

On Our Behalf Hebrews 9:23-28

When children are young, parental antennas of protection are constantly raised and rightly so. Their judgments concerning what is dangerous and safe haven't been sharpened, so we quickly learn the skill of attention dexterity. They might not be aware of their surroundings, but you—especially you mothers accused of having eyes in the back of your head—you stay on high alert. Yet, sometimes watching with awareness is not enough. That thing happened in the grocery store that you don't want them to see or hear, so you cover their eyes or muffle their ears. If they see that, they'll have nightmares. If they hear that, they'll repeat it in Sunday School. They lack discernment and self-control. In sum, they naturally lack maturity.

When we consider these recently converted Jews to whom the author of Hebrews writes, we know from chapter six that they lacked *spiritual* maturity. With their history, they possessed a framework for seeing things rightly, but for various reasons the path of the past and their old way of life kept beckoning.¹ The gospel should have been the new lens through which they viewed the old realities. And back peddling from grace was more than a misappropriation of the body of truth they confessed, it was a move away from the center.² To be more specific, and we've said this a few times in this series, Jesus Himself is that center.³

I try to imagine the intense, persuasive arguments from various Jewish opponents of the gospel, being openly shamed for betraying the God of their fathers, and families being ripped apart because someone dared believe in Jesus as the Christ. Persecutions and pressures have a way of knocking people from their central bearings. This ancient pastor continues to explain how the frequency of their trust and confidence needed to be locked into Jesus. He's not simply saying, "Christ is better," but he's been sewing together various angles and arguments of why He is so. The stitching continues here at the end of Hebrews 9.

One hue running through the whole of Hebrews has been captured through the music and passages chosen for today's service—the great love of God. That reality which is deep and vast as the ocean. Words like *for us* in verse 24 help make the case for such a theme. The presentation of this kind of Person, with such the mixture of astounding supernatural ability, unmatched godly instruction, and surprising kindness to the lowest—He willingly stepped into death *for us*. No doubt this is what these newcomers to the faith needed to grasp. With incomparable love for them, Christ did the work impossible for them to do, for us to do. But what Christ did, past tense, is only one of three tenses we'll discover in this text. Each given to build assurance and fuel our worship. Each argued together are meant rouse our affections, reform our motives, recalibrate our actions, and become the source of our highest confidence.

At this point in Hebrews, I don't think we could deny that the author has attempted (and surely prayed) to instill said affection, reformation, and confidence. He has taken them through familiar territory to show precisely how it was Christ all along who would bring to full bloom the glory of

¹ Sigurd Grindheim, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 457.

² They were encouraged to move on from this immaturity in Hebrews 6:1.

³ Ephesians 4:11–13, "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

God's wisdom. The personalities around the priesthood, the place of the priesthood, and the prescriptions for the priesthood conveyed through the Mosaic Law were insufficient to affect being saved to the uttermost,⁴ but God nonetheless gave them. And as is often the case with our LORD, He didn't just cut to the chase, but He ordained centuries of practicing the commands and ordinances regarding the priesthood. And He did so that when the gospel call rang out in saving might in the fullness of time, that a remnant among the Jews might have a few "Oh, that's why!" moments. They were given a framework for seeing things rightly through gospel lenses.⁵ And, by the Spirit's help, Gentiles might also enter these unfamiliar scenes to glimpse with wonder the glory of our text's subject.

I. What Christ is doing for us now

²³ *Therefore it was necessary for the copies of the things in the heavens to be cleansed with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.* The vocabulary has shifted, though *covenant* and *blood* are bound up in the word *copies*. They were *copies of things in the heavens*. According to verses 15-22, under the old covenant, the tent, the vessels, the mercy seat, and the people themselves were purified by the sprinkling of blood. That is, God accepted the lifeblood of carefully chosen animals on the Day of Atonement, in the Most Holy Place, offered by a consecrated sinner-priest.⁶ It was the prescribed way for mercy to be shown. These practices were *necessary*, cleansing what was earthly and temporary, allowing the priest access to God's presence without deadly consequences as he represented the people and all their wickedness.

But these were mere copies. The author writes *but the heavenly things themselves*, they required *better sacrifices than these*. Again, the effect of animal blood didn't reach down into the real area where the filth thrived—the human heart, guilty of sin, beating down the conscience. Better was needed. But why the plural, *better sacrifices*? The author has labored to tell us that Christ offered up Himself up once for all time, even in our passage the same is conveyed. Why *sacrifices*? The best rendering I could come to terms with on why the author exerts the plural usage here is A.W. Pink's reflections. He states,

“Under the law there were five chief offerings appointed: the burnt offering, the meal offering, the peace offering, the sin offering, and the trespass offering, and in Christ's great sacrifice we have the antitype of all five, and hence His has [met their demands, thus] His has superseded them...His sacrifice [applied to each kind of offering] not only confirmed the significance, virtue, and benefits of all other sacrifices, but exceeded [them all] in dignity, design, and efficacy.”

Remember what Paul wrote to the Galatian church about Christ? “*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law...*”⁷ His one sacrifice answered the Mosaic Law and swallowed up all other sacrifices, fulfilling the types even in His death.

⁴ Shout out to Hebrews 7:25.

⁵ Sigurd Grindheim, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 457.

⁶ Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 415.

⁷ Galatians 4:4

Further, what are these *heavenly things* themselves that needed what was better? I'm not quite sure, and neither are the host of commentators and scholars I sought out for help. Perhaps it's this: If there was to be purification for sins, the bringing of many sons to glory, the delivery from sin's slavery, the granting of eternal rest, remembering sins no more, the cleansing of consciences, and righteous standing before God—maybe these are the *heavenly things* requiring a superior sacrifice—and if they are to be realities, they needed a more substantial basis on which to be grounded. What happened in that tent 3,500 years ago with Moses and Israel takes its place in the storyline of God's saving arm, but these (sin's purification, delivery from sin's slavery, etc.) are the distinguishable shouts, *heavenly things*, or God-ordained aspects *themselves* which required something better to be brought to fruition.

So, how exactly were those animal sacrifices appointed under the law exceeded in worth and effectiveness? 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.* Now we're squarely on the corner of brass and tax.

I have several world maps. The newest ones give more information than most people have time to explore—oceanic cables, happiness scores of various countries, and the migration of money movements to name a few.⁸ But if I want to traverse the coastal city of Lomé in the country of Togo on the African continent, that map could definitely serve as a kind of guide. I would need something more to actually arrive in Lomé—time, money, desire, and a means to get there. I also own an old ship with sails. It's sitting in my office, on my bookshelf. That hand-held ship would do nothing to help with my newfound aim at going to Lomé. Thus, neither the map nor the ship have what it takes to actually place me in Togo. They are copies that offer something of value. And part of their value is that they would drive me to those central things truly needed to visit Togo if I were indeed intent on going.

If we're to stand before God one day, copies won't do it. Nothing *made with* human *hands*, generated by human intellect, schemed by collected human wisdom, could get me all the way into the holiest place. But Christ went into *heaven itself*, the dwelling of His holy Father. To do what? To present the superior quality of His sacrifice in a superior sanctuary.⁹ When we think of that place called Golgotha, the hilly place just outside of Jerusalem, it's the place human eyes witnessed crucifixions. One crucifixion has gained the acclaim of nations. The Gospel writers documented that event four times in four Gospels, which speaks to the centrality of it. But this text uncloaks something beyond the Gospel accounts, something both highly personal and communal.

Christ entered *heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us.* Notice this present tense action—this appearing is a right-now-event. As I preach, as you sit, and as the cars buzz by South Woods on their way to do all manner of things this morning, Jesus is in God's face (if you will) *for us*, for all who are clinging to Christ by faith. This verb *appear* is where we get our English word “emphasis.”¹⁰ In most of its occurrences in the New Testament it carries the idea of giving evidence, as in a courtroom.¹¹ This appearing, then, is not a post-resurrection, casual catch-up session for the Father and the Son. Just as the flawed high priests would have exerted a

⁸ National Geographic's Atlas of the World: 11th Edition, 2019.

⁹ Grindheim, 457

¹⁰ The word *emphanizō* means to show forth.

¹¹ I noticed that four of the ten usages were tied to Paul's legal issues with the Roman government, Acts 23-25 specifically.

heightened sense of God's holiness and the task at hand, Jesus is bringing His case before the Father for our eternal "redemption and release."¹² He is justifying our status before a just God, right now, right in the middle of whatever you have going on in your life. You've sinned. Your heart condemns you. You have a guilty conscience. You fall and plead for mercy, and it's this Jesus Christ, the great Advocate with the Father, who is currently emphasizing His accomplishments applied to your insufficient life.¹³ This sermon-letter was meant to awaken those tempted to retreat from the gospel, and it's meant to do that today. These Jewish converts were tempted to bank their hope on the Mosaic and prophetic days gone by. But their hope and ours has presented a superior work that God has promised to eternally honor.

He is appearing this day, and He is noticed. His lock-tight case is being heard by the Just Judge of all the earth. And that's true because as the Mediator, He understood what it took to make said case before the Father.

II. What Christ did for us then

Listen to the flow again, 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;* ²⁵ *nor was it that He would offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the holy place year by year with blood that is not his own.* ²⁶ *Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world...* The Spirit here reinforces the truth we covered in chapter 7. The need for going into the tabernacle's inner sanctum *often*, or *year by year*, revealed its woeful deficiency along with its inferiority. He'll triple down on this point at the beginning of chapter 10, but notice how he reasons, purposefully posing the irrational in verse 26. If Christ's priesthood functioned like the Levitical priesthood, then as a *consequence* coined in the absurd, *He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world*. We don't need to think too hard about the oddity of that notion. Christ coming to earth, offering Himself in death, rising to life, ascending to the throne of heaven, and repeating all of those unceasingly. One commentator summed it up understandably, "By transferring the idea of repetition from the sphere of animal sacrifices, where it is assumed, to the sphere of Christ's death, where it is absurd, the author indicates the superiority of Christ's sacrifice compared to all others."¹⁴ If there is no qualitative difference in the Melchizedekian priesthood and the Levitical one, then, to borrow from Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, we still have to reckon with our own sins.

In this same vein, the phrase at the end of verse 25, *blood that is not his own*, or *blood of another* as some translations render it, is telling. The idea is rooted in the same terms used to describe the strange fire that Nadab and Abihu offered before the LORD in Leviticus 10 and the foreign gods that Israel often intermingled with, expressed in Joshua 24.¹⁵ The very least this hints at is even though God ordained that the high priest make his yearly rounds into the Most Holy Place, what kept happening there did not fully satisfy God.

¹² O Zion, Haste by Mary Thomson

¹³ 1 John 2:1-2, "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." Etch this text into your mind, whatever it takes. It will help carry you home.

¹⁴ Craig Koester, *Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, 428.

¹⁵ Cockerill, 421.

In God's wisdom He ordains many things that aren't pleasing and satisfying to Himself. It's a larger discussion, but God's will of decree can run counter to His will of command. The disobedience of humans never means that God loses His grip on the wheel of providence. Joseph's brothers did him evil by selling him to a caravan of Ishmaelites, but through that unholy transaction God rescued a whole nation, and ultimately preserved a bloodline through which we have been rescued spiritually. Thus, the blood of bulls and goats, nor any of the other ancillary offerings could rightly or fully tend to our sin with finality. The apostle Peter knew of a better blood, one that we've come to treasure by grace, "...you were ransomed...with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot."¹⁶

Peter's evaluation is ours, and the conjunction of verse 26 leads into similar territory. The author contrasts the contrived situation of the previous verse with his confident assertion, ¹⁷**...but now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.** Other translations express this **consummation of the ages** as simply an echo of Hebrews 1:2, *in these last days*. We live in a time where we have the final word from God expressed in a defining act by God's Son. We're on the last lap of human history, and the whole course of it encircles this **manifested** One. He came into the world to do what none could do. The priesthood merely pointed to this destination: That the Heaven-sent, Bethlehem-born, Nazareth-raised Son of the Father put on our likeness to **put away sin**, to remove it, to abolish it. In fact, it could be His purpose statement in miniature, and is truly every ounce of our glory. Why did the Godhead agree to send the Son into this undeserving world? To put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. What deed might best highlight the glory of God and all of His diverse excellencies? Christ putting away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. How could a holy God ever be reconciled to an unholy me? By Christ putting away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. What would convey the stunning character of the love of God the clearest? Christ putting away sin by the sacrifice of Himself! What is the only hope when any of us come to die? That Christ put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. What can ensure my highest joy in this darkened world? That Christ put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. That's what He did. But He's not finished.

III. What Christ will do for us

²⁷ **And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment,**
²⁸ **so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him.** Notice how the pastor of Hebrews is centering the whole of history on this one act. We're living in the last epoch of time, **the consummation of the ages**. But notice the words **inasmuch** and **so**. They reveal a comparison between the whole of human experience and Christ; the common man on earth and the uncommon Man from heaven. At the appointed time, each of us will cease being physically alive. Part and parcel with the curse of the fall of our first parents, we will come once to die. Many bury this truth. Some think we're reincarnated to become other beings, even animals. Others attempt to escape the whole bit, but so the common man has found no loophole. The author expresses in verse 28 that Jesus comes to share in the same outcome. The Lord of history, of glory, of time and space, of angels, of every nation, of things in the deeps and of things in the highest heights, He breathes our air, then, at His own appointed time, ceases to do so! And an equally incredible truth is that His

¹⁶ I Peter 1:18-19

¹⁷ Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, 340.

death is not a result of sin's curse, but the demise of it! Christ came *once* to die that He might *bear the sins of many!*

Do you confess that you have sinned and are one who continues to sin? Can you honestly say that Christ has borne your sins? That He has put away your sin? That you trust that what He did can do that very thing? What Christ has accomplished in His death has made a way for those under the curse of death to be released from it. The Jewish professing, tempted by the old covenant and its practices, needed Christ placed before them. They needed to know clearly that all who rely on works of the law are under a curse, and that Jesus was infinitely more worthy of their reliance and genuine faith.

In our context, most of us are not contending with Judaizers and temptations to commit ourselves to the Law of Moses. Ours great temptation is to be a law unto ourselves. To do what is right in our own eyes, or in the eyes of the approving masses. And along the way we justify ourselves and think little to nothing to the God of scripture. But He is here, inviting rebels of all kinds to believe in His sacrifice for forgiveness.

But I've not reached the essence of verses 27 & 28 yet. The author is gazing ahead. The *judgment* of verse 27 is most likely a reference to the final judgment, not what happens immediately after death.¹⁸ Man dies once and eventually comes to the final judgment seat. Christ dies once and comes as the One who has borne our judgement. We're not to get it confused—He will come as Judge when He comes again.¹⁹ But for His bride, the church, Jesus *will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin*. When He comes again on the clouds, with His mighty angels, the issue of our sin won't be the reason for His coming! That's been *put away* for all the elect. Calvin speaks to this time of seeing Him as He is. He wrote, "When we come to the tribunal of Christ, we shall find that there was nothing wanting in His death."²⁰

To be sure, this encouragement has been measured out mercifully to all *who eagerly await Him*. Are you eager to see Him? Are you eager to see the place He's prepared? His throne? Are you eager to share His joy? View His smile? Touch His scars? Bask in His radiance? Stew in His wisdom? Be arrested by His sovereignty and His gentleness? We're not holding our breath for life to be discovered in other galaxies, or for this candidate or that candidate to finally bring stability to our land or world, or for science to finally pull through with some remedy or cure to extend life beyond the bounds of death. No. Because of the great love with which God loves us, we have a better Mediator who offered a better blood, through which we have better promises with a better hope. He is who we await.

Conclusion

The One who is doing great things for us now—appearing to the Father and making His case for us; the One who has done great things for us two millennia ago by the offering of Himself to the jaws of death as our payment for sin; the One who will do that great thing for us of appearing a second time to take us to our true home—these acts of the Risen King and Heavenly High Priest, they steal our collective breaths.

¹⁸ Koester, 423.

¹⁹ Acts 17:31, "[God] has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

²⁰ John Calvin, *Hebrews: Vol. 12*, 220.

