

# Praise You

## Hebrews 1:1-4 (5-12)

Once a year, usually on Christmas day, the birth of Jesus is placed front and center. Incarnation is singled out for celebration. In contrast, from its earliest days, the church made it (at least) a *weekly* habit to remember the death of Christ. Learning to behold the face of a newborn comes naturally. It takes a lot more practice to take in the fullness of meaning when we stand before the casket of a loved one.

Reading these opening verses of Hebrews helps us to see the full meaning of the incarnation, which must never stand apart from the larger and longer story of all that is disclosed to us in Christ—in birth, life, death, atonement, resurrection, and glorification. The breadth of Jesus' life story is breathtaking.

Let us examine the central claim of the text before us—an astounding claim about the connection between God and flesh, body and spirit, the universal and the particular, the temporal and the eternal. Verse 3 says: "He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being." In this we see the deity of Christ. However, without diminishing the importance of this fact, we must not miss the implied humanity of Christ in this text. This text gives us knowledge of God, knowledge of ourselves and of the significance of our bodily existence.

To proclaim that in Jesus the glory of God was revealed and that Jesus (in body and spirit) was nothing less than "the exact imprint of God's very being," is to declare that flesh can no longer define existence that is not-God. Flesh is God's territory no less than spirit. The world of bodies, time, and space is God's world through and through.

When beholding the face of an infant, most of us feel we are not far from the glory of God. It is the faces aged by innocence long lost, including our own, that challenge our capacity to see the reflection of God's glory. The deity of Christ at its highest reveals the mystery of a God who bridges height and depth, temporality and eternity, flesh and spirit, divinity and humanity. It is the truth of incarnation that keeps us awake and alert to the possibility of the glory of God in the flesh of humanity—even our own.

For all our talk about spirit and spirituality, it is bodily life that preoccupies much of our attention. The prayers offered in worship on any Sunday reveal our yearning to know God's grace and presence in relation to the experience of our bodies. This is stated more clearly in later passages in the Letter to the Hebrews: "Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things" (Heb. 2:14). "Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest" (Heb. 2:17). "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses" (Heb. 4:15). **David J. Wood**

Jesus is not only a teacher, prophet, and miracle worker; he is also closely connected to the very reality of God. He is the one through whom God created the universe, who nevertheless came into the world as a human being to bring eternal salvation and the ultimate revelation of God.

Hebrews calls Jesus "the reflection [or "radiance," NIV] of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (Heb. 1:3). The concept is of a being so close to God as to bear the nature or essence of God, through whom the light of God's presence emanates to all things. It was Jesus of Nazareth who took human flesh and even accepted human death to make known and put into effect God's saving purposes.

This Jesus, so intimately related to God, is also God's agent in the creation of the universe. In Proverbs 8:22-31, Lady Wisdom is pictured as God's companion and helper in creation, however the Hebrews writer does not call the helper Lady Wisdom but Jesus. From the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon, written in Alexandria perhaps just before or just after the birth of Christ, we read: "Wisdom [is] the fashioner of all things. ... There is in her a spirit that is intelligent, holy, unique, manifold, subtle ... all-powerful, overseeing all, and penetrating through all spirits. ... For wisdom ... pervades and penetrates all things. For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty. ... For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness" (Wis. 7:22-26). Within a monotheistic system, this theology made room for God's Wisdom as a semi-independent mediator of divine order to creation.

There can be little doubt that as Christians in the first century pondered whom they had encountered in Jesus and what the meaning of that encounter might be, they found their way to wisdom traditions such as this. They came to see in Jesus not only the fulfillment of messianic prophecies but much more: the unique embodiment of divine Wisdom.

This passage in Hebrews invites us to think more broadly and more deeply about Jesus and our own encounter with him. We may be used to acknowledging him as teacher, savior, example, or friend. When we also think of him as giver of existence and order, as ever-present sustainer of each detail of the created world since time began, new horizons open up both in our ideas about him and in our relationship with him. To celebrate his coming into the world is to recognize the world's Creator has entered into it in a new and unexpected way, as one of us, united with us creatures in life and in death.

The divine Son, imprint of God's being and sustainer of creation, became fully and utterly human, and so was able to offer himself as an appropriate sacrifice for our salvation (Heb. 2:9-18). Having done so, he entered the true sanctuary in heaven, the very presence of God, as our high priest (4:14-16; 9:11-15, 24-28). **David Rensberger**

In his book of essays entitled *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*, Richard Selzer recalls a story from his surgical practice. The case involved a young woman, newly married. A tumor embedded in her cheek had to be removed. Its removal required that a nerve controlling the muscles to her mouth be severed. Upon regaining consciousness after surgery, her husband by her side, the woman saw for the first time her mouth, irrevocably "twisted in palsy." Selzer tells us what happens next:

"Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks.

"Yes," I say, "it will. It is because the nerve was cut."

She nods, and is silent. But the young man smiles.

"I like it," he says, "It is kind of cute."

All at once I know who he is. I understand, and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works.

Selzer is right to identify this act of love as a glimpse of divinity in the flesh. It is to identify the existence of God in the acts and movements of everyday life. To see and know God in the flesh, in our own flesh—this is the miracle and the mystery of Jesus. **David J. Wood**

All praise to God and to the Son, Jesus, the Christ:

- To the heir of all things, we praise You...
- To the creator of the worlds, we praise You...

- To the reflection of God's glory, we praise You...
- To the exact imprint of God's very being, we praise You...
- To the sustainer of all things by his powerful word, we praise You...
- To the One who made purification for sins, we praise You...
- To the One who sits down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, we praise You...
- To the One whose name is name is more excellent than others, we praise You...
- To the One who God called, "You are my Son;" we praise You...
- To the One begotten of God, we praise You...
- To the One whom God said, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son," we praise You...
- To the One who is the firstborn into the world, we praise You...
- To the One about whom God says, "Let all God's angels worship him," we praise You...
- To the One whose throne is forever and ever, we praise You...
- To the One with the righteous scepter, we praise You...
- To the One whose is the scepter of God's kingdom, we praise You....
- To the One who loved righteousness, we praise You...
- To the One who hated wickedness, we praise You...
- To the One whom God has anointed with the oil of gladness beyond your companions," we praise You...
- To the One who founded the earth, we praise You...
- To the One which the heavens are the work of your hands; we praise You...
- To the One who will remain; while other perish, we praise You...

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