

Sermon for Sunday, September 23, 2012
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Jesus our Hero
Hebrews 2:10-18

2:10 For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. ¹¹ For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, ¹² saying, 'I will tell of your name to my brothers, in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.' ¹³ And again, 'I will put my trust in him.' And again, 'Behold I and the children God has given me.' ¹⁴ Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same thing, that through death he might destroy him 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.

Today we explore the great truth that Jesus is the founder, pioneer or hero of our faith. To do that well, I think we need to consider our views of heroes today. It's clear that we are fascinated with heroes, but they come in several forms and we have mixed attitudes toward them.

We have sports heroes and music heroes. We certainly like "good" heroes, but we also like bad boys. Among Olympic heroes, we have Michael Phelps and Ryan Lochte. Phelps won twenty-two medals, eighteen gold, while Lochte has eleven and five, but Lochte is seen as the marketing champion. Why? Because Phelps eats, sleeps and exercises. They say he should market vanilla ice cream and prunes. But Lochte has crazy hair and a diamond grille, so he can sell cool stuff.

Or take music. The acclaimed films about musicians cover Ray Charles and Johnny Cash – tortured souls, not Paul McCartney. He seems too happy. And in the future we can foresee the Amy Winehouse story, but we can't imagine a serious movie about Justin Bieber – unless he really is the father of a three-headed calf, as a certain newspaper says. He's too nice!

Or take fictional superheroes. They can be simple or complicated; good, dark, or mixed. Although most superheroes were created fifty to seventy-five years ago, the good, simple heroes like Superman and Captain America seem older, suited for another age. We prefer accidental heroes like Spiderman or tormented souls like Batman.

We like the X-men, a group of freaks and outsiders who are ill at ease with their powers. We like Iron Man. He has no superpower, but he designs cool weapons, gets rich, has a cool lab, an oversized ego and a social conscience.

But we are fascinated by Batman (2005-2012), brooding and lonely. Someone killed his parents when he was young. His image, the bat, comes from the time he fell down a well as a child and found himself alone and terrified by a million screaming fluttering bats. As an adult, he's a tormented crusader possibly motivated by a death wish. If we ask how Batman saved Gotham, maybe it's because he is a better warrior, with bigger guns and more capacity to suffer.

Our favored heroes share three things: power, victory, suffering. Clearly, Jesus also has these traits and Hebrews calls him our hero. Let's explore this.

1. It is fitting that Jesus is consecrated and perfected through suffering.

Hebrews says it's "fitting" for Jesus to rescue us through suffering: "For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder ['hero'] of their salvation perfect through suffering" (2:10).

God – that is, the Father - is the Creator for whom and by whom all things exist. Above all it's fitting for God to send Jesus as the founder or hero of the faith. The original for "founder" is a compound word whose parts mean "chief" plus "leader." Jesus is our chief leader, our founder, hero, or champion. Hero and champion are good translations, because Jesus fought and defeated our great foe, Satan. He is also a "trailblazer" because we follow his path.

Hebrews says "It is fitting." First, it fits that the Father sent Jesus because he cares for his creation. The Father is the efficient cause of all things, since they exist by him. He is also the final cause of all things, since they exist for him. "All creation flows from God and all creation flows to God." How could he let his creation lapse into ruin? It was right to act to rehabilitate this lost world.

Second, it fits that he does this through the suffering of his Son. We see that it makes sense for God to restore all things, but why through the suffering of Jesus? Did God have no other way to free us from our misery? Why did Jesus have to take flesh and blood (2:14)? Yet by his suffering Jesus demonstrated what a great price he sets on our life and gave himself as a substitute.

He retained his deity and goodness and yet entered our life, our flesh and blood, including our capacity to suffer. So, as Isaiah 53:3-5 says: "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows... He was wounded for our transgressions, *he* was crushed for *our* iniquities; upon *him* was the chastisement that brought *us* peace, and with his stripes *we* are healed."

This fits God's love of creation. He saw us on the road to ruin – wandering, lost, brutalized, and demoralized, seeking purpose in life, but choosing false gods. In his love for us and his goodness, God chose to renew mankind and to offer the privilege of knowing him, so we could become his children and find the road to glory again. As Hebrews says, he brings many sons, many children, to glory.¹

This occurs "through suffering." In one sense, the Incarnation itself brings Jesus suffering. As a baby he was weak, helpless, speechless. As a child and a man, he suffered the assault of *temptation*. Hebrews says he was tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Jesus always resisted temptation, yet the sinless God felt the tug, the allure of sin. We can hardly imagine how this assaulted Jesus in his purity. We wish we weren't tempted... Imagine the grief Jesus felt.

Of course, he also suffered on the *cross* as Hebrews says later, "To put away sin by the sacrifice of himself... So Christ [offered himself] once to bear the sins of many [and] to save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (Heb 9:26-28).

¹ Hughes, 99, Athanasius, On the Incarnation, 10:13.

In all this the Father made Jesus perfect through suffering. We may ask: If Jesus is already perfect, how can he be perfected? In two ways. First, he perfectly achieved his goals in the incarnation:

- 2:9 says Jesus shared our humanity in order to *experience death* on our behalf.
- 2:10 says Jesus shared our humanity to *bring us to glory*.
- 2:14 says Jesus shared our humanity to *vanquish our foe, the devil*.
- 4:15 says Jesus shared our humanity to be tempted and to be perfectly qualified to be our *sympathetic high priest*.

Jesus is perfected a second way. You may recall that we think Hebrews was written for Jewish Christians living in Rome. When Hebrews quotes the Bible it doesn't quote the original, but a translation, the Septuagint (LXX). That translation was their Bible, just as English translations are our Bible. In the LXX, the verb "to perfect" describes the ordination of a priest (Ex 29:9, 29, 33, 35; Lev. 8:33, 16:32, Num 3:3). Exod 29:29: "The holy garments of Aaron shall be for his sons after him, to be anointed and ordained in them." So Jesus was perfected in the sense that he was consecrated for his ministry. By taking flesh and suffering, Jesus was qualified and consecrated as our high priest. All of this fits the Father's plan of redemption.

2. Jesus delivers us from fear of death and the power of Satan.

Hebrews wants to lead us ever deeper into our knowledge of Jesus' person and work. Hebrews 2:10 says Jesus is our *archegos*, the hero or champion of our salvation. We can call Jesus a champion for reasons stated almost poetically in verses 2:14-15.

Since the children shared blood and flesh
 He likewise partook of them – blood and flesh
 So that by *his* death,
 he might destroy the one who has the *power* of death, the devil
 And *set free* those who, by their *fear* of death
 Through all their *life*, were liable to *slavery*.

Jesus became a man, in flesh and blood, to enter combat as a man. As our champion, He fought our great foe, Satan. By dying, he broke the power of death and defeated Satan. By defeating him, he secured our life and salvation.

This may *seem far* from our experience, but it's closer than we think. Four illustrations: From sports, war, politics, history. The spirit of combat and representative champions is all around us. Last year, the Cardinals played the Rangers in the World Series. As they did, they represented our city. When the Cardinals won, we felt that St. Louis won, that *we* won. In the Olympics, in soccer's World Cup, the nations feel that their athletes represent them and even resolve rivalries between nations through our athletes.

In war, the people who stay home send representatives who fight for us. That's why we always pray for and support our soldiers, even if we doubt a war in itself.

In politics, especially presidential campaigns Republicans, Democrats try to name the best leader to bear their standard, represent their vision of a just society. The candidates are supposed to represent or embody the party's skills and convictions. If their candidate wins, the whole party wins. If they lose, the party loses.

The concept is ancient. Three thousand years ago, David was the representative champion of God's people when he fought Goliath. Their combat settled the battle between Israel and Philistia. But David said, "the battle is the Lord's," that is, God is the champion or warrior fighting for his people.

Isaiah 42:13 (English Standard Version (ESV)): "The LORD goes forth like a mighty man, like a man of war he stirs up his zeal... he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes."

Jesus also compares himself to a warrior. He says Satan is strong and well-armed, but he is stronger. Jesus attacks and overpowers him, takes away his armor and plunders his realm (Luke 11:21-22). Jesus became our champion when he healed diseases, proclaimed God's reign, cast out demons and died and rose again.

In this way he broke Satan's one quasi-legitimate charge – that we are liable to judgment for our sins. Revelation 12:10-11 says, "Satan accuses God's people day and night, but we now have an answer: The accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death."

Do you ever feel accused – by yourself, by family, others? The blood of Jesus, shed for us, silenced his accusations. If we're willing to testify to Jesus, even if it costs our life, it proves we belong to him. That liberates us from the fear of death. Jesus shared our flesh and blood, so he knows this fear. But he doesn't just *know* it or commiserate with us, his death disarmed our foe. By returning to life Jesus, our champion, removed the fear of death.

Apply: How much of energy goes to the fear of death, plus disease and aging! The food industry, cosmetics, insurance of all kinds, exercise regimens, all aim to stave off death or signs of death. Think of foods we're supposed to eat to prevent free radicals from floating around in our bodies... How much effort we put to avoiding ageing, or its appearance...

3. Jesus is our hero, champion of mankind.

The great point of the passage is clear: Jesus is the founder of our salvation because he is the champion, the hero who defeated our foe the devil. Jesus defeated him, paradoxically, by *appearing to suffer defeat*. He achieved victory by letting Satan's minions kill him, dying in our place and rising by his power over death.

Therefore Jesus is one hero who deserves our loyalty, our cheers. All of us have cheered for a hero who both represents and disappoints us. Even as we applaud, we feel conflicted. We hold our nose, vote for politicians with major weaknesses. We cheer for musicians and athletes with glaring flaws.

Often, our heroes are one dimensional and don't inspect their personal lives. After they throw, sing or act, they have few ideas about the good life. Charles Barkley, hall of fame athlete, commentator, gambler, and brawler once entertained a question about his chaotic personal life, and thundered the awful truth, "I am not a role model!" **Not so with Jesus. He deserves every ounce of our admiration.**

4 Heroes and the role heroism in the Christian life.

As we'll see next week, Hebrews 2 has strong interest in a believer's identity. Hebrews 2:11 says Jesus places us in his family. He is not ashamed – he is proud – to call us "brothers." If we want to secure our identity, it helps to know that Jesus is the hero who gladly accepts us.

The trouble is our culture is fascinated by fictional heroes, even while it undermines the possibility of real heroism. Real heroes make it by working with mentors and teams. Fictional heroes are isolated. They are orphans, unmarried, childless. Most important, we scoff at true heroism. Materialism reduces mankind to "an accidental collocation of atoms." How can random atoms be "heroic?"

Classical psychology explains great achievements as the expression of suppressed desires. Freud reduced the heroic accomplishments of Leonardo Da Vinci to the outworking of a sublimated sexual problems. Behaviorists and economic materialists claim that every human action seeks a reward. All behavior, they assume, attempts to meet a need or desire. So they say Mother Theresa didn't serve the poorest of India because she cared about them. She did it to meet her ego needs - to prove her worth or make a name for herself. Economists observe that every good deed can reap a reward and propose that everyone is so motivated. In these ways, every sacrifice is explained away. Cynicism rules.

We need to recapture our sense of the heroic because role models can outline the good life. We need true heroes. So let me mention two of mine. Lance Hudgens is a hero because he is marvelously *present*. If you talk to Lance one on one you have his complete, undistracted attention. He thinks of no one else. If he asks, "How can I help you?" it's not a polite phrase, he really wants to help.

Another hero is my former colleague Willard McMillan. Willard was sixty-two years old when I joined his Bible department at Geneva College in 1986. He had already survived cancer twice and it had weakened him. At 5'10", 135 pounds, he was almost completely bald. Radiation had left his voice with a thin, raspy tone, and he had a stooped posture. His physical persona was unimpressive. But Willard was my hero. Hard-working and intelligent, he was a captivating speaker, witty conversationalist. Endlessly cheerful, he welcomed everyone. In meetings Willard spoke sparingly, but his holiness and wisdom gave him gravitas and his nose for the core issues gave his words great effect.

Willard and I taught required Bible survey classes together. With 300 students, some, inevitably, were displeased with their grades. When they complained to Willard, no matter how they grumbled when they entered his office, they always smiled as they exited. He let them talk themselves out, then let them grade themselves, then suggested methods to improve. Willard led a beautiful life.

I urge you to seek and find heroes. Learn from them as they learned from Jesus.

Heroism and Christian living

The desire to imitate people like Willard is instinctive. But in fact the New Testament often commands us to imitate the wise and godly. About twelve times the Bible invites us to imitate God. Paul says this in my verse for the year, in Ephesians 5:1: "Live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us." And Scripture often tells us imitate an apostle or another leader. Hebrews 13:7 says, "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Also, 'Whatever you have learned or received or heard or seen in me, practice these things.'" (Phil 4:9)

Both commands astonish me. It would approach blasphemy for puny men to dare to imitate God, if he did not invite it. And it would be folly for one sinful man to imitate another, if God did not command it.

God commands it because we are imitators. We need heroes, men and women who *embody* moral and spiritual greatness. Sadly, some people want to imitate powerful or successful evildoers. Others follow the wise, who display their insight by their excellent life (James 3:13).

Heroes model greatness. Their models present a vision, palpable examples of maturity. They capture our imagination and inspire us. We think, "I want to be like that." We need models of excellence because the Christian life is more than rule-keeping. We need models for life, not just rules.

I once met with a group of twenty-five leaders of Christian youths, ages sixteen to twenty-one, from excellent churches in the area. I asked them, "How many of you would say this is the essence of your Christian life: First, you don't do certain things other kids your age do. You don't drink or smoke or experiment sexually. Second, you do things they don't. You go to church, read the Bible and seek Christian friends. Raise your hand if you think that's the essence of your faith." All but one raised a hand. They thought doing was the essence of faith.

Please don't dismiss that as a youthful error. Anyone can succumb to the *soft* legalism that thinks, "If I do these things I'll please God and he'll bless me." No, the essence of Christian living is knowing God, trusting him, and becoming more like him. Christian behavior, keeping the rules, flows from who we are. When God renews our spirit, we do good spontaneously, just as apple trees spontaneously bear apples. We don't change our spirit by keeping regulations, but by knowing God and putting ourselves in the way of his truth.

One way to avoid soft legalism is to find heroes and let their models inspire us. They give a vision of a godly life. Hebrews 11 describes heroes of the faith whose courage and perseverance inspire us. But Jesus is the best model or hero. Yes, he taught morals, but he models excellence and captures the imagination. We think, "I want to be like that."

Think of Jesus' relational style. He befriended everyone. He ate with aristocrats and fishermen, Pharisees and tax-collectors. He talked to Jews, Gentiles and Samaritans. He ministered in city and countryside, with disciples and opponents. He treated everyone with dignity, yet he varied his approach to suit the need. If someone had a bad agenda, he shifted it. If someone asked a bad question, he answered what they should have asked. He feared nothing. He broke foolish rules that said a good man can't spend time with evil people. He knew they would catch his purity long before he caught their pollution.

Jesus is our hero because he *shares* our humanity yet *surpasses* it. We sometimes say, "Misery loves company." That's true, but it's more true that misery loves relief. Jesus provides both company and relief. He shares our weaknesses, to lead us out of them. He is our hero, yet he humbled himself, so he can empathize with us. He loves us in our weaknesses and invites us to a strong, even heroic life, like his own.