, but in Chapter Two he switches gears to the “great salvation...first announced by the Lord” that has everything to do with helping us with our struggles in the here and now. We have this amazing picture, then, of the mighty Son of God in the human form of Jesus willingly and happily coming into our world to get us trained and ready for what God created us humans for in the first place.

It shows us that God's purpose for us from the very beginning still stands. God is still as "mindful" of us as he's ever been. He still wants us crowned with glory and honour and in charge of everything on this planet, but it's not by the rule of angels or the law. And thankfully it's not by human cleverness either.

It's by the mighty Son of God in his human form, Jesus, who qualified to take the reins of rulership on this planet away from Satan, and open up the chance for us to become rulers with him. And this is where the author of Hebrews now takes us, into how Jesus qualified to rule this planet, and why we humans can have absolute and total confidence in his leadership.

And this was hugely important for the Christians in Hebrews to grasp, because their confidence in Jesus was slipping away. And why was it slipping away? Because they were suffering, and they couldn't see the reason for it. How could their suffering play any sort of part in teaching people about the power and love of the Son of God, or enabling us to fulfill what God created us for? And isn't that one of the most often and basic questions asked by all suffering Christians? Why is God letting us Christians suffer, and sometimes horribly, for no obvious reason and with no obvious positive result?

The answer given by the author of Hebrews in **verse 9** is that Jesus was "crowned with glory and honour **because** he suffered death." So in training Jesus for rulership of the world, thereby fulfilling God's reason for creating humans in the first place, **suffering was essential in his life too**. And in the last part of **verse 9** it was "by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" too.

By the grace of God, eh? Well, we know from **John 1:16** that it's "from the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another." Anything to do with God's grace, therefore, brings blessings. It was a great blessing from God, then, that Jesus suffered and tasted death. But what possible blessing can there be in suffering?

The answer to that is given in **verse 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."

So here we have the reason for Jesus' suffering: it was to qualify him - or "make him the author of" - "bringing many sons to glory," which we know from Hebrews 2:7 means humans being "crowned with glory and honour" as rulers of this planet as God intended from the beginning. In other words, Jesus' suffering qualified him to train us to rule with him.

But how did his suffering do that? The answer given by the author of Hebrews in **verse 11** is that “Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family.”

What Jesus’ suffering did was make him (the one who makes men holy) and us (the ones being made holy) into “family.” Well, that’s easy to grasp: He suffered, we suffer; it puts us in the same boat. But it goes much further than sharing the same experience of suffering together, because it was God’s intent from the beginning that the rulership of this world be done by a **royal family**.

That royal family had always been in existence too, which we see for the first time in Genesis 1:26 when God says, “LET US make man...” There was already an “US” in operation, therefore, a royal family consisting - as we learn later - of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but also a Council of other beings too, which pop up several times in Scripture, especially in Ezekiel and the book of Revelation. But right from the start we learn why God created us; it was to make us humans so like himself that we could join his eternally existing royal family as fully qualified members.

Right from Genesis Chapter One, then, God tells us what he created us for. And immediately, in Genesis Chapter Two, he begins our training, and in person too. But one question needed to be answered first: Were we humans actually interested in joining the family business? Well, it very quickly became obvious that no, we weren’t. So what would change our minds, then? And that’s the biggest question in the whole wide world that needs to be answered. And here we are in Hebrews, with a pastor being faced with exactly the same challenge, of waking up his people from their malaise to the staggering realization of what God had created them for so they’d want to join in and be part of it, even when it involved suffering.

And where he begins in facing that challenge is to say, “But we see Jesus,” **Hebrews 2:9**, who “suffered and tasted death for everyone.” In other words, it had been decided by God’s royal family already that whatever we humans suffered in not wanting to join the family business would be suffered by the One who created us. What we suffer, he would suffer.

Picture this, then: We have the mighty Son of God of Hebrews Chapter One coming down here as a member of God’s royal family in human form to capture the imagination of his brothers and sisters as to what God created us for. And where was his starting point? It was tasting and experiencing the agony and utter futility of our world and the human stupidity that caused and formed it all.

Jesus didn't separate himself from it. He became one of us, ready and willing to taste and experience what it's like to be us at our level, because **this is what the royal family of God does**. It doesn't sit in seclusion in a royal palace, unable to relate to us pathetic creatures struggling away, it gets into the dust and dirt of our messed up world to experience it.

And doesn't that sort of flip a switch in our brains, from thinking "Poor old me" when I'm suffering, to realizing that suffering along with everyone else is where the royal family of God wants to be? And it's because of that switch in our brain that the author of Hebrews makes the amazing statement in **Hebrews 2:11**, that "Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers."

He loves us as his brothers and sisters for wanting the same thing he wanted as the human Jesus, which is to suffer along with everyone else in the dust and dirt of this world. He loves us for that, because it means he has brothers and sisters coming down the pipe who are just like him, who have the same view of this world that he has. And like him, we're not looking forward to crushing people for being evil, we're far more concerned about the awful suffering of mind and body that evil has done TO people, because we've experienced it firsthand, just like he did.

Perhaps without realizing it, then, we are becoming like Jesus. And wasn't that God's plan from the beginning, that we humans **become like him**? But like him in what way? We are becoming like **Yahweh**, the other side of the mighty Son of God, who willingly came down to our level to know what it's like to be us, because that's what the royal family of God does.

So when we suffer from what this world and people and circumstances and all the penalties of human stubbornness and stupidity are doing to us, we see it as a necessary step in our training as members of God's royal family too. One day we get the chance to deal with the suffering, but for now God wants us to experience it so we become the same loving, merciful, understanding and compassionate rulers of his Kingdom in the future, just as Jesus is right now.

It's all part of the "new and living way" of salvation that's training us to rule the world with our brother Jesus as bona fide members of the great royal family of God, rulers of all creation, and crowned with glory and honour forever.

And this is where the author of Hebrews goes to win back his congregation's confidence in Jesus and in Christianity: It's in answering that confusing, perplexing and oh so frustrating question: "Why on earth does God let us Christians suffer?"