

The Blood that Cleanses
Hebrews 9:11–14
March 3, 2024

I don't quote Shakespeare often, for a number of reasons. However, I spent a little time recently watching some young people put on the play *Macbeth*. I bring all this up because of two scenes in that particular play. If you don't remember the broad strokes of that tale, the title character violently disposes of King Duncan. The first scene I mention is not long after Duncan's death, when Macbeth says, "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather . . . (make) the green one red." In his mind, there's not enough water in the ocean to wash him. Instead, his hands would stain the sea. That's Act 2, scene 2. In that scene Lady Macbeth shames him, calling him weak. She too had been part of that sinister plot. And if you skip over to Act 5, scene 1, you find her with a doctor. When he shows up, he happens to see Lady Macbeth sleepwalking, rubbing her hands together obsessively, and saying, "Out, . . . spot! Out, I say! . . . Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand." After seeing her in that frenzied state, the doctor says, "Unnatural deeds do breed unnatural troubles. Infected minds to their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets. More needs she the divine than the physician."¹

With this language, archaic or not, what is Shakespeare describing? Something *everyone*—including four-year-olds—is familiar with: a guilty conscience. The four-year-old takes a cookie when mom's not looking. The fourteen-year-old did what he or she shouldn't have. The forty-year-old has a good bit more past to reckon with.

We might *not* have done the heinous act Macbeth did, but we're familiar with carrying guilt to our deaf pillows. We might not furiously rub our hands together, but we know what it means to feel unclean. Because we know what it means to be guilty.

And I don't mean *only* the church. The world knows this too, though they have their ways of coping. It's a smidge harder to ponder your guilt or filth when you're constantly distracted by living in someone else's story, via film or feed.² Because though the world's mechanisms might momentarily suppress, we know there's an aspect of us that water just can't cleanse.

The book of Hebrews tells us what can. Or, *who* can.

We'll study this text by asking three questions. Maybe, at first, they won't seem to address guilt, a guilty conscience, or any sense of defilement. But, Lord willing, eventually it will become clear. The first question is this:

1. Where did Jesus enter? (vv. 11–12)

The author introduced the earthly tabernacle in chapter 8. He did so, in part, to tell us that there's a true tabernacle the earthly one pointed to, the earthly being a copy and a shadow (8:5). Then, in chapter 9 the author gives more detail concerning the copy. In it were the lampstand and the table and the sacred bread and the altar and the ark and Aaron's rod and the tables of the covenant and the cherubim of glory and the mercy seat (9:2–5). And of course, there's more. But, at the end of that description, in case we think he *doesn't* know more than a list, *or* that he's exhausted the topic in a few verses, he writes in verse 5: **but of these things we cannot now speak in detail.** On *this*, the author has got a good bit more in the reservoir.

¹ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 5, scene 1.

² If AT&T were to go out for more than a few hours, we might see more than a few frazzled Lady Macbeths.

However, as best I can tell, Hebrews doesn't do rabbit trails. He's making a case. So, once he's described the *place* itself—helping us to place *ourselves*, visualize the locale—he begins to describe the function—what *happened* in that place (vv. 6–7). Priests would continually enter the outer tabernacle, **performing the divine worship**, passing through the first veil into the holy place to maintain the incense, freshen the bread, etc. We might say that describes the *ongoing* function within the tabernacle.

Then in verse 7, he moves from that continual action to describe something annual, something *key* to understanding today's passage. Verse 7: **But into the second** (meaning through the second veil) **only the high priest enters once a year, not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance.**

Verse 7 is a brief description of the Day of Atonement, that holiest of Israelite days outlined in Leviticus 16. As we've said, on this *one* day a year, *one* man—the High Priest—entered into the Most Holy Place (the Holy of Holies). Leviticus 16 gave instructions concerning *how* he was to enter, but also *why* he did, that is, in order to make atonement **for the people** (Lev. 16:15). He'd make this atonement by slaying a goat and sprinkling its blood over and in front of the mercy seat (Lev. 16:15). Why? Leviticus 16:16 answers: **Because of the impurities of the sons of Israel and because of their transgressions in regard to all their sins.**

That's what verse 7 of our text says as well. In *this* place—the earthly tabernacle—on *that* day—the Day of Atonement—the high priest entered the Most Holy Place and did *that*.

So, to grasp the depths of our short passage today, we need to not only fly a couple thousand miles to the east, and not only rewind a few thousand years to the Ancient Near East, we need to fix our minds on a particular person that entered a particular room on a particular day.

We know that this Day of Atonement is still in the author's mind, in part, because of what he writes in verse 11. After describing the *place*, and what happened *in* that place, he *then* writes, **But when Christ appeared as a high priest.** At this point in Hebrews, we're *not* still thinking of Aaron, nor his progeny, we're considering the Melchizedekian Priest of Hebrews 7.

When *He* appeared, where did *He* enter? Verse 11: **But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation.**

We continue to pile up the contrasts. This *isn't* the Levitical high priest that enters. And what He enters *isn't* the earthly tabernacle. He enters **through the greater and more perfect tabernacle.** Which is what chapter 8 already hinted at, that He's serving as **a minister in the sanctuary and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man** (8:2). That last phrase is reiterated here. This greater and more perfect tabernacle, v. 11, is **not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation.**

Maybe you recall Acts 7 when Stephen declares, **The Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands** (Acts 7:48). Or Acts 17 when Paul speaks in Athens, **The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands** (Acts 17:24).

Where did He enter? What is the greater and more perfect tabernacle? Later in chapter 9 the author answers clearly, in 9:24: **For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us.** And that's what verse 12 means when it says,³ **and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all.**

³ In fact, the main clause of verses 11 and 12 is "Christ entered the holy place." See Barry Joslin, "Christ Bore the Sins of Many: Substitution and the Atonement in Hebrews," in *SBJT*, (Summer 2007), 85.

The earthly tabernacle, Leviticus 16's Holy Place, and the Most Holy Place, were all copies and shadows, patterns of something else. He doesn't dwell in houses made by human hands. Heaven is His throne (Isaiah 66:1; Acts 7:49). And *that's* where Christ is. That's *where* He's entered. Through the veil He took His place, seated and ruling at the right hand of the Father.

Why does it matter *where* He is? We'll talk about the Ascension and session more Wednesday night, but remember what Jesus told His followers in John 16: **I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away** (John 16:7). How did the disciples respond to that notion? They had sorrow in their hearts. Nonetheless, He doubled down. It's to your advantage that I leave, He says.

We'll see some of these advantages under the third point, but I note here that if we desire to understand the glory of what Christ has done in the Gospels, and what Hebrews is describing, we would do well to consider not only His birth, not only His life, not only His death, not only His resurrection, but also His ascension. We miss something of what He's done when we decide to pick and choose from that list.

Where He entered, where He is *now*, matters.

As does *how* He arrived.

2. How did He enter? (vv. 11–14)

Verse 12: **and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place.**

In verse 12 the author mentions a couple of the animals that were part of the sacrificial system. In verse 13 he mentions a couple more. It's important to say that there isn't a single chapter in the Old Testament, nor a single animal, nor a single sacrifice, that *by itself* pictures or communicates *all* that was to come. That's one reason why there's more than one chapter in the Old Testament. That's why there's more than one ritual in the sacrificial system. Each conveys a different aspect, portrays yet another angle. And *together* they collectively reveal *something* of what was to come.⁴

We see this even on the Day of Atonement. On that day, there were *two* goats involved. As we read earlier, **because of the impurities of the sons of Israel and because of their transgressions in regard to all their sins** (Lev. 16:16), the *first* goat would be slain. What would this accomplish? The beginning of that verse answers. In doing this, **He shall make atonement for the holy place.**

So that he might enter, blood had to be brought. It's worth being reminded that the Day of Atonement ritual is set in the context of averting God's wrath.⁵ If Aaron doesn't do *each* step as he'd been carefully instructed, like Nadab and Abihu he himself will die (Lev. 16:2). The consequences for the nation would be no less dire. With that in mind, it's also worth pointing out that in *all* these sacrifices, "blood" isn't a skinned knee. Blood meant death. That first goat wasn't walking away. So, to bring those two sentences together, for Aaron to escape death, something else wouldn't. I say all *that* to say that substitution is at the very heart of the entire sacrificial system.⁶ It's not blood on the doorposts in Leviticus, but the Passover principle is there.

We see that in the first goat. And we see *another* aspect of substitution in the second goat, the scapegoat. Aaron was instructed to lay both hands on this goat's head, and then to confess *over* it the iniquities of God's people, and then send that goat away. Miles and miles into the wilderness the goat would go, never to be seen again, symbolically carrying away the sins of the people.

⁴ Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 296; William Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 239; Tom Schreiner, *Hebrews*, EBTC, 272

⁵ Joslin, 76.

⁶ Joslin, 75.

As I mentioned above, it's the sacrifices *together* that collectively reveal what's to come. In fact, we'd be wise *not* to drive too strong a wedge between the two goats. In Leviticus 16:5, they are described as a sin offering in the *singular*. Together, they communicate. There's cleansing, wrath appeasing, and removal. The blood of the first goat shows us the *means* and the sending away of the second goat shows us the effects.⁷

Recall the promise of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31, just quoted in chapter 8: **For I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more** (8:12).

Now that we've been reminded of those details concerning the Day of Atonement, and *how* the Israelite High Priest might enter the holy place, we're better able to grasp what verse 12 shows us: **and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place.**

Again, to speak of blood in this context—in a sacrificial context—is to speak of death.

I mentioned a couple weeks back a conclusion I came to at the close of Luke's Gospel. I remember wondering as we were preaching through it why that Gospel account included *so many* miracles. Why did the Gospel writer need to include five versions of the same kind of story, showing over and over again Christ's power over the *physical* realm? Further, why did he also include five to ten versions of the same kind of story, showing Christ's power over the *spiritual* realm?

When we arrived at the end of that Gospel, the conclusion I came to is that once we've heard story after story of His sovereign might—calming storms, multiplying bread, raising young children, saving and then saving and then saving again—that when He *then* chooses *not* to save Himself it tells us something quite profound. By that point, we're sure: He *can* deliver, easily. And yet, in *this* case, He doesn't.⁸

The scope of the book helped us better grasp something that came later.

If we were to apply a similar line of thinking here, we might better discover some of the reason the book of Hebrews has spent *so much* time detailing and explaining the Person of the Son. The author of Hebrews hasn't merely said one or two things to describe Him. He's the radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of His nature (1:3). He's better than the angels (1:4). Though everything else might wear out like a garment, He remains (1:11). He, though God Himself (1:8), was made lower than the angels (2:9), made like His brethren (2:17). This better Adam is also a better Moses, worthy of more glory (3:3). Though He was tempted, He was without sin (4:15). In fact, during the days of His flesh He prayed fervently. His prayers were heard because of His reverent piety (5:7). In the days of His flesh He was made perfect (5:9). He's a better priest, a priest forever, according to a better order (7:1–17). He's holy, innocent, undefiled, and separated from sinners (7:26).

That's *some* of who He is. As we've considered Him, who He is, the author's prepared us for this. It's *that* blood—*His* blood—that was spilt. The better High Priest entered the true tabernacle through a better sacrifice: Himself. Verse 12: **Through His own blood, He entered the Holy Place.**

Verse 13 goes on to describe this self-offering: **For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a red heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ.** The "how much more," language is an argument from the lesser to the greater. If the blood of goats and bulls could do *that*. . . Again, why spend so much time detailing the holiness, perfection, and innocence of this High Priest? Because the demands of the Old Testament sacrificial system meant that *any* offering needed to be spotless.

⁷ Joslin, 79.

⁸ And in *not* saving Himself, He was saving others. See Don Carson's *Scandalous*.

The goat offered in Leviticus 16 wasn't lame. Nor was the red heifer in the book of Numbers. They were to be, externally, flawless.

But what's the argument of Hebrews been? Though tempted, repeatedly, without fail, He never failed. He depended upon the Father perfectly, always. And His perfection wasn't merely external, like that of goat or a bull, His perfection is that which is *within*. Verse 13 says as much: **For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a red heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered Himself without blemish to God.**

The only One that *didn't* earn death died. One man explains the significance, "Just as the heinousness of a sin is determined in part by the dignity of the person sinned against, so also the severity of a punishment is determined in part by the dignity of the one punished."⁹

He entered the true tabernacle, the greater and more perfect one—where God Himself dwells—and He did so **through His own blood.**

3. What did His entering accomplish? (vv. 11–14)

Verse 11 hints at these effects, writing, **But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come.** *Where* He entered, and *how* He entered, brought about good for His people. Verse 12 tells us one of those good things: **He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.** God redeemed a people—*purchased* them—by the death of His Son. His blood inaugurated the New Covenant. This is why, and how, God might be merciful to our iniquities. This is why, and how, He might remember our sins no more. He redeemed. In doing so, He delivered from bondage.¹⁰

The author of Hebrews describes this redemption as *eternal*. How might that be? Because, unlike the former priests, or the repeated sacrifices, He, v. 12, **entered the holy place once for all.**

The instructions for the Day of Atonement in Leviticus ended with these words, **And this shall be a statute forever for you, that atonement may be made for the people of Israel once in the year because of all their sins** (Lev. 16:34). In short, the Israelites were told they would *never* have a good year. The next year, and the next, the high priest *alone* would need to enter through the veil, into the Most Holy Place, to make atonement for sins.

We don't live under that covenant, marked by "again and again." He entered. And He entered **once for all**, obtaining a redemption that's eternal.

If He's delivered us from bondage, and done so *forever*, what effect might this have on us? Hear the lesser to greater argument again. Verse 13: **For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh.** Note the emphasis on cleansing that which can be seen, that which we might call *external*. These sacrifices did something, certainly, but primarily they removed ceremonial uncleanness.¹¹ The ESV translates this as the purification of the flesh. Those sacrifices had the power to cleanse one from ritual defilement, to affect an *external* purification.¹² But that's as far as it went. It didn't write on minds, or cleanse hearts.

That's what *that* blood could do. Now hear the lesser to great argument a final time. **For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through**

⁹ Steve Jeffery, *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, 267.

¹⁰ Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 224.

¹¹ Schreiner, 369.

¹² Leon Morris, *Hebrews/James*, EBC, 86.

the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works.

This is why we consider the birth, the perfect life, the substitutionary death, the victorious resurrection, and the ascension and ongoing intercession of the risen Christ on our behalf. Because what you believe about *where* He is, what He did *before* He went there, and what He is doing *now*, very well might determine the guilt you carry with you.

Did He, like that scapegoat, take upon Himself *my* sin, and carry it away, never to be seen again? Can His unblemished blood, *His* death in *my* place, cleanse, even within? Did He enter the true holy place, doing so once for all? Is *my* standing before God determined by the One sitting at His right hand?

A “yes” to those questions can deliver from guilt. In John’s Gospel, as you recall, when Jesus says He’s leaving, the eleven are filled with sorrow. They can’t see how this could possibly be a good plan. But, at the end of Luke’s Gospel, *when* He leaves—when they see *where* He’s gone and what He’s gone to do—they worship. Now they were certain it was to their advantage. And then, in Acts, they tell the world who He is, *where* He is, what He’s done, what He’s *doing*, and what He will do.

The gospel frees us. I don’t ever need to go to a priest, have him tell me I’m forgiven. The Priest *I have* entered *the* Holy Place. Nor do I need to make a sacrifice, work a little harder next time. My Priest offered Himself and entered the Holy Place **once for all**. I don’t have to trust my past week in order to be welcomed by God. God is pleased with what His Son did on my behalf. His Son’s blood cleansed. And it did so within.

And with a cleansed conscience, what can I do? I can do, *rightly*, what the end of verse 14 describes. The blood of Christ can cleanse my conscience from dead works **to serve the living God**. The author didn’t have to say **living**, but He’s careful to remind us that though blood was spilt, the throne of God is ever-occupied. Hebrews 1:3: **When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.** Or Hebrews 8:1: **we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens.**

We serve the One that bled, died, and yet lives. Have you struggled to serve God, whether by delighting in worship or by loving another? Or *when* you do so, have you done so out of guilt? Be freed. Let these gospel truths fuel obedience. Serve because you’ve been cleansed.

Conclusion

Macbeth can’t wash the blood off his hands. Lady Macbeth can’t rid her nostrils of the stench. Do you always seem to know the burden of a guilty conscience? Are you carrying it today? If so, hear Isaac Watts:

Not all the blood of beasts,
On Jewish altars slain,
Could give the guilty conscience peace,
Or wash away its stain.
But Christ, the heavenly lamb,
Takes all our sins away;
A sacrifice of nobler name,
And richer blood than they.¹³

Trust the finished work of Christ—His **once for all**—on your behalf.

¹³ Isaac Watts, *Not All the Blood of Beasts*