

*Jesus' Sacrifice—Once for All*

**Hebrews 9:11-28**

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We're exploring what the New Testament says about the death of Jesus, his sacrifice of himself on the cross.

The emphasis on sacrifice and blood in the Bible and in a lot of Christian preaching troubles some people. I remember my dad coming home from the coffee shop one time. Somehow the discussion there had turned to church and faith and one man exclaimed, "Don't give me that slaughterhouse religion!" If he was talking about Christianity, he may not have realized that Jesus put an end to what might be called "slaughterhouse religion."

In another setting some years ago a theologian from a prominent seminary told a group, "I don't think we need a theory of atonement at all. I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff" (Delores Williams, Union Theological Seminary, NY, at Re-Imagining Conference, 1993).

Contrast that with what H. Richard Niebuhr wrote in 1937 as part of his critique of a Liberal theology that he saw was setting aside the biblical story to teach that "a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministration of a Christ without a cross" (quoted in David F. Wells, *The Search for Salvation* 95).

It is true that some of our ways of talking about the cross and the blood of Jesus don't make sense to people who aren't familiar with the Bible. What do people think when they hear, "Have you been washed in the blood of the Lamb?" What images does that call up?

When we talk about the cross or the blood of Jesus, we're talking about the center of Christian faith and proclamation: God's great act of revealing himself and saving us. But we can't just toss around phrases we are familiar with and expect others to understand them unless we do some explaining. We may need to understand our message better so we can explain it effectively. In this message I hope to help us understand better

and communicate more clearly. And, above all, experience the reality that Jesus died for us.

The book of Hebrews spends a lot of time comparing the work of Christ with the Old Testament worship, priesthood and system of ritual sacrifices. Here in chapter 9, the author focuses on the ritual of the Day of Atonement. That annual ceremony foreshadowed Christ's sacrifice, but his work goes beyond it.

The system of worship God gave Moses and the Israelites included a variety of holy days and places, offerings and sacrifices. The high point of it all was the yearly Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*). Leviticus 16 describes the ritual for that day.

The high priest (Aaron, and later, his descendants) washed himself and put on special garments. He then sacrificed a bull as a sin offering for his own sins and for those of the other priests.

Taking some of the bull's blood, some burning coals and some incense, the high priest went into the Most Holy Place—the inner sanctuary behind the great curtain. In that Most Holy Place was the Ark of the Covenant, and the glorious presence of God dwelt there. The high priest had to burn incense on the Ark so the smoke would shield him from seeing the cover of the Ark and God's presence, causing him to die. Then he sprinkled some of the bull's blood on and in front of the Ark's cover.

Going back out, the high priest cast lots for two goats. He then killed one goat and presented it to the Lord as a sin offering *for the people*. Then he had to go back into the Most Holy Place and sprinkle the goat's blood on and in front of the Ark's cover.

No one else could go into the Tent of Meeting (later the Temple) while the High Priest was in the Most Holy Place.

The high priest then came back out to the altar and sprinkled it with some of the blood of the bull and the goat. His next act was to take the second goat, lay his hands on its head and confess Israel's sins over it. This was seen as transferring the people's guilt onto the goat. This goat (the scapegoat) was then sent into the desert, bearing away the people's sins.

Now the high priest removed his special garments, washed again and put on his regular garments. Then he offered a final sacrifice of two rams,

one for himself and one for the people. The last act of the day was to remove the sacrificed animals outside the camp where they were burned.

All of this was commanded by God as a way to atone for sin, to cover the people's guilt. It also highlighted the seriousness of sin and reminded the people that sin causes death. Each year the people would fast on the Day of Atonement and wait for the high priest to enter the Most Holy Place to offer sacrifices on their behalf.

We can imagine that the people must have waited outside with almost breathless anticipation for the priest to appear again. Would the offering be accepted? Would the high priest misstep and die? Or would he complete the ritual and live, securing forgiveness for the people for another year?

For hundreds of years this ritual went on—in the tabernacle and, later, in the temple in Jerusalem. Year after year the high priest entered the Holiest Place with the blood of a bull and a goat.

The people who first heard the book of Hebrews read in their gathering would have been familiar with all that. So when the author spoke of Jesus as high priest and the offering he made, they would have understood. The author of Hebrews draws on the ritual of the Day of Atonement to explain the meaning of what Jesus did on the cross. At the same time the author shows how the sacrifices of the first covenant were provisional, temporary and inadequate.

Christ came as high priest of the good things that are here—that is, things of God's kingdom: righteousness, peace, joy, love, healing. Christ is our high priest, the One who goes between us and God—not to separate us, but to bring us together. Jesus is the mediator of God and humans. He represents us to God and he brings God's words and the good things of God's kingdom to us. Jesus comes to us as God with us, then he enters God's presence for us and invites us to come in with him.

Jesus didn't enter the *earthly* tabernacle as high priest. Rather he entered into heaven itself, into God's very presence. And he didn't enter by means of the blood of bulls and goats. He did not have to make an offering for his own sins. He had committed no sin. But he entered once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.

Jesus' sacrifice did not have to be repeated as in the old covenant. He gave himself once and for all. No more sacrifice for sin is necessary. You do not have to pay for your sins. You cannot atone for yourself. The price has already been paid.

Jesus himself is the sacrifice. He is not only the high priest; he is the offering, the one that is sacrificed. Our redemption is not based on the blood of a goat, but on the blood of the Son of God himself.

And by his blood Jesus provides eternal redemption. Jesus does not have to sacrifice himself again and again. His one offering of himself on the cross is good for eternity. When we trust in him, he sets us free forever.

The sacrifices and rituals of the old covenant did provide a sort of cleansing. If that's true, how much more effective is Christ's blood! The death of Jesus that happened two thousand years ago affects us because the eternal Spirit, the Holy Spirit of God, makes his sacrifice eternally effective and brings the benefits of that sacrifice to bear on us.

We see the Trinity at work for our salvation here. Christ the Son gives his life. God the Father receives the offering. The Holy Spirit makes that sacrifice effective and applies it to our lives.

When the Spirit applies the blood of Christ to us, our conscience is cleansed from dead works or acts that lead to death. Do you carry the weight, do you feel the pain, of a guilty conscience? Because of what Jesus has done, that weight can be lifted, that pain can be healed. We can enter confidently into God's presence and find grace and mercy. In the meantime, give thanks to God that your conscience is sensitive enough to feel guilt. If we can feel guilt, we can recognize our need for forgiveness and we can turn to God in repentance and faith. When we acknowledge our sins we find forgiveness and the cleansing of our consciences.

Then we can serve the living God. If our service to God is determined simply by our guilty conscience, we won't really be serving God but some imagined picture of God. And the service we give will be a dull, burdensome duty instead of a joyous delight.

But with a clear conscience, freed from the weight of dead works and empty rituals, we can serve the true and living God with joy and freedom. We can worship and pray and read the Scriptures and witness and help

needy people. What a relief when all of those acts stop being fearful and wearisome obligations and become free and glad expressions of love and gratitude to God. Serving God becomes not something we *have* to do, but something we *get* to do.

Because Christ accomplished all this he is the mediator of a new covenant who can provide an eternal inheritance to everyone God calls. He can do this because he died as a ransom to set us free from sins.

At the end of chapter 9, the author summarizes and re-emphasizes some of these themes as he speaks of Christ's appearing.

Christ *appeared once for all* to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Later, the author will say that the Day of Atonement simply served to remind people of their sins (10:3). By contrast, Christ's sacrifice can remove sin. And not only our individual sins that trouble our consciences, but *sin*—the alienation from God and rebellion against God that is present in all the world.

You don't have to look far to see evidence of sin in the world. But the new covenant is sufficient to deal with all the bad things that are going on in our world. We have something to offer in the face of all the evil we see. Jesus died to take away sins. He is able to deal with each of our sins, with the sins in our society and with the human problem of sin. He can take it all away and give us a new relationship with God.

Christ not only appeared to take away sins, *he appears now* for us in God's presence. Christ our high priest continues to represent us to God. He intercedes for us. He speaks on our behalf to the Father. Having entered into the very presence of God, he takes us with him there. Charles Wesley expressed this reality in many of his hymns. Here's one example:

Arise, my soul, arise;  
Shake off thy guilty fears;  
The bleeding sacrifice  
In my behalf appears:  
Before the throne my surety stands,  
My name is written on his hands.

He ever lives above,  
For me to intercede;  
His all-redeeming love,  
His precious blood to plead:  
His blood atoned for all our race,  
And sprinkles now the throne of grace.

Five bleeding wounds he bears,  
Received on Calvary;  
They pour effectual prayers;  
They strongly plead for me:  
"Forgive him, O forgive," they cry,  
"Nor let that ransomed sinner die!"

The Father hears him pray,  
His dear anointed One;  
He cannot turn away  
The presence of his Son;  
His Spirit answers to the blood,  
And tells me I am born of God.

My God is reconciled;  
His pardoning voice I hear;  
He owns me for his child;  
I can no longer fear:  
With confidence I now draw nigh,  
And, "Father, Abba, Father," cry.

*(The Book of Hymns #122)*

*Christ will appear* a second time. When he comes again it won't be to bear sin. He's already done that. He will appear again to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. Jesus has already provided salvation. When we put our faith and trust in him, we find forgiveness, a new relationship with God, and all the good things God has given. Yet we will know the

fullness of salvation only when Christ appears again, completing everything, fulfilling all the promises, renewing creation, coming to be with us forever.

My grandfather died in 1989. He had been ill for some time. Nancy and I went to see him a couple of weeks before he died. In the hospital, he had lots of time to think and he was reminiscing a lot as we visited with him. Then his thoughts turned to the future and he asked me, "What do you think heaven will be like?" He was confident about going there and he knew it wouldn't be long before he went.

I told him that the biblical writers depict heaven in terms of the best things they could imagine. And the best thing I know about heaven is that we will be in God's presence in a way we can't be here. We will be in direct, unhindered fellowship with God. And with us in God's presence will be all the saints who have gone before us.

I believe the Bible teaches that anyone who is in Christ goes to heaven when they die. Their spirit goes into God's immediate presence. Still, those who are in heaven now wait for Jesus to appear again in glory and they will appear with him to join believers living on earth in resurrection and transformation. We will live together with the Lord in the new creation, enjoying the fullness of the salvation he will bring when he appears.

*Jesus has appeared* on earth and has died for us. *Jesus appears now*, seated at God's right hand. He brings us into God's presence now. *Jesus will appear again*, completing and fulfilling salvation. "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." His work is enough to put us right with God and give us a new life with God now and forever.