



THE

Theological Reflections

MAN

on the

CHRIST

Humanity of Christ

JESUS

BRUCE A. WARE

“This delightful study of Jesus Christ the *man* probes deep and complex truths with a lucid clarity designed for ordinary Christian readers. I’m tempted to say that this is Warfield’s christology rewritten for the devout layperson who wants to understand Jesus better and thereby trust, obey, and love him more wholeheartedly. The discussion questions at the end of each chapter promise that the book will be used widely in churches where one of the passions is to understand historic Christian truth in a fashion that is biblically faithful and spiritually nourishing.”

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“This is a simple, readable, accessible, and biblical introduction to the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. It takes a great theologian with a pastor’s heart to boil down difficult big ideas like this.”

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“Evangelicals who believe the Scriptures to be God’s inerrant Word run the risk of emphasizing the deity of the Lord Jesus and, quite unintentionally no doubt, deemphasizing his humanity. Bruce Ware provides a healthy antidote to this malady. This is a welcome addition to the study of christology and one that will aid in our understanding of and love for the man Christ Jesus.”

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“In far too many instances, the church is functionally docetic, basically affirming that the divine Christ only *seemed* to be human. But as Bruce Ware skillfully and passionately explains, the gospel and its implications depend upon the full deity and true humanity of Jesus Christ. Biblically faithful, theologically solid, devotionally heartwarming, *The Man Christ Jesus* will increase your knowledge of and reverence for our wonderful Savior and Lord, the God-man Jesus Christ.”

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“Many arguments have been developed and many books have been written in defense of the full deity of the Son of God. As for arguments and writings in support of the full humanity of the Son incarnate, less attention has been given. Bruce Ware corrects this imbalance by offering a treatment that is biblical, readable, in tune with contemporary issues, and immensely practical. As readers make their way through this book, they will not only become convinced of the humanity of the God-man and understand why the incarnation was needed; they will also be prompted to offer praise and thanksgiving to God for his wonderful work of salvation through Jesus Christ!”

Gregg Allison, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“A thoughtful, provocative work that considers the grand miracle of the one who is fully God pouring himself out to become fully man. This book will move you to contemplate and marvel at the wonder of it all.”

Mary A. Kassian, Professor of Women’s Studies, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Author, *Girls Gone Wise*

“The proper understanding of Christ’s humanity is absolutely essential to understanding our calling and ministry. For years I have taught the humanity of Christ, and countless numbers have said that nothing causes them to love Jesus more than a biblical understanding of his humanity. Because of this, I highly commend this book to you!”

Dann Spader, President, Global Youth Initiative; Founder, Sonlife Ministries; author, *Walking as Jesus Walked* and *The Everyday Commission*

“Ever since the church confronted Gnosticism, the reality and necessity of Christ’s humanity has been at the heart of Christian orthodoxy. Bruce Ware’s grasp and exposition of this essential doctrine contains a rigorous theological precision, communicates an attractive piety, presses the reader to investigate just how central this is to the entire spectrum of the redemptive work of the Messiah, and opens the doctrine to some thick and provocative applicatory ideas. Both ancient and right up to date, Ware’s treatment deserves a serious reading.”

Thomas J. Nettles, Professor of Historical Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *By His Grace and for His Glory*

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PREFACE:

WHY THE HUMANITY OF THE GOD-MAN MATTERS

*For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men,
the man Christ Jesus.*

1 TIMOTHY 2:5

I recall a disturbing moment in my young Christian life. I was about ten years old, reading my Bible at home, sitting on the middle of my bed. My pastor and parents had encouraged the youth to be more diligent in Bible reading. Over a period of months I had made it through parts of the Gospels and some of the Epistles, and I now found myself reading 1 Peter. Despite the serious and repeated warnings about suffering for Christ, I was making it through this book pretty well. But then I read 1 Peter 2:21–23, which, in my small, black, red-letter King James Version (I still have it!) says:

For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously.

It is hard to describe how unfair I felt this passage to be. I really was quite disturbed, not about the part that speaks of Christ's suffering for us and committing his life to the Father, but about his followers' being called to follow in his steps. No fair, I determined. Especially when the passage says to follow in the steps of one "*who did no sin.*"

This was totally outlandish and unreasonable, and I just couldn't see how God could really mean for us to take it seriously.

Behind my childish outrage at what this passage commanded was this: I had been taught in Sunday school that Jesus was God. I remember being quite amazed when I first learned this, that even though Jesus walked this earth and ate and drank and got tired and slept, he was nonetheless fully God. I was taught that the Father sent his Son into the world, and when the Son came, born of Mary, he was still the Son and so he was still fully God.

In my ten-year-old mind, I just couldn't see how it would be fair, then, for God to call us to follow in the steps of Jesus, especially not to sin or to be angry at others who hurt us, since *Jesus was God and we are not!*

Little did I know how this question would come back to challenge me many years later, when I began to study my Bible more seriously and think more deeply about theological matters. This question returned to my mind during my seminary years, when I learned in greater depth that Jesus was both God and man. And that simple understanding—that he had two natures, one divine and one human—began a process of thinking again about 1 Peter 2:21–23 with new questions in my mind: Could it be that even though Jesus was fully God, he lived his life fundamentally as a man? Could the command to follow in his steps be legitimate because he lived a human life in obedience to his Father as we also are called to do? What, then, happens to his divine nature when he takes on human nature? Could he really have been both fully God and fully man and yet lived as one person?

The book you hold in your hands expresses some of the ways that God, in his abundant mercy, has allowed me to process these questions through deeper and richer study of his Word. I want to present here some of the evidence from Old and New Testaments that the human life of Jesus is real and to show how important it is that he lived our life in order to die our death and be forever “the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5) who intercedes for us and reigns over us.

I long for Jesus to be honored through the reflections upon his humanity in this book. Please understand that this is *not* a complete

Christology. I do not in any manner intend to “slight” the importance of the deity of Christ for an understanding of who Jesus was and is, even though his deity is not our focus here. There are a few times when we will examine some aspects of the deity of Christ simply because these must be seen to understand aspects of his humanity. My sense, though, is that evangelicals understand better Christ’s deity than they do his humanity, and so my focus here will be on the latter.¹

I wish also briefly to express thanks to some who have assisted and encouraged me in my writing. Allan Fisher of Crossway first suggested the idea of this book, and he has patiently awaited its completion. I am deeply grateful for the excellent team at Crossway and consider it an honor to publish with them. My family members—Jodi, Rachel, Bethany, and Owen—have all been very supportive and helpful. As any writer can testify, time writing means time not spent with others. Writing is a lonely exercise, and my family has shown such understanding and patience with me, for which I am grateful. Southern Seminary also provided a sabbatical in which I was able to get much done on this book as well as several other projects.

And finally I wish to express my love and appreciation to the two people to whom this book is dedicated: Wayne and Bonnie Pickens. Bonnie is my sister, my only sibling, and I have long loved and admired this godly woman. She is one of the finest pastors’ wives I’ve seen in operation, and I am deeply grateful for her commitment to Christ, to her family, and to the ministry God has given her serving alongside of Wayne. Wayne currently pastors First Baptist Church, La Grande, Oregon. I grew to love Wayne early in his being my brother-in-law, because he loved the Bible, loved theology, and loved to talk and laugh, and he has loved my sister so well. He’s an excellent pastor, preacher, and lover of souls, and I count him among my dearest and closest friends.

Jesus Christ is truly amazing. I know only too well my own inadequacies in conveying the depth and breadth and height and length of his greatness, but my hope is that the pages of this book will point,

¹ For an excellent treatment of the deity of Christ, see Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992).

at least, to some of the ways and reasons he should be praised and thanked and honored and obeyed. My prayer is that the Spirit, who came to glorify Jesus (John 16:14), will be pleased to help all of us know him better, that we may do now what all will do one day in the future: bow our knees and confess with our mouths that Jesus Christ is Lord, “to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:11).

GROWING IN FAITH

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.

HEBREWS 5:7-9

For many Christians, when they consider Jesus's spiritual life, they imagine that it must have been somewhat fixed and static. After all, since he was the Son of God, since he possessed fully the divine nature, and since he lived a sinless life, there could not be any sense in which Jesus "grew" in his spiritual life, so it is thought. Rather, his life with the Father must have been one of static and unbroken fullness, with no sense of growth even possible.

At one level, this intuition is true. Since Jesus never sinned, and since he always did the will of his Father, he always enjoyed the unbroken approval of the Father and lived in intimate and unbroken union with his Father. As John 15:10 declares, Jesus abided in his Father's love because he always kept his Father's commandments.

But there is another sense in which Jesus's spiritual life was anything but static. In fact, his was the most dynamic and growing of all spiritual lives possible precisely because he lived from his heart this life of unbroken obedience and submission to the Father's will. In other words, Jesus's life of perfect obedience did not render his spiritual life a static experience devoid of any growth. Just the opposite: precisely because he obeyed the Father perfectly, including

in times of opposition, agony, affliction, and suffering, this perfect obedience actually resulted in the most profound and radical growth in his spiritual life—a growth of faith greater than anyone has ever experienced.

LEARNING OBEDIENCE AND BEING MADE PERFECT

Consider with me Hebrews 5:8–9. This brief text contains some intriguing phrases in particular that are deeply instructive as we reflect on their implications for understanding the life of faith that Jesus lived. Hebrews here says of Jesus that he “learned obedience through what he suffered,” and also that, “being made perfect,” he was able to save those who obey him (v. 8). Now, I submit to you that anyone whose mental conception of Jesus is that he was fully divine (which, of course, he was!) will have a difficult time accounting for this kind of language. After all, if Christ lived his life fundamentally out of his divine nature—a nature that is infinitely perfect and incapable of learning anything—then what does Hebrews mean here? But if Christ lived his life fundamentally (not exclusively) out of his human nature, then the concepts of his learning what he did not know and “being made” what he was not previously can begin to make sense. So what do these statements in this text tell us about Jesus?

Our first statement, in Hebrews 5:8, tells us that though he was a son, Jesus “learned obedience through what he suffered.” It is important to note that the previous verse indicates that this was his experience during the incarnation and so would not have been true of him eternally. It was “in the days of his flesh,” i.e., his human, incarnate life on earth, that “Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence” (Heb. 5:7). So, we understand that the experience Hebrews is describing here must be of the human Jesus and would not be true—indeed, could not be true—of this Son strictly in his divine nature, which was the case prior to the incarna-

tion. Jesus as a human offered up prayers with loud cries and tears, and Jesus as a human learned obedience through what he suffered.

Another indication that Hebrews 5:7 is contemplating Jesus in his humanity is the mere fact that he offered up prayers and supplications. In his divine nature Jesus had infinite power and exhaustive knowledge, so his prayers and supplications indicate one of the many expressions of the limitations he encountered as an integral human being. Why offer supplications—requests—if you already know everything, including the answer to your own prayers? And furthermore, why cry out with loud cries and tears to another who can save you when you have unrestricted power over anyone who might threaten you? Clearly, Jesus felt strongly his need for divine assistance, and he understood how fully dependent he was on what must be provided to him by another. So, again, verse 7 helps us see that Hebrews is pondering Jesus’s human experience, one in which he felt deeply his vulnerability, his weakness, his ignorance of some aspects of the future, and the need to look to another for guidance and protection.

Having established that this was the human experience of Jesus, we inquire next just what this fascinating teaching of Hebrews 5:8 means, that Jesus “learned obedience through what he suffered.” In order to get at this, let’s first consider two possibilities that prove, upon examination, not to be plausible. First, some might think that this phrase refers to the fact that Jesus learned to obey his Father for the first time in the incarnation. In other words, Jesus as the eternal Son of the Father, fully equal to the Father in his divine nature, never did or could have obeyed the Father prior to the incarnation, since such obedience would indicate some sense in which he was lesser than the Father. Only in the incarnation, so it is argued, is the concept of obedience appropriate; only as he took on human nature did he experience for the first time what it was to obey his Father. After quoting Hebrews 5:8, Millard Erickson writes, “This [passage] suggests that obedience was something that he learned” and that such “obedience was perhaps something unusual or unexpected for a son.”¹

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2009), 121.

There are two reasons for questioning this interpretation: (1) Jesus's own teaching about his relationship with the Father prior to the incarnation suggests his obedience to the Father, indeed, his submission to the Father's will, in coming to earth to become incarnate. Jesus said, "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38), and again, "I came [from God] not of my own accord, but he sent me" (John 8:42). It seems clear that if in Jesus's coming, he did not do his own will but the will of his Father who sent him, and if he did not come on his own accord but came as the Father sent him, then he acted in obedience to fulfill the will of his Father in his coming to earth. It was not his own will per se that led him to come, but the will of the Father who sent him. We certainly do not want to be in a position where we conclude that the Son was forced to come by his Father; obviously he chose gladly and freely to come. The point is that his choosing to come was a choice to submit to his Father's will. So, the obedience of the Son took place in eternity past, prior to the incarnation, as the Son chose to do the will of his Father in coming to take on our human nature.

2) Hebrews does not merely say that Jesus "learned obedience." Rather, the statement reads that he "learned obedience *through what he suffered*." So, the point is not that he learned to obey for the first time ever in his experience, but that he learned to obey within this particular context of suffering, agony, affliction, and opposition. The Son's obedience in eternity past was true obedience, but it was not an obedience forged in the fires of suffering. In the incarnation, the Son's obedience was unlike the obedience he had rendered previously. This "incarnate obedience," we might call it, was rendered often within the context of opposition and affliction, with the result, often, that his obedience was the cause of much further suffering. In other words, he knew that as he obeyed the Father, he was inviting only greater opposition and was putting himself in a place of increased suffering. Obedience per se was not new; rather, this *kind* of obedience was indeed new.²

² A similar line of thought applies to Phil. 2:8, where Paul states of the incarnate Son, "And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on

Another possible explanation of what Hebrews means when it says, “he learned obedience through what he suffered” can be eliminated summarily. Some might think that Jesus finally learned to obey the Father, having disobeyed him many times previously. In other words, the point is that Jesus finally “got it.” He finally learned that he needed to obey rather than disobey. While this may be our experience (at least, we hope we learn to obey when we have disobeyed many times previously!), it simply cannot be what this text means. Just a few verses earlier, Hebrews declares of Jesus that he was tempted in every respect as we are, “yet without sin” (4:15). Obviously it follows that since Jesus never sinned, Jesus never disobeyed the Father. No, it simply cannot be the case that Hebrews means here that a previously disobedient Jesus finally learned to obey.

If these proposals cannot be the meaning of Hebrews 5:8, just what is this text saying? Allow me to offer two suggestions.

1) Although Jesus was a Son, and as a Son he deserved only honor, allegiance, respect, and adoration from those with whom he dealt, he encountered from these very people much hatred and opposition. He was afflicted, scorned, ridiculed, and rejected by many people in many ways. And within this context of suffering, Jesus knew that his obedience to the Father and the Father’s will would mean only continued and intensified suffering. Yet, despite the suffering he knew he would receive, he resisted the temptation to avoid suffering and to turn away from the Father’s will and instead resolutely obeyed the Father every step of the way, no matter how hard things were. Indeed, Jesus learned to obey the Father’s every directive and command without fail or compromise (e.g., John 8:28–29), even at great cost, even though he knew his obedience would bring to him only intensified pain, affliction, rejection, suffering, and ultimately an agonizing death from those who opposed him.

a cross.” Again here, the statement is not merely that Christ “humbled himself by becoming obedient” (period), as if he had never previously been obedient to the Father. As argued above, his very coming to earth to become incarnate was an act of obedience and submission to the will of his Father (e.g., John 6:38; 8:42). Paul’s assertion here, rather, points to the nature and extent of the obedience of the Son—an obedience that was so great, so extensive, so complete, so sacrificial, so other-serving, that it was an obedience “to the point of death, even death on a cross.” As above, the Son’s rendering obedience *per se* was not new; rather, this *kind* of obedience to this *extent* was indeed new.

2) Jesus obeyed the Father in the context of suffering, knowing that his obedience would only aggravate the intensity of that suffering, but Hebrews is saying more than this. And this gets at the heart of the notion that Jesus's spiritual life was anything but static, and that Jesus in fact grew in his relationship with the Father and grew in faith every step of the way as he obeyed the Father in the midst of suffering. Notice that Hebrews does not declare (merely), "Although he was a son, he obeyed the Father in the midst of what he suffered," as remarkable as that would be. But read carefully that this text says something additional. It declares more amazingly, "Although he was a son, he *learned* obedience through what he suffered." In what sense, then, did Jesus learn to obey?

Must it not be that Hebrews is indicating that Jesus learned to obey the Father through the whole of his life with an obedience that was rendered in increasingly difficult situations as he grew and developed? As the Son learned to obey the Father in earlier times of "lighter" divine demands upon him and consequent "lighter" suffering—lighter, that is, in comparison both to the divine demands and the suffering he would encounter in the end, as he obeyed the Father in going to the cross—these earlier experiences of faith in the Father's provision, protection, and direction prepared him for the greater acts of obedience he would need to render as he got nearer to the time of the cross. In other words, those earlier "obediences," we might call them, under circumstances with lighter suffering and affliction, were prescribed by the Father as the training program necessary to prepare Jesus for the later and much harder obediences that were to come. He *learned* to obey increasingly difficult divine demands with their accompanying increasingly difficult opposition and affliction through the whole of his life, which prepared him for the greatest of all divine demands upon him and the greatest attending suffering he would or could ever experience. In this sense, then, the difficulties and afflictions Jesus experienced through the whole of his life were planned by his Father in order to prepare Jesus for the greater—and indeed, greatest!—acts of faith he would need to render to complete the Father's mission for his Son.

Consider a couple of indicators that seem to warrant this reading of Hebrews 5:8. First, look at what Hebrews had just told us in verse 7. We read there not only that Jesus offered up prayers and supplications to the Father throughout his life (“in the days of his flesh”) but that he did so “with loud cries and tears.” Unless we trivialize what this is declaring, would we not have to conclude that the situations this verse points to are ones in which Jesus experienced agonizing hardship and difficulty in his endeavor to obey the Father? Does this not indicate that Jesus’s trust in the Father and his dependence on what the Father alone would provide him was hard fought and won? Throughout his life he fought to believe and fought to obey and fought in prayer as he hoped in what the Father would provide. To put this point differently, Jesus’s faith and obedience during these times of testing, in which he offered supplications with loud cries and tears, were not experiences of an easy walk of faith or effortless acts of obedience. Jesus’s obedience was not automatic, as though his divine nature simply eliminated any real struggle to believe or effort to obey. No, in his human nature, Jesus fought for faith and struggled to obey; otherwise the reality that Hebrews 5:7 describes is turned into theatrics and rendered disingenuous. The inclusion of “with loud cries and tears” tells us, then, of the reality of the struggle Jesus endured as he trusted and obeyed his Father, praying earnestly for what he needed to fulfill the Father’s will.

Additionally, Jesus’s life of fighting to believe and obey is confirmed when we consider afresh his experience in the garden of Gethsemane. Matthew (26:36–46) and Mark (14:32–42) both tell us that Jesus prayed three times in the garden that the Father would remove the cup from him. Three times, also, Jesus declared that despite this deep and strong desire to avoid the agony of the cross, he longed even more to do the will of his Father, not his own will. Luke’s rendering (22:39–46) adds the poignant comment, “And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (v. 44). It is simply impossible to think deeply about these accounts and draw the conclusion that since Jesus was God, and since it was impossible for him to sin, his obedience here in the garden was both automatic and easy. Everything in these passages cries for

the opposite conclusion. His obedience was anything but automatic and easy; it was rather extremely difficult and hard fought. Praying three times, as Jesus did, indicates the deep struggle to embrace in that place and time the Father's will that he go to the cross. This battle for belief in the goodness and rightness of the Father's will was not over quickly or easily. If there had been some resolution immediately upon praying the first time, why pray a second time, and then a third?

Furthermore, Jesus's comment to his disciples, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me" (Matt. 26:38), indicates an agony of soul that we probably cannot even fathom. And his request that his disciples pray with him and for him also shows his earnestness of heart as he faced the impending suffering of the cross. All of these factors point to the same conclusion: Jesus felt deeply and agonizingly the weight of the suffering he was being called to endure; he longed to avoid it if at all possible, and so he prayed fervently that God would strengthen him to do it, leading him, then, to embrace fully what the Father had sent him to do.

Let me draw two conclusions from this discussion. First, Jesus's struggle to believe and obey the Father was real! Oh, my, how horrible to the meaning of these texts, and how dishonoring to our Savior, to think or propose that because he was fully God, his obedience here and elsewhere in his life was easy and automatic. Nothing could be further from the truth. His obedience here was difficult, painful, agonizing, even tortuous, and he felt deeply and in prolonged fashion the struggle to believe and obey his Father.

Second, given the fact that this was the *greatest* act of obedience he rendered, requiring the *deepest* commitment of faith and hope in his Father, in light of the *severest* of all suffering he was about to encounter on the cross, does it not stand to reason, then, that the Father had prepared Jesus for this moment? Can we not now see that all the previous tests of his faith, the divine demands that he followed and the sufferings that he experienced, were preparatory and strengthening for his obeying the Father in the garden? So here's an interesting question: Could Jesus have obeyed the Father and gone to the cross to die for our sins when he was twelve years old? Could he have done so at

the outset of his ministry, at age thirty? Or did the Father know just when his Son's faith would be strengthened sufficiently so that at this time he was able to engage the fight and withstand the temptation and declare in the end, "Not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42)? Indeed, Jesus learned obedience from the things he suffered. That is, he learned to obey increasingly difficult demands of the Father, preparing him for this hardest of all demands—going to the cross. Could he have faced this Gethsemane challenge successfully at the ages of twelve or thirty? I think the answer is no. As remarkable as his obedience was each step along the way, all of these experiences were meant to build his faith and strengthen his character so that he could, in the end, succeed in fulfilling the will of the Father in choosing to endure the agony of the cross for the remission of our sins.

This discussion leads naturally to a consideration of the second striking and surprising description of Christ that Hebrews uses. After we have been told that Jesus "learned obedience through what he suffered," Hebrews says, "And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (5:9). Made perfect? And this is being said of the Son of the Father? What can this mean, and how can this be? In light of what we've seen, it should become apparent what is being declared here. As the sinless Son of God, Jesus was nothing other than perfect in terms of his righteous character and faithful obedience before the Father. He never moved from sinfulness to sinlessness, as we are in the process of doing by God's grace. No, he was sinlessly perfect. So, in what sense can Hebrews declare that Jesus was "made perfect"?

The term used in Hebrews 5:9 for "perfect" refers to bringing to completion or moving to a planned or desired end. The English words *complete* or *mature* can also translate this Greek term. The issue for Jesus was not one of moving toward sinless perfection, for he was always sinlessly perfect. The issue rather was one of character formation and faith maturity, such that he would be able, in the end, to obey the Father's most difficult demand upon him and go to the cross. I admit that for many believers this concept is a hard one to appropriate—character formation for Jesus? And faith maturity for

the sinless Son of God? But clearly Hebrews is speaking about some manner in which Jesus was made perfect, mature, or complete in a way that he was not previously. And as we've seen already, this cannot refer to some fundamental change in Christ's human nature from some degree of sinfulness to sinlessness. Rather, this has to be a kind of maturity that takes place within the fully sinless human nature of Jesus. And given the fact that Hebrews declares that Jesus was "made perfect" immediately after telling us that Jesus had "learned obedience through what he suffered," it stands to reason that the perfection or maturity of 5:9 is the outcome of his having learned obedience from what he suffered.

The perfection, maturity, or completion accomplished in Jesus, then, was the strengthening of his character and faith to the point where he would be able to accept fully the will of the Father to go to the cross. His "being made perfect" is precisely about his growth in faith and his strengthening of character and resolve through his lifetime of testings and sufferings so that he was fully mature and able, through prayer and divine enablement, to accomplish the work the Father had sent him to do. And as Hebrews 5:9 reminds us, it is only because he was so perfected, it was only through the pathway of this process of the maturity of his character and faith, that Jesus was able to be the "source of eternal salvation to all who obey him."

Much was at stake, then, not only in Jesus's going to the cross but in his having lived the kind of life he did—learning to obey increasingly difficult demands of the Father, enduring suffering such that his faith and character were strengthened—in order that when the moment of greatest testing came, he would embrace his Father's will and give himself over to die for our sins. Praise be to God for Jesus's death on the cross for our sins! In addition, praise be to God for Jesus's life of deepening obedience and growing faith that prepared him to accept, in the end, the ultimate purpose for which the Father had sent him into the world. So, let us rejoice that Jesus "died for our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3). But let us remember that this happened only because it is also true that Jesus became "obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8). The life he lived prepared the way for the death

he died. Praise be to a Savior, the only Savior of sinners, who gave himself with resolve and passion to the will of his Father, “learning obedience” and “being made perfect” through the trials and testings of life, that he might be able, in the end, to save all who believe and follow him.

APPLICATION

1) There are no “little obediences.” Every opportunity given us by God, either to obey or to disobey, is an opportunity for that character formation and strengthening of faith that can prepare us for the greater challenges of faith God has in mind for us in the future. Clearly, this was true for Jesus. He had to undergo the trials, testings, sufferings, and afflictions the Father designed for him in order to strengthen and prepare him for the greatest test of his faith imaginable—to accept the Father’s will in going to the cross.

Jesus’s training ground of tested faith is the same kind of training that the Father designs for us. When we see this, it transforms how we think about the “little” acts of obedience or disobedience we face repeatedly throughout each day. We can think of those “little obediences” as of minor or trivial importance, whereas, seen rightly, they are divinely ordained means to “perfect” us, to enable us to “learn obedience” so that through these tests of faith, we are matured and strengthened in our character. We have no idea what greater opportunities of kingdom work or faith expression might await us in the future if only we are obedient now in smaller ways, preparing us for these bigger challenges that God, in his mercy, may bring our way. May we learn from Jesus that every obedience matters. May we obey in the smaller things that we may be prepared for the larger. May we understand the role that faith testing plays in the preparation for what God may have designed for us in the future. May we be more and more like Jesus in his resolve to obey and obey and obey, no matter the cost.

2) Suffering, affliction, trials, testing—these are gifts granted to us by God for our growth, the necessary paving stones along the pathway

that leads to our fullness of character and joy. Just as Jesus's life of faith and obedience transforms our understanding of the importance of the little obediences of life, so does Jesus's pathway of growth transform how we think of suffering. There is nothing accidental in suffering. The God who declares "the end from the beginning" (Isa. 46:10) and works all things after "the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11) is fully in control of every situation of pain or suffering that we encounter.

Oddly, some Christians seem instinctively to want to push away suffering. They think it best to keep suffering at arm's length. But not only is this a mistake biblically and theologically; it is a huge mistake spiritually and practically. Oh, what strength there is to know that God controls and ordains suffering precisely because only through such suffering do we grow in the ways God intends for us, strengthening us for what he has in store for the future. Jesus was prepared to face the greatest challenge of his life—the greatest challenge anyone ever could face, period!—only because his Father had graciously taken him through the training ground of suffering by which he "learned obedience" step by step by step. May God help us to see the divine wisdom in ordained suffering and the goodness of God in the trials of our lives, and may we grow through these, as Jesus did, in ways that strengthen our character and bring greater glory to God.

3) The life of faith, of growing faith and strengthened character, is one that involves a fight for faith and enduring through difficulties. This life of faith is never lived on auto-pilot; it is never a life of passivity and ease; it isn't something done to us without our full and active participation. These glimpses we've seen of Jesus—who offered prayers and supplications through loud crying and tears, who prayed three times in the garden of Gethsemane for the cup to be removed—give evidence to the active, war-like nature of the life of faith. If anyone might be thought to have lived life on auto-pilot, it would be Jesus. After all, along with his true and full humanity, he was fully God; and although he had the nature of a man, his human nature was totally sinless. You would think such a person (unlike any of us!) could coast. To have a divine nature and a sinless human nature would seem to

make obedience easy. Well, look again at Jesus. What you see is a man who labored to obey, who agonized in the testings the Father designed for him, who fought through the trials of life to maintain his integrity and obedience before his Father.

In light of this, it should be certain that we who are not God, we who do not have sinless natures, will find it necessary also to fight for faith and labor for obedience. Yes, as with any and every act of faith and obedience, we affirm with Paul, it is “not I, but the grace of God” with me. Only by God’s sustaining and empowering grace can we obey. But this divine enablement does not replace our responsibility to fight and labor. Rather, such divine enablement activates our resolve and puts in motion the fight of faith necessary to obey.

In the end, may we be more like Jesus. May we count every obedience significant and see each as a stepping stone toward the greater opportunities God has for us. May we embrace suffering as one of the means God uses to bring about this growth in faith and strengthening of character we need so very much. And may we resolve to fight every step of the way, by God’s rich and unfailing grace, to see God’s purposes in and through our lives fulfilled through our increasing faith and obedience before him.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) Isn’t it astonishing that Jesus, the sinless God-man (Heb. 4:15), nonetheless “learned obedience from the things that he suffered” (Heb. 5:8)? How does this help us to appreciate more the life that Jesus lived, the temptations he encountered, and the afflictions he endured? How is your attitude toward Jesus affected from understanding this about him?

- 2) If God used suffering and affliction in Jesus’s life to bring about maturity, does it not stand to reason that he has ordained also to bring affliction into our lives for the same purpose? Reflect on your recent past and consider some of the difficulties you’ve encountered and the sufferings you’ve undergone. Can you now see these as God-designed means to afford you the opportunity to trust and grow? What can you learn from your responses to these past experiences that can help you face future God-designed affliction?

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- 3) Consider more specifically just how suffering in our lives can produce character change and maturity of faith. Think about some very clear examples of affliction you've encountered and consider the specific benefits that came to you, or could have come to you, from these distresses.
- 4) There are no "little" obediences, precisely because every opportunity to obey is one in which we may either grow in our trust in God or turn from him. In light of this, consider some of the "little" ways you have obeyed or disobeyed in recent weeks. Can you see in these small opportunities ways in which your heart can be strengthened by obedience, or how it can be rendered more cold and indifferent from disobedience? How does this affect your attitude about these opportunities to obey what God has commanded?
- 5) Jesus's obedience was not automatic. It was not easy for him to resist temptation and to obey. He fought every step of the way in his struggle to obey what the Father commanded him to do. How does this understanding of Jesus help us as we face struggles and obstacles in our fight to obey the good and wise commands of God?

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