

Hebrews

Hebrews 2:11 - The road to holiness

The insert last time asked the question: “How can God take us from who we are, with all our obvious weaknesses and stupid things we still think, say and do, and make us highly valued members of his royal family forever?” And how can God actually **justify** doing that too, when he cannot compromise his standards or his rules of behaviour? There has to be something that happens in this short-lived, temporary existence of ours, therefore, that somehow convinces God we’re entitled to an eternity of glory and honour ruling this planet alongside his Son. So what on earth is it?

Well, there are three things mentioned in Hebrews so far in answer to that. **First** of all, still in **Hebrews 2:9**, it is “by the grace of God.” Underlying this entire plan of God - that somehow transforms a lowly human into a member of God’s royal family forever - is God’s grace. Without that we would all be dead. But by the grace of God, **verse 9**, Jesus “tasted death for everyone,” which got God’s plan for us back on track. It wasn’t by anything that we do, or how well we live our lives now, or how many good things are said about us at our funeral, that put us back on the right track, it was entirely thought out and put into action by God through his Son.

The **second** thing that led to us being made worthy of glory and honour forever in God’s eyes was Jesus being made “perfect through suffering,” which then qualified him to become “the author of our salvation,” **verse 10**. So again, this was all God’s doing through his Son. It was through Jesus willingly going through the process of suffering and tasting death that set the stage for us being crowned with glory and honour too. It was Jesus hacking his way through the jungle first that the path to eternal glory and honour was opened up to us as well.

The **third** thing that justifies God giving us frail, vulnerable, incomplete humans a life forever in his Kingdom is **the kind of suffering** Jesus went through to make him perfectly qualified to “bring us to glory.” And that was mentioned back in **Hebrews 1:8**, when God said of his Son, “Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever,” **because, verse 9**, “You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness.” And that’s where the suffering and tasting death came in for Jesus, because loving righteousness, or loving God’s will over his own will, had Jesus sweating blood it was so hard to do.

It's by those three things that the doors to God's Kingdom, locked to us humans since the Garden of Eden swung open to us again. And it's all been God's doing, because it was purely by God's grace that Jesus died the death we deserved, by God's grace that Jesus' suffering and tasting death was enough to make him the author of our salvation, and by God's grace that Jesus' perfect obedience to God's will made him the Supreme Commander of Planet Earth forever, so that he can now get us through to glory and honour with him.

With this firmly entrenched in my mind, then - that this imperfect me is being made worthy of glory and honour in God's royal family forever by God's grace alone - I moved on to **Hebrews 2:11**.

Verse 11 starts in **verse 10** with the statement: "In bringing many sons to glory it was fitting that God" - and now **verse 11** - it was fitting that "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."

What was "fitting to God," then - or what justified him going this route of giving eternal life to the likes of us imperfect humans - was having Jesus MAKE US HOLY. And note that it's Jesus who makes us holy, not us making ourselves holy. So now we have a **fourth** act of God's grace through his Son. But this time it's not setting the stage or putting all the props in place in **preparation** for bringing many sons to glory, this is showtime when the other three acts of God's grace - Jesus' death, suffering and obedience - have opened up the actual **process** of Jesus making us holy. In theatre terms, then, the curtain rises and the play now begins.

Which makes it the most important project being played out on this planet, because it's in Jesus making us holy that he is not ashamed to call us "brothers," despite our obvious imperfections. It's because HE makes us holy that we can live forever with him as members of God's eternal royal family. And that process is in operation right now for those who understand this is what God sent Jesus for, realize it's only by Jesus making us holy that it happens, and therefore put all their trust in Jesus to make it happen for them personally.

I'm curious, though, as to how Jesus makes us holy, and what it's actually like being made holy. And can I know that I'm being made holy too? And is there a process we go through that we can easily recognize? And what is our part in it, if there is any part that we play?

Well, I can't help thinking back to when God made our world and he said, "This is very good."

Because that means **we humans** started off very good too. So God, again by his doing and his grace, got us off to a great start. We weren't evil or sinful by nature, we were made in God's image and his likeness, so God actually instilled his goodness in us. And that's where the process of making us holy began, which to me is very encouraging, because this is clearly what God wanted for us right from the beginning, and he set us up right away with what we needed to get us started.

But all that goodness he put into us wasn't enough to make us holy, was it, because one test of two trees and one temptation by a serpent and down in flames we went. So clearly something else was needed to make us holy.

Which raises the obvious and immediate question as to what "holy" actually means. It has to be mean more than just goodness, or being a good person, which Peter also confirms when he tells us in **2 Peter 1:3-4** that God's ultimate purpose in his power and promises is that "through them you may **participate in the divine nature.**" And to me that's the best definition of holiness in Scripture, that it's taking on God's divine nature.

So in Jesus making us holy, he's instilling God's very own nature in us. And that he has to do because we don't have it in us naturally. God's nature is "divine" so it can only come from him. God got us off to a good start in Genesis, but it wasn't enough for Adam and Eve to become holy. So what else did they need? And what else do we need too, when we discover it's possible for us humans to be good **without** God?

We see that at funerals for people who were very good during their lifetime, but they weren't interested in God at all, nor did they go to church. It's fascinating being at such funerals, because out come all these inspiring stories by family, friends and work mates that tell of how great the deceased was as a Dad, how faithful and loving he was as a husband, how fun he was as a Grandpa, and what an all-round grand chap he was to know, and yet - he had no interest in God or Jesus whatsoever.

I've bumped into living people like that too, who aren't Christian, aren't religious and aren't spiritual in any way, but they are generous, caring, happy, charming, funny, and great company. They are honest, do a great job on your car or home repairs, and they never complain or say a nasty word about anyone. They enjoy life to the full, have all sorts of interests, and their homes are full of laughter and fun. They are rocks in their community, their kids and grandkids adore them, and when they're sick or dying they're more concerned about how you are. And all this without any interest in God too.

So where do they stand with God? And where do they stand in our minds too? Because they sound like better Christians than we are, which is a bit disconcerting, so can we be pleased for them and celebrate their goodness, or what?

Well, of course we can celebrate their goodness, because what we're seeing is what God put into us naturally producing good fruit. It's like being taken back to the Garden of Eden and seeing the goodness God created in us humans coming out naturally in that first man caring for the land, caring for the animals, and waxing poetic about his wife. And amazingly there are still people like that today, that despite all the evil going on, and all the temptation and pressure to think only about themselves, they are caring, loving people giving us a wonderful glimpse of what God put into us from the very beginning.

Can we acknowledge all that goodness in a person at his or her funeral, then? Of course we can, because it's all part of what GOD put into that person coming to fruition. Because it was he, God, who put all this natural goodness in us, he who designed it, and he who makes it possible for us to be good even in an evil world. It's part of what has been called "common grace," meaning God gave every one of us goodness in our nature and the capacity to enjoy life and people, and give our lives in service to others too. And for some lucky families they have a long run of this goodness through several generations, creating many happy marriages and thoroughly pleasant children, even if none of them showed any interest in God or in attending church.

But didn't Jesus say in **Luke 11:13** that even evil people know how to give good gifts to their children? And even hardened criminals can repent and change. And why is that? Because, as Paul explains in **Romans 2:14-15**, God gave us a conscience too, so that even pagans and atheists who have no interest in God, or any knowledge of his laws, can still know right from wrong. They can also feel pangs of guilt too, when they go against their conscience.

For some people, however, due to lousy upbringing by ignorant or evil people, their conscience becomes seared and no longer active, but it was God's design **originally** that a conscience - as The Message phrases it in Romans 2 - is "woven into the very fabric of our creation." So right inside our heads is the ability (and desire) to be good and right. And it's all because of God's grace again, because he's the one who placed this natural goodness and conscience in our nature, and enabled people who aren't Christians and never go to church to care for hurting people, and to hate injustice, cruelty and exploitation of the weak. But God did say he made us in his image, so it's not surprising that echoes and traces and fragments of that original image still remain in us.

Sitting at the funeral of a good person, therefore, I'm thinking what a great entry point a person's goodness is to Jesus making him holy, because it's actually a response to what God had put in him. But there's a problem, because the good person is dead, so what was the purpose of all that goodness in him if the effects of it only last for a while in those who knew and loved him, and in three generations his goodness will probably be forgotten?

So as people are telling stories about the dead person's goodness I'm thinking, "Come on, somebody, please, please mention **Romans 2:6-7** to make the person's goodness mean something more than just how good he was in this life - and that's it, game over." Because **Romans 2:6** says, "God will give to each person according to what he has done."

Oh, so **GOD noticed the person's goodness too**, did he? He certainly did, and he had it recorded too. Well, that takes things to another level, doesn't it, because it means the play isn't over and finished with the man's death. The curtain may have come down on his death, but it was only to mark the end of Act 1. The curtain now rises again to reveal the stage set for Act 2, to show that the man's goodness has a life to it after his death - that won't fade away after three generations either, because it's been preserved by God.

And that then opens up the opportunity to really make the man's goodness mean something, because **verse 7** says, "To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honour and immortality, he, God, **will give eternal life.**"

Imagine saying that at a funeral of a good man who never attended church and wanted nothing to do with God, that the man's goodness was actually an entry into eternal life as well. It might cause a nervous twitch or two in the Christians attending, though, who believe no one earns eternal life by his goodness. And they're right, because **Romans 3:23** is very clear about us all falling short of the glory of God, but goodness is obviously a **step in the right direction**, because again it's mentioned in **Romans 2:10** that there's "glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good" - and no matter who it is too, because in **verse 11**, "God does not show favouritism."

In other words, God appreciates anyone, Christian or non-Christian, who is making the goodness he put into us bear fruit. He gave us the capacity and the conscience to do good, so doing good is a very good start to being made holy. But even better than that, says Paul in **Romans 2**, is a person consciously seeking to be good **with GOD in mind**, because God very much notices and appreciates that too. And since we're talking in terms of a play, let's bring on an actor who illustrates this for us perfectly....

Up goes the curtain and on stage strides a Roman centurion all decked out in his shiny armour and short sword belted at his waist. He tells us, as **Acts Chapter 10** also tells us, that his name is Cornelius and he's stationed in Caesarea, capital city of the Roman province of Judea. He has command of a small army of nearly a hundred men as part of the Italian Regiment which has ten centurions in total, whose job it is to hold their ground against all enemies and be willing to die doing so.

So Cornelius is a soldier through and through, and a Gentile, but then we find out to our astonishment that not only is this trained killing machine a good man "giving generously to those in need," **Acts 10:2**, he's also, listen to this, a "devout and God-fearing" man too, who "prayed to God regularly."

So he's a good man, just like the good men we hear about at funerals today, but he's also conscious of God too. In fact, that's **the reason** he's being a good man - it's not just because goodness comes to him naturally, it's because he's seeking to be good with God in mind. He's upped things a level to Romans 2:7, which puts him in a wonderful position, because in his "persistence in doing good" with God in mind, God "will give eternal life" to him.

For Christians who worry that this sounds like we get salvation by our good works or our good attitudes, or by our goodness, the story hasn't finished yet. It ups the level another notch to a third stage, where we find out what makes us holy, because it's holiness God is after, not goodness. Goodness is good, yes, but holiness is better. Our goodness gets us off to a great start too, especially when we're good with God in mind, but look what God does next:

"One day," **Acts 10:3**, "at about three in the afternoon Cornelius had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, 'Cornelius.'" I've never had something like that happen to me, and I'm not sure I want it to either, because in **verse 4** "Cornelius stared at the angel in fear," wondering what on earth he was in for next.

To his relief "The angel answered, 'Your prayers and gifts to the poor, Cornelius, have come up as a remembrance (or memorial) before God.'" I find that fascinating, because we do memorial services for people today who've died, to remember and honour all the good things about them. Well, here's God doing the same thing for Cornelius. He has a memorial service in heaven for Cornelius, while Cornelius is still alive too, dedicated to telling all the good things he loves about Cornelius. And God even sends an angel to Cornelius to tell him this is what he's doing. So is God pleased or not by the goodness he sees in this man? Clearly, God is delighted.

And delighted enough to introduce Cornelius to the next stage. And this is where I'm screaming inside at a funeral for a good person who's died, hoping someone will talk about this next stage too. I've already burst blood vessels hoping someone will mention Romans 2, that our goodness is a great step in the right direction to eternal life to get this man's goodness meaning something way more than being good for this life now. But now comes my edge of the seat moment, because we can't leave everybody thinking our goodness or our persistence in doing good, is all we need for eternal life. It's a great start, yes, and a great step in the right direction - the best, in fact - but Acts 10 tells us **there is more to this story** of how God justifies giving us imperfect humans life for ever in his royal family, and what it takes to make us holy.

And that becomes clear in **Acts 10:43**, when Peter tells the assembled crowd of relatives and friends gathered at the home of Cornelius "that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through his name," because that's the moment when "**the Holy Spirit came on all who heard it.**" Peter was totally caught by surprise too, because he had more to say but suddenly the Holy Spirit interrupts him, and Peter seeing what's happening yells out, "They've received the Holy Spirit just as we have," and he has all those in the household of Cornelius immediately baptized in the name of Jesus (verses 47-48).

So here's the next vital step needed to make us holy: It's the receiving of the Holy Spirit. And obviously so, because even in the name, "HOLY Spirit," this is where holiness comes from. But notice who receives the holiness of the Holy Spirit. It's those who "believe in Jesus" as the one who made forgiveness of sins possible. So again the focus is on God's grace through his Son, which is why they are all baptized "in the name of Jesus," to ram home the point that it's not our goodness that makes us holy, it is totally based on what God does for us through his Son.

Baptism in Jewish tradition was also associated with being made holy, so baptizing in the name of Jesus really meant "being made holy by Jesus." And it was John the Baptist who first lifted Jewish baptism up to this level of recognizing Jesus as the one who makes us holy when he said in **Matthew 3:11** "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who...will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

But John's baptism was a step in the right direction. People didn't receive the Holy Spirit from his baptism, but it gave people the chance to bury their past life and start out afresh, determined to be better people with God in mind, thereby fulfilling the first two stages on the road to being made holy.

It's interesting, then, seeing what happened next to some of those who responded to John's call to repentance and set about becoming better people with God in mind, because we bump into some of them in **Acts 19**. Paul arrives in Ephesus where he meets some disciples in **verse 1**. Which is great news, that here, tucked away in the staggeringly pagan city of Ephesus was a group of people who were genuinely good people, and just like Cornelius they were devout and God-fearing too.

But Paul's first question for them in **verse 2** is: "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" It seems like an odd question to ask, but it shows where Paul's main concern was in meeting disciples. It was where they were on the road to holiness, and for holiness to happen it could only come from the Holy Spirit, so had they received the Holy Spirit?

But in answer to Paul's question they all looked at him rather blankly in **verse 2** and said, "Well no, we've never even heard there's a Holy Spirit." To which Paul asks in **verse 3**, "Then what baptism did you receive?" To which they replied, "John's baptism."

Yes, but, Paul replies in **verse 4**, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance." It was a step in the right direction, yes, but it wasn't the whole story, because remember how John himself had "told people to believe in **the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus**"? Well, "On hearing this," **verse 5**, "they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul then placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them."

So here we have people who'd responded to their need to repent and be better people, meaning they'd successfully got through the second stage. God, then, through Paul, introduces them to the third stage, because on the road to holiness they would also need the Holy Spirit.

So let's recap what we've got to so far. We're talking about the process we go through that leads up to us being made holy, and noted that every step of the way it's God's doing. Because even if we're good, which very nicely gets us started on the road to holiness, it's purely because God put that goodness in us in the first place. And when we bring the goodness God gave us to fruition by "persistence in doing good" with God in mind, it is God who makes it a step toward us receiving eternal life.

It's God who planned this route for us, and the steps along the way. And even our desire to repent is God's doing too, a point also brought out in **Romans 2**, that it's "God's kindness that leads us to repentance," **verse 4**.

So it's a huge leap forward when we want to be good with God in mind, because that puts us fairly and squarely on the path to eternal life. But we then see in the story of Cornelius and the Ephesians that a third step is necessary too, and this time it involves the giving of the Holy Spirit.

But why would we need the Holy Spirit if we can be good without God, which clearly many people are, including those non-Christians whose goodness we celebrate at funerals?

We need the Holy Spirit because holiness is the goal, not goodness. And whereas goodness comes naturally, holiness doesn't, as we read back in **Hebrews 2:11**, that we only become holy because **Jesus makes us holy**. That's why Peter had Cornelius and his household immediately baptized in the name of Jesus, and Paul did the same with the Ephesians, in recognition of Jesus being the one who makes us holy - and HOW he makes us holy too, through the giving of the Holy Spirit to us.

And when I asked earlier if we can know and recognize Jesus making us holy through the Holy Spirit, the answer is a resounding "Yes," because **1 John 4:2** says we can "recognize the Spirit of God," and in **verse 13**, "We know that we live in Jesus and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit." So, yes, we can literally know and experience this third stage on our road to holiness.

And going full circle back to **Hebrews 2:11** it actually tells us **what we experience** too, because "the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy **are of the same family**." As Jesus makes us holy through the Holy Spirit we become aware that we are "family" to him. So this third stage goes much further than merely having God in mind, or being devout and God-fearing, it is creating a direct and very personal relationship with Jesus that can only be described as "family."

And the reason for that, **2 Corinthians 3:18**, is because we "are being transformed into Jesus' likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." The Holy Spirit, in other words, is making us like Jesus, taking on his very nature, which is the definition of holiness.

So no wonder we're entering a whole new feeling of family with Jesus, when the Holy Spirit is making it ever easier to relate to Jesus on his level. It makes prayer a joy like we're sitting down at a dining table with him and talking as families do. And we know he's listening because all kinds of amazing and personal answers to our prayers keep coming, just as he said they would back in **John 14:13-14**.

But then I go to a funeral for a good person and hear all those wonderful stories about his goodness that make me feel so lacking in my life, and make me think Jesus would much rather sit and talk with that lovely person than me. But that's when **Hebrews 2:11** dives in to my rescue, because no matter how inferior I may feel, "Jesus is not ashamed to call me his **brother.**"

And it rips away this feeling that I'm not really on Jesus' level, or I can't really talk to him like we're family, or that these good people who died are so much better in God's sight than we are. Hebrews 2:11 tells me Jesus isn't embarrassed by me at all, because he's been making me into a brother by the Holy Spirit - and a brother who is very, very special to him too, because we're not just brothers like brothers in a family, we are also **brothers-in-arms.**

We see that in **John 17:18** when Jesus prayed, "As you, Father, sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world." So what he was called and sent to do by his Father, we are now called and sent to do by him. We are brothers-in-arms with him, in other words, given the same calling and desire he had, of reaching out to others.

But reach out to others for what purpose? Well, to get them on the road to holiness too, right? And how do we do that? We do it, **2 Corinthians 4:2** "by setting forth the truth plainly" because in doing so "we commend ourselves to **every man's conscience** in the sight of God."

Oh, so our Creator designed this right into our conscience too, so that anybody can respond to the gospel when the truth of it is plainly and clearly explained. And Paul gives us an actual example in **1 Corinthians 14:24-25** when "an unbeliever happens to walk into a church service, hears us all discussing God's truth, and it hits him right in his heart how much of a sinner he is in need of forgiveness, and there and then he cries out, 'Wow, is God ever here among you.'" It really does happen, in other words.

And it needs to happen because this is the **fourth stage** on our road to holiness; it's recognizing we can now get others onto that road to holiness too. And realizing it has made me a little braver in talking to others who mean a lot to me about what I believe, and to my surprise there has been a response. Hopefully then my funeral can also be used to explain what I believed and how it all got started for me. It started when my conscience was stirred by the truth of what God has provided for us in his Son, that from beginning to end the road to holiness and eternal life is all God's doing. And in hearing that said about me, here's hoping another conscience or two might be stirred and onto the road to holiness they jump too, because isn't that, for now, what we've been called to be disciples of Jesus for?