What was the best thing you got for Christmas? I have been asking that question for longer than I can remember. That was always a very important activity at my grade school. We would come back from Christmas vacation and everybody wanted to know what gifts everybody got and which one was the best. I do not know if it was mere curiosity or an excuse to tell others about what you had received.

I still do it today. I just love watching the excitement in little children as they tell you what they got and what they liked the best. I find it fascinating to hear what teens and pre-teens think is a good gift. It helps me understand them and their world just a little. And with adults, I love to hear about new things.

So, what was the best thing you got for Christmas? With this question I am not so much interested in toys or electronic equipment or clothing you may have received from loved ones. I am asking you what you received that is truly the best, better than any material gift you got. After all, those things are mere reminders of the most precious gift God gave mankind with the birth of his Son, Jesus.

So, what was the best thing you got for Christmas? The writer of Hebrews wants to remind you that the best thing you got is: **THE PERFECT SUBSTITUTE!** It is someone sent to substitute himself for you. He is to be your replacement. He is the one who will stand in for you.

In what regard? **In leading many sons to glory,** we are told. God’s will for all eternity, the Lord’s reason for creating this universe and the people in it, has never wavered or changed. Our heavenly Father wants all mankind to be his sons and daughters, to live with him as his children forever in all the glory that’s his as the only true God. He has always wanted to give you the fullness of life in his presence.

That certainly sounds easy enough, doesn’t it? And it was, according to God’s blueprint for mankind. But rather quickly mankind abandoned God’s plan and then things got complicated. You see, the Lord demands perfection from everyone who wants to live in heaven. We must perfectly obey all his commandments. As we were originally designed, that was no problem. But as soon as we rebelled against the Lord, all that changed. We became sinners - less than perfect.

His demand that we be perfect remained the same, but our sinfulness made it impossible for us to keep his commandments. We simply cannot do it. We should forfeit heaven. But the Lord still wants us to be with him. So he sends in a Substitute, someone who is perfect, someone who can keep all his commandments, someone who will allow us to take credit for his perfection. In that way, we can enter heaven.

If you think you are good enough to enter heaven, if you think you do not need such a Substitute to stand in for you, you probably fall into one of three groups. You might think that a superficial obedience to the commandments is all that God requires. You have never murdered or stolen or cheated on your spouse, so you think must have kept the commandments.

But Jesus says: **But I tell you that everyone who is angry with his brother without a cause will be subject to judgment. I tell you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.** I could go on, but you get the point. Perfect obedience is not in your grasp.
Or perhaps you are in that second group which does not understand the nature of the obedience the Lord requires. As James reminds us, love your neighbor as yourself, is the royal law, the essence of obedience. True perfection can only be attained if the obedience is done in love, with no hope or expectation of reward. As soon as you obey thinking this will get you into heaven or put you in favor of someone, you have tainted your obedience – you are no longer perfect. Or maybe you think you do not need a Substitute because you are a pretty good person overall. You are better than most, so you must be worthy of God’s love.

But then you run into God’s standard which states that whoever keeps the whole law but stumbles in one point has become guilty of breaking all of it. God’s expectation of holiness is just that – perfection - perfection under any and every circumstance. In the final analysis, only the biggest fool and most ignorant person would not realize that he needs a Substitute if he’s to have any chance at life.

That is why the greatest Gift you received this Christmas is Jesus, your Substitute. Jesus came to provide the perfection we need. He did it by becoming us! For he who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified all have one Father. For that reason, he is not ashamed to call them brothers. Jesus delights to call us brothers, to include us as part of God’s family, to serve as our replacement. But this substitution was not easy. The Substitute is, after all, the second person of the Triune God. He is God in every way there is. He bears all the characteristics of God. He holds all the rights and privileges of God. So it’s that his intrinsic nature, everything about him, is the polar opposite of a human being.

The idea that true God and true man could be one Being defies logic. Which is he - eternal or mortal? - omnipotent or humanly strong? - all-knowing or teachable? It cannot be both. And yet it is! It must be. It is a necessity. Since the children share flesh and blood, he also shared the same flesh and blood. God must make it so. And in baby Jesus, we see a miracle - God in human flesh.

Why would our Substitute have to be both? Why couldn’t he be just a man or just God? Well, remember that he is your Substitute. He has to take your place! As God alone, he cannot take our place – we are his creation. He must be a man so that he is under the same expectations God has for us and all mankind. He has to be God, however, so that he can live the perfect life we all need.

Only as God can he be born holy as we must be. Only as God can he keep everything contained in God’s commands in perfect love. Only as God will his one single life be sufficient to give life to every human being. As the writer of Hebrews explains, that is only half of the problem, only one part of the reason he has to be both God and man to be our Substitute.

It is all well and good that we have in our possession the perfect life God demands of the heaven-bound. Unresolved are the consequences of the sinful life it replaces. We are born as sinners - descendants of Adam. We live sinful lives - and the wages of sin is death. When we chose to sin, we brought the just punishment for sin upon ourselves. In fact, we began to suffer those penalties immediately.

Right from our conception and birth we were spiritually dead. We were already cut off from the total love of God. We are not overly aware of it because we do experience some of his love and we do not know what it’s like to experience it all. We do not know what we’re missing. But we live, even now, in the condition of death, cut off from the entirety of his love.

Our lifetimes are our opportunity to restore needed perfection. It is our only chance. If we do not do it now, our physical deaths will be the beginning of absolute death. We will be completely cut off from all of God’s love in what can only be called hell. This death sentence still clings to us. We need a Substitute to remove it from us. And Jesus is it!

Since the children share flesh and blood, he also shared the same flesh and
blood, so that through death he could destroy the one who had the power of death (that is, the devil) and free those who were held in slavery all their lives by the fear of death.

Again, we see the necessity for the Substitute to be both God and man. God does not die, God cannot die - and our Substitute must. So he must be a man. But the life of one human being is sufficient payment only for the life of one other human being - no more. So, our Substitute must be God so that his single life atones for the lives of all mankind. Only in that way can we be freed from the devil and the power of death.

For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Thus, our Substitute is the perfect and complete replacement we need. But just because his substitution for us is complete and eternal life is ours, does not mean that he stops working for us.

There are after-effects that continue to bless us! He had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God. Because our Substitute is like us, he understands us. He can represent us to the Lord, whom he perfectly understands, as well. He can serve in the role of high priest. He can bring our prayers and our needs to the throne of God.

He can express our needs in ways that only he, as our Substitute, can. He is then able to come back to us with the Lord’s answer to our prayer and make it work for our ultimate good. In a similar fashion because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. When the temptations of life threaten us, we can go to him for his help. As man, he understands the nature of temptation – he has already endured it himself. And as God, he knows how to defeat temptation and helps us do the same.

This is truly the best thing you got this Christmas – a Substitute unlike any other. You received a Substitute who lived and died for you, a Substitute who continues to live to keep you with him forever. What a great Christmas it has been! May we always enjoy God’s greatest gift to us. Amen.

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