

The Midweek Podcast:

Heaven and Earth: Hebrews 9:11-14 | July 28, 2025 | Pete Hammett + Tony San Nicolas

Pete Hammett

Well, hello everyone. I have the honor of sharing on Hebrews 9:11-14. So let's read these verses to begin with.

¹¹ But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) ¹² he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. ¹³ For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, ¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our^[c] conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

Amen. I'm curious, how often do you say to someone, how are you doing? Now my wife is from New York, Staten Island specifically, and New Yorkers have a really distinct way of asking, how are you doing? This was made famous by Joey on Friends. How you doing? We hang out with my wife's family from New York, you get that a lot. How you doing? I like that.

You know, we use this phrase a great deal often in passing, sometimes as a way of saying, hello. And I have found myself saying, how you doing, as I walk past somebody? I wonder what I would do if that person said, well, not so great. Would I interrupt my plans and stop and visit with the person, learn what was going on in their life? Would I spend any time with them and pray?

When done sincerely, when asking somebody how they're doing, that's not only kind, but it's critical. Early in my career, I worked for the company that made spacesuits. And I watched with great interest whenever an astronaut was on a spacewalk. Watching spacewalks, I learned that that question, how are you doing, is an incomplete question. A fuller question is how are you doing according to who and compared to what.

When Houston asks an astronaut how they're doing on a spacewalk, the question doesn't end there. Houston will ask the other astronauts around to put their eyes on their colleague and comment on how they're doing. And Houston will also monitor the astronaut's vitals, their heart rate, their respiration, and they'll compare their vitals to the baseline. How are you doing, according to who, and compared to what?

As often as we might ask someone, "How are you doing?", we might likewise turn that question around and ask, well, how am I doing? And here again, when we ask that question rightly, the insights we gain can really be of great benefit. But how do we rightly ask, how am I doing? Well, in our verses in Hebrews, we find the very heart, the spiritual equivalent of a fuller question, that question of how am I doing? The fuller question is, how am I doing according to God and compared to how he would call me to walk with him? And our conscience is God's way of keeping us spiritually in check.

That Greek word for conscience translates really into like a moral awareness or moral grounding and it refers to the internal reaction when our words and deeds either conform to or are contrary to a standard of right and wrong. Twice in Hebrews 9, the writer draws our attention to our conscience. In fact, depending on the translation you use, the New Testament mentions conscience more than two dozen times. It's been said that Hebrews is the most "Old Testament" book in the New Testament. And in chapter 9, we're reminded of the structure of worship in the First Covenant. Pastor Michael spoke about this in the last podcast. And while worship in the First Covenant was good, it was imperfect, as we see in verse 9. According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper. Under the first covenant, sacrifices were made to atone for sins, sins the people knew they committed and sins they didn't really know they had done. They called those unintentional sins. However, the sacrifices did not clear the conscience of the worshiper.

That is when the worshiper asked, "how am I doing?" and their conscience replied, well, so-so. Why is this? Why did the sacrifices under the first covenant not clear the worshiper's conscience? Because the sacrifice was imperfect. The sacrifice had to be done often and had to be done on the behalf of others. Jews were not able to approach God themselves. But now the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ provides an atonement once and for all. And I love that phrase, once and for all. Christ's perfect sacrifice occurred just one time and was for all of us. And we see in Hebrews 9, Christ's perfect sacrifice purifies our conscience from dead works to serve a living God. And yet, for some believers, there's a real struggle to embrace God's gift of grace and a purified conscience. For some, past sins and ongoing struggles hang like a dark cloud. And I'm going to circle back to that in just a moment. But I

want to highlight another source that often troubles our conscience. This is well-meaning but misguided criticism from fellow believers.

Asking how I'm doing is good. But there should be a warning sign for those who are compelled to tell a fellow believer in Christ how they're doing. Before we offer critique to someone, we need to ensure we have the mind and heart of Christ. To be sure, giving and receiving feedback is incredibly valuable and important. And I've spent the better part of my professional life coaching business leaders on how to give and receive feedback. In my opinion, learning how to ask for and how to provide feedback is a skill everyone would do well to learn.

For a lot of years, I was the head of HR for a large energy firm, and I can tell you with great certainty that most of the issues that come into HR could have been resolved if people simply talked with one another. Way too often, however, folks are more focused on expressing their personal beliefs and experiences than learning the heart and motives of their colleague. Too often, when we're disappointed or frustrated with the words or actions of others, we tell a story in our minds that assumes emotives and passes judgment. And with that story smartly crafted, we make a direct line to the person to offer our criticism, long before we seek God's wisdom and guidance. Rather than offer encouragement, we pronounce judgment. I like [Philip Yancy's book on prayer](#), and he illustrates this really, really well. Several examples of very poor encouragers. He relays a story of his friend Claudia, who had been diagnosed with Hodgkin's and only given a 50 % chance of surviving. Claudia and her husband John were both strong Christians, but as the treatments began to take their toll, the couple's faith became strained. While Claudia longed for visitors who would encourage her faith, those who came really offered little comfort. In the Yancy account, we can find examples of well-meaning Christians who either lack the gift of encouragement or really misunderstood how to exercise that gift.

Think about this. Think about how you would feel if you got the following advice from people who stood along your bedside. A church leader came to Claudia and suggested that she needed to learn what God was trying to teach her, going on to say somewhere you must have stepped out of God's will because these things just don't happen. God uses circumstances to warn us and punish us, so what's God telling you? Or how would you respond if a church member you hardly knew showed up as a halftime cheerleader with flowers and songs and happy psalms? Claudia had a friend come and share with her difficult things and the visitor would, when Claudia began to say, here's what's really going on, the visitor would change it to something lighthearted and cheerful. And then after short time, the visitor left and never came back.

Here's another one. Claudia had a visitor who was so confident that faith would help Claudia be healed and express thoughts like this. Sickness is never God's will. With faith, you can move mountains. Just name your promise and claim it. Clearly the advice that people gave Claudia was of no comfort.

So one of two things was either at play, either Claudia was unable or unwilling to hear God's message, or the other thing that might have been going on was none of the advice that was offered was from God, but from people's opinion. And even if we were to suppose that God was speaking to Claudia from one of her visitors, then the question is, well, which one? Because not every piece of advice could have been from God.

You know, I would never want to dissuade someone from bringing a word of encouragement to a brother or sister in need. Nor would I ever want to hinder someone from offering helpful, God-centered admonition. Clearly, Nathan was led by God to confront David of his sin. What I would hope for and what I would want to do for myself is to make sure the advice I offer is from God's heart and not my opinion.

My pastor from some years back offered this poignant prayer after receiving very hurtful criticism because the church was introducing a contemporary worship service. And the pastor's prayer was, "Lord, deliver us from well-meaning but spirit-lacking Christians." Yeah.

Well, if you've done any level of ministry in the work, you've likely been the recipient of unwelcome or hurtful or maybe even spiteful criticism. I can tell you from my experience, the greatest hurt I've ever had has come from the words of a believer. But brothers and sisters, it should not be this way. For the longest time as I served in various roles in church leadership, I often asked myself and others, how was church this Sunday? By God's mercy and grace, a better question has surfaced for me. Was God glorified and what his word handled rightly? Any other critique around church is a matter of opinion and preference. Not that opinion and preference is unimportant. It's just not the first thing we should do. Our first question should always be, was God glorified and what was his word handled rightly?

So let me come back and close with that first point I was making. What do you do? What do we do when we're overwhelmed by past sins, when we struggle to embrace God's gift of grace and a purified conscience? If you struggle here, please know that you're not alone. Your struggle happens to many of us. I can at times struggle myself, and then I'm drawn to the words of the hymn, "Amazing Love, How Can It Be, That Thou My God Should Die For Me."

When we struggle to embrace God's grace, we could reflect on three anchors. The first one, remember the forgotten. When you're haunted by past sins, sins you've already laid at the foot of the cross, remember that God has forgotten those sins. It's like if you're asking God to re-forgive a sin he's already forgiven, God says back to you, have no idea what you're talking about because he's clearly forgotten. We see this in chapter 8 of Hebrews when God says, I will be merciful towards their iniquities and remember their sins no more.

Remember this likewise, we've exchanged a ritual for a relationship. Under the first covenant, sins were forgiven through a ritual and they were facilitated by a priest. We couldn't approach God directly, but in the new covenant, we've exchanged this ritual for a relationship. Through the sacrifice of Christ, we now have a direct relationship with God. We can approach God directly. And this was made so clearly in Matthew 27 in verses 50 and 51 when the apostle describes what took place immediately after Christ died on the cross. "And Jesus cried out with a loud voice and again yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain was separated in two from top to bottom." That curtain that was in the temple that separated the holy place has been torn and we now, because of the work of Christ, can approach God directly.

And then finally, remember we have an eternal redemption. Here again, Roman reminds us that nothing can separate us from the love of God. "For I am sure that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God and Christ Jesus our Lord." There's a terrific song by Chris Rice called ["Untitled Hymn"](#) and it captures our walk with Christ and I'm gonna try to sing for you the first two the first two verses.

So check us out, right?

"Weak and wounded sinner, lost and left to die. raise your head, for love has passed you by. Come to Jesus, come to Jesus, come to Jesus and live. Now your burden's lifted and carried far away And precious blood has washed away the stain So sing to Jesus, sing to Jesus, sing to Jesus and live."

If you've not heard that song, I would really encourage you to get it. So let me just close in prayer.

"Father, we thank you that through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ, our conscience has been purified. And we can now approach you directly as the Lord God Almighty, our Heavenly Father. Thank you. Amen."

Pete Hammit and Tony San Nicolas Discussion (Transcript Not Available)