

## The Imprint of God's Being

Hebrews 1:1-12

Back in 2005 a rookie wide receiver who was drafted by the Cleveland Browns was so happy about being able to play in the NFL that he made a promise to 100 Cleveland area eighth graders. **Slide**

Braylon Edwards, who now plays for the 49ers, promised these 100 students that if they graduated from high school with a 2.5GPA or better and performed 15 hours of community service, he would personally write each of them a \$10,000 check to help pay for their college.

Keep in mind that in Cleveland only half of the students even graduate from high school, much less attend college. Well, these kids worked extra hard and this year 79 of the 100 met the criteria. And sure enough, Edwards cut the checks, even though he's making the league minimum of \$1 million this year.

Most of these students are attending colleges in Ohio, but some are attending Ivy League schools too. It's an opportunity most of them never dreamed of. Most of them grew up under the illusion that they would probably not graduate, much less attend college.

But Edwards felt very fortunate, and he knew what it was like to grow up feeling like he had little opportunity to rise above his circumstances. And he's used his own economic power, limited as it is in the scope of things, to make these kids' lives a little better and give them a chance.

Don't you wish there was someone like that for the rest of us? Don't you wish there was someone who had the power and authority to come in and bring hope to the situations in life that we find hopeless?

The thing is, even though we sometimes feel like that person or that movement has come, and that everything will now start to get better, that all the pieces are in place, after a while we start to get disillusioned because some of those problems still exist.

When that happens, people generally revert to what wasn't working before. At least what we did before was familiar, even if it wasn't working. That kind of dynamic has been repeated throughout history.

A new leader comes to power, people expect the world of him or her, then when things don't work out, they decide to go back to the way things were before. But what happens when our understanding of faith changes?

When you begin to understand what God is doing in the world, it doesn't mean that you understand the solution to all of life's problems. So what if this new revelation you've come to all of a sudden doesn't seem so earth shattering after all?

Do you go back to what you used to believe? I don't think that's possible. I think most people just kind of give up and say there is no sense to what happens. And I think that's the situation we're looking at when we talk about who Jesus is, and what his coming means.

We're here today because we have taken time out of our schedules to remember and celebrate the birth of Jesus. And our author, the author of Hebrews, says that Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God to the world.

God had spoken to people through prophets and through signs and other various ways. But this latest communiqué from God was unlike anything else God had ever done. Jesus was God's son, according to Hebrews, the exact representation of God's own self in human form.

When I look at my daughter I can't help but notice just how much she looks like my sister in New York. Same nose, same facial features. She's a Carlson. She's also a Smith. She looks like Michelle's family too.

She reminds people of us. She reveals parts of us that we don't generally publicize. As you're aware, in my field that can be a dangerous thing. I appreciate the fact that people don't pump her for the goods on what Michelle and I are really like.

Honestly, if you want to know what we're really like, Emma's a pretty good indicator. That's way our author describes Jesus. But Jesus doesn't just have God's nose. Jesus didn't just pick up some of God's bad habits the way Emma has with us.

Jesus was God's solution to the fact that, as I said before, people didn't think that things were working between them and God. So instead of sending some scraggly looking prophet to tell people to shape up, God sends God's own son, who is the human embodiment of everything God is, if that's even possible.

But 2000 years ago, the idea that God would send his son to earth as a human being was met with plenty of skepticism. God had given people a set of laws and told people to follow those. In fact, many people today still see their relationship to God as one where the primary activity is making sure you follow a set of rules.

That's what God wants out of you. God doesn't care how you feel. God doesn't care if those rules make sense. God doesn't care if everyone else thinks those rules are ridiculous. You follow them and God blesses you. You break them and God smites you. Period.

There are millions of Christians in this country who believe in a God like that. And in their most lucid moments, during brief glimpses of clarity, it has to occur to them that if they're ultimately responsible to God for their own sin, if they have to pay the penalty for what they do wrong, then what does Jesus really do for them?

If he paid the penalty for sin, why do they have to keep paying it themselves? This letter was sent to a group of people who were struggling with that same question. They had been raised or converted to Judaism.

In Judaism, you follow God's laws. That's what it's all about. But the problem is that many of those laws involved doing things at the temple in Jerusalem. And in 70 AD the Romans came in and destroyed the temple. So what do you do now?

Do you figure out new ways to follow those laws? Or does this mean an end to Israel's God? Or has Israel's God decided to go about things in a completely different way? Jesus' followers were also dealing with this question.

Many of them understood that the coming of Jesus to the world was God's completely new way of communicating with the world. And those followers frequently went to different Jewish communities and said, "Hey, we think we've figured out what's going on with the whole destruction of the temple thing."

When the author came and told these about what God had done in sending Jesus to the world, they became followers of Jesus. And everything was going ok. Except that if Jesus came to save the world, it just didn't look like it.

Most of the same bad things that happened before were still happening. The world didn't seem any better. And people were wondering about Jesus' promise that he would return. Where was he? Why was he waiting? Couldn't he hurry up?

In that situation the people started wondering if it might be better for them to go back to Judaism. Maybe this Jesus guy wasn't all he was cracked up to be. Maybe they got sold a bill of goods by some charlatan.

The author writes this letter, which is really a sermon, in order to convince them not to go back to Judaism. He tells them that Jesus is greater than Moses, greater than Joshua,

greater than their priests, greater than their prophets. And in this chapter he says that Jesus is even greater than the angels.

He is God's own son. And because he is, he was able to deal with the problem of sin in a way that none of their priests ever could. The author reminds his readers that in their old religion, people kept on sinning and the priest kept on having to offer animal sacrifices year after year.

After you do that for about 1200 year, you start to wonder if this whole sacrifice system really works. If you have to keep repeating the sacrifice, don't you start to wonder at some point if it's really working?

Michelle and I have this debate. When I think I have a solution to a problem I try it. If that solution doesn't work, I try it again. Sometimes over and over. At that point she tells me that the definition of insanity is to repeat the same action over and over and expect a different result.

I reply that it isn't insanity to keep trying. It's persistence. And if I persist, eventually my solution will work, flawed as it may be. That's my story and I'm sticking to it. But the author of Hebrews really sides with Michelle on this one.

He thinks that the way people dealt with sin wasn't working. That God had decided to deal with it in a way that didn't need to be repeated time and time again. So instead of some poor animal being sacrificed and burned to atone for people's misdeeds, God's own son offered himself as a sacrifice for sin.

That sacrifice was so great that it never needs to be repeated again. So the meaning of Christmas, the point of Jesus coming to earth and living among us, was to deal with sin once and for all. There's nothing you and I can or should attempt to do to deal with our sin.

According to the author, we are incapable of doing so. And trying to do so is counterproductive. It's almost like rejecting this incredible gift that God has given us. Why would you even want to do that?

Let me illustrate what I mean. Some of you know that one of the most popular computer games out there is this incredibly simple game called "Angry Birds". It is now a source of stress relief for people all around the world.

The whole gist of the game is that you take these angry birds and you shoot them from a slingshot at these green pigs who have stolen the birds' eggs. The pigs are always

protected by wobbly structures of wood, ice and metal. The object of the game is to knock over those structures and kill the pigs. Simple enough, right?

Well, Michelle is hooked on this game. It's actually very addicting. But she also likes to play the game while lying in bed, or just about anywhere else she wants. So she plays the game on her cell phone. As you might imagine, it requires a lot of squinting.

She also loves to read books. But she wants to be environmentally responsible. She also doesn't want to continue building the library of paperback books that are overflowing my office in the basement.

Again, she can read e-books on her phone. But the print is pretty small, and the phone company charges us extra for the amount of data she downloads playing Angry Birds and reading paperbacks. What to do?

This morning Michelle received an Ipad as a gift from her brother. It is the most incredible thing I've ever seen. It's literally the size of our church directory and it does all of those things I mentioned and about a million times more. It does them better, faster and easier.

There's no way she'll ever go back to reading books or playing Angry Birds on her phone. Why would she? She's got something way better, something which solves a lot of the problems she was having. Something that will last a long time, even though technology is changing so fast these days.

Jesus is like that when it comes to sin. He came into the world because what we had before wasn't working. Our attempts to deal with our guilt weren't working. The good news is that he has dealt with sin once and for all. The question of what we need to do to get God to forgive us never needs to be asked again.

It's a done deal. And none of the crazy things we try to get God to forgive us will work. People do all kinds of things to try to deal with their sense of guilt over things they've done. Lots of people try to figure out ways to "make it up" to God, to make amends for past wrongdoings.

But we don't believe in penance in the Baptist church. We believe that Jesus was all the penance any of us will ever need. So give yourself a break. Stop carrying around that full set of luggage called guilt. Set it down and go on with your life.

If you want to do something kind for someone, by all means, go ahead. Do it because it's good, because it's the loving thing to do. Don't do it to try and compensate for some terrible misdeed of yours in the past. Jesus paid that debt. You don't have to.

In the movie “The Mission” Robert De Niro plays a Jesuit priest in training who travels to South America to work in a mission that has been established among the natives in the seventeenth century.

Part of the reason De Niro’s character makes such a trip is because he is overwhelmed with guilt for murdering his brother. In fact, in order to do penance, his mentor makes him go around with this huge sack of metal objects tied to his waist. **Slide.**

His mentor figures he needs to do this for a while for his own conscience. But eventually the mentor takes a knife and cuts the rope which binds the young priest to the bag of rocks. He declares the young priest’s penance to be over.

Many of us look at an image like that and think about how ridiculous this young man looked. But in some ways many of us also carry those bags of rocks around in our minds. And we think that if we do enough good things we might make up for all the things that we’ve never forgiven ourselves for.

And yet Hebrews teaches us that Jesus has taken that bag of rocks, carried it himself, and made us square with God. End of story. So why would we still want to go around with that bag tied to our waists?

Today we celebrate the fact that this chasm between God and the world has been crossed. Sin no longer needs to get in the way. We no longer need to live under its crushing weight.

The one who was made lower than the angels for a little while has now been made Lord. But he’s a Lord who knows what it’s like to be one of us, to suffer, to hurt, even to die. Today we celebrate his coming, the one who is the exact imprint of God’s own being.