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God in the Thin Places

Jennifer Hale Christy

The word of the Lord from the book of Hebrews:

We must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it. For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will.

Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. But someone has testified somewhere,

“What are human beings that you are mindful of them,
or mortals, that you care for them?

You have made them for a little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned them with glory and honor,
subjecting all things under their feet.”

Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying,

“I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters,
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.”

And again,

“I will put my trust in him.”

And again,

“Here am I and the children whom God has given me.”

Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested. (Hebrews 2.1–5 NRSV) *The word of the Lord.*

Prayer

God, I thank you for this space, for this gathering, and for this time. I ask you to pour through me the gift of preaching. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you. And may these words fall on open ears and open hearts. May you shape us ever more into the image of your son, our savior and friend. In whose name I pray, amen.

Sermon

It is good to be here today. It's cold! It's shocking my system since it's still 90 degrees back in Los Angeles. But it's good to be here with you.

I miss my family though! My husband, Dave, is back home—Superdad!—juggling four kids with school drop-offs and pickups, sick kids and naps, and his own teaching load at Pepperdine. I've done a lot of traveling over the years that's taken me away from my family, and the younger they are, the harder it is to leave them. My youngest is just five months old; his name is Lane.

I don't know where you were on Cinco de Mayo this year, but I was at Los Robles Hospital witnessing once again the miracle of new life. Even though he was my fourth, each time it's truly a miracle. **It's sacred ground.** Even though it hurts terribly. Even though for me it means a miserable nine months and even though the previous nine months pale in comparison to those final gritty hours.

It's holy ground. And in those final moments of delivery, you are so tangibly in touch with God as creator and so aware of how miraculous and wild and painful and messy this creation stuff is. You experience God in a new way as you ponder in your heart how this rush of emotions you feel over a fragile little human is just a glimpse into how God feels about you. You never want any harm to befall them, never want them to die. You feel love and wonder and awe in deeper and more profound ways than ever before. And at long last, this little wrinkled, helpless, wiggly person is placed in your arms, and your eyes meet for the first time in forever, and time just stands still.

We experience these “thin places” where time stands still—these moments we call “thin” because they're an experience of transcendence, of existing somewhere between this life and the life to come. Somewhere between heaven and earth, these are the places where the temporal and the eternal seem to overlap for just a brief moment.

Perhaps for you it was your wedding day or the birth of one of your children. Sometimes the thin places are where we might expect them to be—at big moments. But other times, and probably more often, they're where we least expect them. They are just ordinary moments that are transformed, *transfigured* into sacred spaces. Maybe it's around the dinner table with good food and good friends. Maybe it's out in the garden, working the earth to bring forth new life. Maybe it happens during a church service.

I've had a few ordinary experiences such as watching my husband play the piano while holding our first daughter who was just a few weeks old or walking alone on a hike where I got an unexpected and overwhelming sense of God's nearness. In moments such as these, all of the details just fade and time seems to stop. The camera is focused tightly in on you, and everything else swirls and fades and blurs into the background. You might not even hear the music or voices around you. You don't notice time passing. Has it been a few seconds? Or minutes? Or hours? You don't know and you don't care.

These are moments of pure euphoria, and there's no fear here. You feel fully alive like you've never felt before. All your senses, all your awareness, are tuned into what's happening right here in this timeless moment. **And we want to stay here.** We want to pitch our tent here and never leave this place. This is a little taste of heaven for us. The curtain is pulled back a tiny bit and we behold the glory. It gives us hope. This deep joy and timelessness are ours for a fleeting moment and we glimpse what is to come.

Then it's gone—as quickly as it came, it's gone. Something happens and you're ripped from that euphoric state by a buzzing cell phone. Or a car honking. Or a doorbell ringing. Maybe it's more gradual. You just realize you're not in that thin place anymore. You're once again aware of time passing. You're awake to the stresses of life and the big decisions ahead of you and all the tasks on your to-do list.

The countdown is ticking, and the power of death is strong. You are reminded of your mortality, of your finitude. You realize how much you hope to accomplish and how little time you have. Time is once

again rushing at full speed and your soul can hardly keep up with your body. You are once again enslaved to your taskmaster.

What happened?! You want to go back to that happy place . . . back to the moment when time was standing still. Why? Because in the other 23 hours and 58 minutes of this day, you're all too aware of just how messed up things are in this world. You realize that things are not as they were intended to be. This thin place offered a glimmer of hope shining through the storms of chaos and despair and pain, and even just monotony. We caught a vision of how things were intended and how they will be one day when all is set to right. But we can't stay here—not yet. But we also can't leave here unchanged.

The author of Hebrews wants us to remember that divine encounter. Remember that euphoria, when we were fully alive and fully present and fully leaning into the life of God even if we weren't consciously aware of it. Remember it and don't slip back into the old rhythms.

That's what was happening to those first hearers. They had been persecuted; some of them spent time in prison and lost everything for their faith. It was crazy and risky and exciting! They were living by faith and singing in jail cells and depending on God for their daily bread. They were experiencing the tangible presence of God and it was glorious.

But they got on the other side, and eventually, life went on as usual. Jesus still hadn't returned . . . and as the months and years rolled by, their faith weakened. Maybe he wasn't coming back as soon as they thought. Maybe all this faith stuff wasn't so urgent.

They grew sedentary in their faith and practice. They showed up to house church week after week but they were just going through the motions. The weekly exhortation was watered down, but it didn't matter because it fell on deaf ears anyway. They were singing the songs, but their minds were focused on how the bills were going to get paid. Their prayers were hollow. Some felt they had forgotten how to pray, or wondered why bother. . . . They hadn't felt God's presence in who knows how long.

This kind of sounds like many of our churches. Or many of us. . . . The author of Hebrews says to us, "Wake up! Don't just go back to the way things used to be." Back when we were enslaved by the fear of death. Back to when we submitted ourselves to the empire. Before we encountered the living **God**.

God used to be far from us, speaking to us through mediators. We didn't have direct access . . . but now—NOW God has come near! God came to us—**God comes to us**—in the person of Jesus. He is the heir, creator, redeemer, and sustainer. He is the reflection of God's glory, the exact imprint of God's very being! He sustains everything and he sits at the right hand of God! He seems too good to be true, but he is the definition of TRUTH.

He made it possible for us to draw near to God and for God to draw near to us and that's what those thin places are. We are on the mountain and God's spirit is passing by. Sometimes we see the burning bush and other times we don't. We might not even be consciously aware of it but in those places, the ground is holy and God is near.

Yes, friends. Even when God seems light years away. Even in the midst of all hell breaking loose. Even though the mountains crumble and fall into the sea. Even though we receive word that it's stage 4, it's 90% blocked, it's terminal. When we hear those dreaded words, there's nothing more we can do.

Though we suffer and those we love suffer, we can dwell in the presence and person of Jesus who suffered just like us. And his suffering was **in accord**ance with God's plan of salvation. It wasn't by mistake; the plan didn't fail. Jesus's suffering and death was all in accordance with God's plan of salvation. But it doesn't make sense to us. Why wouldn't God send a superhero? Why not a warrior-king? Why not a leader of impeccable pedigree and grooming? Well, we had Saul. We had David. We had Solomon. We had Moses and Aaron and Miriam. We had Deborah. God's been in conversation and partnership with us from the beginning. There were plenty of chosen ones who both met and defied expectations. They each had an important role in God's ongoing story and each helped to propel it forward. But none of them were fit for the ultimate task. None of them could fulfill the salvation that God promised and only the divine could deliver.

Suffering was **in accord**ance with God's plan of salvation. And it didn't come in a way we would expect. We've heard it too many times, so the shock has worn off. We must remember just how ridiculous this plan is—how foolish it seems. Salvation didn't come in the form of a powerful army or a strong show of triumph

over visible powers. There was no knight riding in on a white horse, no firefighter heroically swooping in to rescue us. God's salvation came as a helpless infant born to an unmarried girl, who grew into an awkward, pimply, teenage son of a carpenter and then into a no-name, thirty-something, single traveling preacher from a tiny village from which “nothing good comes.”

He was Jewish, yes. He was male, yes. He was from the line of David, yes. But was he a ruler? No. A war hero? No. Was he a man like Saul, who everyone picks as their leader based on his physical appearance and stature? Nope! God's plan exceeds our expectations in surprising ways. In upside-down ways. In upside-down ways like the Savior of the world being tried and executed as a political criminal, suffering a gruesome, agonizing death. And that agonizing death is the very thing that brings all of us life. Is it upside-down? It is indeed. How could this suffering be in line with God's plan?

The power of death is indeed strong. We were never meant to suffer. The creation narrative paints a picture for us of a paradise that's free from suffering. This is what God intended for us, God's beloved. But things went horribly wrong. And suffering and death entered the world. Suffering in childbirth, suffering in working the land, suffering in relationships, and suffering in separation from God. And in short order, we spiral and splinter out with all different kinds of suffering: broken families, broken hearts, broken bodies, ruined lands, people enslaved, terrifying global epidemics, nations at war . . . And death is so much a part of this suffering. Mourning a loss, anticipating a loss, fearing your own death or the death of a loved one. And the ways in which that fear of death manifests itself and we're not even aware of it.

So in becoming like us in order to redeem us, Jesus had to suffer like us. Jesus had to die like us. He became like us in every way in order to redeem us. A because of his testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested. When we are tempted to become complacent in our faith, to go back to business as usual. When going through the motions seems easier. When we would rather live a comfortable life of accommodation than take seriously the radical call of discipleship.

Jesus was tested in these very same ways. In the wilderness, he was tempted with abusing his power and having an easy life. He could have chosen the tempter's way of being ruler over all kingdoms—all he had to do was bow down to him. *That* would have been much easier than submitting to suffering and death on a cross, than trusting in God to redeem him. The power of death is strong, my friends. He could have had it all the easy way. But “the easy way” is not the life to which he was called. And neither are we. Jesus was called to a life of submission and service. He was called to a life marked by peace, calling people deeper in the authentic expression of their faith. He was called to a life of speaking out in righteous indignation at injustices, of taking risks in the name of justice and love and mercy.

His was a difficult journey through rejection and suffering. But this suffering was not in vain. His suffering had a cosmic purpose, that he might destroy the power of death. The cross is a sure symbol of the *Roman government's power over human life*, but in Jesus, the cross became the symbol of *God's power over death*. In Jesus's death, burial, and resurrection, God showed once and for all that God has power over death.

The power of death was strong. The fear of death was oppressive, paralyzing. We were acting out in our own self-interest. Trying to prove our worth. Commodifying everything and acquiring as much as we could. Preserving our own survival at all costs.

But now the *power of death* has been destroyed. We don't have to be afraid of it. **We are no longer slaves to it!** The power of death has been destroyed and the thin places we experience testify to this truth. God's kingdom is indeed breaking in around us and through us and because of us and in spite of us. Fear of death no longer has a hold over us, dictating how we speak and act and relate and live. The fear of death has been driven out by perfect, divine love. And this love is what we were created for—we have to believe that the power of death has been destroyed if we are to live into our created potential.

This is good news, my friends. No longer do we willingly wear the shackles of the fear of death. We have been freed! No longer do we operate out of a place of fear. We have been shown perfect love. We remember the thin places and long for the day when we *can* stay there forever.

We live into the truth that the power of death has been destroyed. The fear of death has been dismantled. We have to let go of that fear. Though the ground becomes unsteady beneath us and threatens to give way.

We stand together surrounded by an ancient and great cloud of faithful sisters and brothers and say, “Yet will I praise you. I will put my trust in you.” With a quivering voice and a fluttering stomach, staring fear in the face, we say, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. May it be with me according to your word.” *The word of God for the people of God.*

Prayer

Let's pray. God, you have indeed destroyed the power of death. You have removed our shackles. Give us eyes to see and all that we need to live into this every day. We love you. Amen.

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