

Hebrews 9:15-28
Exodus 24
Psalm 16

“A Better Sacrifice”

April 4, 2021

Exodus 24 is one of those strange passages that seems bizarre to us today.
Now you understand why people don't like to sit in the front row!

I'm sure you'd like to be well in the back when Moses started throwing blood on people!

Exodus 24 is the first corporate worship service described in any detail in the Bible.
This is the moment that God had promised back at the beginning of the book of Exodus,
when God said to Pharaoh,
“Israel is my son – my firstborn – let my son go,
that he may serve/worship me.”

This is the first time that God has met with his people as a whole.
Sure – he had revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob –
but only here at Mt. Sinai does he enter into a covenant with his people.

Adam and Eve had rebelled –
and so for thousands of years God let humanity try things on their own.

But God is merciful – and so he wanted to show us that “doing it my way” doesn't work.
How can a sinful people come into the presence of a holy God?
Only through the blood of the covenant.

And notice in verses 9-11, that Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the 70 elders
“saw the God of Israel.”

At least – they saw his feet – and under his feet “a pavement of sapphire stone –
like the substance of the heavens in clearness.”
Think about how the sky is blue –
they see a blue pavement –
as though God had ridden down on a piece of the sky!

After all, in the whole OT, when people are given a vision of God,
man never goes up to heaven.
God must come to earth.

As we saw last week – the way into the heavens – the way into the heavenly holy place –
was shut.

Our sin has closed the way of access to God.

We can't draw near to God unless he opens the way –
and that's precisely what he began to do in Exodus 24.
And David understood this –
which is why we sing about this in Psalm 16.

Psalm 16 speaks of the resurrection of the Son of David –
and how the grave will not be the end of our story!

Sing Psalm 16
Read Hebrews 9

We often refer to the "sacrifice" of Jesus.
What does that mean?

We thank God that he sent Jesus to be "the sacrifice for our sins."
What are we referring to?

Probably you are thinking of the cross.
It is on the cross that Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice for our sins.
Right?

If you mean by "the cross" the whole death/resurrection/ascension of Christ,
then it is fine to say "the sacrifice of the cross"
because it is indeed the blood shed on the cross that Jesus offered to the Father –
but it was not *on the cross* that Jesus offered his blood to the Father.

Think of how Exodus 24 speaks of the offering of the burnt offerings and peace offerings,
and then the sprinkling of the blood on the altar – and on the people.
That's what Hebrews is talking about here.

Last week we saw how the Mosaic worship of the first covenant foreshadowed Christ.

We looked last week at the earthly holy place and the Mosaic regulations for worship.
We saw that the earthly tabernacle had two parts,
the first (the Holy Place) symbolized the present age and the first covenant,
the second (the Most Holy Place) symbolized the age to come/the new covenant.

So long as the first part of the tabernacle was standing,
so long as the priests offer the repetitive day after day sacrifices,
the way into the heavenlies is shut.
Only the high priest could enter once a year.

Now Hebrews is ready to explain how the better covenant is expressed through a better sacrifice.

Hebrews 9:1-10 makes it clear that the first covenant was weak and impotent because it had restricted access to God (7-8) and it lacked any decisive dealing with sin (9-10).

But if you want to fully understand the glory of the new and better covenant, then you need to pay attention to how the first covenant worked.

And especially, the relationship between covenant and sacrifice.

I know.

For some of you, you may be thinking –

“Great.

Why do we have to spend so much time talking about these OT practices?

Bloody covenants, bloody sacrifices –

What has it bloody got to do with me?!”

Hebrews is talking to people just like you.

This is a *word of exhortation*, that is designed to help you hold fast to Jesus.

There are all sorts of things going on in your lives right now that are pulling – tugging – at your mind and heart.

And what Hebrews wants you to see....

... is Jesus

Not an imaginary Jesus.

Not a “makes me feel good” Jesus.

There are lots of those out there!

Lots of preachers will tell you about a very modern Jesus –

a Jesus who “feels comfortable” today!

But they are just talking about an imaginary Jesus.

Hebrews is telling you about the *real Jesus* –

the one who really did die on a cross –

the one who really did rise from the dead on the third day!

the one who is really coming again to judge the living and the dead on the last day!

Hebrews says in chapter 2 –

We see *him* who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus,

but now is crowned with glory and honor,

because of the suffering of death,

so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

This is not some tame Jesus.

Centuries of well-intentioned Christians have tried to tame Jesus
to make him easier to understand.

But the Jesus whom Hebrews wants you to see –
the Jesus who sits at the right hand of God –
is a very strange Jesus.

But it is only that strange, almost bizarre Jesus,
who comes to us enmeshed in these ancient Jewish rituals,
who can be that merciful and sympathetic high priest.

He can only identify with us in our sufferings,
if he first becomes the sacrifice for our sins.

Because all those strange, bloody rituals that God gave to Israel
were designed to teach them (and us) about sin, redemption,
and our eternal inheritance.

1. The Reason for the Sacrifice: Covenant and Inheritance (9:15-17)

Jesus is the high priest of the good things that have come (v11).

The new creation has begun to dawn in the resurrection of Jesus!

He has entered, not the earthly holy of holies, but the heavenly holy of holies,
at the right hand of the Father.

And he has offered there the perfect sacrifice which purifies our conscience
from dead works to serve the living God.

And therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant.

What is the point of this new covenant?

So that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.

Back in the beginning,

Adam was created as the Son of God.

He was called to enter his eternal inheritance through his faithful obedience.

As the Son of God he was to reflect his heavenly Father's righteousness,
by his perfect, perpetual obedience.

But Adam failed.

And so Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden –

they lost their inheritance –

they traded their inheritance for an estate of sin and misery.

And so God established what Hebrews calls the "first covenant"-with Israel,
saying "Israel is my son, my firstborn".

And Israel was called to enter God's inheritance.

And as we saw in Hebrews 3-4, Israel failed miserably.

But as we saw in Hebrews 8, the problem was not solely with Israel.

The first covenant itself was faulty.

The Mosaic covenant had no provision for dealing finally with sin.

Every time the high priest comes out of the Holy of Holies,

all Israel could breathe a sigh of relief:

"All of our unintentional sins from the past year have been dealt with!"

But within days, hours, minutes-the list would start all over again.

We're going to need another Day of Atonement next year!

If the Son of God is going to enter his inheritance,

then we need a better covenant than the Mosaic covenant,

a better mediator than Moses,

a better high priest than Aaron,

a better sanctuary than the tabernacle,

a better sacrifice than bulls and goats!

Read:

¹⁵ Therefore he 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.

Verse 15 emphasizes that Jesus is that mediator of a new covenant.

And the reason why you *know* that the new covenant has come,

is because a death has occurred that redeems us from the transgressions
committed under the first covenant.

Verse 15 and verse 22 open and close this paragraph by insisting that death/blood

is necessary for dealing with sin:

"Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (v22).

Verses 16-21 explain how this works.

Verses 16-17 are difficult to translate.

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.

Most translations (like the ESV) use the word "will" or "testament"

in verses 16-17.

The problem is that the word translated "will" in those two verses
is the same word translated "covenant" in the rest of Hebrews
(including three times in the same paragraph: verses 15, 18 and 20).

So let me give you another translation of verses 16-17:

"For where there is a covenant, the death of the covenant-maker must be brought forward; for a covenant is valid upon dead bodies, since it is not in force as long as the one who made the covenant is living."

Plainly in verse 15 we are talking about a "covenant."
Wills do not have "mediators."

Most commentators think that Hebrews is using a play on words
(because the Greek word *diatheke* can mean either "will" or "covenant"),
and that is certainly possible,
but his example doesn't fit the idea of a will in the ancient world.
In the ancient world (both Jewish and Roman),
many children received their inheritance while their father was still alive.
Think of the prodigal son who asked for, and received, his inheritance.

Plainly, then, a will could take effect without the death of the testator.
So while the idea of a will may be present here,
we should be wary of thinking solely in terms of a will.

The solution is to pay more close attention to our text.

The translation I gave you points to one aspect that is often overlooked:
"the death of the covenant-maker must be *brought forward*."
The ESV says "the death of the one who made it must be established"
The NAS "there must of necessity be the death of the one who made it."
But the word here has nothing to do with "establishing" or "necessitating"
but "bringing."
The death of the covenant-maker must be *brought*.

And this is precisely what priests do!
They "bring" sacrifices.

What is the problem with the old covenant?
First, the people keep breaking it – so that the son of God
would never enter his inheritance;
and second, the sacrificial system of the first covenant

could not provide a final solution for sin.

In other words, a death needed to be *brought* that could deal finally with sin.

And where a covenant is involved the death of the covenant-maker must be brought.

How do you “bring” the death of the covenant-maker?

In the OT this was done through animal sacrifice.

The death of the animal was your death.

When you brought that goat, or that bull, to the altar,
that animal died in your place.

The priest *brought* your death to God.

We could paraphrase verse 17 by saying,

"a covenant is only valid through the dead bodies of the sacrifices,
since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive."

The word translated "dead" or "death" in verse 17 is plural,
even though the "one who made the covenant" is singular.

Let's make sure this is clear:

Verse 17 says that a covenant only takes effect “upon the dead bodies” (plural).

But there is only *one* who makes the covenant.

How can one person have many dead bodies?

This is talking about substitutionary death through a sacrifice.

There must be a sacrificial death in order to establish a covenant.

And usually, in OT covenant-makings, there are lots of dead bodies –
lots of animals that are sacrificed.

In Genesis 15 God established his covenant with Abraham.

He had Abraham cut the animals in half,

and then God himself passed between the pieces of the animals,
saying, in effect, "may I be cut in two, if I do not keep my covenant."

So Hebrews is saying that just like OT covenants were established

And part of why I am so convinced that this is what Hebrews is doing –

is because this is exactly what verses 18-22 are talking about!

2. The First Sacrifice: The Blood of the Covenant (9:18-22)

(read v18)

¹⁸ *Therefore not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood.*

Hebrews could have used lots of OT examples,
but the focus of his message is on the Mosaic covenant,
and the Aaronic priesthood,
so he uses that story.

His reference here is from Exodus 24, the ratification of the covenant with Israel: (v19)

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.

After Moses had proclaimed the law of God – the book of the covenant,
he sprinkled the book and all the people with the blood of the covenant.

In Exodus 19 God had forbidden the people to even touch the mountain.
When God proclaimed his covenant-the Ten Commandments,
the people trembled with fear and pled with Moses that they not hear God's voice.
Why?
Isn't the nearness of God a good thing?!

What you see in Exodus 19-20 is the Word of God without a sacrifice.
And without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins!

Exodus 19-23 is the only time in all of redemptive history
where sinful people approach the living God without a sacrifice.
And not surprisingly, the voice of God terrifies them!
Because the Word of God without a sacrifice can only strike terror into the human heart.

The book of the covenant reveals the purposes of God,
while the blood of the covenant reveals the power of God for salvation.
Think of what Paul says in Romans 1:16
"I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation"
And what is the gospel?
The gospel is the revelation of the righteousness of God
in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The gospel is nothing less than God's final solution for sin and death.
And as you see all through the scriptures,
the book of the covenant and the blood of the covenant need each other:
Without the book of the covenant, the blood of the covenant is meaningless.

Why are you killing those animals?
Why are you sprinkling people with blood?!

You need the word of God – the book of the covenant –
in order to interpret and explain the sacrifice.

But then without the *blood* of covenant, the book of the covenant is powerless
the sacrifice is after all, the substance of the *good* news.
Without the sacrifice, the Word of God condemns us.
Without the Word, the sacrifice has no meaning.

And Hebrews shows us this by reminding us of how Moses sprinkled both the book
and the people, saying, "this is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you."
The same book that terrified them in Exodus 20,
now becomes good news, through the blood of the covenant in Ex 24.

Just think of it this way:

What if Jesus had come, had told us how to live,
and then left.
Just went up to heaven and said, "now you guys try it!"

That would be the book of the covenant without the blood of the covenant.
And there is no gospel there.
There is no "good news."

What makes the gospel *good news*
is that the gospel proclaims that there *is* a sacrifice for sin!
Christ has entered the heavenly holy of holies on our behalf – by the sacrifice of himself!
A death has been brought forward!
A priest has presented a full and sufficient sacrifice for our sin!

²² *Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.*

This is why the shedding of blood was so pervasive in the OT.
There was a sacrifice for everything!
Everything had to be cleansed by blood.
"Shedding of blood" is a fine translation,
but the point is not the death of the sacrifice,
but the application of the blood of the sacrifice.
It is the sprinkling of the blood that is in view.

It is not simply the fact that Jesus' blood spilled out of his body on the cross that purifies us,

but the fact that he presented his own blood in the heavenly Holy of Holies.
A death has been brought forward!

And, as Hebrews says in the next chapter, his blood is applied to *you* –
you have been sprinkled with the blood of Christ's sacrifice.

3. The Better Sacrifice: Once for All at the End of the Ages (9:23-26)

So if the pattern or copy – the OT sanctuary – had to be cleansed with the "inferior" sacrifices,
then we see the necessity of a better sacrifice to cleanse the heavenly things.

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.

What?

The heavenly things had to be purified? Cleansed?
What does that mean?

We saw last week that the earthly sanctuary – the tabernacle – had to be cleansed annually,
because the earthly tabernacle was God's dwelling place among an unclean people.
And the uncleanness of the people contaminated the earthly sanctuary.

And now Jesus is about to bring all these unclean people into the heavenly holy of holies?!
How can God dwell with all these unclean people?

This is why the Son of God became a man.

This is why the very radiance of God's glory became one of us.

Because only the power of an indestructible life could cleanse once-for-all.

In the OT, the unclean contaminated the clean,
but in the resurrection of Jesus, this is reversed.
In Jesus, the power of the holy cleanses the unclean.

Christ has entered – not the copy – but the true holy place – into heaven itself,
now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

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.

This was a once-for-all sacrifice.

Please understand the implications!

It is not just that Jesus died once.

It is not just that Jesus suffered once.

It is also that Jesus presented his blood before the Father once!

Notice well *when* Jesus came to the Father.

It was "once for all *at the end of the ages.*"

Jesus, after all, is the *eschatological* Son – the last Son –

the one who brings about the end of history in the middle of history.

Why is it important that this is the *end* of the ages?

Because this means that your sins have been definitively dealt with.

There is nothing left to be done!

There is no future sprinkling!

You have been cleansed by the blood of Christ,

and your conscience is now purified from dead works to serve the living God.

This is why we administer baptism only once.

There is *one* cleansing, *one* sprinkling with the blood of Christ.

4. The Point of the Sacrifice: Are You Eager? (9:27-28)

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.*

In Numbers 35, we are told that at the death of the high priest,
those who had fled to a city of refuge were set free.

The high priest was the sin-bearer of Israel,

and so his death was reckoned the death of those guilty of involuntary manslaughter.

Are you still bearing the guilt and shame of your past?

The death of Jesus is the death of the great High Priest.

In his death, you are set free.

Yes, you will die one day – and after that will come the judgment.

Do you look forward to that?

Are you eagerly waiting for him?

Because he will appear again – not to deal with sin (that's already dealt with),
but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Salvation has a past – a present – and a future.

There is a sense in which we have been saved –
the purified conscience from dead works to serve the living God in verse 14.
There is that definitive work of Jesus Christ at the end of the ages 2000 years ago;
but there is also a sense in which we look forward, longing for our salvation –
longing for the day when faith will be made sight,
when God will right all the wrongs of this age,
as he has promised in Jesus Christ.

What does it mean to “eagerly wait” for Jesus?
This word is used seven times in the NT –
and every time it is used in exactly the same way!

Paul, in Romans 8, speaks of how we are waiting for our adoption –
the redemption of our body (the resurrection).
And in Galatians 5 he says that through the Spirit
we wait for the hope of righteousness by faith.
And in Philippians 3 he says that our citizenship is in heaven,
and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus.

In all of these passages, the point is not that we are just sitting around
waiting for Jesus to come back!

No, in all of these passages, Paul is highlighting what Christian character looks like!
Too often when we think about Christian character,
we just think about being a “good person.”
What does it mean to be a Christian at work? At home? In your neighborhood?
It’s not primarily about “trying to be a good person” –
after all, anyone can try to be a good person!

Eagerly waiting for Jesus means living a life that is characterized by the gospel.
Because you are waiting for the one who suffered and died for us –
therefore you endure the afflictions of this life with the hope of the resurrection!

In the midst of the everyday struggles at home, at work, and in your community,
you need to see Jesus.
And when you see him as he is, both in his humiliation and in his exaltation,
then you are finally able to put everything else in perspective.
You are not the center of the universe.

Jesus is.