

Jesus the Once-for-All-Sacrifice

EXODUS 24:1-8; 1 TIMOTHY 2:5; 1 PETER 3:18; HEBREWS 9:11-28

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Congregation of Christ: Did you ever notice that movies today that show animals being hurt or killed will have a disclaimer at the end, saying, “No animal in this film was harmed”? Or do you remember the story a few years ago of some whales stranded in an ice field off the east coast of Russia? A lot of money and effort, in addition to putting rescuers in danger, were spent in rescuing these whales.

Our culture is so averse toward what we have been studying the last few Sundays: bloody animal sacrifices in the Old Testament. Bulls, cute little lambs and goats and pigeons were slaughtered, and their blood poured out to atone for the sins of the people. It was a gory, bloody business. Why couldn't God just require food offerings instead of bloody sacrifices? The SPCA, PETA, the Humane Society¹ and other animal rights groups will have a fit if they heard or read this sermon.

It is hard for me to forget a statement about blood in the Scriptures made by feminist theologian Delores Williams in what was called the “Re-Imagining Conference in 1993 in Minneapolis. She said, “I don't think we need a theory of atonement. I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff . . . we just need to listen to the God within.” This conference, whose main sponsors were liberal Presbyterian, Methodist and Baptist denominations, included blessing and worshiping the Greek goddess of wisdom Sophia and other female gods around the world. They celebrated a “communion” consisting of milk and honey offered to Sophia. These women were horrified at the cruel slaughter of animals and all the grisly blood all over the tabernacle, the priests and the people. They couldn't imagine a God who would order the “genocide” of “innocent” Canaanite men, women, children and even animals! So much violence, murder and war then and now.

But our texts today, and countless other texts in the Scriptures, tell us that from the beginning, God planned the salvation of fallen humanity through the use of blood sacrifices of animals. At the dawn of history in the Garden of Eden, God slaughtered an animal to provide skins to cover Adam and Eve's nakedness after they fell into sin. And from that day on, bloody sacrifices were commanded by God to atone for sins. So in the new covenant, Jesus came to offer himself as the final, once-for-all bloody sacrifice for sins. All bloody animal sacrifices ended forever with him.

In offering himself as the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice for sins, Jesus is our one and only Mediator, our poor then rich testator, and our returning King.

¹ These three organizations take in about \$300 million annually in donations. Ninety-six percent of Americans said, we have a moral duty to protect animals and we should have strong laws to do so.” “Who is Really Standing for Animals?” <http://tinyurl.com/hcr54om>. April 17, 2013. Retrieved March 4, 2017.

The One and Only Mediator

Our writer says that Christ is the “*mediator of a new covenant*,” a covenant that is better than the old. How is this covenant better? We learned in Chapter 8 that the covenant he mediates is better “*since it is enacted on better promises*” (verse 6). The writer explains this by quoting Jeremiah 31:31-34, where the prophet says three things about the superiority of the new covenant. First, God will put his law within them, writing it on their hearts. Both covenants are based not on external rituals, but on internalizing God’s Word. However, there will be multitudes more in God’s visible kingdom whom he will renew spiritually. Second, he will be their God, and they shall be his people. Because of their spiritual renewal, their communion with God will be closer and more personal. Third, he will forgive and forget their sins forever.

How will God fulfill these better promises to his people? By sending a one and only Mediator who is not like Moses and the high priests. What is a mediator? A mediator is a peacemaker, or a go-between in a dispute, or a “guarantor” of an oath, like an arbiter in a company strike.

How is Jesus better than Moses and the old covenant? The writer mentions three things. First, he mediates from heaven, the true “holy places,” since he ascended into heaven 2,000 years ago. Heaven is “*the greater and more perfect (not made with hands)*.” Moses and the high priests mediated from an earthly tabernacle made with hands, and which is only a copy of the tabernacle God showed him. Second, unlike the daily and yearly old covenant animal sacrifices, his mediation is “once for all” which secured an eternal redemption. Third, sacrifices made with the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer only purified them externally. But Christ’s bloody sacrifice of himself completely purifies our conscience—internally—once for all and forevermore.

Fourth and last, his blood was offered for past, present and future sins. In verse 15, the Preacher says that Jesus’ death is retroactive, since he “*redeems [ransoms] them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant*.” While the old covenant Day of Atonement was for the sins of the past year, Christ’s most superior atonement reaches all the way back to Adam and Eve’s sin. Paul also says that God “*has passed over former sins*” of those who receive Christ’s bloody atonement by faith (Rom 3:25). In 1 John 1:9, we read, “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins*.” This refers to *all* our sins—past, present, future—since if his forgiveness is only for past and present sins, he has to sacrifice himself repeatedly for our future sins. His atonement is sufficient for *all* sins.

Therefore, Christ as our Mediator stands between God and his people, reconciling us to God for eternity. And he is the one and only Mediator, as Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:5, “*For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus*.” One and only Mediator: not the Virgin Mary, or any other earthly priest or saint in heaven.

The Poor Then Rich Testator

The Preacher explains in more details how he became our Mediator by using the example of a last will and testament. Has any of you been included as a beneficiary of an inheritance in your parents’ will? Did you receive your inheritance while they were still alive? Of course not, because a will takes effect only when the maker of the will, called the *testator*, dies. An unbelievable will of

a million dollars, or a house, or even just a luxury car will not do you any good until the testator dies. This is why the prodigal son committed a heinous crime when he demanded his inheritance from his father while his father was still alive. It was equivalent to wishing his father dead!

And the blood of Christ satisfies this requirement of a testator. The writer explains this more in the ratification of Israel's covenant with God at Mount Sinai. After Moses read the whole law before the people, he slaughtered calves and goats, and sprinkled the book of the law, the people, the tabernacle, and all the vessels inside with blood, saying, "*This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you.*" Why the tabernacle and its vessels? Because they have also been made unclean by the people's sins (Lev 16:19). So the writer says that "*almost everything is purified with blood.*" Why not *everything*? Because the very needy could not afford to offer animal sacrifices, so their offerings were of bloodless grain.

Therefore, even the tabernacle and its vessels, mere copies of the heavenly things, were purified with blood. But when Christ came, even the true "heavenly things" are purified with his superior sacrifice. How can "heavenly things" still require purification? Aren't heavenly things already pure? The answer is in the comparison with the tabernacle. The tabernacle in the new covenant is the church, God's people, represented by Christ and purified by his blood. Paul calls the church "*a dwelling place for God*" (Eph 2:22). Peter calls believers "*living stones... being built up as a spiritual house*" (1 Pet 2:5). We have been elected "*for sprinkling with his blood,*" and ransomed from sin "*with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot*" (1 Pet 1:2, 19; verse 14).

Then the writer adds something that is of utmost significance: "*without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.*" Blood sacrifices were God's design from eternity for the forgiveness of sins, from Adam all the way to the end of the world. Sin brought death into the world, and must also be resolved by death. This is what we read in Leviticus 17:11, "*For the life of the flesh is in the blood... for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.*" And that final bloody sacrifice was that of Christ on the cross.

The sacrifice by Christ for us is a sacrifice in the fullest sense. It was a perfect sacrifice because he perfectly obeyed his Father's will. It was a most sufficient sacrifice for all the sins of all his chosen ones. It was a sacrifice given to us by God himself, the Son of God, who left all his glory and riches and prerogatives in heaven to become the poorest of all mankind. He was forsaken by God, and he suffered the anguish and terrors like that of hell as his Father forsook him and poured out his wrath on him because of all our sins.

This is why Paul says that Jesus, "*though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men*" (Phil 2:6-7). We see his grace, "*that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich*" (2 Cor 8:9).

And what are these riches? The Bible calls them our inheritance, which God promised long ago to Abraham: a heavenly dwelling-place with God forever. Abraham lived in temporary tents because he "*was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.*" He

“[desired] a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Heb 11:10, 16). This “city,” this “better country,” is beyond our imagination and comprehension. Paul calls it a *“glorious inheritance”* (Eph 1:8) and *“unsearchable”* (Eph 3:8). Peter says it is *“imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you”* (1 Pet 1:4). In all his sufferings and persecutions, Paul takes comfort in that Christ is all he needed, so that *“having nothing, yet possessing everything”* (2 Cor 6:10).

What a glorious inheritance we await! And this inheritance is nearer to us every day that passes, because at God’s appointed hour, Jesus will finally return as our King.

The Returning King

Near the end of his explanation of the bloody sacrifice of Christ, the Preacher says that if his sacrifice was like those of the old covenant, then he must *“suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world”* (verse 26). Here, he makes the transition from the past and present into the future.

We have learned that his sacrifice was for past, present and future sins—for all sins. Christ therefore has appeared for the forgiveness of sins in the past—“once for all”—and in the present, *“the end of the ages.”* When he says “the end of the ages,” he is affirming that the last age in the history of the world began 2,000 years ago when Christ first came in his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension into heaven. The writer also calls his time as the “last days” in Hebrews 1:2. Paul also says that *“end of the ages has come”* in the first century (1 Cor 10:11). In his first sermon on Pentecost Sunday, Peter calls Jesus’ first coming as the inauguration of *“the last days”* (Acts 2:17), and *“the last times”* (1 Pet 1:20).

So the “last days” is old news to the first century Christians. But for the last 2,000 years, every generation has mistakenly predicted that their generation was the “terminal” generation. As early as 150 A.D., the false prophet Montanus predicted that Christ will return then. No generation passes without false prophets like him. In our generation, we have had many prophets predict the end of the world, the second coming of Christ, every year. Why these false prophecies? Because every one of them misinterpret the “end of the ages” or the “last days” as merely the last few days, months or years before Christ’s return. They misinterpret all these verses that clearly say that the last days *began 2,000 years ago* when Jesus first came into the world and will end on the day of his return.

And what will happen then? If his first coming was to *“deal with sin”* by offering himself as the once-for-all sacrifice, his second coming will be *“to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.”* But the question will be raised, “Didn’t he already save us 2,000 years ago?” No, the writer is referring to the completion and perfection of our salvation. Now we are already saved from sin, but not sinless. Now we have eternal life, but not yet in eternal heaven. Now we have joy, but not without sorrow. Now we have healing—spiritually, but not physically from all diseases and pains. Now we have been transferred from spiritual death into life, but not free from death and the dead are not resurrected yet.

Dear friends, the writer of Hebrews greatly encourages not only the persecuted Jewish Christians in the first century, but you as well. Christ offered his own body and

blood for the forgiveness of all our sins. He has done his Father's will perfectly, and we cannot add any of our good works to his perfect works in his life and death. We are assured of our glorious inheritance through faith and trust in him alone. When you persevere in your faith in Christ through this life of temptations and sufferings, your reward is in store for you *"who are eagerly waiting for him."*

But the writer also gives a hint to those who reject Jesus as Savior and Lord and King of their lives. In verse 27, he says that just as Jesus first came to put away sin once for all, *"it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment."* Do you think you will have a second chance if you die in unbelief? The Bible completely rejects this false and dangerous idea. When you die, the next thing that happens to you is Judgment Day. When he returns, there will be a final judgment of all your sinful works in thought, word and deed because you believed that your "good" works will be your passport to heaven. Instead, what you think are good works will be condemned on Judgment Day as filthy rags in God's sight.

Therefore, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and not in your own "goodness," and you will be saved and given your glorious inheritance.