

Communion Sunday August 1 2021

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Today is communion Sunday. And so, we take a break from our discipleship series to spend a few moments focusing on the cornerstone of our faith, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, his work accomplished on the cross, and his role as our saviour and Lord.

Today we will reflect on some scriptures from the book of Hebrews, a book which spends much of its time explaining who Jesus is and the importance of what he has accomplished.

Hebrews is not a book without mysteries. Who wrote the book is not clear. Unlike Paul's letters written to specific individuals or specific churches, we are not given to know the exact audience for the book of Hebrews only that it appears to be written primarily for Christians from a Jewish background.

Hebrews portrays Jesus, as the Son of God, Hebrews portrays Jesus as deity, and Hebrews portrays Jesus as someone to be worshipped.

Hebrews portrays Jesus as creator and sustainer.

Hebrews portrays Jesus as the elimination of the need for the Old Testament sacrificial system.

Hebrews portrays Jesus as the word of God a role previously held by the prophets.

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Hebrews 1, verses one to three says:

Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he created the universe.

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The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command. When he had cleansed us from our sins, he sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven.

We human beings struggle with change. And our resistance grows in direct proportion to the magnitude of the change being encountered particularly so when the change impacts our faith.

And so, you can imagine the struggle the readers of the book of Hebrews might be having adopting to the changes being spoken about.

All their life, and their parents before them, and their grandparents before them, and multiple generations before that, had a substantially different understanding of God and the key aspects of their faith.

Note carefully that phrase “when he (that is Jesus) had cleansed us from our sins’.

If the reader of the book of Hebrews had known the author he might well have asked: “What do you mean Jesus cleansed us from our sins?”

“We have been taught faithfully, generation after generation, that the priests regularly offer sacrifices for our sins.”

“We know from our own experience that we have a sinful character and because we fall into sinful acts regularly, we must repeatedly bring our sacrifices to the priest who must go through the sacrificial rituals and offer the blood of our animal sacrifices to cover our sin. “

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“What do you mean Mr. author of Hebrews that he has cleansed us from our sins? How is that possible?”

It is no wonder that some, perhaps many, who had heard the apostles teaching and had initially embraced the good news were now struggling with their newly found faith.

Struggling to deal with the quantum leap of faith, to transition from generations of blood sacrifice offerings to feel comfortable with the teaching that there was no more need for animal sacrifices.

It is also quite likely that the Jewish religious authorities of the day who were rigidly sticking to the old ways, were pressuring these followers of the way of Jesus to return to the Jewish fold.

Pressuring them to set aside this heresy they had been taught, pressuring them to bring some animal sacrifices to the priest and have him intreat God to forgive their sin of departing from the laws concerning sacrifice that they had been taught.

Now as we share our faith today, the vast majority of our culture around us has no background in the old animal blood sacrificial system.

Most would have no concept of the need of sacrifice in order to have sins forgiven. While many would admit mistakes and some might even acknowledge sin, few would think in terms of the need of a sacrifice in order to find forgiveness.

But the Bible narrative is clear.

From the earliest pages of Genesis to the closing book of Revelation, sin is portrayed as rebellion against a Holy God, it must be punished for without punishment there is no justice from a Holy God who proclaims himself to be both Holy and Just.

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And scripture is also clear. In a verse we quote many times from Hebrews 9:22 (ESV) at Communion time forgiveness from our Holy God is not possible without blood sacrifice.

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

So, the Old Testament sacrificial system with its many rules and rituals existed for multiple generations.

It did at least temporarily address the need for blood sacrifice to cover the sins of the people, but it had its imperfections, it was far from perfect, and at the right timing in God's eyes, it was time for a major change.

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Beginning at Hebrews Chapter seven verse eleven (ESV) we read:

Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.

So, the point was made here that the old system with its priests from Aaron's descendants was not perfect. It was administered by imperfect people who like the people they served had their own personal sins to deal with.

The Old Testament law required that the priests who would follow Aaron would be Levites, from the tribe of Levi, but that was about to change.

A new priest was coming, not a Levite, not a descendant from Aaron, but rather someone from the tribe of Judah as had been prophesied.

The old system selected priests with all their imperfect lives on the basis of the biological lineage

. But a huge change was coming, a dramatic change, an eternal change to the priesthood was on its way,

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In Hebrews 7: 15& 16 (ESV) we read about the change:

This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life.

Note that last phrase: “*by the power of an indestructible life*”.

In verses 23& 24 we see another weakness of the old system. It was transient in nature.

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The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he (that is Jesus) holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever.

Why is the resurrection important? Lots of reasons but one blessing of that resurrection is seen here, we do not have to deal with different priests as time passes but we have one high priest, a sinless high priest, who will be with us throughout eternity.

Another major weakness of the old system was the need for repetitive sacrifices.

Let's think about you and I for a moment under the Old System. We have in common a sinful nature that is common not just to us but all mankind.

And so we sin today. Our sin condemns us before a Holy God. And so, under the old system our solution is to examine the law find the appropriate animal sacrifices, which can be a bit complicated, and then take them to the priest who will offer them on our behalf.

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Perhaps we live in a remote area and getting to the priest takes some considerable time and travel. But we are determined. We get there, the priest is available, the sacrifice is made and we go home feeling relieved. Our sin is covered.

But what happens if we sin again? What if I am unable to afford to buy additional sacrifices? What if I am unable to make the long trip again? What happens if I should die before I get chance to make the necessary sacrifice?

Throughout the entire Old Testament age people lived with this burden of having to make repeated sacrifices.

They lived with the anxiety of not knowing what would be their fate if they were to sin and then die before the sacrifices could be made.

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So, consider the great difference between the Old System and the New Testament covenant. Beginning at verse twenty-seven we read:

He (that is Jesus) has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he (that is Jesus) did this once for all when he offered up himself. For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

There are some important words to note in this text:

First that word ‘once’. Jesus offered himself once. The Old Testament system with its imperfect priests and repeated sacrifices was superseded by our perfect high priest who needed only once to offer himself as the perfect sacrifice.

The second important word to note in the text is that little word “all”. He did it once for all. All people everywhere.

The Old Testament system required sacrifices to be offered for each person, repeatedly for recurring sin. Jesus offered himself once for all.

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There is another important distinction to be made when we consider verse twenty-five. It reads:

Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

Remember the anxiety of the old system where one would wonder what would happen if they were to die before the appropriate sacrifice could be made?

What Jesus accomplished on the cross deals fully with that shortcoming of the old system.

Jesus offered himself once for all time. Every sin you and I committed in the in the past and present is fully paid for.

We find forgiveness and expungement of guilt by simply confessing and asking for that forgiveness.

But the scripture we have just studied says very clearly that Jesus died once. Therefore, every future sin of ours has been dealt with as well. We need not live in anxiety hoping that we will be able to find the priest and offer the correct sacrifice before we die.

We have found the perfect priest who has offered the perfect sacrifice once for all time.

That does not give us licence to be careless about our lives and fail to take sin seriously, but it does mean that as we live our lives in reverence before him, aware of his call to live holy lives and endeavouring to do so we need not be anxious about the availability and ability of our high priest to make the appropriate intercession before a Holy God on our behalf.

Note carefully the words of that last text. He is able, he was able in our past, he is able in our present and he is able in our future since he always lives to make intercession for us

So today is once again the first Sunday of the month and a time when we fix our thoughts on what our Lord has accomplished for us.

This poem by Frank Carpenter summarizes it well for us :

Beloved child, though you had wandered far from me
Though your very nature repelled me
Though your rebellion was deserving of death
I love you still, beloved child

Because of my boundless love for you
I reached out across time for you
I reached out beyond sin for you
I reached out to rescue you

Because of my love for you, beloved child
Because of my perfect love for you
I took your sin upon myself
I bore the cross you should have borne

I died the death which you deserved
I sacrificed my life for you
All for the love of you, beloved child
Because of my sacrificial love for you

I cancelled your iniquity
I cleansed you from the stain of sin
I washed you whiter than the snow
I bought you for eternal life

Because of my love for you
I am my Father's beloved child
But his love for you is such that he offered me on your
behalf
He offered me to suffer and die
That he might draw you back unto himself
Because of his great love for you, beloved child
Because of my gracious love for you

I gave my body to be broken for you
I gave my blood to be poured out for you
The blood of my covenant and my forgiveness
These I offered willingly because of my love for you

Always remember my love for you
May the bread and the cup ever be tokens between us
Taken because of your love for me

Our Communion reading today is from Luke's Gospel
chapter twenty-two beginning to read at verse 14.

When the time came, Jesus and the apostles sat down
together at the table.* Jesus said, "I have been very eager to
eat this Passover meal with you before my suffering begins.
For I tell you now that I won't eat this meal again until its
meaning is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God."

Then he took a cup of wine and gave thanks to God for it.
Then he said, "Take this and share it among yourselves. For I
will not drink wine again until the Kingdom of God has
come."

He took some bread and gave thanks to God for it. Then he
broke it in pieces and gave it to the disciples, saying, "This is
my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of
me."

After supper he took another cup of wine and said, "This cup
is the new covenant between God and his people—an
agreement confirmed with my blood, which is poured out as
a sacrifice for you.