

“Once for All”

The Thirteenth in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

Texts: Hebrews 9:11-28; Numbers 19:1-22

Christianity is not primarily a religion of morals and ethics. Christianity is a religion centering around shed blood, a Roman cross, and an empty tomb. The animal sacrifices and the purification rites of the old covenant served a number of very important purposes. For one thing, the very need for such sacrifices demonstrates that our sins are a great offense to a holy God, and that satisfaction must be made to his holy justice in order to turn aside his wrath. That the sacrifices were offered by a high priest who alone could enter the Most Holy Place after making sacrifices for his own sins, is a graphic illustration that our sin separates us from the presence of God. And while providing a provisional and temporary relief from sin, ultimately, the nature of these sacrifices shows that they were intended to teach God’s people and prepare the nation of Israel for the coming of Jesus Christ. But as the author of Hebrews continues to make his case for the superiority of the priesthood of Jesus Christ and the new and better covenant, he now describes how Jesus offers a sacrifice that is much superior in every way to the types and shadows of the old covenant, thereby rendering it obsolete, and establishing the new covenant in his blood.

As we continue our series on the Book of Hebrews, we are working our way through that section of the author’s extended argument for the superior priesthood of Jesus Christ, and the nature of the once for all sacrifice for sin made by our Lord, the great high priest. One of the remarkable things about the Book of Hebrews is that the author keeps building his case by adding additional arguments to those already made. In chapter 7, the author described how Jesus is an eternal priest after the order of Melchizedek, tying our Lord’s priestly office to this mysterious figure to whom Abraham paid tithes. Then in chapter 8, we saw that with the coming of Jesus Christ the new covenant era is now a reality, and the old covenant is no longer in force. Jeremiah’s well-known prophecy of a new and better covenant was the fulfillment of the covenant promise God made to Abraham, so that all those who are Christ’s are the children of Abraham.

Throughout both of these chapters, the author has shown that everything in the Sinai covenant (the law, the tabernacle, and the priesthood) was designed to teach the people of God about the superior priesthood of Jesus Christ whose once for all sacrifice for sin puts an end to the Old Testament sacrificial system. Jesus is the better priest with the better sacrifice (himself), and his death alone, once and for all, turns aside God’s wrath toward all those for whom he dies.

In chapters 9-10 (that section in which we now find ourselves) the author makes four important theological points building upon those points he has already made. In verses 1-10 of chapter 9 (which we covered last time), the author described the earthly tabernacle, the worship which was conducted there, and the role these things played in redemptive history. The tabernacle, its priests, and its sacrifices are types and shadows which point ahead to the coming of Jesus Christ. In the balance of chapter nine (vv. 11-28, our text this morning), the author discusses the nature and meaning of the death of Jesus (in light of the old covenant types and shadows) and sets forth how our Lord’s shed blood does what the sacrificial system associated with the old covenant could never do, remove the guilt of our sin and secure for us an eternal redemption. The old covenant sacrifices temporarily and provisionally turned aside God’s anger, but these can do nothing to assuage the consciences of guilty sinners.

And then as we will see in the coming weeks, in chapter 10:1-18, the author discusses how the death of Jesus puts an end to the old covenant sacrifices, and then in the balance of chapter 10, he addresses the wonderful assurance that is ours by trusting in what Jesus has done to save us from our sins.

As we take up our text we begin with verses 11-14, which we briefly touched upon last time, and then we will work our way through the balance of the chapter in vv. 15-28.

Having described the sacrificial system and duties of the priests in verses 1-10, the author moves on to spell out the nature of that once for all sacrifice for sin which renders the old covenant obsolete. In this section we find some of the most important teaching anywhere in the New Testament about the meaning of the death of Jesus, and how his death actually accomplishes what God intended it to do. Like Paul, the author of Hebrews sees the coming of Jesus Christ as marking the dawn of a new age in redemptive history in which the promised glories foretold in the Old Testament are now a reality for all those in Christ. In Hebrews 8, this dawn of a new age in redemptive history is spoken of in terms of a new covenant. Paul speaks of this as the age of the Spirit (in contrast to the letter of the law) and as the new creation. And as does our Lord, Paul also speaks of this in terms of the dawn of the age to come, as the eternal breaks in on the temporal. The point is that when Jesus completes his messianic mission, the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai is rendered null and void. It is obsolete, and passes away. We live in a new age in redemptive history, under a new and better covenant.

As the author states it in verses 11-12, *“but when Christ appeared 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 places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.”* The earthly types and shadows (including the tent and the priesthood) pointed ahead to the eternal temple (the reality and fulfillment), which he describes as a “more perfect tent” i.e., a more perfect tabernacle which was not made by human hands, but which was created by God. And into this eternal and unseen holy place (of which the holy place and the Most Holy Place are graphic illustrations), Jesus offered something much better than the blood of sacrificial animals—he offered himself. And this sacrifice secured an eternal redemption—the guilt of our sin having been removed and the wrath of God turned aside.

The reason why this sacrifice secures an eternal redemption is spelled out in verses 13-14. *“For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.”* The key to understanding the wonder of this is the “how much more” language. The blood of sacrificial animals and the various purification rites prescribed under the old covenant did indeed turn aside God’s wrath for a time, but the sacrifices had to be repeated, and they were only effectual because of the sacrifice of Jesus yet to come.

The great contrast between the animal sacrifices and the death of Jesus Christ is such that the author can speak in terms of the work of the Holy Spirit in making these sacrifices effectual. Here the author is probably thinking in terms of the external (i.e., the purification rituals, sacrifices and washings deal with the body, i.e., the flesh), while the Holy Spirit’s work is internal, granting us a pure conscience, and delivering us from “dead works,” which is likely a figure of speech for sinful actions which defile us, just as touching a dead body defiled someone under the old covenant.¹ As the author has made a contrast between the inferior and superior, between the old and new covenant, so here we have a contrast made between the external (the rituals) and the internal (the work of the Spirit in applying to us the once shed blood of Jesus Christ). The practical consequence of embracing the superior, the new covenant, and the internal, is a pure conscience before God—something that is only made possible by a sacrifice which is so

¹ Vos, The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews, 16, 22.

much superior. “How much more . . .”

The author now restates a point he has already made about the mediator of the new covenant in chapter 8:6. In verse 15 he writes, “*therefore [Jesus] is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.*” This time the author explains in more detail the benefits for the people of God which result from Christ’s mediatorial work on their behalf. Jesus Christ can do what Moses, the mediator of the old covenant, could never do. Those who are beneficiaries of Christ’s redemptive work actually receive what was promised, whereas Moses could only point people ahead to the coming redeemer. Jesus ensures that all those whom he calls (through the preached word in the power of the Holy Spirit), actually receive the promised inheritance.

Under the old covenant, the promised inheritance was a long life with many children in a land flowing with milk and honey. The inheritance included safety in a peaceful land where God kept the various Canaanites tribes at bay. But the inheritance we receive under the new covenant is so much better and is not tied to earthly and material things. The promised inheritance includes the forgiveness of our sin, the removal of our guilt, and the turning aside of God’s wrath, all of which was accomplished for us by the doing and dying of Jesus Christ, and which is applied to us (internally) by the work of the Holy Spirit. The earthly blessings and material prosperity were intended to point Israel to the heavenly blessings which are unseen—this is the Reformed version of the “prosperity gospel.” God has promised to give us something much better than physical healing or lots of cash—he has promised us that all the benefits earned by Jesus Christ are now ours securing for us an eternal redemption. And this includes the cleansing of my conscience here and now.

The legal basis for receiving this inheritance is that a death has occurred—a death which becomes the basis for this wonderful inheritance received by Christ’s church, the members of the ecclesia. Jesus’ death upon the cross is that which accomplishes what the blood of animals and the high priest of Israel could never accomplish, redemption from every single transgression committed under the first covenant (or better the “former” covenant—i.e., the old covenant). To put this in the most simple terms, when God gave the Ten Commandments, he gave them for the purpose of showing us how sinful we are. The law is designed to condemn us. God’s commandments expose how sinful our hearts truly are, and the commandments even excite us to greater and greater levels of sin. As Paul says in Romans 7:7, “*yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’*”

And yet, says the author of Hebrews, Jesus died for all of those times we broke God’s commandments, whether we did so through thought, word, or deed, whether intentional or not. Jesus’ death secured our eternal redemption—redemption being a common first century term describing the purchase of slaves on the open market, thereby implying freedom and a change in ownership. Jesus’ death redeems us, so that we are now God’s own possession, set apart (i.e., holy), and called to serve our new master (Jesus), not our former master (sin and death). This is what the death of Jesus establishes for us.

The author now turns to a legal analogy to further illustrate this point. If we are properly prepared for death, we have prepared a will, which once established, cannot be changed after we have died. Using this familiar and common analogy, in verse 16, the author writes, “*for where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established.*” The term translated as “will” by the ESV, is the Greek word *diatheke*, which is variously translated as covenant, or “testament” as in “last will and testament.” Because the author is speaking of the death of the testator (Jesus), “testament” would seem to be the better translation. The author’s point is that the new covenant was formally established with the death of Jesus

Christ, and cannot be changed now that the testator has died.²

It is this particular death in which God's covenant oath (his sworn promise to Abraham) is fulfilled and now becomes the legal condition under which the people of God are now bound. This is why Christians are children of Abraham under the new covenant, because it too is built upon God's gracious promise to Abraham. This also means that the condition which existed prior to our Lord's death (the old covenant) is no longer in force—it is now rendered null and void by the death of the testator. To put in theological terms, when Jesus died, God's testament (the will of the testator) is now in force (the new covenant) and the old covenant is thereby legally rendered null and void. The author makes this very point in verse 17, "*for a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive.*" This is but another way of saying that with the death of Jesus, the old covenant is superseded by the new.

This is a very important point for the author to make with this particular congregation receiving this letter—a congregation which was made up mostly of Jewish converts to Christianity, a number of whom had given up on Christianity and returned to Judaism. But as the author has just demonstrated by the use of this analogy, why would someone go back to an inferior covenant, which is now null and void, having been fulfilled by the testament of God himself, legally executed through the shed blood of Jesus Christ?

Having made this point, the author moves on to address a matter which makes many of our contemporaries a bit squeamish. Christianity centers around a bloody cross and an empty tomb. Ours is not a religion centered in making bad people into good people, or good people into better people. Christianity is a religion in which God saves sinners—even the worst. This is clear throughout the gospels as Jesus himself enjoyed the company of repentant IRS agents and prostitutes. And Jesus redeems such sinners through the shedding of his own blood—the animal sacrifices of the old covenant, pointed ahead the shedding of the blood of Jesus in the new. It is this death which secures an eternal redemption for sinners. "How much more . . ."

Despite the discomfort of our contemporaries, the Bible is crystal clear that unless God's holy justice is satisfied, there can be no forgiveness of sins. In verse 18, the author makes this very point. "*Therefore not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood.*" God is holy, he cannot even look upon sin, and his holy wrath can only be propitiated through the shedding of blood. The sacrificial blood of animals does this in a provisional and temporary way because these things anticipate the death of Jesus. But with the death of Jesus, his once for all sacrifice turns aside God's wrath securing for us an eternal redemption. That this talk about the shedding of blood makes our contemporaries uncomfortable, is an understatement. But then these things are foolishness to Greeks, and a stumbling block to Jews.

In verses 19-20, the author recounts the events of Exodus 24 and Numbers 19, well known texts to first century Jews—the latter text being our Old Testament lesson and a passage often read by Jews in the synagogue to commemorate the day of atonement. In order to make the point that unless sacrificial blood is shed, there is no forgiveness of sin, the author contends, "*for when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, 'This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you.'*" Although the old covenant was a works-based covenant, with blessings promised for obedience, and curses threatened for disobedience, the old covenant did not replace or do away with the gracious covenant which God had made earlier with Abraham—that which the author now calls the new covenant. The sacrificial system required that blood be shed when the law was given to

² Vos, The teaching of the Epistle of the Hebrews, 16, 22.

the sanctify the people and the mountain (Sinai) so that YHWH can be present with his people.

In verse 21 the author now recounts from Exodus 29:12 and Leviticus 16:14-19, that “*in the same way [Moses] sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship.*” The point here is that God cannot meet with his people unless and until the guilt of our sin has been washed away and God’s holy justice satisfied. The point is set out again in verse 22. “*Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.*” Make no mistake about it, the sacrifices and purification rituals of the Old Testament were very, very bloody.

Because God met with his people in earthly places, everything in those places must be sanctified and purified by the shedding of blood. In fact, the author lays down one of the most fundamental points in all of Christian theology when he states—without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sin. We may prefer a nice, sanitized religion of ethics and “do-gooding,” but make no mistake about it, Christianity is a religion of shed blood. And if blood is not shed and God’s justice is not satisfied, then we are still in our sins no matter how nice we think we are, or no matter how much “do-gooding” we may have done.

Then in verse 23, the author reminds us that this is the nature of earthly things, which were handled and touched by sinners. “*Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.*” The first thing to consider here is the statement that the earthly things are a copy of the heavenly things. This is a point the author has made repeatedly and one we must understand as we read the Old Testament. Both the tabernacle and the temple were graphic illustrations of the invisible and heavenly temple (which is the reality). But the second point here is the critical one for the author’s current point. If earthly things must be purified by the sacrificial blood of animals, heavenly things require something different, something vastly superior—the blood of Jesus Christ, the creator of all things, and the redeemer of the world.

And this point spelled out for us in verse 24. “*For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.*” After dying on the cross, and being raised from the dead, Jesus ascended on high and performed his priestly work once and for all, entering into God’s presence on behalf of his people. This work of Jesus is the heavenly reality, which we cannot see, but which nevertheless saves us from the guilt and power of our sins. This then is how we are redeemed. This is how our eternal redemption comes about—through Jesus Christ’s priestly work.

That this puts an end to earthly sacrifices and the shedding of blood is made plain in verses 25-26. “*Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.*” Here, then, we find the very heart of Jesus Christ’s priestly work—performed in the heavenly temple, once for all, because the sacrifice which removes the guilt of our sin, has already been made, by Jesus himself, for us, his people. Jesus died once for all because his blood does what the blood of animals could not do—turn aside God’s wrath. Jesus’ sacrifice, once offered, puts an end to all further sacrifices. And although it is easy to overlook, the author’s point is that this sacrifice marks the turning point in the biblical conception of redemptive history. God’s last will and testament is now in force. He has sworn on his oath and his promises are now reality. When Jesus makes this sacrifice, it marks the end of the age and the old covenant, and brings about a new age in which there are no more earthly sacrifices for sin. Period. There is no more shedding of blood. No more high priests. No earthly temple.

This is why confessional Protestants find the Roman Catholic mass so offensive. The only sacrifice which

can secure our eternal redemption has already been made on the cross, once and for all, by the great high priest which is applied to us in the heavenly temple. And in light of the priestly work of Jesus Christ (and the author's emphasis upon the once for all nature of that sacrifice), continued sacrifices on earthly altars by sinful priests are not, and indeed cannot be effectual. To even perform such a sacrifice is to say that Christ's own priestly work is ineffectual and incomplete.

In the closing verses of chapter 9, the author makes a number of significant theological points which wrap up his previous points. In verse 27, he writes, "*and just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,*" in order to make plain that every person has but one life, and at the end of it faces the final judgment. While author is probably referring back to his earlier point about a will becoming valid after the death of the one who makes it, the impact of this statement is crystal clear: Christianity teaches a final judgment for every person after death yet to come.

This means that there is no possibility of reincarnation or the transmigration of the soul after death—a view which would have been widely held by first century pagans in the city where this congregation worshiped. This also means that when someone dies, they stay dead awaiting the final judgment and resurrection, and their souls do not come back and visit the living. We do not and cannot see dead people! It is not possible, and those who argue this way or believe this nonsense have imbibed far too deeply from the pagan culture around us (as in the recent best-seller *Heaven is for Real*, a serious error which Christians all-too willingly embrace with little or no discernment because the book is charming).

In verse 28, the author now offers a wonderful word of hope to all those who trust in what was done to secure their eternal redemption through a once for all sacrifice for sin by reminding God's people that our great high priest will one day return to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new. He writes, "*so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.*" That one who has died for our sins—"how much more . . ." "once for all . . ." will appear a second time, not to die for sin (because the final sacrifice has already been made), but to deliver all those for whom he died, and who are now eagerly awaiting his return. On that day, the author reminds us, our eternal redemption will be a visible reality. God will dwell with us, and we will behold his eternal glory in that new heaven and earth, when all of the redeemed creation will be God's glorious temple.

What, then, do we away take from this text?

As he makes his case for the superiority of Jesus Christ—his priesthood and the new covenant which he institutes—the author repeatedly emphasizes the fact that because of the sufficiency of the sacrifice made by Jesus on behalf of his people ("once for all"), and because of its superiority to the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament ("how much more . . ."), God's wrath is fully satisfied and our eternal redemption is thereby secured. This is the author's theological explanation of our Lord's dying words on the cross, "it is finished." The death of Jesus, our great high priest, does exactly what God intended it to do—save us from the guilt and power of sin.

His death cleanses our consciences. His death turns aside God's wrath. And because he did "once for all" there are no more sacrifices for sin. There is only the wonderful hope that our Lord will return "to save all those who are eagerly waiting for his return." "Amen" and "Maranatha," come quickly Lord Jesus.