

Sermon 47, Better Priest, Better Future, Hebrews 9:23-28

Proposition: Jesus Christ is the perfect priest whose perfect sacrifice saved us forever, as will be proven when He returns to save us.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have been talking at length over the last few months about how Jesus' ministry is superior to Aaron's. The Levitical system was not a live religious option for anyone in here. I know that. But the point of this look at Hebrews has been to help us understand the relationship between the testaments and, more importantly, to understand the greatness and glory of Jesus Christ. Jesus' ministry is superior to Aaron's in every way, so much so that in some ways, I feel that I have been preaching the same sermon for months. But it is never tiresome to proclaim the glory and majesty of Jesus Christ! Our text this morning is no exception. It proclaims the superiority of Christ over the old covenant priesthood in the purification He made and the offering He offered, and follows that up with a reminder that His ministry is also superior because of its future dimension. Aaron was faithful during his lifetime, but he never promised the Israelites "I will return someday to take you all to heaven." Such a thought is ludicrous when applied to a merely human high priest. But it is not ludicrous at all when applied to Christ our Lord. He is the perfect priest whose perfect sacrifice saved us forever—and this will be proven when He returns to save us.

I. Christ's Superior Heavenly Ministry, vv. 23-26

We all know that heaven is superior to earth. That is presupposed by the book of Hebrews and by every Christian. If heaven is not superior to earth, why on earth are we Christians? Why do we live constantly in the belief that heaven has met all our needs and will be a wonderful eternal home for us when we die?

I'm not here to question the truth that heaven is superior to earth. That presupposition is 100% correct. But I am here to apply it. Since heaven is utterly superior to earth, what then?

A. Heaven's Purification Superior to the Tabernacle's, v. 23

Well, the heavenly worship is totally superior to the earthly worship. The writer speaks about how the earthly holy place was cleansed by the blood of bulls and goats, and then he adds that the heavenly holy place has been cleansed by better sacrifices. We spoke last time about how it seems odd to think of heaven as being even common, much less defiled. How is it that heaven needs to be purified? As we saw last time, this is most likely a reference to the purification of us, the future inhabitants of heaven. Earthly things can be purified with earthly blood, but heaven can only be purified with the blood of its chief inhabitant — Jesus Christ. In other words, yet another way in which heaven is superior to earth is in the quality of purification that it needs.

A basic car burns regular unleaded gasoline. But a premium car requires premium, high-octane gasoline. Earth and flesh made of dust can be purified with animal sacrifices. But heaven, and the people whom God has made fit for heaven, can be purified only with the better sacrifice — the best sacrifice.

B. How Our High Priest Purified Heaven, v. 24

The writer goes on to speak of the glorious consequences of Christ's sacrifice. He purified heaven in at least two ways, according to this verse.

1. Through His Triumphant Entry There, v. 24a

First, He purified heaven simply by walking into it!

Now, we all know how great heaven is. This truth, then, shows us how much greater Jesus is than we can even begin to fathom. His presence, His entry into the Holy Place, is what made the place holy! Now, perhaps this should not come as such a revelation to us. After all, Jesus spoke directly to this reality in terms of the earthly temple.

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.' Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it.' Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it. And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it. (Matt 23:16-22)

Heaven is holy because God is there. The temple was holy because God was there. The church is holy because God is here.

Jesus Christ purified heaven simply by existing within it. He entered the holy place made by the word of God, the eternal dwelling place that He had shared with the Father and the Spirit from all eternity, and in the virtue of His sacrificial death, He purified that place. It was already holy, but the risen Christ made it, in a certain sense, *holier*, if such a thing could be possible.

2. Through His Intercession There, v. 24b

Not only does He hallow heaven by His presence, but specifically by His presence in His Father's presence. He entered so that He could appear in the presence of God — for us! I daresay most of you go visit your parents because you love them and are grateful for all the ways they have cared for you over the years. Clearly Jesus wants to go to His Father's presence simply because He loves the Father and wants to be with Him. But He doesn't go to the Father's presence simply because of their connection as Father and Son. He has insisted on adopting us, on bringing us into the family, on going to the Father's presence because He wants us to be part of the same love and joy and home that the Three divine persons share.

That makes heaven holier. That purifies the very throne room of God. The love that exists from all eternity between the Father and the Son has been opened up, extended out of the throne room down here to earth to embrace us and bind us to them in perfect, eternal union. You are Christ's, and Christ is God's, and that purifies the very courts of heaven. It's all possible because Jesus entered the Holy place in the power of His own blood.

C. Christ's Offering Superior to Aaron's, vv. 25-26

That's what the next two verses say. Christ's sacrifice was a better sacrifice than the sum total of everything Aaron and his successors offered, because those sacrifices only cleansed an earthly sanctuary while Jesus' sacrifice cleansed the heavenly sanctuary. The author lists three specific ways in which Christ's offering was superior to those old covenant sacrifices.

1. It Was Once, Not Repeated, vv. 25-26

The first way is its utter uniqueness, perfection, unrepeatability. He has had no need to suffer often since the foundation of the world. Suffering once was valuable enough to pay for all the sins ever committed.

Now, we are about to speak of Jesus' promise to return and take us all to heaven. From a human high priest, such a thing sounds like total megalomania, as I just mentioned. Well, similarly, this claim to suffer once for all also sounds like total megalomania on the lips of a merely human priest.

Imagine Aaron, or any priest, saying "I once suffered too." You would be utterly disgusted. A human being who tells you "I once suffered" is completely delusional. Suffering is part of this life, and absolutely no living man has suffered once for all. That's not how this works. It's not that if you once cut your finger, you will never cut it again. If you once get in a car wreck, you'll never get in a car wreck again. If you once lose a loved one, you'll never lose another loved one.

That's absurd! Human suffering is ongoing. It is not once for all. It can't be, not in this world, under this curse, surrounded by these wicked people. Yet our writer says about Jesus that if He weren't so perfect, He would have had to suffer often!

Indeed, brothers and sisters, the claim that Jesus is so perfect, so glorious, that one act of suffering on His part is enough to save the whole world from all the centuries of pain and agony that burden this planet — that claim is nearly beyond belief, even for the most dedicated Christian! Why else would the Roman Catholic Church have invented the claim that the Mass is

an unbloody re-presentation of the sacrifice of Christ, such that He needs to be re-sacrificed thousands of times a day all over the world? It is so hard for us to come to grips with the greatness of the Son of God, to say that one act of suffering on His part actually makes up for, actually pays for, all the suffering and sin that swamps us here under the sun on every day that ends in *y*. But brothers and sisters, it is true. The sacrifice of the Mass is a slap in the face of Jesus and His Father. It is an explicit denial of the once-for-all value of the sufferings of the Son of God, insofar as it is sacrifice. For if it is indeed a re-sacrificing of Christ, then it is a statement that His suffering was actually not enough. And if it is a sacrifice in which Christ does not suffer, does not pay a price for the sin of the world, then it is not a sacrifice. Notice how our author puts in parallel “suffering” and “sacrifice.” There is no sacrifice without pain. But there is a sacrifice who only had to feel pain once, who by one act of suffering put away all sin. His name is Jesus of Nazareth, and He is God’s Anointed.

2. It Put Away Sin, v. 26

That’s what His suffering did: It put away sin. Oh, yes, people still sin. I still sin, and so do some of you. But the sacrifice of Jesus is uniquely powerful to take that sin away from us and cast it into the depths of the sea. By His one offering, He has neutralized the wicked actions of every sinner who takes refuge in Him.

Sin is not something that can simply be ignored or swept under the rug. It can’t even be placed in a toxic waste dump somewhere far from human habitation, for it is part and parcel of the human being unless by a spiritual process it is neutralized. That spiritual process is described in Scripture as being sprinkled by the blood of Christ. In other words, God in His sovereignty takes your sin from you, places it on His Son, and burns it up in the person of His Son in the fire of His wrath. The blood of Christ is the only substance that can neutralize sin. That’s why you shouldn’t go back to the Levitical system. That’s why you shouldn’t accept the unbloody sacrifice of the Mass. If it’s unbloody, it’s unhelpful. It can’t deal with what ails you. Only the blood of Jesus, applied to you not by an earthly priest but by the Spirit of God Himself, can take away your sin and wash it down the drain.

3. It Inaugurated the Age to Come, v. 26b

The sacrifice of Christ is not only once-for-all and absolutely destructive of sin. It also brought in the age to come. The writer expresses this by speaking of the completion or consummation of the ages. This does not mean that the coming of Jesus ended the world. Rather, it ended the period in which the Levitical system was operative. It broke the back of this present evil age, and it inaugurated the age to come.

Now, the death of this age is gradual, as is the dawning of the new age. Though the coming of Christ was in principle the event that killed off the present evil age, it is still very much in its death throes. The world still lies in the wicked one, and the kingdoms of this world have not yet become the kingdom of our God and of His Christ. But even so, the age to come is here. We have been resurrected from spiritual death by the physical resurrection of the Son of God. As the age to come dawns, we grow more and more like the Son of God. When the age to come is consummated, He will transform our vile bodies to be like His glorious body. He will fix

the bio-political order of this world. No more will sins and sorrow grow, nor thorns infest the ground. No more will the state listen to the counsel of the beast and make war on the Son of Man. No more will Christians be persecuted, and no more will children die.

These things are already happening, in a small way, in their eggs, their seeds, their principles of life. We do not yet see everything under the feet of the Son of Man, but by His cross-work He has most certainly won the victory, bound the Devil, and is busy subduing all things to Himself with the rod of His strength from Zion.

Let me speak to the age to come a bit more specifically. The death of Christ has restrained Satan. His activities are curbed in the following ways: (1) He used to accuse believers before God's throne, but is no longer allowed to do so; (2) He can no longer fool all of the nations all of the time and thereby prevent the spread of the gospel; (3) He cannot control the time of the nations' end-time rebellion. Nonetheless, he can still lie, deceive large parts of the world, and inspire false teaching within the church.

The age to come has dawned, and we are waiting for the Sun of Righteousness to rise and finish destroying the works of the Devil.

4. It Was the Sacrifice of Himself, Not of Animals, vv. 25-26

And it has dawned through the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ. How did He do it? By sacrificing Himself rather than animals. It was through His willingness to serve as both priest and sacrifice, the one doing the killing and the one doing the dying, that we are freed. He didn't take the blood of a prizewinning bull into heaven. He doesn't send the Holy Spirit to sprinkle us with goat blood and wash our sins away. He offered Himself. He laid down His life for us.

It's comparatively easy to sacrifice an animal. It's comparatively easy to give cash and checks here at church. But when you have to give up your time, your health, your freedom, your desires for the sake of Jesus, that's when you really learn the meaning of sacrifice. When He asks for something you really value, something you can't live without, that hurts. I can tithe and still have enough to eat. So can you. But if Jesus takes your job, your health, your spouse, your home, your parents — then you are learning a little bit more of the kind of sacrifice He made. He may even call on you to lay down your life for Him. Do you believe in His sacrifice enough to sacrifice yourself for Him?

II. Christ's Return to those Waiting for Him, vv. 27-28

You should. Because not only is His sacrifice as great as all that — transcending suffering once for all, inaugurating the age to come, offering Himself and not someone or something else — but it also has a future dimension. In other words, Jesus' work not only accomplished a whole bunch of good things in the past and present; it will also consummate those good things in the future when He returns to those waiting for Him. That description is itself a call to action. If Jesus is everything you say He is, then you need to be waiting for Him. You are occupying till He comes, for sure. But part of that occupying is waiting, expecting, looking out for Him to return and take us all to heaven.

A. Death, then Judgment, v. 27

The writer makes two basic points here: after death comes the great final judgment. This is the reality of life as a fallen man in a fallen world. “Life you may evade, but Death you shall not. You shall not deny the stranger” (T.S. Eliot). The exceptions — Lazarus, the son of the widow of Nain, and so on — only prove the rule. They had to die twice, but they still have to face the final judgment. All will be put right at that judgment. Unfortunately for all of us, we are part of what’s wrong with the world, as shown by the fact that we die. Death is already a sort of preliminary injunction, where the court takes us out of circulation in order to put a stop to our wicked ways.

B. Death, then Salvation, v. 28

But judgment is not the final word for those who are waiting for Jesus’ return. He was offered once for all, suffered once for all — and He will return to save us. He already dealt with sin. At His return, He will consummate the coming age, fully, finally, and completely remove all remnants of sin from us, and make us His forever. I cannot summarize it better than the Larger Catechism does, in Q. 90:

What shall be done to the righteous at the day of judgment? A. At the day of judgment, the righteous, being caught up to Christ in the clouds, shall be set on his right hand, and there openly acknowledged and acquitted, shall join with him in the judging of reprobate angels and men, and shall be received into heaven, where they shall be fully and for ever freed from all sin and misery; filled with inconceivable joys, made perfectly holy and happy both in body and soul, in the company of innumerable saints and holy angels, but especially in the immediate vision and fruition of God the Father, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, to all eternity. And this is the perfect and full communion, which the members of the invisible church shall enjoy with Christ in glory, at the resurrection and day of judgment.

This is coming. Though it seems to delay, wait for it. His once-for-all sacrifice has a future dimension, and if you’re waiting for Him to return, you will receive all of these blessings — and far, far more — when He appears. Brothers and sisters, join me in longing for that day. It will be here, and it will be ours, before we know it. That’s because we have a better priest and thus a better future bought with a better sacrifice. Cleanse yourself with His blood, and wait for Him to return and finish bringing in the age to come. He is already in Heaven, cleansing it just by being there. Imagine what it will be like when you are there with Him, forever. Amen.