

# ONCE FOR ALL

*SERIES: THE SUPREMACY OF THE SON*

by Steve Zeisler

The Automobile Association provides a service for its members in which they draw up an itinerary for those planning trips. They even highlight your route on a map so that you may easily follow their directions. It's important to have such a help when you are traveling into unfamiliar territory. And if your destination is particularly attractive, it's especially helpful if you can avoid being sidetracked.

We could regard the passage we are going to look at from the book of Hebrews today in the same way. Christians are headed for a glorious spiritual destination. We will hear related in powerful terms the wonderful truth that our sins are forgiven. We no longer have to bear guilt for the rebellion and impurities of our lives. Our consciences have been cleansed from sin. That is the glorious destination before us.

But we will discover as we go along that there are quite a few side trips we could make, and many beneficial stops we could consider. Because of time limitations, however, we will have to pass by many of these interesting details. The essential thrust of the passage is so valuable it almost demands our remaining on course, on the colored line, as it were.

We find that Hebrews 9:5 encourages us along these lines, referring as it does to "things we cannot now speak in detail:"

**...and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat; but of these things we cannot now speak in detail.**

Yes, we will find many things along the way worthy of our attention, but we will move quickly through them to arrive at our destination. There is nothing more necessary to vital Christianity than the knowledge that you are free of sins; that your conscience is cleansed.

It is well known that those most heavily in debt are the very people who are the target of sales promotions. When faced with temptation to spend and acquire, the fact that they are the ones who can least afford to spend money doesn't seem to matter. The same principle holds true in our spiritual lives; we are most vulnerable to temptation when our conscience accuses us and we are unclear on the fact that God has forgiven our sins. Those who are burdened by the past find themselves ill at ease with the present.

But the essential point in the passage before us this morning is that our consciences need never accuse us again. As Christians, we can awaken every morning absolutely certain that God accepts us and loves us. We can fight today's battle and run today's race unencumbered by the crushing weight of sin and guilt. Despite whatever negative feedback we get from any human quarter, this truth remains: God accepts us and loves us. We have been cleansed of all impurities.

In this letter to the Hebrews we have seen that there are two spiritual realities which exist side by side, and we must choose between them; we must live our lives based on one or the other. When this book was written, Jerusalem had not yet been sacked by the Roman armies. Worship was carried out daily in the temple. The writer reminds us that not only was that temple standing in Jerusalem, but the heavenly temple also was standing, and worship was offered daily there too. God's people had

to choose, therefore: would they worship primarily in externals, in things that could only be seen, or would they bring spiritual worship to God? Would they worship according to the priesthood of Melchizedek or according to the Levitical priesthood?

Again, the passage we will look at today talks about the present time and the time of reformation. Both exist simultaneously. Most importantly, the distinction is made between the new covenant and the old covenant. Each covenant is in operation at the same time. We have a choice to make on which basis we will appeal to God.

When I was a student at Stanford, I once made an observation about the Stanford church and the house I lived in. Stanford Church is a very beautiful building. It possesses a great religious history. But when I was a student, the church was primarily a center for political debate. It was a religious building that existed mainly to talk about human enterprise. The house I lived in on campus at that time was a little two-bedroom structure in the College Terrace area of Palo Alto. It ought to have been torn down years ago, but it's still there today. A group of four students were permanent residents, although there were always several others to be found sleeping under and on top of tables, etc. But there was probably more prayer, more expression of love of God and more study of his Word going on in that funny little house in College Terrace than took place in Stanford Chapel. Things are not always what they seem to be. The building in which God receives most honor is not necessarily the one you would expect.

We find that dichotomy throughout the book of Hebrews. There is a heavenly reality and there is an earthly reality; there is spiritual worship and there is man-made worship. The letter repeatedly urges us to choose between the two. This morning's discussion of the cleansing of a conscience will face us with the same issue. We have a long way to go on our trip, with a lot of territory to cover. Many details will, out of necessity, have to be overlooked, but I hope the central point will become apparent.

**Now even the first covenant had regulations of divine worship and the earthly sanctuary. For there was a tabernacle prepared, the outer one, in which were the lampstand and the table and the sacred bread; this is called the holy place. Behind the second veil there was a tabernacle which is called the Holy of Holies, having a golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden jar holding the manna, and Aaron's rod which budded, and the tables of the covenant; and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat; but of these things we cannot now speak in detail. Now when these things have been so prepared, the priests are continually entering the outer tabernacle performing the divine worship, but into the second, only the high priest enters once a year, not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance. The Holy Spirit is signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed while the outer tabernacle is still standing, which is a symbol for the present time. Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience, since they relate only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation.**

**But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Hebrews 9:1-14)**

Earthly worship, despite all of its majesty and beauty, is primarily concerned with cleansing the flesh (Hebrews 9:13). It is ritual worship. It ministers to our appearance, to our feelings, but what it cannot do is penetrate to our hearts and cleanse them. Earthly worship cannot give us a clear conscience.

This ministry of cleansing the flesh, I believe, can be compared with the results of psychological counseling. Now I'm not saying that psychology is ineffective. The ministry of cleansing the flesh is not entirely useless. But it does not accomplish the most necessary thing—cleansing of the conscience. Psychologists and psychiatrists can assure you that you are not the only one ever to suffer what you are suffering, and that can be useful to know. They can stand with you and bring a word of encouragement. They can move your neuroses around and lay your problems on other facets of your behavior rather than the one that bothers you so much. But, in the long run, the failure of such solutions is that hearts are not cleansed, consciences are not quieted. We cannot be certain that we are right before God.

What Jesus did is much more valuable. “How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” How much more effective is the ministry of Christ, who once and for all dealt with our sins! How much more valuable it is to have ministry to our spirit, the inner man, than ministry merely to the flesh!

Earlier this morning we sang with full hearts of the majesty of God. Where did we get the temerity to do that? How can we who have stained our lives with the rebellion into which we were born, sing the praises of God? Where do we get the courage to sing of his majesty? The answer is, despite our history, despite our impurities and rebellion, they are no longer counted against us. As Christians, we have a High Priest who cleanses our conscience, making us not only legally right, but free from the accusations of our conscience. In the magnificent words of Roman 8:1, “There is therefore now no condemnation....” That announcement overreaches everything. We have One who ministers to us by cleansing our conscience.

There are some very interesting points made in this passage. Let us look in particular at the description of the worship in the temple in Jerusalem. As long as it still had standing, the temple was witness to the failure of external religion to do what it purported to be able to do.

The Jews believed that temple worship was the means by which they gained access to God. But the writer of Hebrews says that very expression of worship announces precisely the opposite. It is the best testimony available to the fact that we do not have access to God. No one was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies except one man, and he on only one day each year. Then, he sprinkled himself in ritual cleansing and went forth in fear and trembling into the presence of God—one day each year only. The temple is a graphic visual aid to help us recognize that we are not acceptable to God, that we may not go into the Holiest Place. But the great truth of the Melchizedekian priesthood, the great truth of Christ's sacrifice, is that the temple curtain was rent, and we now have access to God at any time—every day, everyone, not just one man once each year.

All man-made religious enterprise is declaring over and over again its own failure and inadequacy. Think of the many Christian organizations that get bigger and bigger, with their committees, computers and satellite dishes. If men and women were experiencing real intimacy with God they wouldn't need the increasingly voracious and intrusive involvement of many of today's high-profile organizations. Much repetitive religious patter succeeds only in pointing out how ineffective it is. The same is true of psychological counseling. Ever since Freud invented modern psychology it has been a tremendous growth industry. Almost daily we read of new schools of thought in the field of psychology as one trend supplants another. But all of them are declaring, in effect, that all ministry that is aimed at cleansing the flesh is inadequate. The reason such a ministry grows bigger and purportedly better is that it just does not work.

The temple worship in Jerusalem testified to the inability of men and women to draw near to God. But hear the words of the new covenant in Hebrews: “How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” How much more magnificent is the ministry of Christ! Every moment of every day, for every man and woman who will believe, the blood of Christ grants access to the power of the living God. What a magnificent testimony!

Beginning with verse 15, we find that not only is Christ's ministry more effective and more valuable than that of the ministry of the old economy, it is also much more certain; it is absolutely and irrevocably certain.

**For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. (Hebrews 9:15)**

The issue before us now speaks of an inheritance, one that is unchangeable, eternal. At this point the Greek word *diatheke*, which has up to now been used to speak of a covenant, an agreement, is here used in a slightly different sense. The word can also mean will, or testament, referring to the document that is used when one is apportioning his money and goods. It is in that sense that the word is being used now.

**For where a covenant is, there must of necessity be the death of the one who made it. For a covenant is valid only when men are dead, for it is never in force while the one who made it lives. Therefore even the first covenant was not inaugurated without blood. For when every commandment had been spoken by Moses to all the people according to the Law, he took the blood of the calves and the 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 WHICH GOD COMMANDED YOU." And in the same way he sprinkled both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry with the blood. And according to the Law, one may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. (Hebrews 9:16-22)**

All this reference to blood may strike us as odd and archaic. But it is important to understand the central point of this passage so that we may know why the reference to blood is so significant.

The provisions of a will are not executed until the one who made the will is dead. The relatives of wealthy individuals are often portrayed as living in uncertainty, tearful that their rich aunt or uncle may change his mind on the terms of his will. And that may happen; as long as an individual remains alive he is free at any time to change the terms of his will. My father, who is a CPA, is frequently called upon to work in the area of estate planning and related matters. He has told me some horror stories about the infighting he has seen occur among the heirs of certain individuals who fear their elderly father or aunt or whoever will remarry and dispose of their wealth some other way. As long as a testator remains alive there is always the chance he will change his mind, no matter how adamant his promises. But once he or she has died, the facts are irrevocable. The inheritance becomes certain.

That is the idea which the writer of Hebrews is putting forth here. Jesus not only promised life as an inheritance, his death had the effect of sealing his promise, making it irrevocable. His death cast his promise in cement. Death makes everything irrevocable—it is useless to try and offer an apology to someone who is dead. You cannot go back and make things right. Death shuts the door. Everything that was in place at the death will remain. Here in these verses we have testimony that the inheritance which we are promised is ours now because the death of Christ guarantees that it cannot be changed.

The end of Hebrews 9 contrasts the repetitions of earthly worship with the finality, the once and for all, irrevocable promise of God. Worship that was offered year after year after year was merely declaring its inadequacy year after year after year. That uncertainty, that possibility of change is directly contrasted with the ministry of Christ who died once and for all.

**And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment, so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him. (Hebrews 9:27, 28)**

When Christ returns, he will not bring up the issue of our sins. He will return again for salvation, for a joyful reunion, for the purpose of establishing righteousness. He will not bring up our past. He will not discuss our failures. He will not make any reference to our sins, our inadequacy, our impurity. He will not bring them up because he has already dealt with them. God is not interested in our sins. Everything that remains in our past is done away with by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for us.

Verses 1-18 of chapter 10 set forth a related point, which is simply this: we need to choose between a new and old covenant. As long as the earthly tent has standing, as long as we think some activity or effort on our part will take away guilt, then we are rejecting Christ. This is an all-or-nothing proposition.

We cannot hope to be cleansed by Christ and have our consciences ministered to if at the same time we are hoping that human religion, which can only cleanse the flesh, will meet our heart's needs.

**Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us; for after saying, "THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THEM AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS UPON THEIR HEART, AND ON THEIR MIND I WILL WRITE THEM," He then says, "AND THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS I WILL REMEMBER NO MORE." Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin. (Hebrews 10:11-18)**

The point of this passage is, if we are really forgiven, if we have been cleansed of our impurities, then there is nothing we can do to add to it; we can make no further offering for sin. Have you ever wanted to pray but felt unable to do so because of guilt? When I feel that way, I think that if I could be "good" for a while, change my habits and clean up my act, then I could sneak into the presence of God with my prayers. I feel so burdened by what I have done, and so responsible for my actions, I imagine I may not go into the presence of God until I do something—until I make some offering for sin that will allow me access. When we do that we deny the message of this chapter. Christ died once and for all. There is nothing we can do that will add to that. If we choose to try we are denying him.

Tonight begins the Jewish celebration of *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. Even though no temple sacrifice is possible now, Jews view this day as the holiest of the year. Yet, this year's Day of Atonement. However sincerely worship is offered, must testify to the inadequacy of last year's appeal for forgiveness. Only the blood of Christ can render us guiltless, and every other offer to cleanse a conscience must be rejected.

Almost daily we must deal with failure, with comparisons in which we come up second best, with negative feedback and evidence of our inadequacies. But if we are Christians, we never come under such judgment from the Lord God. He will never display our failures to us. Christ has paid for our sins once and for all. We are set free of the weight of them. Scripture says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Confession of sin does not produce forgiveness. Forgiveness is given beforehand. Confession is the announcement; that we have given up our efforts to make ourselves acceptable. And it is when we stop trying to do it ourselves that the glorious ministry of forgiveness becomes ours.

Jesus said, "The one who is forgiven much loves much" (cf Luke 7:47). Do you have a problem with lovelessness? Do you wish you were more able to be giving and loving and be a blessing to others? It is when we know the depth of our own forgiveness that we can love much. Jesus tied together our ability to forgive the sins of others to our reception of forgiveness in

the Lord's prayer. It is when we become increasingly certain of our own forgiveness that we can be freed from resentment and the inability to forgive.

Some years ago a popular recording was made of the gospel song, *O, Happy Day*. I wondered at the time if it was the upbeat music and the sound that attracted people, or whether the song was popular even among non-Christians because it spoke of something that everyone needs so desperately: "O, happy day, the day that Jesus washed my sins away." One day, one time, once and for all, Jesus Christ accomplished what we need for forgiveness. We need never, ever be concerned for our sins as we enter the presence of God.

We must run the race. We must fight the battles. We must overcome temptation. We have an adventure before us—to render service to God and that is made possible by the cleansing of our conscience, it says in Hebrews 9. But we run the race without any weight on our backs. We do not have to fight, carrying with us the burden of a guilty past. That is gone forever. Every day of our lives we awaken with the knowledge that we are sons and daughters, intimates of God. There is nothing standing in the way of our relationship with him. We can face every day debt-free, cleansed from the sins of the past.

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