

Sermon Summary #5

Pollyanna vs. Christian Hope: Discerning the Difference Hebrews 2:5-9

[“The introductory formula [in v. 6a] is interesting. At first glance the wording seems cavalier, ‘But one has somewhere testified.’ The author is not betraying ignorance, as if he doesn’t know the text which he cites. The letter as a whole demonstrates that he is sophisticated and knowledgeable in his use of the OT. These are not the words of an uneducated novice. Hebrews doesn’t focus on the person who uttered the words or the exact place where they are found. The author wants us to pay heed to the OT scripture as testimony . . . , as the word spoken by God, and hence the human author remains unnamed” (Tom Schreiner).]

I’ve never been a huge fan of the 1960 film, *Pollyanna*, starring Hayley Mills. Let’s just say it’s not my style and leave it at that. However, I have always been somewhat intrigued by the philosophy of life she adopted, especially when it is contrasted with the biblical view of the hope we have in Jesus Christ. I suspect that most of you are unfamiliar with the story of Pollyanna, so let me bring you up to speed.

The film was itself based on the novel by Eleanor H. Porter, written in 1913. The lead character’s full name was *Pollyanna Whittier*. After the death of her parents she went to live with her wealthy but rather unpleasant Aunt Polly, in Beldingsville, Vermont. The approach Pollyanna took to life was *highly optimistic*, to say the least. She called it “*The Glad Game*”. It’s not very complicated. Regardless of the circumstances in which you find yourself, you must always find something to be glad about. Pollyanna first thought of the game when instead of a doll for Christmas she ended up with only a pair of crutches. She made up the game on the spot, determined to look on the bright side of things. In this case, she was glad she had crutches because she didn’t need to use them! And that’s something to be glad about!

Playing “the glad game” is about the only thing that enabled Pollyanna to survive in the house of her Aunt. When she is confined in the attic, she is “glad” that there is at least a beautiful view from a high window. When she is punished for being late and for dinner is served only bread and milk, she is again “glad” because she at least has *something* to eat.

Pollyanna’s philosophy of life is genuinely put to the test when she is hit by a car and loses the use of both legs. Lying in bed, she comes to grips with the severity of her situation. But instead of falling into depression or bitterness, she decides she can at least be glad that she has her legs, even if they don’t do her much good. Pollyanna eventually is sent to a hospital where she learns to walk again and thus once more finds a good reason to be glad.

So, is this how a Christian is supposed to view life and adversity and heartache? Does God ask us to play our own version of “The Glad Game” in order to cope and survive in a fallen and corrupt world? On the one hand, the Bible does tell us to “rejoice always” (1 Thess. 5:16) and again to “count it all joy . . . when you meet trials of various kinds” (James 1:2). Is that the same thing Pollyanna is doing when she plays “the glad game”? I don’t think so.

I understand and appreciate to a small degree what Pollyanna is recommending. After all, if I only have a potato for dinner, *at least* I have a potato. And in that I should rejoice and be thankful. If I only make enough money to pay the bills, with virtually nothing left over, *at least* I can pay the bills. And in that I should rejoice and be thankful. In other words, I think the gratitude she displays is admirable. Her attitude is the opposite of the entitlement mentality that characterizes so much of our world today.

But what she lacks is basically two things. **First**, there is a distinct absence of the sort *realism* that the Bible calls on us to embrace. The Bible never asks us to pretend that things are better than they really are. It never asks us to ignore pain or to put on a fake smile and act as if we aren’t frustrated or confused or deeply hurt. Sadly, many who have

embraced the so-called “health and wealth gospel” think that God expects us to act as if everything is wonderful even when things are quite wretched. Not to look on the bright side is to lack faith and to lack faith is to forfeit the health and wealth that God otherwise would bring us. Many in this movement play their own version of “The Glad Game” when they insist that we should never speak forthrightly and honestly if that means using what they call “negative” words that indicate a lack of faith. But Scripture is brutally honest. ***It is not a lack of faith to be realistic about our circumstances and suffering.*** We can be positive and grateful and glad for all we have at the same time we are honest and real and genuine about what we are facing in life.

Second, there is absent from Pollyanna’s approach to life a vibrant, confident hope that in the end God will put all things to rights. The Scriptures encourage us to be grateful for all we have and to patiently endure pain and heartache because God has promised us and assured us that in the end Jesus will reign victorious and all evil will be overcome and truth will be vindicated and every enemy will be placed under his feet and all confusion will give way to understanding and joy.

Now you may be wondering what Pollyanna and her philosophy of life have to do with Hebrews 2:5-9. The answer is found in v. 8b, where we see biblical realism expressed explicitly and honestly. “At present,” says our author, “we do not yet see everything in subjection to him.” Now, in order to understand what this means and how it shapes how we live, we need to back up and start at the beginning of our paragraph and try to understand why our author has drawn this conclusion.

It is obvious that vv. 5-8a are an interpretation of Psalm 8. So let’s read Psalm 8 in its entirety.

“1 O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

2 Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger.

3 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,

4 what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?

5 Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.

6 You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet,

7 all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,

8 the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

9 O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

Psalm 8 is obviously David’s reflections on the majesty of God’s creative work in nature and our relationship as humans to it. In Hebrews 2:5 we are told that God did not ordain or plan that angels should rule the world to come. ***To whom, then, was this incredible promise made? The answer, according to Psalm 8, is: to us!*** God’s design was to give ***human beings*** dominion over all of creation. This is also what we read in Genesis 1:28. There God said, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

But Adam rebelled and turned his back on the mandate God gave him to exercise dominion over all things and to subdue the earth. We in turn have distorted this responsibility and have either abandoned what God called us to do or have abused the creation for our own sinful purposes. The intent of God and his purpose for creation is clearly stated in Hebrews 2:8a – “Now in putting everything in creation in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control.” The “him” in this verse is a collective reference to human beings, what we call “mankind” or what David referred to in Psalm 8 as “the son of man.”

David's point in Psalm 8 is that when you compare fallen mankind with the beauty and majesty and greatness of God's natural creation, he appears small and insignificant. In fact, the psalmist says that on the scale of greatness, at least for a short season, man is lower than the angels. Yet God's grander purpose is that eventually human beings would be elevated and given authority and power over all of creation.

But that has not yet happened. Because of human sin and wickedness and rebellion and unbelief, the author of Hebrews says that "at present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him" (2:8b). As Tom Schreiner has said, "the glory designed for human beings has not become a reality in human history. Instead, human history is littered with the wreckage of destruction and death—a world gone mad" (Tom Schreiner). In the final analysis, it is the presence and power of "death" that explains why we fail to exert righteous rule over God's creation.

So, will it *ever* happen? Will human beings *ever* find themselves exercising proper dominion over creation? Will there *ever* be a time in the future when "everything" will be in subjection to us, as God originally planned it? The answer to that question is found in v. 9. If we don't see humanity exercising righteous and godly dominion over all things, what do we see?

"But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (Heb. 2:9).

Now notice what has happened. In Genesis 1:28 and again in Psalm 8 it is human beings that are in view. It is human beings, men and women, that God has subjected the world to come. It is under the feet of "man" (v. 8a) that God has subjected all things. But we don't see it now. It hasn't happened. Something has gone terribly wrong. So again, is there any hope that the original mandate given at creation in Genesis 1 and reaffirmed in Psalm 8 will ever come to pass?

There are times when I wonder about that, when I doubt, when I fear that it may never occur. One need only look around at the wickedness of mankind globally. One need only think about the evil, moral corruption, and sexual immorality of our world. One need only reflect on the political tyranny of nations, as well as the upheavals in nature, be they earthquakes or tsunamis or tornadoes. If anything, *we* are in subjection to *nature*, suffering the disease and devastation and brutality it imposes on our existence.

So again I ask: is there any hope that the original mandate given to Adam and described in Psalm 8 will ever be fulfilled? The answer is a resounding Yes!

But how? By what means? When? And most important of all, *in and by whom* will this dominion and rule be established? The answer, as I said, is in v. 9. The answer is: *in and through and by means of* who Jesus Christ is. The answer is: *in and through and by means of* what Jesus Christ has accomplished in his life, death, resurrection, and his current reign from heaven. The answer is: *in and through and by means of* what Jesus Christ will bring to pass when he returns to this earth to consummate God's original purpose in having created mankind in the first place.

As we make our way through vv. 5-8 into v. 9 we discover that what God originally planned for mankind, indeed for us, will ultimately be brought to fulfillment through the true man Christ Jesus. The ultimate "man" that David had in mind when he wrote Psalm 8, the "man" who was for a little while made "lower than the angels" and has been "crowned with glory and honor" is **Jesus Christ!** The one under whose feet all things will be put in subjection is **Jesus!** In other words, *Jesus is the "representative" man who has fulfilled the calling intended for mankind as a whole.*

There are several things that we need to explore to make sense of this.

First, in what sense was Jesus, "for a little while . . . made lower than the angels" (v. 9a)? That sounds odd, given the fact that most of Hebrews up until this point has been about the ways in which Jesus is superior to angels. It almost sounds as if our author is now reversing himself! No, he isn't.

By becoming a human being in the incarnation, the Son of God embraced the lowly status of a man who was forced to endure persecution and slander and rejection. The words “for a little while” obviously refer to the 33 or so years that Jesus lived on this earth. It was the time of his humiliation, the short season during which he was subjected to ridicule and mockery and weakness. It was the time of his earthly life during which he was denied, betrayed, arrested, scourged, and nailed to a cross. As Isaiah prophesied of him, “he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Isa. 53:2-3). That is why he is described as “lower than the angels,” for no angel of God was ever subjected to such horrific mistreatment and shame. No angel ever died as Jesus did.

The **second** thing to note is that this man Christ Jesus was “crowned [by God] with glory and honor.” This clearly points to his resurrection from the dead and his exaltation to the right hand of the Majesty on high (1:3b). This Jesus who for a short season voluntarily embraced an earthly life that subjected him to vile rejection and scorn at the hands of sinful men and women, a life that no angel ever endured, has now been exalted and magnified and vindicated as the one true Son of God. That is why Jesus is better than the angels.

Third, and finally, don’t overlook why Jesus was exalted in this way. Don’t miss our author’s primary point that it was “*because of the suffering of death*” that God crowned him “with glory and honor” (v. 9). This is precisely what the apostle Paul had in mind in Philippians 2:5-11. There he declared that Jesus, “being found in human form . . . humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. *Therefore*, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name” (Phil. 2:8-9a).

Thus we see again that the primary way in which Jesus was placed beneath the angels is that he, like all other human beings, was subject to death. But he did not deserve to die. His death was an expression of the saving grace of God for all those on whose behalf he suffered. And who were they? He will tell us in v. 10 that it was those “many sons” whom he is bringing to “glory.” It is those “brothers” (and “sisters”) in vv. 11-12 and the “children of God” in v. 13. By suffering death in their place he destroyed the power of death and corruption that has for so long prevented mankind from exerting that dominion over all things that God originally designed for us.

Jesus is the true man, the representative man, the man in and by whom God’s original design for the human race will ultimately be fulfilled. He currently reigns at God’s right hand, having been crowned with glory and honor. God is slowly but surely bringing all his enemies into subjection beneath his feet. We do not yet see all his enemies subdued. But in the sovereign royal rule of King Jesus we see the destiny of the human race, the destiny of all those who belong to him by faith. This is why we must not lose faith in God’s promise that we will, in the end, exert complete authority over all that God has created.

Two Practical Conclusions

Now we need to take a close look at two very important and highly practical conclusions drawn from all this.

First, this destiny of ours to be crowned with glory and honor and to rule in dominion over all of God’s creation is part of that “*great salvation*” that our author described back in Hebrews 2:3. Christ died and rose again to obtain for us eternal salvation; reconciliation with God the Father; adoption into his family; the forgiveness of sins. But a central element in that salvation is the fulfillment of God’s original mandate to humanity that they should rule and exert dominion over creation.

Remember what our author said back in v. 3 – Don’t neglect this salvation! Don’t ignore or treat as trivial and unimportant the indescribably great and glorious privilege that God has given us to rule and reign over all of the work of his hands. And that includes judging and reigning over angels as well, as Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:3 makes clear.

This, then, is one reason why our salvation is so immeasurably valuable and “great”! We, not the angels, are destined to have all creation put in subjection to our feet. And it will happen for all who are in Christ Jesus by faith, for he is the true “man” in whom God has worked to bring this glorious promise to fruition.

Second, we have come full circle. We are now prepared to see what all this has to do with Pollyanna and her misguided philosophy of life.

We are promised here that one day, and for all eternity, because of what Jesus has done we will no longer be subjected to the ravages of nature. Nature, instead, will be subject to us. We will no longer be the victims of floods and hurricanes and famine and war and pestilence and disease and tornadoes and tsunamis and earthquakes and volcanoes. Unfortunately, we currently live at a time when Hebrews 2:8b is still true – “At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him.”

In other words, at present, our friends and family members suffer from the ravages of glioblastoma brain cancer and paralysis and heart disease and lymphoma and blindness and diabetes. And we struggle to understand why . . . why a young mother of two toddlers is found to be with life-threatening cancer . . . why a dear friend in his 50’s is laid low with an aggressively malignant brain tumor . . . why a faithful Christian businessman is subjected to the illegal and underhanded ways of a once-trusted partner . . . why a godly teenager is constantly bullied and berated merely for being a Christian . . .

We want answers. More than that, we want healing! We want deliverance! We want justice! And sometimes God in his mercy and kindness provides it. But not always. Not everything has yet been put in subjection to us.

We like to think that we are the masters of our own fate and in final control of all that happens. After all, we humans created computers and space travel and artificial heart valves and cornea transplants and cell phones and the internet. There is a lot in creation over which we appear to exert dominion.

But here’s the problem. ***We have not conquered death.*** It continues to exert its authority over us. Babies die. Mothers die. Good friends die. Pastors die. Teenagers on the brink of college die. Powerful politicians die. Nobel Prize winners die. Doctors die. And we want things to change and wonder if God is worthy of our trust if they don’t!

But Hebrews 2:8b doesn’t say that although “we do not yet see everything in subjection” to our will and desires that we should just wait a couple of years and it will all turn around for good. The Word of God doesn’t say that if we would just have enough “faith” or avoid negative words or successfully play “the glad game” that everything would turn out in our favor. The unavoidable fact is that nothing ultimately is subject to us because in only a matter of a few years it will all be taken away. In Psalm 8 David says that man has a glorious future as the ruler of all creation. This is part of our great salvation. But the reality is we are not conquerors now.

But Jesus is! Did you hear that? Do you see that in v. 9? When we look around at our world and are realistic about life and death we are forced to admit that “we do not yet see everything in subjection” to mankind. So what **do** we see? We see **Jesus!** We see “him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus.” We see him “crowned with glory and honor” sitting and reigning at the right hand of the Majesty on high. We see him who because he suffered a death he didn’t deserve has showered us with God’s glorious grace.

In other words, we don’t at present see Psalm 8 fulfilled in ourselves yet. ***But what we do see is Psalm 8 fulfilled in Jesus. And that, says our author, is the key to life.*** The solution to our struggles and the way we survive our circumstances isn’t by playing “the glad game” but by looking to Jesus in faith and hope that our ultimate destiny is fulfilled in him. We are still subject to death and all kinds of weaknesses and futilities. But Jesus has now passed through weakness and death, and is crowned with glory and honor. He is seated in power at the right hand of God and all his enemies are subjected to him as a footstool for his feet (1:13). And that ought to bring immeasurable “gladness” to us our hearts. But it is a gladness that does not close its eyes to the reality of life and its frustrations and fears and pain and heartache.

Dear friend, when life throws the very worst at you, when nothing seems to make sense because everything you planned falls to pieces, when your best and dearest dies, when all your efforts to do what is good and godly appear to bring only loss and disillusionment, “***see him***” (2:9). Look to Jesus in whom your destiny is wrapped up. See “him” says Hebrews 2:9. Fix the eyes of your faith on him. Invest your hope in who he is and what he has accomplished in fulfillment of Psalm 8. Keep your focus on him, for God is slowly but surely bringing all things under his sovereign rule. That is where our hope must rest. John Piper put it this way:

“The first man—the first Adam—sinned and was subjected to futility and death. The second Adam, Jesus Christ, defeated death and restored the hope of Psalm 8 for all who are in him. You, Christian, who do not neglect this great salvation, you will reign with Christ, and all things will one day be put in subjection to you. All things will serve your great good. All things, without any mixture of pain or sorrow or regret will manifest the glory of God *to* you and *through* you as you rule with Christ.

What then shall we do? Put your faith in the promise of this great future grace—that what you see in Christ today will someday be your portion. Fix your eyes on Christ, not on the pain and futility and frustration and sickness and death of this age. They will not have the last word. Christ has conquered death and all the sin and pain that lead to death. Think on him. Consider him. Look to him” (“Who Rules the World to Come?” May 19, 1996 at www.desiringgod.org).

Pollyanna’s “glad game” may sound appealing. It might even work to help you survive a few of the lesser frustrations and problems in life. But in the long run, when Satan and this world throw in your path the very worst and most painful situations and circumstances, speak aloud and say confidently:

“Psalm 8 is my destiny! Because I am in Jesus Christ and he is in me one day all things will be put under my feet and I will rule and reign with him in glory forever. Until then, sustain me, O Lord. Preserve me in faith. Don’t let my doubts cripple my capacity to love you and enjoy you and trust you. Help me each day to fix my eyes on Christ and behold in him the glory that will soon be mine.”