

The Hardest Part of Being Human Christmas 2023

It didn't have to be this way. It didn't have to happen with we three kings and angels we have heard on high or in the little town of Bethlehem. It didn't have to be away in a manger. It didn't even have to be Jesus.

What I mean is this: If God's main purpose in sending Jesus was to save us, aren't there other ways that God could have accomplished that? If we believe that God is all-powerful; if we believe that God is ultimately free to do as God chooses; isn't it true that it could have gone a million other ways? If God sent Jesus to save us, couldn't he at the very least just as easily have sent someone else?

After all, if we're honest, the Jesus approach seems to have come with mixed results, which is just to say, even if we believe it was ultimately effective for those who believe, there remain a disheartening number of people out there who appear to be unconvinced.

Maybe a Middle-Eastern peasant was a poor choice for getting the world's attention. I understand that kings and queens are probably too predictable and politicians are too divisive, but couldn't God at least have sent someone more popular, like, I don't know, a Taylor Swift type? Or maybe Oprah would have been the best one to deliver God's good news: "You get to go to heaven! You get to go to heaven! You get to go to heaven!"

Actually, it's worth asking if God really needed a Messiah figure at all to accomplish this saving work. And in particular—as long as we're throwing wide the doors of possibility—is all that crucifixion business totally necessary? Isn't that all just a little, I don't know, old school? If God really is all-powerful, couldn't God have decided just to snap his fingers and save us? Did Jesus really have to go through all that pain and suffering for Death to be defeated forever? Couldn't God just, you know, say it, and make it so? After all, it sounds like that's more or less what God did to create the universe in the first place. God just spoke things into existence—light, stars, sea, and sky. Couldn't God just speak from on high and say "Your sins are forgiven. Death has been defeated" and then it would just be that way?

In that case, God wouldn't need a Messiah, he'd just maybe want to deliver the good news of the decision reached from his desk in the sky. So just, you know, write it in the clouds. Or consider making an animal or two speak. That, surely, would make it to the first page of the New York Times. Or, wait, even better: Send us an alien messenger? I mean, even if there aren't aliens, couldn't God create just a single alien for this purpose? To land on the lawn of the White House and say: "God is real. And God is love. God is the Creator of everything and is the love in between every atom and God wants you to repent and believe and to live with him in heaven forever." Then we'd all definitely believe, right?

My hope is that these ridiculous and probably heretical thought-experiments lead us to asking the actually most interesting and most important question: So why is it the way that it is then? If it is true that God really could have done it any way God wanted, what *exactly* is the reason God chose to do it this way? What is it that God is trying to communicate that no other way of saving us could have? What does this way of saving us tell us about the nature of our salvation?

This is pretty high theology stuff to be putting in one's Christmas sermon, I know. Let me try to put the question in a slightly different way, one that doesn't ask you to look out at the stars and make sense of God's eternal and mysterious purposes, but instead to look inside your own heart, to look at your own life, and to ask yourself a simple question: What is wrong, actually? What is it that we need saving from, exactly? Let me put it even more pointedly still: What is the hardest part of being human?

One classic answer to the fundamental question of "what is wrong" is sin. Sin is that innate tendency we all feel in our hearts and experience in our actions to do those things which we ought not to do. It is the degree to which we are automatically disposed towards selfishness over the common good.

Sin explains a lot of what is wrong, a lot of what makes being human difficult. It explains violence and war. It explains greed and poverty. It even explains climate change. It explains the ending of friendships and the dissolution of marriages. But, I'm sorry to say, sin does not explain everything that is wrong. It doesn't really explain Death.

That's the other classic answer to the question of what is wrong: Death—capital D Death and all its lesser minions. Our bodies rebel against themselves—they break, they are diseased, and ultimately, all of them fail. Death marks every day on earth with tragedy and heartbreak. The sickness and death of those we love can mark and alter our lives spectacularly. Death explains a lot of the heaviness we carry with us.

So then, we must ask, do these two things combined then, sin *and* death, explain all that is wrong with the world? All that we need to be saved from?

The answer is no. Sin and death remain problems that God could have solved with a snap of his fingers from on high. The simple truth is if those were the only problems we had, we wouldn't have needed Jesus. We have to dig deeper. Think back to the difficult moments in your life. I suspect you won't have to dig very far. Think back to the diagnosis, the divorce, the death, the disappointment, and ask yourself "What was my soul crying for?"

When you are the one in the ditch, what turns out to be invariably not super helpful is people who obsess with identifying the cause for your suffering, or people who obsess with various possible solutions to your suffering; that is, people who obsess with sin and death. It gets even worse when those people lump God into those obsessions by saying things like: *You know, God teaches us that everything happens for a reason* or *Have you considered praying more? Maybe*

Go will heal you if you just pray. It turns out that what you and I end up longing for the most when we're going through it is not actually explanations or solutions but just friends. What are souls cry out for is simply and profoundly companionship. For those who will be with us as we wait.

The most difficult part about being human is not sin. It's not even death. The most difficult part of being human? It's being alone. What makes any kind of suffering exponentially worse? When no one else knows. What makes any kind of suffering exponentially more bearable? Having others to bear it with you. This point is even better made in the reverse: What can make life's greatest victories ring hollow? Having no one to share them with. What makes them worthwhile? It's the look of surging pride you get from your partner who saw you work so hard behind the scenes. It's the ecstasy of embrace with your teammates. Life's best moments are not life's best moments without company.

Let me try to put this another way: What do you imagine heaven is like? Some describe heaven as a place where sin is no more, suffering is no more, and death is a distant memory. But we need to be very careful with that definition of heaven. It's not wrong; it's just incomplete. Take it this way: If I told you that heaven was a series of magical islands where you live forever and you never get sick or experience pain but that the only rule is that there's only one person allowed on each island, would you be interested in going to that heaven? That state of being, of sheer perpetual existence, even without suffering, even without death, is not good enough, and we know it. Living forever alone is not a description of heaven. It's actually one of the classic descriptions of hell.

In other words, what makes the absence of suffering and death valuable in heaven is precisely the relationships they make possible. We now get to be with God and with one another without all the dominating distractions that sin and death perpetually provide on earth.

Finally we can see what Christmas is all about. This is why it had to be Jesus. This is the problem that Jesus uniquely solves: Our being cosmically alone. In Christmas, we see that God wanted so much more than to simply be our rescuer. God wanted to be our friend. God wanted more than to do stuff for us, God wanted to be with us.

It didn't have to be this way. God could have snapped his fingers and taken away sin. God could have spoken Death's defeat into being. But the only way that God could fully be with us was to become fully human himself.

Whatever suffering comes your way, because of Christmas, God gets to say: I'm with you in this. I know human suffering not from some detached distance, but I know it from the inside out. I know what it feels like to be spit upon, to be despised, to be ignored, to be depressed, to be terrified, to be left alone in one's hour of greatest need. I know what it's like for one's own body to feel like it's being ripped apart at the seams. I even know what it's like to die.

And this wonder of the incarnation applies to the joys of our life as much as it applies to the grief. God, because of Christmas, gets to say: I have seen with my own eyes the glory of the mountains and the sea. I know the intimate joy that comes in friendship. I know the exhilaration of freedom that comes when one's in the safe care of parents. I know the wonder one feels when playing with young children. I know what it's like to feel one's heart surge with love.

After Christmas, through the course of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God also solves the sin problem and the death problem. But for God, these are simply means to an end. What Christmas proves forever is that what God wants more than anything is to be with you. And it could have been no other way than this: God with us, Immanuel, forever.

Amen.