

# THE REMOVAL OF SIN BY THE SACRIFICE OF CHRIST

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Ben Janssen | **Hebrews 9:15-28** | June 16, 2019

<sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, <sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, <sup>28</sup> 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.

One of the greatest days of my college career came at the end of my least favorite class, English Literature. It was a difficult subject for me. I wasn't much interested in the subject at the time, didn't really care to know what Shakespeare meant by the metaphors or symbols he used in his sonnets. Anyway, this great moment came at the end of the last class, at the end of the final exam. I had all my study notes with me that I was cramming into my head before I walked into class. But then I sat down, put my notes away, and took the exam. And then, as soon as I finished the exam, I got up, crinkled all my study notes into a giant wad, and as I walked out the door threw them violently into the trashcan, making a bit of a scene. It was rather immature, I admit, but it felt good to be released from English Literature, to be set free from my obligations to the class. And it was one of the highlights of my college career.

Last time in our study of the sermon called *Hebrews*, the Preacher of this sermon told us that "Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come" (Heb 9:11). He has secured for us "an eternal redemption," (Heb 9:12), a release from an obligation to which we were bound. In the passage before us today, we look a bit closer at the benefits of what Christ has secured for us. We can understand these benefits as we consider the theme of release: the release of death, the release by the cross, and the release from fear.

## THE RELEASE OF DEATH

First, the release of death. In verses 15-22, the Preacher wants us to ponder the realities that go into effect at death. This is something that we live with in everyday life. Death may be tragic, but it is also very effective. Its effectiveness is seen in the release it brings about.

### Death Dissolves a Covenant

Just think about death's power to dissolve a covenant. Take marriage, for example. The Apostle Paul reminds us that "a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage" (Rom 7:2). Death dissolves the marriage covenant.

Now this is good news, for the same principle applies when it comes to our relationship with the old covenant. Paul goes on to say in Romans 7 that "now we are released from the law, having died

to that which held us captive” (Rom 7:6). It’s not that the law was a dreaded marriage partner for us. It’s that we are dreaded marriage partners with it. We are the transgressors. We are the ones who have been unfaithful to the commands of God.

But, the Preacher says in verse 15, “a death has occurred,” and it is a death “that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.” Under the terms of the old covenant, transgressions against the covenant were punishable by death. There was a curse to be levied against those who violated the covenant, cutting them off from it and from all its benefits.

But a death has occurred which has effected our release from the terms of the first covenant. We’ll come back to this thought in just a moment, but the Preacher first highlights another aspect of the release of death.

### **Death Inaugurates a Covenant**

You see, death not only dissolves a covenant, but death also means we are free to enter into a new covenant. And that means that because of death we are not only free from the curse of the first covenant but also free for the receiving of new covenant blessings.

So what the Preacher does in verse 16 is move to this other aspect of a covenant which we understand to be the outworking of a person’s last will and testament. The term *will* in verse 16 is the same word as *covenant* in verse 15. But in the same way that a death releases one from the commitments of a covenant, it can also release one into the benefits of a covenant.

Perhaps you have a parent or a grandparent, or even another relative, an aunt or uncle perhaps, who has died and left you an inheritance. All of a sudden, you come into some money that you did not expect to receive. You might even be surprised how much money was left to you. You may not have known just how much your relative was actually worth, and now it is all yours. It is an unexpected blessing that comes even as you grieve their death. Now, hopefully, you don’t love the inheritance you’ve been given more than the relative you’ve just lost. And yet, it took your relative’s death for you to fully possess your inheritance. While they lived you probably enjoyed some of it, coming to you from time to time in smaller gifted portions. But now that they are dead, it is fully yours.

### **The Release of Forgiveness**

So we see these two different aspects of how death brings about release. Death has the power to release us from covenant curse and it has the power to release us into covenant blessing. Either way, we should understand the power of death and why, as the Preacher says in verse 18, “not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood,” without death.

He then reminds us in verses 19-21 of the ratification of the old covenant described in detail in Exodus 24. Lots of blood is involved because “under the law almost everything is purified with blood.” The principle becomes well established, the principle articulated in verse 22. “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.” The Greek word *forgiveness* means release. The only way we can be released from the curse of sin is by death.

This is the power of death. And if we will grasp this truth, a truth we are quite familiar with in everyday life, then we can begin to grasp the truth of what Christ achieved for us by his own death.

### **THE RELEASE BY THE CROSS**

In verse 23, the Preacher moves to apply the principle of death—the power of release—to the achievement of the cross. In this one death, Christ achieved for us both the release from the curse of the old covenant as well as the release into the blessings of the new covenant. We have been released by the cross of Christ.

### **Purification of the Heavenly Realities**

Look at verse 23. If “it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites,” then we should expect better sacrifices to be necessary to purify “the heavenly things themselves.” F. F. Bruce explains the argument of this verse by encouraging us to think here of “the material order” over against the “spiritual order.” The material order was the copy of the spiritual reality. When Moses sprinkled blood on practically everything to purify it from the pollution of sin, it was all a ritual purification pointing us to a far greater reality. If God’s symbolic dwelling place—Tabernacle and Temple—had to be purified with blood because of the pollution of sin, how much more would it be necessary for God’s real dwelling place—the people of God themselves—to be purified with blood. And with the blood of a better sacrifice than the sacrifice of goats and calves.<sup>1</sup>

This is what Christ was attempting to do by his own sacrificial death. He was entering into the true sanctuary as our High Priest. Verse 24 says, appearing “in the presence of God on our behalf.” And he had come to purify God’s true and ultimate dwelling place from the pollution and defilement of sin. Where is that place? It is right here, within and among God’s people. You are the temple of God. “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you?” Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 6:19. This is why there had to be a better sacrifice, one that could purify the pollution within our souls, the purification of our consciences. What better sacrifice could there be, what greater death, than the sacrificial death of the Son of God himself?

### **Once for All**

Clearly, *that* would be a better sacrifice, a more effective cleansing agent.

I recently started making some home-made cleaners for our house. I’m not all that in to eliminating chemicals, but I am a bit of a sucker for “Mom-blogs” about organizing and cleaning our home. So I came across one that had these nice, simple recipes, and I thought, “That sounds easy. It will save us money and a trip to the store.” So I did it, and we’ve got these clearly labeled bottles of home-made cleaners in the kitchen and bathroom, and I feel really great. I sure hope they actually clean! I’m taking this one “Mom-blog’s” word for it.

My sister-in-law sold us on a few Norwex products a few years ago, giving us this demonstration of how you could clean practically everything with water and these special cloths that had silver in them. That’s simple, but does it really work? How can I know I won’t come down with salmonella when I clean my kitchen countertop with just water and a way-too-expensive rag? Thankfully, my

sister-in-law proved the cleansing power with this testing kit that seemed to have the backing of good chemistry. I'm taking her word for it.

How do you know if Christ's sacrifice of himself is a better cleansing agent than the recipe called for by the old covenant? Here's how. *The sacrifice of Christ was a once-for-all offering.* It never has to be repeated. Once the blood of Christ has been applied to the pollution of sin in the dwelling place of God, the space becomes sparkling clean and never has to be cleansed again. It becomes immune to the defilement of sin forever. Now *that's* clean!

In the repeated sacrifices of the old covenant, there is the admission that cleaning had to take place over and over and over again. But of course, Christ only died once, and that is significant in and of itself. If his death was only marginally more effective than the sacrificial death of animals, "then," verse 26 says, "he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world."

### **He Put Away Sin and Made Us Heirs**

What then are we to make of the sacrifice of the cross? Here's how the Preacher puts it, in verse 26. "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." Hear then what Christ has done. *He appeared once for all* so that his one sacrifice is sufficient to cleanse every single person who has lived, is living, or ever will live. *He appeared at the end of the ages*, meaning that his cross is the introduction of a new and final epoch in history; in biblical terms, it is the inauguration of a new covenant. *He appeared to put away sin*, "a bold legal metaphor" meaning that sin has been annulled, cancelled, and decisively purged.<sup>2</sup> And *he appeared to sacrifice himself*, because there could be no better cleansing agent than the sacrificial offering of Christ, the Son of God.

Let's go back, then, to what we saw in the first part of this passage. Death has the power to release us from covenant curse and also to release to us covenant blessings. In the one sacrificial death of Christ, both of these have occurred. "Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant," verse 15 says. Jesus is like executor of a will, tasked with dispensing all the benefits of the last will and testament to the heirs of a massive trust. A will has gone into effect because a death has occurred, releasing "the promised eternal inheritance" to "those who are called" to receive it. And at the same time, Jesus is like the testator of a will. Because he is very God of very God, he is the one who made the will in the first place, and by his death he has released all of its benefits to us his beneficiaries. Jesus "is testator and executor in one, surety and mediator alike," says Bruce.<sup>3</sup> And what this means for you and for me is that in Christ we have been blessed "with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world" having been "predestined . . . for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ" (Eph 1:3-5).

### **THE RELEASE FROM FEAR**

And so it is that Christ becomes the centerpiece of human history. His appearance 2000 years ago as our High Priest has marked "the end of the ages." Sin, which ravaged human societies since the beginning has been "put away" once and for all "by the sacrifice of himself." Do you sense the

finality in these words at the end of verse 26? It's almost like we've come to the end of a great story.

Except, even we Christians know this is not the end but only the beginning. A new age has dawned with the coming of our Great High Priest, and it is a glorious age. The future is bright, and it's all because of Christ. Because of the release we've been given in Christ, we are released from fear, from the fear of death.

### **Our Appointment with Death**

Yes, this is true even though death still exists. We do not deny this. We do not say death is an illusion. We are able to accept death for what it is. As verse 27 says, "it is appointed for man to die once." Appointed by whom? Appointed by God.

Do not let this trouble you. Death is the destiny of all of us, but you only have to experience it once. I know that doesn't sound very comforting, but it's not death of the body that should concern us; rather, we should "fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt 10:28). "It is appointed for man to die once, *and after that comes judgment.*" The day of reckoning is what follows. We must all give an account before God.

For sinners under the sentence of death, the arrival of death is the end to the delay of serving out that sentence. As sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, we live our lives like those who have been convicted of a criminal offense and are only waiting for the day that we must report to prison. Or we are like those who have been convicted of a capital crime and are waiting on Death Row for the day of judgment to arrive. This is the closest to heaven we will ever come. Death will usher in the serving out of our life sentence. Death will release you—straight into the prison walls of the eternal judgment you deserve.

### **Christ's Appointment with Death**

But for those who are in Christ, there is a different future. For Christ has put away sin, and by the sacrifice of himself has paid sin's penalty. This means that for those who are in Christ, there is a future that awaits us after death that is just as certain as the judgment that awaits those who are not in Christ. I say "in Christ" because this is what makes all the difference. Human beings have a one-time meeting with death after which comes judgment. But Christ also had a one-time meeting with death, but his death is followed by salvation for all who have died with him.<sup>4</sup>

The point of the comparison between human death and the death of Christ is to highlight what we can expect to follow from both. We are surrounded by human death. We know it's finality. We are acquainted with its misery. Christians understand why death exists, as the just wage for sin we are all doomed to receive. Thus, apart from Christ, death is no victory and death provides no relief. All that we can expect after it is judgment.

But because Jesus's death was the perfect sacrifice, because in his death he bore the sins of many, there is a new future and a new hope before us. He "will appear a second time," which is also a reference to his priestly function. On the Day of Atonement, the people waited as the High Priest

went into the Holy Place to make atonement. No one else was allowed even within that outer room of the Tabernacle while he was in the presence of God. His reappearance was a declaration that the required sacrifices had been made and had been accepted.

In the same way, when Christ appears again, as he said he would, there need be no fear for those who are in Christ. His reappearance will not be for the purpose of judgment. He will not come again "to deal with sin" since sin has already been dealt with once for all.

## **Final Salvation**

What then will be the meaning of his reappearance? Like the High Priest emerging from the Tabernacle, the Second Coming of Christ will mean that salvation has come. The meaning of the Second Coming is not judgment, not for those who are in Christ. It means that Christ's "high priestly ministry has been fully effective" and now the full enjoyment of our inheritance has arrived.<sup>5</sup>

It's true that we are still waiting for his return, and that, in this sense, we have not yet been saved. But his Second Coming has nothing to do with our sin. That has been decisively resolved by his First Coming. So, yes, we are waiting. Eagerly waiting in fact. Not even death can hinder our confident expectation. "All the blessings which he won for his people at his first appearing will be theirs to enjoy in perpetual fulness at his second appearing."<sup>6</sup>

Back in chapter two, the Preacher first introduced this theology of Jesus as a high priest, saying that Jesus partook of the same things as us, becoming fully human in order that he might die, and by his death "deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery" (Heb 2:15). Now, as he begins to bring to a conclusion his exposition on this great theological theme, we hear this truth again. What has Christ achieved for us as our high priest? In his sacrificial death, he has secured for us a release. We've been set free from our sins and set free into our inheritance. This is salvation. This is Christ, for whom we eagerly await and for whom we joyfully live.

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<sup>1</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), [228-29](#).

<sup>2</sup> William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), PAGE., [249](#).

<sup>3</sup> Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, [224](#).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., [231-32](#).

<sup>5</sup> Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, [251](#).

<sup>6</sup> Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, [233](#).