

Back Home Through the Blood

Bible Verses Referenced: Hebrews 9:11-14, Genesis 3, Psalm 46, Romans 8

We've been working our way through the book of Hebrews, and we've come to a part of the section of Hebrews, which actually is a bit challenging, where we talk a lot about the priesthood, the tabernacle, sacrifices, the Holy of Holies, and the way forward into the Holy of Holies.

These are things that are somewhat foreign to us unless we really spend a lot of time reading through the Old Testament, particularly the Book of Leviticus. Is that one of y'all's favorite books of the Bible, the book of Leviticus? Yeah, if you don't spend a lot of time thinking about those things, this can be a bit of a foreign section of the Bible. But the writer of Hebrews is actually saying that all of those things and a lot of times we skip over are actually really important to understand what's happening in new covenant worship.

That if we are in old covenant worship are those things that those old covenant symbols and signs we're pointing to will be a reality for us as we walk by faith into the deeper presence of our Lord Jesus Christ. To lay some groundwork for before we dig into the book of Hebrews, I want to think a little bit about the book of Genesis and a passage that's pretty familiar to us, Genesis chapter 3.

We have another one that is leaving too. The baptism candidates are falling one by one. So cute. Ignacio, are you next? No, he's not. So think back with me to Genesis chapter 3 in Adam and Eve in the garden.

And you'll remember Adam and Eve and the serpent and how the Lord said, "You shouldn't need of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil," and then the Satan, the serpent, tempted Eve, and then they fell, they partook of the tree, and then you had Adam blaming his wife, and his wife blamed the serpent, and the serpent didn't have a leg to stand on. It was a long way to get there, but we did.

But that whole scene is really important for us to understand the fall. That we are sinners and that we, by extension of being descendants of Adam and Eve, are characterized by a sin nature. We have a fallen, sinful nature.

And this is fundamentally our problem that we have turned away from God and become exiled from the presence of God and from His love and His presence. And this is the problem that is set up right at the beginning of the books of the Bible, and that the whole of the Scriptures is really working out as it gets to the culmination and the satisfaction of the problem and the solution to the problem and the great salvation offered to us by Jesus.

And so I was recently at a clergy conference with one of my old seminary classmates, actually, Chuck DeGrote, was leading the clergy of the Diocese of Florida. It was so wonderful to see him. He is now a Presbyterian minister and a Christian mental health therapist. And he has written a lot of books about narcissism, actually, of all things, and particularly narcissism within the clergy ranks.

One of the things about being a priest is that sometimes people are trying to work out their own problems and difficulties, and that's why they might be attracted to the ranks of the clergy, is because they themselves have challenges and things that they're trying to sort out. I will confess guilty as charged on some of that.

But one of the things that I asked Chuck, I said, "Can narcissism be healed?" This is something I've heard before that true narcissists are some of the toughest to counsel through as a mental health disorder. What is narcissism? And I asked Chuck this to give me his definition of what narcissism is.

And the way he describes it is that usually there is some traumatic thing that happens or some misfire or something that a person has done sinfully in their childhood or in their early formative years. It could be a trauma, it could be some moral failing, something like that. But what ends up happening is there is a failure to develop in a mature way as a young person.

And so there's an overcompensation that happens with your external self. In other words, you begin to project a false image of who you are as a way of protecting that hurting and broken and fallen inner child. This is a therapist's way of thinking about this.

What Chuck said is, "Yes, that inner self actually can be healed." He said, "I wouldn't have gone into this ministry if I didn't believe that." And then the other thing that he said is, "To a degree, we all struggle with levels of narcissism," which I thought was very interesting. What he's saying is, and this is the title actually of his most recent book, that what we need is to be healed from within.

And so, in his recent book, he raises the questions that God raises of Adam and Eve when he approaches them after the fall. The questions that you read about in Genesis chapter 3, "Where are you?" You remember Adam and Eve hid from God because of their guilt and their shame? "Who told you that you were naked?"

Did you eat of the tree that I told you not to eat of? What is this that you have done?" I think all of us, when we hear those questions, we probably can hear maybe even our parents asking us those questions, right? And feel the feelings of guilt and shame that are associated with hearing those questions when we've messed up.

Where are you? What have you been doing? Did you do what I told you not to do? Guilt is a problem that is universal. Guilt is an actual violation against God's ways and His commandments. Guilt is very specific. We know exactly what we're guilty of when we experience guilt. I broke God's law. I did wrong.

I did something unjust. We can have true guilt because of things that we've done, but some people suffer from false guilt where they actually have taken on the guilt of other people and at times guilt of sins that were done against them. But guilt is a very real thing. Shame is related to this, which is more about who we are as a person in our personhood. Guilt is connected to action.

Shame is connected to identity. In other words, I am guilty because I broke God's law. I am shameful because I am a sinner. I am a bad person. I am a failure. That's shame speaking. Now, what's interesting is guilt for Genesis, and this is what Hebrews is getting at, is that guilt and shame make us hide from God.

And with good reason, because if we were to come into the presence of the Holy, Holy God in a condition of guilt and shame, we actually wouldn't be able to stand. And so This is the fundamental problem that the writer of Hebrews is addressing.

In fact, the entirety of the temple complex and the priesthood and the sacrifice of bulls and goats and so on was all designed by God to help make it possible for a sinful and guilty and shameful people that wanted to hide from him to be able to approach his throne and to come into his presence.

And so that was all done through creating a sense of place, the temple, giving mediating ministers, the priests, sacrifices to pay for those sins and to make atonement for them. What the writer of Hebrews said is that none of those things in the Old Covenant actually satisfied or did anything that would actually take away guilt and shame in an actual way.

There goes the last one. Hopefully they'll come back. I'll wrap it up. So let me put again our reading from Hebrews. "But when Christ came 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, he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood.

Thus, he obtained eternal redemption. One of the things that I longed for for many years was actually to come back home to Jacksonville. I grew up in this area. I spent a lot of time out on the St. John's River. I've lived in Charlotte, Lake Mary, Florida, and Houston, Texas, Chicago, Illinois.

And in all of those places, one of the things that was just deep within me, and it got more and more after about 30 years, is a sense of longing for home, a wanting to be back to the place where my roots were and my people are. And that's actually what is lost for us with the losing of the Garden of Eden.

And in the Most Holy Place, we actually have the gateway back to home. That's what the Scriptures are holding out for us, is there is a way for us to get back home. But we need access. We need the key that will unlock the door. We need the way to approach it.

And what the writer of Hebrews is saying is it's the blood of Jesus Christ because we can't unlock that door ourselves. We can't satisfy the just requirements of the law ourselves. We can't make the atoning

sacrifice. We don't have the capacity. We don't have the ability. We don't have the worthiness to do that. And what we were powerless and what the law was powerless to do, God has done in sending His Son, Jesus Christ, to make an eternal redemption for our souls so that we can get back home.

That's what the writer of Hebrews is essentially arguing that He, Jesus, entered once for all into the Holy Place, entered into home, so that through His blood, He can obtain redemption so that all of us can get back home too. It's a beautiful picture of our great salvation.

And so, there is power in the blood of Jesus Christ, power to redeem us, but also power to change us. And this is where he goes next.

"For if the blood of bulls and goats and the sprinkling of ashes or the heifer sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more with the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purifying our conscience from dead works to worship the living God." I want you to hear that word again, "Eternal Spirit that accomplishes a purification of our conscience." What is conscience?

So, we have the guilt, we have the shame. The conscience is the voice that says, "You're guilty. You should be ashamed of yourself." Have you ever heard that voice? That little conscience? Now, the thing about the conscience is it tells us the truth on its better days, and it convicts us of the things that we've done wrong.

And when we hear the voice of the conscience, we might feel that conviction and it might lead us to repentance where we say, "Oh, I really messed up. I need to fix that. I need to straighten that out." And the conscience is a part of our gift from God. It's part of us being made in the Imago dei, the image of God, where we hear the literal voice of God convicting us and challenging us to get our lives in order with the Lord.

But our conscience, apart from Christ and His eternal redemption, can also say to us, "There's no hope for you." Our conscience can be what says, "Oh, you've now messed up so much that you're condemned." The writer of Hebrews uses the metaphor of the race, and we actually had that in our colic today. It wasn't a tough mudder. It was called a rugged maniac race.

It was all these obstacles in the race. One of the obstacles was this big wall that was about eight feet tall, and you had to jump up and muscle yourself up to the top of the wall, and then get your body over the wall like that. And I remember getting to that wall, and the first time I tried, I pulled myself up, and I got myself almost all the way up, and then I was like, "Oh, whoop." I went back down.

The next time I tried, there was very little progress being made, and my conscience started to say, "You're not going to make it." And all of a sudden, I quit and I gave up on trying to get over that wall, and I just walked around it and went to the next obstacle. You know, sin brings us before various obstacles in our life, and the writer of Hebrews describes them.

He says, "There are obstacles, there are hindrances to our walk with faith, and it's a race that we're on." But it actually is not us that needs to pull ourselves up over that wall, because in our own strength and in our own power, we will never be able to do it. But it is this gift of the eternal spirit that purifies our hearts and our conscience and empowers us to live the Christian life in a way that, in our own strength and in our own capacities, we can't lift ourselves up by our own bootstraps.

It empowers us forward by faith to finish the race that is set before us, the writer of Hebrews, calls us to the race of faith. And so, the gift of the New Covenant is actually eternal redemption, a blank slate, and a fresh start, and eternal empowerment to live the way that God is calling us to live through His Son, Jesus Christ.

You know, we're about to baptize three young children who are just starting out their race of faith, and we will be claiming the promises of the New Covenant for them, that they will be given this blank slate. And part of the conviction and the purification of our consciences is to help them to hear not a voice of failure, or you can't do it, or you'll never win, but to hear, "You are a child of God."

You have been marked by Christ and His own forever." And part of the job of you as parents is to raise them into that knowledge of their eternal redemption in Him. But then the other pieces that I will with God's help, part of the promises that we're about to make, is we have all these things that we're called to as Christians that are part of the Christian life, and none of us can accomplish it in our own strength and power.

And so we pray, "I will with God's help." And it's that eternal spirit that we will be calling down upon these young ones, but we also have an occasion for us to be renewed in that Spirit ourselves as we renew our own baptismal covenants, experience the indwelling power of God's presence and Spirit to lead us back home to Himself.