

“Perfect!”

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When we think, “I’ve got this,” we are spiritually most at risk.

Hebrews 2:10-18

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Barney and Vivian

I believe every sermon I preach should meet three standards: biblical, interesting, and helpful. *Biblical* comes most naturally to me. I love the Bible.

Helpful is the most challenging of all. Those who listen to the sermon are facing a wide array of life’s joys and tests. I know I can’t meet every person’s need.

Interesting is important, because if a sermon is not interesting, nobody will care if it’s biblical or helpful. We preachers try to make it interesting with humor, stories, or visuals. We try to hook your interest with an introduction. On this Mother’s Day, I’m going to tell you about my biological grandmother.

Nobody knows who wrote the book of the New Testament we call Hebrews. I’m calling the preacher “Barney” because want him to have a name. I don’t like saying, “the writer of Hebrews” every time I refer to the anonymous source. One of the most credible theories is that the writer was Barnabas, the traveling companion of Paul. His name means “son of encouragement.” In the New Testament, to encourage is to come alongside. Barney calls this work “a word of encouragement.” I think it’s a sermon.

Barney was also my grandfather’s name. His wife, my grandmother, was born Vivian Lizzie Shute. She was the daughter of a prominent Methodist theologian and author named Abraham Lincoln Shute, who most likely got his name because he was born the day after Abraham Lincoln was shot. Vivian was born in 1890 in Kewanee, Illinois, west of Chicago. Because her father studied and traveled internationally, she met Barney and married him in Lahore, India (now Pakistan) in 1920 when she was 30 years old.

My grandparents served together in India for 20 years, including the Great Depression. My grandfather journaled about the family income that dropped in half from the fall of 1932 to the fall of 1933. Even with that handicap, Vivian was known for her hospitality, especially to Indian boys and girls and foreign soldiers stationed there. She was also much in demand as a gifted speaker for churches, women's clubs, and forums.

In 1940, with World War II breaking out in Europe, my grandparents were sent home to New York. A year later, the Methodist mission board sent my grandfather back to India even though he protested that he was leaving three teenage sons. While he was there, in 1943, my grandmother Vivian was diagnosed with brain cancer and never regained consciousness after surgery. She died at 53; my father was 17. Barney was halfway around the world and didn't learn of his wife's illness until after she was gone.

By all accounts Vivian was an amazing woman, a woman of self-sacrifice and service, trained in the things of God and articulate in passing on God's word to others. Yet she and Barney faced economic uncertainty, illness, separation, and death.

This story is one reason I want to refer to the first century pastor-author behind Hebrews as Barney. Barney, both my grandfather and the writer of Hebrews, needed encouragement and knew that others needed it as well.

Like my grandparents, the Barney who wrote Hebrews was multi-lingual, cross-cultural, smart, articulate, and compassionate. His congregation was more than likely Jews who believed in Jesus and were living far away from the homeland of their ancestors. They faced trials of many kinds, and they also heard many voices telling them what to do. Some were abandoning the church or even deserting their faith.

We face similar tests. Life is uncertain and unfair. It's filled with unexpected challenges and unhappy endings. What is a person to do who believes in God? Isn't God supposed to make the world better? Isn't that why Jesus came?

Barney's argument is that life with Jesus is better than any alternative. Jesus is biblical, interesting, and helpful. Jesus "works" across barriers of language and culture. Life is life wherever and whenever you live it. Stuff happens. People die. It's not fair. What's a Christian to do? Live for Jesus anyway. He's a perfect answer to every question, a perfect solution for every problem, a perfect help in every test.

Why is Jesus perfect for our need? Because he's one with God and one of us.

He blazed our trail (10, 14-16)

If it seemed like we were mid-sentence or mid-thought when we started the Scripture reading today, we were. Last week we began our studies in Hebrews with the first paragraph of Barney's sermon. Writing to Greek-speaking, Jesus-following Jews, he

starts out by saying that Jesus is better than their prophets. Prophets spoke in many ways and times, but a Son is better because he exactly represents the Father. When you wonder what God is like, you look at his co-Creator and co-regent.

Jesus is also better than angels because his name is better than theirs. The Bible itself says that angels are there to serve humans. They don't exist for their own good. They're only messengers of God's salvation and of his glory.

But doesn't the Bible itself say that humans are "a little lower than the angels"? Yes, but it's because we see only a part of the whole picture. They seem superhuman, but they're really subhuman. They're like A.I. androids, robots with Artificial Intelligence. They don't die, but they don't live – not like we live. They don't grieve because they don't love – not like we love. They don't connect with God or with each other like we do. They only seem glorious because we don't have the perspective of the eternal, invisible world – not yet.

Jesus was "made lower than the angels for a little while" as a human being, but he is "now crowned with glory and honor." This plan of God was "fitting," verse 10 says. Perfect!

God came up with the perfect answer to our dilemma of suffering and death. Mother's Day is a day of thanks and joy for some, but for others it is a day of grief. This is a confusing and uncertain world when mothers die, when babies die, when tyrants terrorize, when darkness reigns. But what if God himself were to become one of us, were to show the way through death to glory?

Barney, who wants his sermon to be *interesting*, uses a word variously translated as "pioneer," "author," "leader," or "captain." Maybe the best translation is "trailblazer." Jesus is Lewis and Clark, Shackleton, Magellan, Neil Armstrong. He goes where no one has gone before to show that there is a way to get there. No one before or since has descended to the dead, declared victory, and returned in a resurrected body never to die again. He's shown that it can be done because it has been done.

This what verse 14 means when it talks about the devil holding the power of death. The power the devil holds over humans is not death itself, but the fear of death (15). Humanity was enslaved by this fear until the Son blazed the trail to the grave and back. He didn't do that for angels (16), but for "Abraham's descendants" (people).

We still do and should grieve death, but we don't *fear* it because of Jesus.

He claimed our tree (11-13)

In preparation for this sermon, I looked up our family tree. There are sequoias in that tree – like Abraham Lincoln Shute and his daughter, my grandmother, Vivian Lizzie Shute. There are also contrasts. Did you know that I am descended from the villainous

Edward Longshanks of *Braveheart* notoriety? I'm ashamed of his branch in the family tree.

Jesus is not ashamed to call you and me "family." Both the one who makes people holy (Jesus) and those who are made holy (us) are family (11). Barney, who wants his sermon to be *biblical*, quotes two Old Testament texts in verses 12-13, to establish his point in Scripture.

First, "I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters; in the assembly I will sing your praises." This quote is from Psalm 22, which famously begins, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Most of the psalm is despair – where is God when my enemies surround, destroy, and mock me? But the psalm turns in verse 22, when David says that he's going to praise God among his "brothers." We who suffer and will be rescued are family!

Second, Barney adds two quotes from Isaiah 8. The context of Isaiah is again the suffering of God's people under a cruel oppressor, Assyria. But Isaiah and his children have reason to trust in God. Families help each other keep their confidence in God. Jesus doesn't mind being called our big brother because that helps us fully place our trust in his father and ours.

I love how one translation puts it: "He doesn't blush to call us family." Some of you may be with family members on a holiday like this one and find yourself thinking (or even saying privately to someone in the corner), "I hope nobody sees us and knows we're related." Jesus never says that about those he has redeemed. He became one of us so he could proudly say, "They're my people!"

He faced our tests (17-18)

Barney wants to be *interesting* and *biblical*, but he also wants to be *helpful*. And this is where he goes in verses 17-18. "For this reason he had to be made like them (literally, "like his brothers"), fully human in every way...." Here Barney introduces several ideas that he will develop later in the sermon – high priest, atonement, temptation.

You could argue, I suppose, that blazing our trail or claiming our tree is not very helpful when we're in the middle of our battles with sin and death. Imagine yourself in a steel plant tunnel in Mariupol, Ukraine. Maybe you even believe that Jesus has been to the grave and back, and that he claims you as family. That's inspiring, but this moment is terrifying. I can hold on to faith and hope for eternity, but what about this specific trial?

Barney will spend several chapters on Jesus as our "high priest," which is key to our salvation. He made atonement once and for all – that's coming. We don't have to fear the penalty of sin. But the point here is something else. Jesus is a "merciful and

faithful high priest.” Think about Mom. I realize there are exceptions, but most of us knew growing up when we wanted empathy, we went to Mom. When we were sick or hurt or bad, it was Mom who was “merciful and faithful.”

Why is Jesus that for us? Because “he himself suffered when he was tempted.” The word “tempted” can also be translated “tested.” That’s true in most uses in both the Old and New Testament. A “temptation” is also a “test.” In a “temptation” you’re enticed to failure. In a “test” you’re given the chance to do the right thing. Every temptation is an opportunity to pass a test.

Jesus passed his tests, and that’s why he can “help” (18). This verb comes from the same noun as “Help!” It’s the idea of desperately, urgently calling for someone to rescue you in distress and someone runs to your aid. Like Mom would.

The tests of mothering

Barney intends to be most *helpful* right here. When you call for help, Jesus will come quickly because he knows what it’s like to be human.

But does he really know what it’s like to be you. When I was an 11-year-old in boarding school, I wet the bed. Until I was 15, but let’s stay in sixth grade for a moment. When you live at home with your parents, it’s one thing. When you live in a dorm with a dozen other boys in close quarters, and nobody wants the bunk under yours, it’s humiliating. When the boarding parent disciplines you for wetting the bed and you’re terrified one of the boys will tell the girls in the sixth grade class, it’s awful. I remember pondering this verse at age 11: “Does this mean Jesus wet the bed?”

Let’s use a different analogy: mothering. I’ve never been a Mom. Yesterday I googled, “Hardest things about being a Mom.” Some of the answers: Mommy shaming – inflicted by others as well as yourself. It’s all unknown territory. Exhaustion. There’s a manual, but it’s not for your model. Time goes too slow and too fast. You can’t ever switch off. Teenagers. Trying not to shout. Loss of independence. Sleeplessness. Self-sacrifice. Guilt. Taking the blame. Watching our kids hurt.

Was Jesus ever a Mom? No. Come to think of it, he was never married. He never faced an uncertain stock market. He never battled internet pornography. He never had to worry about what the other kids in boarding school would say to the girls.

Then how can we say he “suffered when he was tempted”? It’s not about the specifics of every test. It’s about the kinds of tests we face. He was exhausted. He was judged. He was humiliated. He was confined by space and time. More people demanded his attention than he was able to give. His Dad died. He had to step up and help his mother, had to eke out a living, had to take care of his siblings. The whole range of our tests and temptations, Jesus faced them. So when we say, “Help!” he runs.

What's the "help" he offers? That will vary from test to trial to temptation that we face. But whatever it is, by calling for "Help!" we are doing what we most need to do. Our greatest need is need. To flip that around, our greatest problem is self-sufficiency. When we think, "I've got this," spiritually speaking, we are most at risk. When we get to the place where we have a test or temptation and finally admit, "God, I need you!" we're most vulnerable and most secure. We need him always. Those are the moments when we most understand that.

That's so interesting. And biblical. And helpful.

Jesus became one of us so that when we are tested, we would know he's been there. And we would know we need him. That plan is perfect! Amen.