

**“The Gospel According to the Old Testament”**  
**Hebrews 9:1-28**  
**August 22, 2021**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

We have all experienced some of the same struggles and temptations faced by the recipients of Hebrews. As they faced the threat of suffering, they found their hearts drifting away from the Lord. It seemed to them that life was easier before they came to Christ. Their hearts were growing cold and hardened toward the Lord. Some were even on a path toward falling away from Christ completely. What medicine will our author apply to their need? He resorts to the only medicine available, and the only medicine needed for sinners like these and sinners like us—the gospel of Jesus Christ. He doesn’t whip them with the law, but woos them with the gospel. He doesn’t shame them with their sin, but reassures them of God’s love through Christ.

Chapters 7-9 are the heart of his gospel explanation, and he does so by means of using the Old Testament. The gospel appears in the pages of the Old Testament in shadow form, much like seeing a photograph of a person versus the real person. A photograph is accurate as far as it goes, but it is far inferior to the real flesh and blood person. Today’s passage uses the practices on the Day of Atonement to paint a picture of the gospel, a picture that is fulfilled by our great high priest, Jesus. On the day of this annual event, the high priest would take the blood of the sacrificial animal and walk into the outer room of the tabernacle, a room our text refers to as “the Holy Place” (v. 2). He would then pass through that room to the inner sanctum of the tabernacle, a room called “the Most Holy Place” (v. 3). It was in that room that the ark of the covenant was located, on top of which sat the mercy seat. This was the throne room of God, the tent where God lived and from which he ruled his people. The priest would sprinkle the blood of the sacrificial lamb on that mercy seat for the forgiveness of his own sins and of those of the people.

Old Testament practices like this Day of Atonement are pictures of the gospel. Let’s note three of the priceless gifts brought to us by this gospel.

**I. The Gospel Proceeds to the Root of Our Problem**

The gospel will become the kind of good news that thrills the heart only when we accept God’s view that sin is our root problem. The Old Testament sacrifices on the Day of Atonement and throughout the year demonstrate God’s view of things. A sacrificial death makes the point that sin deserves death. How big a problem is sin? It’s so big that complete removal is the only solution. The

principle is stated with utmost clarity in verse 22: **“Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.”**

This truth was made clear to Israel through animal sacrifices. A worshiper would bring an animal without blemish to the priests at the tabernacle. He would then take a knife and slit the throat of the lamb or other animal. Blood would pour forth with each beat of the heart until the animal lost enough blood to no longer be able to stand. The blood flow would gradually slow until the heart stopped beating and the life was gone. This was repeated thousands of times throughout the year. It has been estimated that during the Old Testament era of temple worship more than a million animals were sacrificed.

Modern thought views this as an archaic religious relic. Kent Hughes tells the story of his college English professor making fun of William Cowper’s famous hymn, “There is a Fountain Filled with Blood.” He viewed this hymn as an example of primitive sentiments, calling it “slaughterhouse religion.” Others have mocked God by accusing him of child abuse in the death of his Son. This seems to me to be the greatest example of human pride. Proud humanity wants to tell God that his holiness should not be so hard on sin. This pride is made even more ugly when we consider the fact that God doesn’t ask sinners to pay this price of blood sacrifice, but instead has paid it himself. Cowper’s hymn is gloriously true. “There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel’s veins; And sinners, plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains.”

There is a word found at the end of verse 10 that is difficult to translate. Speaking of the Old Testament worship practices, it says that they **“deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.”** It’s obviously speaking of the contrast between these Old Testament practices and the cleansing brought by Jesus. Jesus’ sacrifice brought about “the time of reformation.” It’s a word that means to set things straight or to restore the natural order. In his space trilogy, C. S. Lewis uses the term “bent ones” to describe those who live on our planet. Sin has made us to be like a warped board or a crooked arrow. This is our basic problem that Jesus has come to address. Your root problem is not your appearance, your inabilities, your bank account, your job or your relationships. Your root problem is your sin, and that is the problem that Jesus has come to address.

## **II. The Gospel Purifies the Conscience**

This root problem of sin brings psychological harm in the form of a guilty conscience. It is the blood of Christ alone that can cleanse a guilty conscience. **“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”** (v. 13-14). The Old Testament purification rites were able to cleanse outwardly, but only Jesus’ blood is able to cleanse inwardly. Is a guilty conscience a problem for you? In my experience, most Christians live with a black cloud of guilt hanging over their heads all the time. We often feel as if we are not as good as those other nice people at church. We sometimes think that Jesus will tire of us and cast us out. In his book, *Gentle and Lowly*, Dane Ortlund says, “Fallen, anxious sinners are limitless in their capacity to perceive reasons for Jesus to cast them out. We are factories of fresh resistances to Christ’s love. Even when we run out of tangible reasons to be cast out, such as specific sins or failures, we tend to retain a vague sense that, given enough time, Jesus will finally grow tired of us and hold us at arms’ length.”

Ortlund refers to an entire book written by John Bunyan on one verse, John 6:37: **“Whoever comes to me I will never cast out.”** He updates some words from Bunyan describing the objections stemming from our guilty consciences.

“No wait”—we say, cautiously approaching Jesus—“you don’t understand. I’ve *really* messed up, in all kinds of ways.” *I know*, he responds. “You know most of it, sure. Certainly more than what others see. But there’s perversity down inside me that is hidden from everyone.” *I know it all*. “Well—the thing is, it isn’t just my past. It’s my present too.” *I understand*. “But I don’t know if I can break free of this any time soon.” *That’s the only kind of person I’m here to help*. “The burden is heavy—and heavier all the time.” *Then let me carry it*. “It’s too much to bear.” *Not for me*. “You don’t get it. My offenses aren’t directed toward others. They’re against you.” *Then I am the one most suited to forgive them*. “But the more of the ugliness in me you discover, the sooner you’ll get fed up with me.” *Whoever comes to me I will never cast out*. (pp. 63-64)

When Jesus purifies the conscience, we are freed **“from dead works to serve the living God”** (v. 14). What are dead works? They are works disconnected from a heart change, works that could be classified as merely going through the motions. A dead work is making an appearance at a worship service but leaving your heart behind. A dead work is giving money for the Lord’s work but finding no joy in it. A dead work is doing just enough not to feel guilty about something, while you really don’t want to do anything. A dead work is like the insect after the spider finishes with him. The spider injects poison into the body of its victim and lets it steep for a while, until the insides become a soup to be consumed by the spider. The outside of the victim remains intact, looking just like a live insect, even though there is nothing left on the inside, and no life whatsoever.

Jesus is able to bring life to a cold, dead heart. He does so by this assurance of forgiveness that leads to a cleansed conscience.

### **III. The Gospel Provides the Final Solution**

The final verses of our chapter return to this Old Testament practice of the Day of Atonement and present Jesus as the ultimate fulfillment of that day. Just as the high priest went into the Most Holy Place on that day, so Jesus has gone into the heavenly temple to offer his blood as a sacrifice for our sins. Ultimately, your salvation depends on something that happens unseen to any of our eyes. Satisfaction for sin must be made in heaven, and that is what Jesus has done. If a storm comes through your neighborhood and you lose your electrical power, there is nothing you can do within your house to restore that power. You can go to your breaker box and flip the breakers all you want, and still no power will return. Even if you could rewire your entire house, it would do absolutely nothing to get your power back on. Something must happen outside of your house, whether it's a downed power line or a blown transformer. It's not required that you know any of those details. You don't have to do anything. Those in the know will identify the source of the problem and then repair it. The text speaks of something similar. Our most fundamental problem is that our sin leads to certain judgment. In the heavenly temple, in the throne room of God, satisfaction is made by the blood of Jesus.

Since this satisfaction for our sin happens in a place invisible to us, how do we know that it's happened? When the power is restored there is an immediate and visible result, but the same is not the case here. The text makes the point that the satisfaction of divine justice that is brought by the blood of Jesus is something that needed to happen only once. This is in contrast to the work of the high priest on the Day of Atonement. He would come every year to offer the blood of the sacrifice. But all such sacrifices have now ended. Jesus has offered a once-for-all sacrifice that needs no repetition for the simple reason that the first time concluded the matter. The gospels report that at the crucifixion of Jesus the temple curtain that prevented anyone from entering the Most Holy Place was torn in two, from top to bottom. God was saying, "This sacrifice opens the way into my presence for my people."

Have you known people who have made numerous professions of faith, out of a fear that they didn't do it the right way in previous attempts? Perhaps they've walked an aisle for salvation on multiple occasions, looking for some assurance that it has finally worked. Such efforts are misguided. It's not a matter of our doing it the right way, but of Jesus having done it the right way. Our need isn't to attempt a do-over for ourselves, but to rest in the one act from Jesus that never will need a do-over. Here's another quote from *Gentle and Lowly*. "It is the most counterintuitive aspect of Christianity, that we are declared right with God not once we begin to get our act together but once we collapse into honest acknowledgment that we never will" (p. 78). Satisfaction has been made. The final solution has been accomplished.

The final two verses of the chapter hit this hammer blow again of the certainty of Jesus' work of salvation. The oft-quoted verse 27 begins the argument when it says, "**And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes**

**judgment...**” The author is bringing up two facts that all of his readers would have accepted as certain and inevitable. It is appointed for man to die once. The verb “appointed” means to put something away and to store it for safe-keeping. It is the verb used of the foolish servant who took his one mina and kept it hidden in a handkerchief (Luke 19:20). The day of death for each one of us is stored away in God’s book. It is a certainty, as is the fact of judgment that will follow. The author is not asserting these things as true, but assuming that all of his readers already accepted them as true and obvious. It’s roughly equivalent to the statement you will sometimes hear people say today that the only two certainties in life are death and taxes.

His point is to compare what is obviously certain to them with another proposition that is equally certain but not as obvious. **“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”** (v. 28). The first of the two certainties he lists is that Jesus has already borne the sins of many. He has taken the burden of our sins upon himself, carrying that burden in order to remove it from us. That is a certainty that is in the past. The second certainty is yet to come. He will appear a second time **“to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.”** He will finish the work he began by bearing our sins. We are already saved from the penalty of sin, and one day in the future we will be saved from both the power and presence of sin.

## **CONCLUSION:**

The last phrase of the chapter is the only one that speaks of our role in this salvation. The entire chapter has focused on Christ’s work on our behalf, and now the last phrase of the last verse mentions something we do. We eagerly wait for his return. That is a description of what faith looks like. To eagerly wait for his return says much about us. It says that we recognize and accept the fact that we are not yet what we should be. We still have actual sin even though we no longer have any guilt for that sin. It also says that we recognize and accept the fact that this world is not what it should be, and we are waiting on Jesus to put things right. And it says that we are trusting Jesus to do so. We wait because there is no alternative. We wait like the person waiting for a delayed flight across the Atlantic. Since it’s too far to swim and no roads can take you there, you wait. Our waiting for Jesus is an expression of our trust in him. Waiting is God-centered, distancing us from our pervasive self-centered tendencies. It focuses us on God’s actions and not our own. That is our need, and that is the medicine of the gospel. And we wait eagerly, filled with joy in the prospect of the sure and certain conclusion of this great work of salvation accomplished by our great high priest.

**Small Group Questions**  
**Hebrews 9:1-28**

1. The Old Testament sacrifices are a picture of the gospel. Try to put yourself in the position of an Old Testament Israelite bringing his lamb as an offering and taking the knife to slit its throat. What do you imagine might be some of your feelings as you do so?
2. This text, as well as the rest of the Bible, clearly views sin as the root of our problems. How might sin be implicated in some of the problems we experience today?
  - Marriage
  - Poverty
  - Political dysfunction
3. Jesus brings about “the time of reformation” (v. 10), which means a time when all that is crooked will be made straight. What are you most looking forward to seeing made straight?
4. The gospel purifies the conscience. It is a universal trait that we live with a sense of defilement. Is that your experience? What does that look like?
5. The dead works from which we are said to be purified refers to works that are done outwardly with no heart in them. It’s just “going through the motions.” Is there an area in life where you are just going through the motions? How does the gospel deliver us from this kind of outward religion?
6. The final paragraph of the chapter emphasizes the once-for-all nature of Jesus’ work of salvation. How might this truth help someone who is always wanting to recommit his life to Christ out of a fear that he didn’t do it the right way the previous times?
7. Why does the chapter conclude with a description of faith as “eagerly waiting” for Jesus’ return? How is such waiting a good description of faith? Is your life marked by such eager waiting?