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Hebrews 2:5-18

Leader Session Guide

Focus Statement

The person Jesus Christ is fully human, in every way like us. In Jesus we see and know God. In Jesus we see and know who God created us to be.

Key Verse

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.
Hebrews 2:17

Focus Image



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Who Is Jesus? (Part 2)

Session Preparation

Before You Begin . . .

Take a few moments to consider what it means to be human. Reflect on phrases like “I’m only human,” “she’s a real human being,” “the milk of human kindness,” “human frailty,” and “it’s human nature.” Consider what’s important to you personally about being human. What are your feelings as you reflect on this?

Session Instructions

1. Read this Session Guide completely and highlight or underline any portions you wish to emphasize with the group. Note any Bonus Activities you wish to do.
2. If you plan to do any special activities, check to see what materials you’ll need, if any.
3. Have extra Bibles on hand in case a member of the group forgets to bring one.

Session Overview

Jesus’ humanity is as important to the author of Hebrews as Jesus’ divinity. This session explores both what Hebrews has to say about Jesus’ humanity and the church’s understanding of Jesus being both human and divine. Martin Luther put a great emphasis on Jesus’ humanity, teaching that it is through Jesus’ humanity and our own that we truly know God.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The **incarnation**—Christianity’s teaching that Jesus is both human and divine—burst the confines of both Greek philosophical thought and Hebrew tradition. Ancient Greek philosophy knows God as immutable and, therefore, impersonal. The Hebrew scriptural tradition teaches that God interacts with human beings in history. God walked in the garden with Adam and Eve. God spoke to Moses in the wilderness.

This seemingly irreconcilable difference came to a head in the fourth century in the Arian controversy. Arius was an elder of the church at Alexandria. Arius and his followers taught that God is impersonal and outside history, while God’s *Logos* is personal and directly involved with human beings. The *Logos* (“word”

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Incarnation:

“Incarnation” is embodiment in flesh (Latin: *caro, carnis*). In Christianity, the incarnation is the belief that God was flesh and blood in Jesus.



Sanctified:

To be “sanctified” is to be made holy. To be holy is to belong to God. In our sanctification, Jesus, Son of God, accomplished our adoption as children of God.

in Greek) refers to Jesus. For example, John 1:1 says of Jesus, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” This last idea—that the Word Jesus is God—was the focus of the Arian controversy. Did the *Logos* of God exist coeternally with God the Father, or was there a time when the *Logos* did not exist? Is the *Logos* a creation of God and less divine? Or, is the *Logos* uncreated and fully divine? What is God’s relationship to the world? Are creator and creation separate, or is the creator intimately involved in the creation?

The Roman emperor Constantine called the First Ecumenical Council in 325 C.E. to resolve the controversy, which was dividing the Roman Empire. The First and Second (381 C.E.) Ecumenical Councils gave the church the Nicene Creed, which articulated a resolution to the dispute.

LITERARY CONTEXT

Note the ways in which the author points to Jesus’ humanity. Having earlier argued that Jesus is superior to angels, we hear now that “for a little while” Jesus was made “lower than the angels,” that is, human. As a human being, Jesus’ suffering and death are the focus of the author’s attention. Jesus shared “flesh and blood,” which meant he was subject to death like all human beings. “Like his brothers and sisters in every respect,” Jesus “was tested by what he suffered.” Seeing Jesus—that Jesus is visible, not invisible—is also a mark of his humanity.

Note that Jesus is described as “pioneer” of salvation. In ancient Greece, a pioneer or leader was the founder of a city, fellowship, or community. As pioneer, Jesus’ work of “perfecting” and “**sanctifying**” as “merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God” making “sacrifice of atonement” will be discussed more fully later in Hebrews and in the next session of this study. The motifs of high priest and sacrifice are based in Hebrew liturgical and scriptural tradition.

In Hebrews 2:9, Jesus’ humanity and his being “crowned with glory and honor” are tied together. Likewise, in verse 10, Jesus’ “bringing many children to glory” is connected with his suffering.

The motifs of freedom and slavery were central in Hebrew tradition. The God who raised Jesus from the dead—freeing human beings from the death and the power of death—was the God who delivered—and delivers—slaves from bondage.

LUTHERAN CONTEXT

We know God most clearly in the person of Jesus. In his lectures on Hebrews, Luther said, “Therefore he who wants to ascend advantageously to the love and knowledge of God should abandon the human metaphysical rules concerning knowledge of the divinity and apply himself first to the humanity of Christ. For it is exceedingly godless temerity that, where God has humiliated Himself in order to become recognizable, man seeks for himself another way by following the counsels of his own natural capacity” (Lectures on Hebrews, *Luther’s Works* 29:111).

Luther goes further, saying that it is not just Jesus himself who is God’s revelation to us. Because God was flesh and blood among us in Jesus Christ, we can know God in flesh and blood, that is, in other people and in ourselves.

Jesus being fully human and fully divine is a **paradox**. The identification of Jesus’ humiliation with Jesus’ exaltation is a paradox. Not only Jesus’ becoming human but also Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross are the grounds of Jesus’ exaltation. “[God] exalted Christ above all things when He cast Him down below all things” (Lectures on Hebrews, *Luther’s Works* 29:127).

Jesus’ humanity, God’s being in flesh and blood, fulfills God’s plan of salvation. In suffering and dying, Jesus became like all human beings so that human beings could become like Jesus in glory and honor.

DEVOTIONAL CONTEXT

Death and fear are powerful realities in our lives. Yet, Jesus became incarnate “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” (Hebrews 2:14-15). In Jesus Christ we need no longer fear death. “The devil,” the power of evil, has been overcome.

Participants may or may not believe there is or ever was such a being as the “devil.” Either way, they may question the devil’s having been overcome, given the state of the world. Hebrews’ approach to the problem of evil being overcome is “already, not yet.” In Hebrews 2:8, the author writes, “Now in subjecting all things to [human beings], God left nothing outside their control.” Of course, none of us feels everything is under control, much less that we have control over everything. Hebrews goes on, “As it is,

**Paradox:**

A paradox is a statement that contradicts itself.

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we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus.” Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection—his humiliation and exaltation—are evidence to us that, despite appearances, death is not the final word.

Facilitator’s Prayer

Gracious and loving God, give me grace and generosity as I lead Bible study. Help me to see you in every person who gathers for this time together. And, let me, by my words and actions, be a witness to your love for us all. Amen.



Tip:

Listen carefully for any comments people have regarding the previous week’s session or their follow-up experiences during the week. You may be able to draw on these in this or later sessions.



Tip:

Be mindful that participants come with different physical abilities. If it will be helpful, accommodate participants by their location in the room or type of seating.

Gather (10-15 minutes)

Check-in

Invite learners to share completed homework or any new thoughts or insights about the previous session. Be ready to give a brief recap of that session if necessary.

Pray

Almighty God, you gave us your only Son to take on our human nature and to illumine the world with your light. By your grace adopt us as your children and enlighten us with your Spirit, through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (Nativity of Our Lord III, *ELW*, p. 20)

Focus Activity

Take a moment to focus on Jesus as fully human. Stand or sit. Close your eyes. Focus on your posture—the angle of your head, the positions of your arms and legs, the shape of your back. Imagine that you are Jesus. Adjust your body as you imagine what it felt like to be him. What does it feel like? How is this different from your usual stance or posture?

Open Scripture (10-15 minutes)

Form two or three groups. Have members of each group work together to present the text in a creative way for the rest of the participants. After the creative presentation, explore the similarities and differences among the groups’ approaches.

OR

Use sketch books to have listeners “doodle” during the reading. It’s useful for visible learners to “see” what they are hearing.

Read Hebrews 2:5-18.

- How do you feel as you hear this passage?
- What word or phrase in the text grabs your attention most?
- What questions does the text raise for you?

Join the Conversation (25-55 minutes)

Historical Context

1. Hebrews expresses the belief that God was flesh and blood in Jesus. This belief, called the *incarnation*, burst the confines of both Greek philosophical thought and Hebrew tradition.
 - Read together the Nicene Creed. Look closely at the Second Article, the portion about Jesus. How does it talk about Jesus’ humanity? What is the relationship between Jesus’ humanity and Jesus’ divinity in this creed?
 - Look also at the Apostles’ Creed, a shorter creed from an earlier time in the church. List differences and similarities in how this creed and the Nicene Creed teach the relationship between Jesus’ divinity and humanity.

Literary Context

1. While Hebrews 1 emphasizes Jesus as divine, Hebrews 2 emphasizes Jesus as human.
 - Read Hebrews 2:5-18 and underline or highlight the words and phrases that distinguish Jesus as human.
2. Jesus is described as the “pioneer” of salvation (Hebrews 2:10) and later as the “pioneer” of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). Pioneers may lead the way or break new ground in fields such as science, technology, music, or dance. Some pioneers are explorers—on earth or in space. Some pioneers are the “first,” for example, the first female major league baseball umpire.

+ Bonus Activity:

Distribute copies of the Athanasian Creed (*LBW*, pp. 54-55). Have the group read it aloud, each participant in turn reading a sentence. Ask for initial responses to the creed. Ask participants to speculate about the theological controversy or controversies that may have given rise to this creed. As there is time, have participants underline the word *Son* wherever it occurs, and then focus on what the creed has to say about the Son.

Tip:

Mention that controversies have marked the church throughout its entire history. They are part of the process of discernment in our life together. What seems settled—even obvious—to us now may once have been the object of great conflict.

+ Bonus Activity:

Philippians 2:5-11 is an ancient creedal hymn about Jesus’ human and divine nature. Ask participants to close their eyes and visualize the text as a volunteer reads it aloud slowly two times. After a few moments, ask participants what they experienced, saw, or learned in this visualization.

Tip:

Encourage participants to underline or highlight words or phrases and to make notes in the margins of their Bibles. Some people will be a bit uncomfortable with the idea. The Word of God is not confined to the page, which is only a vehicle for our receiving it. The Bible—God’s Word—is an invitation to conversation and engagement, including on the page itself.

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+ Bonus Activity:

Jesus was in every way like us. Have participants read Matthew 26:39 and Matthew 27:46, then discuss whether Jesus experienced fear. By what he did (which will be discussed further in the next session), Jesus freed “those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death” (Hebrews 2:15).

+ Bonus Activity:

Jesus “shared the same things”—our flesh and blood—and became “like his brothers and sisters in every respect” (Hebrews 2:14-17). Explore these images. Invite participants to close their eyes and get a clear image in their minds of a particularly memorable experience. Then, in their minds, invite them to put Jesus in their place, experiencing what they experienced.

Tip:

Some Christians find it difficult to accept the idea that God died. For others, God’s dying only makes clearer God’s power over death and God’s willingness to become vulnerable for our sake.

+ Bonus Activity:

Invite participants to express their views on whether God died on the cross. Record responses—yes “votes,” no “votes,” and other comments. A few early theologians taught that God the Father and God the Son were the same, so the Father suffered and died just as the Son did. Ecumenical councils distinguished the Father and the Son. The Son suffered and died; the Father did not. In more recent centuries, theologians (including Luther) have articulated the idea that though the Father did not die, God did die since the Son is God. What does it mean that God died? For Luther, God’s suffering was a mystery, which he understood as a paradox.

- Draw or describe what the word *pioneer* means to you. What does a pioneer do? Where does a pioneer go? What are followers’ relationships to a pioneer? What kind of person does it take to be a pioneer?
- What does the image of a pioneer tell us about Jesus?

Lutheran Context

1. Lutheran theology includes several *paradoxes*—statements or realities that seem to contradict themselves. (For example, Martin Luther talked about Scripture as both law and gospel, and Christians as both saints and sinners.) The session Scripture text also contains paradoxes: Jesus is fully human and fully divine, and he is exalted because he becomes human and suffers and dies on the cross. As Luther writes, “[God] exalted Christ above all things when He cast Him down below all things” (Lectures on Hebrews, *Luther’s Works* 29:127).

- How does the paradox of Jesus’ full humanity and divinity help you and your faith?
- List the questions this paradox raises for you.

2. For Luther, becoming a parent brought with it faith lessons. In his children, Luther realized what it meant that God was born among us in Jesus Christ, an infant child.

- Identify ways in which human infants are vulnerable and dependent.
- How does it feel to imagine God as a human infant?

Devotional Context

1. Sing together “Word of God, Come Down on Earth” (*ELW* 510). Then, as someone reads the words aloud slowly and deliberately, stand when the hymn refers to Jesus’ humanity and sit when it refers to Jesus’ divinity.

2. Sometimes people think of Jesus as somehow superhuman. Rather, Jesus is *fully* human. In Jesus, we see what God intends for human beings. Jesus is fully human and, in our human sinfulness, we fall short of being fully human. Write in a journal or make a picture of ways in which you feel or sense this in your life, and ways in which Jesus shows what it means to be fully human.

3. Turn your attention to the session's Focus Image. Imagine yourself as part of the scene. Describe what you experience and the emotions this evokes.

Wrap-up

1. If there are any questions to explore further, write them on chart paper or a whiteboard. Ask for volunteers to do further research to share with the group at the next session.
2. Ask each person who is willing to briefly tell one embarrassing thing about themselves. After each person is done sharing, have the group say together, "Jesus was human, just like you."
3. Review the ways Jesus' humanity has been described in this session. Ask participants if they want to add anything to this.

Pray

Brother Jesus, you are like me. Does that mean I am like you? In the week ahead, help me to follow your lead. And, in the week ahead, strengthen me in the face of challenges, that I may meet them with love and without fear, because I am confident in your love. Amen.

Extending the Conversation (5 minutes)

Homework

1. Read the next session's Bible text: Hebrews 4:14–5:10; 9:24–10:1; 10:10-18.
2. Created in God's image, you have a body! This week celebrate your body—the fact that you are incarnate! Exercise as you are able—flex your feet and ankles right now, go for a walk this week, stretch your arms and legs as you are sitting. Make physical contact with people who are important to you and, as you do, thank God you are human. Eat responsibly. Take deep breaths. As you perform life's daily bodily care and preparations, celebrate these basic human realities as part of who God made you to be.
3. As you hear news of human suffering, pray for the people involved and their care and healing. Pray for peace. If you are able, do something to help alleviate suffering. Perhaps you can make a contribution of money. Perhaps you will write a letter to encourage legislative action. You may very well meet human suffering face-to-face in this week and have an opportunity to be of help more directly. When you see suffering, remember that Jesus is there.



Bonus Activity:

In 1996, the song "One of Us" was in the top 10 on the pop music charts. This song was written by Eric Bazilian and originally recorded by Joan Osborne and later by Alanis Morissette. The questioning refrain, "What if God was one of us?" can help you and your group reflect on the incarnation. Obtain a recording of the song and play it for your group. Note the questions in the song and discuss them.



Tip:

For the reflection on the Focus Image, quiet the room and encourage everyone to get comfortable. Invite participants to meditate on the Focus Image as a volunteer slowly reads aloud the following passages: Hebrews 2:9; 1 John 4:18; Romans 8:15; and Hebrews 2:18. As a closing to your meditation, pass the peace among the group.



Tip:

Use this opportunity to bring together the themes of the first two sessions, which have focused on the person of Jesus Christ, who is fully divine and fully human.



Tip:

The question for the next session is "What did Jesus do?" Suggest that participants note how that question is answered in the Bible texts for the session.

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Enrichment

1. If you want to read through the entire book of Hebrews during this unit, read the following sections this week.

Day 1: Hebrews 3:7-19

Day 2: Hebrews 4:1-11

Day 3: Hebrews 4:12-13

Day 4: Hebrews 4:14-16

Day 5: Hebrews 5:1-6

Day 6: Hebrews 5:7-14

Day 7: Hebrews 6:1-12

2. Do a Web search to learn more about the Arian controversy. For example, the First Ecumenical Council was called by the Roman emperor Constantine. What business did an emperor have convening a Christian assembly?

3. *The Green Mile* (Castle Rock Entertainment, 1999) is a film based on a Stephen King serial novel (Signet, 1996) of the same title. The story takes place on death row. The characters are guards and inmates, one of whom has special powers. That character, John Coffey, convicted of a heinous crime of which he is innocent, is both intimidating and childlike. *The Green Mile* is a story of how people respond in the face of human and divine powers at work in their midst, a story of great cruelty and great healing. Watch the film with others or, if you participate in a book group, suggest reading the novel.

For Further Reading

And the Word Became History by Medardo Ernesto Gómez (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992).

The Gospel According to Jesus Christ by José Saramago (San Diego: Harvest Books, 1994).

Looking Ahead

1. Read the next session's Bible text: 4:14—5:10; 9:24—10:1; 10:10-18.

2. Read through the Leader Guide for the next session and mark portions you wish to highlight for the group.

3. Make a checklist of any materials you'll need to do the Bonus Activities

4. Pray for members of your group during the week.