

¹⁶ For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. 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. ¹⁸ Therefore not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you." ²¹ And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. ²² Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. ²³ 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. 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. ²⁵ Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, ²⁸ 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.

Introduction

Reading the book of Hebrews, it is difficult to miss the reoccurring theme of "better things" (6.9) that pertain to the coming of Christ. We have spent some time reflecting on better promises (8.6) a better priesthood (7.26), a better ministry (8.6), a better covenant (7.22), and a better hope (7.19). Now in Hebrews 9.16-28, we come to the foundation of all these better things, which is the better sacrifice of Christ. We can outline the passage by identifying two main reasons for the better quality of His sacrifice. These reasons are like two hooks on which other positives will hang. His sacrifice is better because it fulfills that which is both necessary and sufficient for salvation (for the deliverance of sinners from final judgment, now and not yet).

1A. His sacrifice fulfills what is necessary for salvation

1B. First, its necessity is shown in the overlap of covenant with will (vs. 16-17). The common case of the will (for inheritance to be granted) demonstrates and illustrates the necessity of Christ's sacrificial death (¹⁶ For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. 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). In the case of a will, there must be validation of the death of its maker (v. 16). That is so because as long as the maker of the will lives, the will cannot be implemented (v. 17). No part of the inheritance stipulated in a last will and testament can be discharged, no heir can benefit from a will until the benefactor dies. There are no beneficiaries without a death. Pointedly, for someone to benefit from a will, someone else *must* die. Our Lord's sacrificial death meets that requirement.

2B. Second, its necessity is shown by the use of blood in the heavenly tabernacle

This is the point of 18-23 (¹⁸ Therefore not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you." ²¹ And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. ²² Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. ²³ 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 old covenant was not inaugurated without blood (v. 18). Almost everything (people, tent, and vessels) was sprinkled for purification with blood to make the nature of this necessity clear: death by the shedding of blood is required for forgiveness of sins (v. 22). To teach that lesson explains why the copies were purified with blood rites: **Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites** (9.23a).

Thus, the reality is that if there is going to be forgiveness of sins, the shedding of blood is necessary and that is why the copies were purified by blood. But how should we understand 9.23b: **the heavenly things themselves [are purified] with better sacrifices?** There is a bit of ambiguity here in the use of the plural "sacrifices" for the sacrifice of Christ. As a matter of fact, we might say that there is a lot of ambiguity in the thought here that heavenly things need cleansing and purification. How can we get our arms around the idea that heaven was somehow defiled and in

need of cleansing? The simple and brief answer is this: we can understand the author on this point if we can get our feet into the shoes of prophetic metaphor. That is easier to say than to do, as we observed in the study of prophetic metaphor in Matthew 10. We can think of our text in Hebrews as prophetic metaphor when we fix our attention on the relation of copies to reality that runs through Hebrews 9. Let us get our bearings on the cleaning of heavenly things in steps.

1) Step one: the “heavenly things” refer to the heavenly tabernacle

The Mosaic tabernacle anticipated, promised, and shall we say, prophesied the future entry of Christ into the heavenly tabernacle: **For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands...into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf (9.24)**, which is where He is a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man (8.2). Thus the writer tells us that **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) ¹² 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 (9.11-12).**

2) Step two: the heavenly things are the real things

The earthly tabernacle is not the real thing. It was something real to be sure. It had actual wood, cloth, and gold as component parts. However, it is important to remind ourselves that that tabernacle (that tent with its holy places, the lampstands, table with bread on it, the altar of incense, the ark of the covenant, the jar of manna, Aaron’s rod, and the tablets of the Law) was a copy of the reality yet to come. The tent the old covenant high priests entered was a shadow of the heavenly reality that Christ entered as our great high priest. Thus, the author tells us that these earthly things are **symbolic [or parabolic] for the present age (9.9)** and they are **copies of the heavenly things (9.23)**.

3) Step three: the heavenly things receive a figurative cleansing

We are immersed here in a form of prophetic metaphor. The purification that pertains to the heavenly is by means of a better sacrifice, Christ’s death. It was necessary to have a better sacrifice to accomplish what the old order typified, namely, a heavenly purification. It is *as if* a cleansing process swept across the heavens with blood sprinkled on every component of the heavenly tent, on almost everything in heaven! The purification of heaven is metaphorical. We have the symbolic language of the copy transferred to the reality to which it points to give the powerful statement that the work of Christ is absolutely necessary to complete the transaction of the purification of sinners in the presence of God (“in heaven”)

It is as if sinners are brought into the heavenly tabernacle to have a heavenly mercy seat placed over them and the blood sprinkled on it to cover and cleanse them. Thus, this metaphorical way of speaking about heavenly things being purified uses the language of the old tabernacle cleansings to depict the completed work of Christ in the presence of God on our behalf, *on the basis of His own blood*. In a picture, His blood must be sprinkled on the altar in heaven cleansing the heavenly altar to accomplish what the old types anticipated. The plural, “sacrifices,” indicates the carry over of the copy to the reality in a figurative way: it is as if all the ancient sacrifices are offered in the heavenly tabernacle to cleanse heaven. This is a powerful figure of what was required, namely, the sacrifice of Christ that had to be applied in the heavenly sanctuary by His abiding priestly ministry in the presence of God on our behalf. Such priestly intercession in heaven is something we absolutely need and it is something Jesus provides.

A final clarification is in order. It is not necessary that God save sinners, but having covenanted to do so, the sacrifice of Christ is absolutely necessary. In the end, His sacrifice is better because it fulfills the radical necessity that someone die in order for the heirs of salvation (Heb. 1.14) to benefit from the new covenant. Death is the fundamental requirement of the covenant and Jesus fulfilled it perfectly and completely to the full satisfaction of divine justice.

Thus, the sacrifice of Christ is better because it fulfills what is necessary for salvation. Another reason that His sacrifice is better is because it is efficacious. To that point we now turn.

2A. His sacrifice fulfills what is sufficient for salvation

This is just to say that the death of Christ is efficacious. Three points in the text bring out this efficacy. His sacrifice is like a will, it put away sin, and by it Jesus bore the sins of many.

1B. His sacrifice is like a will

It is like a will in the precise matter of efficacy. When death occurs, benefits flow to the heirs. Wills are common in human experience. They illustrate the fundamental fact that sinners become beneficiaries, heirs of salvation (1.14), heirs of the promised eternal inheritance (9.15), and heirs of eternal redemption both now and not yet (9.12) by a death: **a will takes effect... at death.** Thus, as a pointed basic of the gospel, we receive the benefits of the new covenant *by the death* of our covenant Lord. The bottom line is the connection of the benefit with the death. When you receive an inheritance and, for example, take possession of a piece of property, the death of your benefactor put that property into your hands.

The better sacrifice is better because it is efficacious; *it grants the inheritance* to the heirs. Thus, when God calls a sinner from death to life and from darkness to light, that is a step in the giving of the benefits that flow efficaciously from the cross to that sinner. The death of Christ secured the call that releases the sinner from his bondage in sin and death. His death *in fact redeems* (sets you free, 9.15b) because that release from bondage was guaranteed for you when, on the cross, Jesus *secured* eternal redemption (9.12). His covenant is like a will: the death of the testator (the covenant maker) is sufficient for the salvation of the stipulated beneficiaries. His sacrifice does not merely make man savable; it saves. The death that occurred redeems. There is wonderworking power in the precious blood of the lamb.

2B. His sacrifice put away sin

This fact also supports the efficacy of the death of Christ. ²⁵ **Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own,** ²⁶ **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** (9.25-26). There are some remarkable things in these verses for our meditation. The high priest of the old covenant had to repeatedly make offerings for sin because the ritual offerings were ineffectual as mere shadows of the real offering. By contrast, the sacrifice of Christ was self-sacrifice (He came **to offer himself**), deadly (with His own **blood**), and painful (He **had to suffer**). But none of this had to be repeated because His pain-filled and deadly self-sacrifice was effectual. By it, He **put away sin**.

What does it mean “to put away sin”? To answer, let us follow the context. Putting away sin occurred by His appearance on the scene of human history (**he...appeared**). Remember, the purpose of His coming into the world was not to be served but to serve and give His life as the ransom payment in exchange for the lives of many (Mat. 20.28). Thus, the cross was an event like none other that brought the purposes and promises of all past ages to their end. That is, His sacrifice brought the past to fulfillment in such a way that the Law as symbol and promise is now abolished. The symbolic rituals have been annulled, cancelled, and **set aside** (**a former commandment is set aside**, Heb. 7.18). In 9.26, the same word (annulled, cancelled, and set aside) is translated **put away**. Therefore, in an unparalleled way, the appearance and death of Christ altered history at its center by annulling, canceling, setting aside, and putting away sin. How, we ask, can this be the case with so much sin continuing in the world? The answer is that the pain-filled and deadly self-sacrifice of Christ set aside all the legal claims of the Law; it once and for all time removed the pronouncements of guilt and condemnation from the ledger for use on judgment day.

Two related questions demand consideration: is this telling us that no one will face the legal claims of the Law on the Day of Judgment? Answer: no, the Law will expose the guilt of sinners and demand their punishment. If God will find people guilty of Law breaking on the final day, then should we weaken how we understand the nature of this putting away of sin from something definitive to a potentiality? Answer: no, this text is not telling us that the sacrifice of Christ made it *possible* for sin to be cancelled. His death was the consummate event of history that cancelled the condemning charges of the Law due to sin. The cross does not make people savable; it saves. The sacrifice of Christ by death on the cross once and for all removed the

pronouncements of condemnation from the ledger for use on the final day *for His covenant brothers and sisters*. The next support for efficacy makes this particularism patently clear.

3B. His sacrifice bore the sins of many

²⁷ **And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,** ²⁸ **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 (9.27-28).** The words “just as...so” indicate comparison and contrast between the appointment of man to die and Christ’s covenant appointment to die. Man, mankind, humankind, the human family...sinners must die once. This is the general rule since the fall (there are some exceptions such as Enoch, Lazarus, and the saints living at the time of our Lord’s second coming). However, death is not the end of the story for there is more: after death comes the judgment. This is the second death. Man has a one time appointment with death physically, but the second death encompasses the totality of one’s existence, body and soul forever.

Fallen sinners must die once and then face judgment; that is the unbendable fact. From this fact, we learn what it means “to bear sin” (as Peter puts it, **He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree**, 1 Pet. 2.24). *He endured the judgment* for sin; He suffered the punishment that sin requires. Furthermore, within the book of Hebrews, we know what it means to bear the sins of many. The reference is to the judgment that Jesus endured as a substitute in the place of His covenant people, those the Father gave to Him (2.13) and for whom Jesus appeared to take away their sins. He named us by name as He performed His priestly work on the cross; He had us in His heart. Therefore, His sacrifice is far better than the ineffectual sacrifices of the time of promise. His sacrifice took care of our sin debt once and for all.

Jesus faced the judgment that we should face. He endured the punishment that our sin deserves. Therefore, when He comes again, it will not be to deal with sin. He will appear a second time to save you who patiently wait for Him (those waiting in the time between). Based on the work He did for you on the cross (securing your eternal release from sin), He began a work in you by calling you into fellowship (1 Cor. 1.6) and He guarantees (His blood guarantees) the completion of that work in the final day (Phil. 1.6, **And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ**).

Concluding Reflections

1) Death followed by judgment is a hard fact

It is appointed unto man once to die, but after death is the judgment: **it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment**. You need to prepare for death in light of the sobering fact of eternal judgment. You ought to face it squarely. Think about death in the world and your death. Tell yourself that you are going to die, not because that is the natural way of things, but because death is the unnatural consequence of sin: death entered the world by sin. Thus, you need to face the unnaturalness and indignity of physical death as a consequence of sin that points emphatically to what follows beyond the door of death, eternal judgment.

2) The better sacrifice of Jesus gives a firm hope

In His death, He endured eternal judgment and dealt with sin and death once and for all. If you entrust yourself to the Lord Jesus, you will not have to face death in fear of judgment. If you trust in Him, then you have Him as your great high priest and you have protection from the punishment of sin that you deserve.

Just as faith does not save, but Christ saves through faith and promise is therefore to faith, likewise, eagerness does not save, but His sacrifice secures the guarantee that He will save those eagerly waiting for His second appearing. This hope, expectation, and patience will not disappoint.

To the risen Lord Jesus who continually presents a better sacrifice in the presence of God on our behalf be all glory now and forevermore, amen.