



Preparing for Judgement

Hebrews 9:23-28

Grace Church | 1.15.23

During our study of Hebrews, we have come through multiple ways to see that the main point of the book is that Jesus Christ, the eternal son of God, is the final exclamation point of reality. There is nothing better than him coming—no better picture of God, no better king, no better deliverer, no better advocate, no better sacrifice. And there is something about this wrestling with Jesus being the *end* of reality that forces us to think forward as well. When we begin to expand our vision of just how *big* Jesus is, and just how significant it is to follow him—we can't help but think about the bigger picture, or even, the end of the picture. So our thoughts of Jesus naturally draw us to thoughts of Heaven, to God's throne, when the author of Hebrews tells us that he now dwells, sitting down (remember) since his work is complete. And our thoughts of Heaven draw us to consider the end of our own life.

What is the Christian relationship with death? Is it an enemy, or a friend? Depends on how you look at it. Last week we considered how death, and specifically blood, was necessary for covenant and inheritance. If you want to receive all that God has—it costs the blood, the death of Jesus. So, death is the gateway to life—seems good, right? And in the same way, those who have lived a full life, and who now are in pain or suffering—death can feel like the embrace of a friend. But all of us, even the kids here, we also know the sting of death, that when it happens, it hurts, it feels not right. What is the Christian relationship with death? Is it an enemy, or a friend? What if the answer was both?

Four Certainties

I think it was Benjamin Franklin who said the only certain things are “death and taxes.” Well, the Holy Spirit, speaking through the author of Hebrews, wants us to know that there are a few things in life that we can be absolutely sure of. In our text, he gives at least four, all of them encapsulated in **verses 27-28**.

First, *you will die*.

Second, *after death comes judgment*.

Third, *Jesus died*.

Fourth, *Jesus is coming again*.



So immediately in this text we are seeing a link. Why do we fear death? Well, the text tells us in **verse 27** it is final. It happens *once*. You don't get another shot at it. Most video games these days give you infinite lives, but some of us remember going to arcades or pizza joints where if you played mario brothers you only have three lives per quarter. But none of us are foolish enough to think that we get more than one go at this.

But more than that, because of death's finality, we also intuitively know that with death comes judgment, **verse 27**. If God is real, and truly sees all, how could there not be judgment of some kind? I think we can understand this if we consider what it is like to be a child again. Under a careful parent's eye, we expect to be rewarded for good behavior and disciplined for bad behavior. In fact, when we get away with something we know to be wrong or crooked, we anticipate judgment. You know that feeling don't you—it's a feeling that you have had since you were a kid. Even those who are not Christians think of death in these terms. If there is no afterlife—they want to be judged here on earth as living a full life, so people can say of them at their funeral: well done. What is life if not a test or some kind? And who of us goes into a test expecting it not to be graded?

Imagine yourself on that day. Standing before God, the one who sees everything, you can't lie. So what will you say? What case will you make for yourself? See, already you are getting tense, anxiety is rising. Why? Because we all live with low grade guilt. Guilt is what makes us human—we all have standards. It is what prevents us from coming to the conclusion that everything is relative and nothing matters.

Let me add to that tension a bit more. The third certain thing told to us at the end of this section is that Jesus died. Our text says that he was *offered*, something important to come back to you later, but it is speaking of his death. This shouldn't be news to you—you are in a Christian church where the symbol of our worship is the crucifix where Jesus bled out. But we also profess that Jesus rose from the dead, ascended to the Father, and is coming again, a second time, our fourth certainty. The second coming of Christ, says Jesus himself, will be sudden and unexpected, and the purpose of it will be to complete his judgment—since after death comes judgment. So that scenario where you stand before God, wondering what you will say for yourself? Either through your certain death, or Jesus' certain coming—that scenario is also certain, and coming sooner than you think.

Which brings us to the curious part of our passage. What is the Christian's relationship with death? Well, it completely depends on your relationship with judgment. Look at the end of **verse 28**. Those who are in Christ are described as those who "eagerly wait" for Jesus' second coming. Remember in this context the second appearance of Jesus is all about judgment—since after death comes judgment.

Now, we are used to eagerly awaiting a vacation, or eagerly waiting for our birthday or Christmas. We are used to eagerly waiting for the baby to arrive, for our amazon package to come in the mail. But eagerly awaiting judgment? Wouldn't that be like eagerly awaiting a trip to the dentist, an impossibly hard final exam, or a dangerous surgery?



Yes, unless something has happened that changes the way we understand judgment. An impossible test doesn't have to be scary if you've received the grade you need before it is even taken. So what if I told you that if you have repented of your sin and put your faith truly in Jesus, you need not fear judgment? That the grade for the test has already been given? The results of the surgery have already been announced? That is exactly the point of this text, and at the very heart of the gospel of Jesus. The certainty of Death, and the judgment of all things, can be welcomed by those in Christ with eager anticipation and joy, because the second coming of Christ is not the first. And something happened in the first coming that changes our view of the second coming forever.

Which brings us to our main, and really only one point, this morning (yes, a one point sermon—shocker).

You can eagerly await Jesus' return, because in his death he has already judged your sin once for all.

Verse 26 tells us more about the first coming of Christ. He came one time. We will explore this more next week, but here is where we receive our understanding of Jesus' work. We do not need to continually sacrifice him, **verse 25**. The reason Jesus' sacrifice was once for all was because it was his blood, not an animal, not another. Animals are a dime a dozen—but there is only one God. There is only one incarnate Son, there is only one Christ.

It's also final because, as **verse 26** says, if it wasn't, Christ would "suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world". What the author means is that the cross is the turning point of history. Every sin Christ suffered for every sin there—past, present, and future. If that wasn't the case, then Jesus not only would have to continue to suffer for our sin now, but he would have had to have started in eternity past. The way God chose to deal with sin, however, was not through continually renewing suffering, but through a once for all. This gives us hope when we remember our suffering is not eternal. This is confirmed by the author reminding us that Jesus appeared "at the end of the ages", that is, at the exact right time, the turning point of history.

What was the purpose of Jesus' suffering, death, sacrifice of himself? **Verse 26** says it is to "put away sin". So go back to our image of the upcoming test, the judgment, the grade. Sin is the negative mark, the red pen on your essay. In God's economy, sin is disobedience against his character that causes us to incur guilt before him. It's failing to live up to his standard of holiness, it's that stain on our conscience that tells us we will not be accepted.

So because sin is an affront against the holiness of God, it *must* be dealt with. How could a holy God continue to live in a world where sin exists? So sin must be dealt with—it must be put away, it must be judged. And what Hebrews is teaching us is that there are two ways God deals with sin. Well one day, in the return of Christ, he will deal with sin finally. He will bring justice to all those who are oppressed, he will put away all evildoers forever. God will not allow even a hint or ounce of sin into



his new kingdom—so when Jesus returns it will not be as a lowly infant but a conquering king, ready to vanquish his enemies and all those who reject his rule.

So that is God's final judgment of sin, his putting away of it. But that isn't the only time God puts away sin. See, God deals with sin differently for those who come in repentance than for those who continue to be his enemies. The first dealing with sin happened for his beloved children, it first happened when Jesus Christ the innocent was judged by man and that judgment was confirmed by God—when Jesus laid down his life willingly, as an “offering”, once and for all, the sins of his people were put away.

And the point is now becoming more clear to us. How could a just God judge us for sin that has already been dealt with? He can't. See, if you are in Christ, if by faith you have come to him truly forsaking all others... your judgment has already occurred. The test has already been taken. The grade has already been given. God has already declared you not just a passing grade but a perfect righteousness judgment based on the perfect righteousness of Christ!

Here are two implications of this.

First, Christ's cleansing is final. Let's start back in **verse 23**. When he says “the “copies of heavenly things”, he is referring back to last week's passage, and the reference to Moses sprinkling blood on all the vessels of the tabernacle used for worship. **Verse 22**, nearly everything in the tabernacle was covered with blood, what you might see as gross was a symbol of ritual purity. Guilty people like the Israelites had to worship God in holiness, so they used the blood of innocent animals to purify their hands and all the things their hands touched in worship. They did this not just for religious ritual, but they also knew deep down that failure to take part in this kind of purity would incur the just wrath of God. Aarons very own sons were destroyed and consumed by fire for failing to worship the Lord in his prescribed way. So the purification of both the priest and the priestly instruments was necessary to prepare against the righteous judgment of God.

In the same way, just as we have said earlier, the primary obstacle for us anticipating Christ's return with eagerness is the reality of our own uncleanness. Earlier this year I watched the newest film adaption of MacBeth with Denzel Washington. The power in Shakespeare's story is we can all in some way imagine going mad with guilt, as both MacBeth and his wife do. There is that famous part where although she has entirely lost it, we almost understand as Lady MacBeth sleepwalks and imagines her hands stained with spots of actual blood and screams and rants, trying to scrub them clean.¹

And so, **verse 23** says, if even the earthly things had to be cleansed, how much more the “heavenly things”. Now the picture here is metaphorical—it doesn't mean that in heaven's throne room there

¹“Out, damned spot! out, I say!--One: two: why, then, 'tis time to do't.--Hell is murky!”



are candle stands or altars in need of cleansing. No—heaven is not impure, because, **verse 24**, it is not “made with hands”, that is, not stained with the sin of humanity. Rather, the “heavenly things” that are cleansed are not inanimate objects of heaven, but the vessels used in worship in heaven are the people of God! Before God’s throne, *his saints* are his instruments of worship.

And so in your imagination as you picture yourself standing before God—picture yourself standing, or kneeling, to worship him. But you can do so knowing that there has been a better sacrifice, a better blood, the blood of Christ, that has purified you and cleansed you. Unlike the instruments of worship in the tabernacle, you will not make it to worship God in heaven and suddenly need to be ushered out for regularly scheduled cleaning. Remember—the judgment has already happened. You *are* clean. Even though your actions are not perfect yet, your heart, your conscience, has been purified if you are in Christ. The Father, even now, sees you as pure. AND because of Christ’s once for all sacrifice, that isn’t changing.

Second, Christ’s Advocacy is Final. In **verse 24** we read again that Jesus has entered into the presence of God on our behalf. One concern we can have, one fear of judgment, is that even if our purity doesn’t wear off, we will still need to believe it, to prove it.

The truth is, we live in a world where condemnation comes easy. The world condemns us for failing to live in pursuit of pleasure, or wealth, or status. But sadly, even the church may condemn us—withholding grace because of our stumbling and sin. We condemn ourselves, for even if we know we are pure in Christ, we know the depths of our own sin best, and find our faith in Jesus’ blood lacking. Most of all, Satan himself would love nothing more than to heap condemnation on us—to kill us not with an under-realization of our own inadequacy, but a hyper-realization of it that causes us to doubt God is really good enough to save us.

But there is no need for a renewal of Jesus’ advocacy. Remember, he is the one pleading our cause. Paul agrees in Romans 8:33-34,

“Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.”

Once and for all, Jesus, by his sacrifice, entered into the Holy Place of God, and brought us with him, so that no one can ever doubt our place there.

I’m serially bad at cleaning my house by putting things in an unorganized way into closets and unseen spaces. My wife calls this “outside-in” cleaning. I’m very effective at it: I can tidy the whole house in less than an hour. But you know what? The inside mess always comes out.

Put yourself one last time in that dark place, that place where you are overwhelmed with guilt and condemnation. You know you have cut corners, but no one else does. You know the hatred you secretly harbor towards your co-worker or boss. You know the depths of sexual sin, lust, and



fantasy that no one else does. You know that you really hide your anxiety and insecurity through work, busyness, and responsibilities. You joke about the shows you watch and mindless scrolling you partake in, but you know that inside it's a front for how ashamed you are that most of your days are spent with nothing to show for them. You know that place of condemnation.

And you know you will be found out. It's only a matter of time, because you can't hide from God. Jesus is returning, and his cleaning will not be outside in, but inside out. He will open up the cabinets, organize the closets, shine a light into the basements and attics. When I was a child, I remember shaking and hiding when I knew my parents knew what I had done wrong. Perhaps, like a bashful child, perhaps you anticipate a scolding from God coming, and you dread that day.

But, brothers and sisters, if you have trusted in Jesus, he is not coming to condemn you. When I hid from my parents, they always found me. But, because they understood the grace of God, they never condemned me. God the Father, through the work of Christ the Son, in the presence of the Holy Spirit, will find where you are hiding. But he does not come to scold you. Instead, he returns to *save* you, **verse 28**. He comes, as chapter 2 told us, to "deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery." You don't need to fear death, because you have no need to fear judgment. In judging our sin finally at the cross, Jesus defeated death and the Great Accuser's condemnation over us. It is finished, once and for all. All that is left for you to do is eagerly await the return of Jesus, your salvation. He is coming soon, and when he does, you will never feel the need to hide ever again.

