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JUDGMENT OR SALVATION?

Hebrews 9:23-28

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July 25, 2004

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Hebrews Lesson 27

Judgment or Salvation? Hebrews 9:23-28

Before I bailed out of engineering as a major in college, I had a physics professor who often repeated his teaching method to us. He would say, "Class, I'm going to tell you what I'm going to tell you. Then I will tell you. Then I'll tell you what I told you. Then I'll review." He knew that repetition is a major key to learning.

The author of Hebrews follows the same pattern. He was writing to people who were tempted to turn away from Christ to their former Jewish religion. He is hammering home the vital truth of the superiority, supremacy, and all-sufficiency of the Lord Jesus Christ and His sacrificial death for our sins. To turn to *anything* other than Christ for salvation is spiritually fatal! Christ alone fulfilled everything that the Old Testament pointed to in type. The priesthood, the sacrifices, and all of the religious rituals found their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. In a nutshell, if our trust is in Christ alone for salvation, we will escape God's judgment. But if our trust is in anything or anyone else—our own adherence to some religious system, our own good works or righteousness, our religious heritage, or whatever—we will die and come under judgment.

So the issues at stake here are of eternal significance. If the repetition seems tedious, bear with it. If God uses it to open the eyes of one soul to the impossibility of salvation by human works or worth, and to the cross of Christ as God's only provision, it is well worth repeating again. So, the author reviews. Verse 24 reviews what he has stated in 9:11, as well as in 8:1-5. Verses 25-26 review 9:12. Verses 27 & 28 draw both a comparison and a contrast that present the only options in the future: judgment or salvation. He wants us to understand that...

Because of Christ's once for all sacrifice for our sins, we can look forward to salvation when He returns, not to judgment.

These verses fall into two sections. In the first, the point is:

1. Christ's once for all sacrifice of Himself for our sins far exceeds the Old Testament sacrifices (9:23-26).

“Therefore” (9:23) goes back to the previous section, which made the point that forgiveness of sins is possible *only* through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. The blood sacrifices of the Old Testament all foreshadowed the supreme sacrifice of the Son of God. “The copies of the things in the heavens” (9:23) refers to the tabernacle and its furnishings. These things had to be cleansed by the blood of sacrificial animals. But these things were only earthly types of heavenly realities. The heavenly things themselves had to be cleansed with better sacrifices than these, namely, the blood of Christ. He uses the plural to refer to the one sacrifice of Christ, which gathered up into one all of the Old Testament sacrifices. Christ’s sacrifice “is so many-sided that it required a whole range of sacrifices to serve as adequate copies” (Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* [IVP/Eerdmans], p. 196).

But verse 23 raises a question: What are the heavenly things and why do they need cleansing? A number of views have been put forth (Leon Morris summarizes these in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 12:91). We need to understand that the author is speaking spiritually. There is no literal altar or golden lampstand or table of sacred bread in heaven. But why would the spiritual counterparts in heaven (whatever they are) require cleansing? Some say that it is a dedicatory consecration, similar to the dedication of the tabernacle. Some relate it to the fact that Satan and the fallen angels have defiled heaven and that in His atonement, Christ disarmed them and triumphed over them, thus cleansing heaven.

But in light of 9:24, which states that Christ entered the true holy place in heaven to appear in the presence of God *for us*, the author is likely referring to the fact that we, God’s people, are now His spiritual dwelling place (3:6). How can we be pure and free from defilement, so that God may dwell in us, not just individually, but corporately as His holy temple (Eph. 2:21-22; 1 Pet. 2:5)? The answer is that Christ’s blood alone can cleanse our conscience from dead works to serve the living God (9:14).

In 9:24-26, the author further explains this “better sacrifice.” We, who are not used to the physical rituals and sacrifices of the Jewish temple, may not struggle with the spirituality of Christian worship. But the first readers of this epistle were having a hard

time letting go of the physicality of the temple and the sacrifices. So the author emphasizes again (8:1-5; 9:11) that "Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us" (9:24). Under the Jewish system, the high priest would go into the Holy of Holies once a year to represent the people before God, but Jesus is in the true holy place permanently on our behalf!

Furthermore, the high priest had to keep returning year after year with the blood of the sacrificial animals. But Jesus *once* for all offered His own blood. He didn't have to suffer and die over and over again from the foundation of the world. His one sacrifice at the consummation of the ages put away our sin. "The consummation of the ages" is similar to Paul's phrase in Galatians 4:4, "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son...." It implies the preexistence of Christ before His birth. It also means that the cross represents the apex or consummation of God's purpose of the ages, to glorify Himself.

At the cross, God's perfect justice was displayed. If He had simply forgiven our sins without the payment of the penalty, He would not have been just. The death of the infinite, holy Son of God satisfied God's wrath by paying the penalty we deserved. The cross also magnified God's amazing love and grace. Any system of salvation that magnifies human merit or minimizes the cross is not from God.

At the cross, Christ "put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (9:26). The Greek word for "put away" is used only in 7:18, where it refers to the "setting aside" of the Law that established the Levitical priesthood in deference to the greater Melchizedek priesthood of Jesus. "Put away" "is used in a technical, juristic sense," "meaning 'to annul' or 'cancel'" (Morris, p. 93). Philip Hughes (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 385) states, "This nullification, moreover, is comprehensive: it covers sin in its totality, without qualification, in every form and degree and also in every age of human history, retrospectively as well as prospectively." This means that when Christ died, He paid the penalty for the sins of all of His elect both before and after the cross.

While it is controversial and difficult to work through, I think that a careful understanding of the atonement requires that we see

it as particular, not general. If Christ *actually paid* for *all* the sins of *all* people, then all would be saved, which Scripture plainly denies. If He only died for *some* sins of *all* men (unbelief being excluded), then how is the sin of unbelief atoned for? No one can pay for his own sin of unbelief. Thus it is more biblically correct to say that Christ died for *all* the sins of *some* people, namely, for His elect. (John Owen's *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* [Banner of Truth] is the most thorough treatment of this issue. The above reasoning is on pp. 61-62.)

Christ did not come to die and then leave salvation up to the fallen sinner's choice. Rather He came to "save *His people* from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). He came to lay down His life for *His sheep* (John 10:11, 14, 15). "Christ ... loved *the church* and gave Himself up *for her*" (Eph. 5:25). He was "offered once to bear the sins of *many*" (Heb. 9:28, reflecting Isa. 53:12). He will not fail in His purpose to save *all* that the Father gave Him (John 6:37-40). His sacrifice on the cross put away all of our sin once and for all.

You may wonder, "How can I know that Christ offered Himself for *my* sins?" That is a *vitaly important* question! First, are you *aware of your need* for cleansing from your sin? Christ didn't come to put away sin from those who think that they are righteous in themselves (Luke 5:31-32). Second, are you aware that you can *do nothing* to pay for your sin? You cannot put away your own sin through penance, personal determination, or self-denial. Years of good deeds cannot pay your debt of sin. Even the Old Testament sacrificial system could not put away sin (10:4)! Only Christ, by His death on the cross, could put away sin. If your trust is in Him and in Him alone, then you can be assured that He has put away *your* sins.

In a sermon on this verse, Spurgeon puts it like this (*Spurgeon's Expository Encyclopedia* [Baker], 14:211-212): He says that if any are conscious of the burden of their guilt and the impending judgment of God on their sins, the news of one who can put away sin should be of great joy. If your house were on fire, you would rejoice to hear that the fire engines were coming down the street. You would be absolutely certain that they were coming for you, because your house was in a blaze if no one else's might be. Thus the news of Christ's coming into the world to put away sin will sound like a trumpet blast of joy "to those who know themselves to be full of

sin, who desire to have it put away, who are conscious that they cannot remove it themselves, and are alarmed at the fate which awaits them if the sin be not by some means blotted out."

If our trust is in Christ alone to pay for our sins, then ...

2. When Christ comes again, we can look forward to salvation, not to judgment (9:27-28).

In the first half of 9:27 & 28, the author draws a comparison between the deaths of all people and the death of Christ. "It is appointed to men to die once...." Even so, it was God's purpose for Christ to be offered once to bear the sins of many. But the second half of both verses contains an unexpected contrast. Men die once and then comes judgment. You would expect verse 28 to be parallel: "Christ died once and He's coming back for judgment" (which is true). But instead, he says that Christ died once, but He "will appear a second time," not for judgment, but "for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly wait for Him."

There are four important, practical truths here:

- A. God has appointed death for all people.

Enoch, Elijah, and those living when Christ returns are the exceptions. But apart from them, all must die by God's appointment. In other words, death is *not* a "natural" process. Death is a reality because man sinned and God ordained that the penalty for sin is death. I once attended a funeral at a liberal church where the minister tried to soothe everyone by saying that death is just part of the natural cycle of all things. It is not! Death is God's curse on our sin. For the believer, the sting of death is removed by the cross (1 Cor. 15:54-57), but even so, death is a reminder of our sin and of God's holy justice.

Also, the Bible teaches that God sovereignly appoints both our birthday and our death day. David proclaimed (Ps. 139:16), "in Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them." Death may seem accidental to us, but it is never accidental to God. No one lives a day less or a day longer than God ordains. That should give us great comfort when we lose a loved one, especially if it is a younger person. God has reasons and purposes that we do not know, but we can trust Him. As Job said when his ten children were killed in a

sudden windstorm, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21).

This truth that God has ordained the day of death should also give us peace as we think about our own death. While we should not take reckless chances with our lives by doing foolish things, and while we should be sensible with regard to diet, exercise, and proper medical care, the fact is, our lives are in God's hands. We will die at His appointed time.

At age 54, Jonathan Edwards, the godly revivalist preacher, received a vaccination for smallpox when that treatment was in its earliest practice. No doubt he thought that it was a wise precaution that could extend his life. Instead, the doctor gave him too much vaccine, and he contracted the deadly disease. On his deathbed, he spoke to his younger daughter, who was there with him. He did not question the sovereign will of God. He said (Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards, a New Biography* [Banner of Truth], p. 441),

Dear Lucy, it seems to me to be the will of God, that I must shortly leave you; therefore, give my kindest love to my dear wife, and tell her, that the uncommon union, which has so long subsisted between us, has been of such a nature, as I trust is spiritual, and therefore will continue for ever. And I hope she will be supported under so great a trial and submit cheerfully to the will of God.

He went on to commend his children "to seek a Father who will never fail you." "Then, when those at his bedside believed he was unconscious and expressed grief at what his absence would mean... they were surprised when he suddenly uttered a final sentence, 'Trust in God, and you need not fear.'"

For her part, when the news reached Edwards' wife Sarah, she was suffering so much from rheumatism in her neck that she could scarcely hold a pen. But she wrote to her daughter Esther, who had lost her husband, Aaron Burr, just months before:

What shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. O that we may kiss the rod, and lay our hands on our mouths! The Lord has done it. He has made me adore his goodness, that we had him [Jonathan] so long. But my God lives; and he has my heart. O what a legacy my husband, and

your father, has left us! We are all given to God; and there I am, and love to be (*ibid.*, p. 442).

B. Apart from Christ, people die and face judgment.

Men “die once and after this comes judgment” (9:27). This verse clearly refutes reincarnation. People do not die and come back in another life as someone or something else. I once heard a radio interview with a woman in Southeast Asia who was dying of AIDS, which she contracted from her husband, who got it from prostitutes. The interviewer asked her if she was angry at her husband. She answered that she was not angry, because she knew that she would come back in the next life in a better situation because of her unjust suffering in this life. I thought, “What a lie of Satan!” Reincarnation is totally at odds with the truth of the Bible. We die once, and then comes judgment.

This verse also refutes the idea that people get a second chance to receive Christ after they die. Death is final. Philip Hughes writes (p. 388), “To refuse the cross as the instrument of salvation is to choose it as the instrument of judgment (cf. John 12:48).” This is why the Bible urgently warns us, “now is ‘the day of salvation’” (2 Cor. 6:2). Delay in trusting Christ could be eternally fatal!

Believers in Christ, however, do not come into judgment, but have passed out of death into life (John 5:24; see also, Rom. 8:1). Believers will appear before the judgment seat of Christ to be recompensed for the deeds done in the body, whether good or bad (2 Cor. 5:10). Our faithless, evil deeds will be burned up as wood, hay, and stubble, whereas the gold, silver, and precious stones will be the basis for reward. But, “If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:10-15).

C. Christ died once to bear our sins, but is coming again to finalize our salvation.

Christ was offered *once* to bear our sins (9:28). This clearly refutes the Roman Catholic practice of the mass, where Christ is offered as a sacrifice repeatedly in the communion elements, which they believe become the actual body and blood of Christ. Catholic theologians claim that the priests are making present the eternal

and timeless sacrifice of Christ (P. H. Davids, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by Walter Elwell [Baker], p. 697). But the average Catholic worshiper scarcely understands such fine distinctions! They do not understand that the instant they trust in Christ's all-sufficient sacrifice, God forgives all their sins and imputes the righteousness of Christ to them.

Christ's second coming will not be with reference to sin, since that issue was completely resolved at His first coming. Rather, He will appear *for salvation* for those who eagerly await Him. There are three tenses to our salvation. We *were saved* in the past at the moment we trusted in Christ. Presently, we *are being saved* as God works His holiness into our daily lives. And, in the future when Christ comes, we *shall be saved* completely and finally. "When He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is" (1 John 3:2). Because of this great promise,

D. Those whom Christ has saved eagerly await His coming.

The picture behind the last phrase of 9:28 is of Jewish believers on the Day of Atonement. Their high priest took the blood and went out of their sight, behind the veil, to make atonement for their sins. The minutes that he was there seemed like hours, as they anxiously awaited his reappearance. Finally, he came out again, and the people rejoiced because they knew that God had accepted their offering and their sins were covered (see F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], pp. 223-224). Even so, our High Priest has gone into the true Holy of Holies in heaven, out of our sight. He took His own blood with Him. We eagerly wait to see Him come again, because then all of God's promises of salvation will be fully realized!

Do you eagerly await the coming of our Lord? As Paul faced martyrdom, he wrote, "In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day." Then he added, "and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Tim. 4:8). If, because Jesus Christ is your Savior you love His appearing, then He will not mete out judgment, but as the righteous Judge, He will award you the crown of righteousness.

Conclusion

Years ago, in a frontier town, a horse bolted and ran away with a wagon that had a little child in it. A young man risked his life to catch the horse, stop it, and rescue the child. Sadly, the rescued child grew up to become a lawless man. One day he stood before a judge to be sentenced for a serious crime. The prisoner recognized the judge as the same man who, years before, had saved his life. He pled for mercy on the basis of that experience. But the words from the bench silenced all his pleas: "Young man, *then* I was your *savior*; *today* I am your *judge*, and I must sentence you to be hanged" ("Our Daily Bread," 8/84).

Today, Jesus Christ offers salvation to all who will trust in Him. But if we refuse to turn to Him in faith, one day we will stand before Him as our righteous Judge. Will you die and face judgment? Or, will you trust in Christ's supreme sacrifice of Himself for your sins and receive His salvation?

Discussion Questions

1. If Christ's sacrifice covers all our sins, why do we still need to confess our sins and ask for forgiveness?
2. How do you square John 5:24 (believers do not enter into judgment) with Matt. 16:27, 2 Cor. 5:10 & Rev. 20:11-15?
3. Why is it important to view the Lord's Supper as a remembrance of His death, not as a sacrifice of His body and blood? How important is this doctrinally? Why?
4. How would you witness to someone who believes in reincarnation and rejects the Bible as God's Word?

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