

The Epistle to the Hebrews Session 6
The New and Living Way of Christ's Fidelity
Hebrews 9:23–10:39

One Again "Heavenly" Cleansing: Hebrews 9:23-28

The homilist has laid the groundwork for connecting in a new way the death and resurrection of Christ with the life of his followers. That death, and the shedding of Jesus' blood, is somehow linked to the forgiveness of sin, but that connection remains to be explored. The next section of the exposition of the Yom Kippur analogy returns to the scene sketched at 9:11-14, Christ's entry into the heavenly sanctuary to effect a "cleansing" better than that of earthly altars and vessels. What needed cleansing were "heavenly things themselves" (v 23). That claim seems paradoxical. How can there be anything in heaven, as conventionally conceived, that would need to be cleansed? The paradox is pressed further as the homilist describes Christ's entry to "heaven itself," the "true" heaven, not some copy. The Platonic framework again seems clear, even to the extent of using the phrasing that Plato used to talk about the forms, such as "Goodness itself" "Beauty itself." Another mark of the ideal character of this event is that it is unique and unrepeatable (vv 25-27).

But what are these "heavenly things" that were to be cleansed? Our homilist has already answered that question in referring to the cleansing of "conscience" (9:14). Christ has entered into heaven "on our behalf" (v 24). By his action he has undertaken to "bear the sins of many" (v 28). The heavenly realities that have been cleansed by Christ's priestly action are our hearts and minds, the places where Jeremiah's prophecy foresaw the writing of a new covenant. What

awaits is the consummation of the “inheritance” that comes from Christ’s will, an inheritance of salvation for “those who are eagerly waiting for him” (v 28).

Concluding the Exposition: Hebrews 10:1-18

In Hebrews 10:1-10 he returns to the earthly work of Jesus as High Priest, and in Hebrews 10:11-18 he brings the sermon to its stirring conclusion, returning to the citation from Jeremiah where he began in chapter 8.

Heaven and Earth come together: Hebrews 10:1-10

Now the contrast between shadow and reality takes a somewhat different turn. It is not the earthly tabernacle which is the shadow of the heavenly, it is the old covenant that is the shadow of the new. The homilist thus shifts from the vertical antithesis between earth and heaven that had dominated his exposition so far, and reads the contrast in terms of horizontal, and temporal axis defined by the terms “new” and “old” in the quotation from Jeremiah. What casts a “shadow” (v 1) is no longer a heavenly reality, as in the heavenly model of the tabernacle mentioned at 8:5, but the present “bodily” (vv 5, 10) reality of Christ, “foreshadowed” in the rituals of old. The homilist here uses a common image of a body and its shadow (as in Colossians 2:17) to point to the reality of Christ’s example.

Continuing his interpretation of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the homilist contrasts the penitential rituals of Israel’s high priest with the far more effective atonement accomplished by Christ (vv 1-4). There are at least two ways in which the sacrifice of Jesus is superior to that of the former priests. First, under the old covenant the Day of Atonement was celebrated every year, because the sacrifices performed by the high priest were not sufficient to

accomplish real atonement. God's reconciling act toward humankind should not need an annual renewal.

Second, the sacrifices of the old covenant involved the blood of sacrificial animals. The sacrifice of the new covenant was accomplished by the blood of Christ himself. We have hints here not only of the distinction between the inferior shadow and the superior reality, but of the traditional homiletical device: if the ancient sacrifices accomplished a little, how much more will the sacrifice of Christ achieve.

As he does so often our author turns again to Scripture (vv 5–7), here Psalm 40:6-8, as we find it in the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, which differs dramatically from the Hebrew. Instead of “you have given me an open ear” the Septuagint reads, “A body you have prepared for me.” As he has with Psalm 110 in Hebrews 1:5 and Psalm 8 in Hebrews 2:6, the homilist applies the words of the psalm directly to Jesus, and those words provide him the warrant for the body-shadow image that structures this section.

The author uses the Psalm to indicate that Jesus' sacrifice not only surpasses the former sacrifices, it abolishes them. In this way he prepares the way for the discussion later in Hebrews of the abrogation of the rituals of the old covenant in favor of participation in the new.

The affirmation of the Psalmist, that he has come to do God's will, includes another important claim. The previous chapter, with its play on what a “covenant” is, suggested that the members of a new covenant were “heirs” to something. One of the essential elements of that package of inheritance is the example of the “inaugurator and perfecter” (12:2). It is his example, as a “new and living way” (10:20) that his followers “inherit.” The example is defined by the words of this Psalm, in which Jesus, in effect, answers the Father's call to be a “priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek” (5:6; 6:20; 7:21).

Here our author for the first time uses the full formula for naming the Great High Priest “Jesus Christ.” If “Jesus” in some fashion is the most appropriate way of referring to his full humanity and “Christ” is the most appropriate way of referring to his exalted divine status, the two names together serve as a reminder that the earthly Jesus is also the Christ enthroned in the heavenly places, and conversely that the exalted heavenly being is who and what he is because of his very human act of obedience to God’s will. The heavenly ideal is incarnate.

The reminder that this happens once and for all (that the readers’ redemption is accomplished once and for all) echoes Hebrews 7:27 and 9:12.

A Preliminary Peroration: 10:11-18

These verses serve as both the culmination and the summary of everything our author has said in this long exposition of Jeremiah 31, beginning with 8:1.

The new covenant is superior to the old because it is accomplished once and for all, not renewed annually. The new covenant is ratified by the enthronement of Jesus at the right hand of God. The new covenant is not written on tablets of stone but on the hearts of believers. At the same time that the believers’ hearts are inscribed with righteousness, God’s memory is wiped clean of the believers’ former sins. True amnesty.

There is also a foreshadowing here of a theme that will be more fully developed toward the end of Hebrews. Christ, who is seated at the right hand of God, has yet one more triumph to accomplish: “Since (sitting at the right hand he) has been waiting ‘until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.’” Here Hebrews alludes again to Psalm 110, but points ahead to a consummation even beyond the consummation of the great Yom Kippur. (Similarly, see 1 Corinthians 15.)

The peroration returns to the citation of Jeremiah, calling attention to two of its promises that have emerged as absolutely central to our homilist, the writing of God's laws on the hearts of the people (v 16), and the forgiveness of sins (v 17). It should be clear now how these two things are related. The "sacrifice" of Christ, which combines actions resembling Yom Kippur and the inauguration of the first covenant (Exodus 24), creates a new covenantal reality, promised by Jeremiah. In that reality those who are marked by Christ's blood/life have received the example of his obedience to God to guide their lives and have heard the assurance that God simply does not remember sin any more. The "sacrifice" is not one in which a ransom or a debt is paid, nor is it one in which one suffers for another. The sacrifice simply marks the recipients of God's gracious forgiveness.

The Implications of this Great Sacrifice: Hebrews 10:19-39

The strong "Therefore" with which this subsection begins indicates both that the exhortations that follow are related to the assurances that precede this section, and that the exposition of the nature of the new covenant has practical consequences in the life of the community. The whole section marks a transition to the admonitions that are central to the final third of our letter.

Holding Fast in Community: Hebrews 10:19-25

In a striking way our author combines rhetorically powerful exhortation to faithfulness with a nicely concrete reminder: Don't forget to come to church. The exhortation also embodies the three "theological virtues," faith (v 22), hope (v 23), and love (v 24), which will be prominent in the following chapters, faith in 11, hope in 12 and love in 13.

The good news that Christ has entered the sanctuary by the sacrifice of his blood now means that believers, too, may boldly and with confidence enter into the presence of God. The claim that Christ has entered this sanctuary “through the curtain, that is through his flesh” (v 20) is a little puzzling. It is possible that we have here one of the occasional hints of the kind of Platonic philosophy that some of Hebrews’ readers may have known. Believers enter into the sanctuary by passing through, giving up, the impediment of the flesh. More likely we have one more reference to the way in which Christ’s own sacrifice as true High Priest has made possible both his access to the Holy of Holies, but the access of believers as well. His sacrificed body is the new and living way.

While the stress in this epistle has been on the power of Christ’s sacrifice to accomplish the cleansing of sin, which finally is simply a matter of divine grace (v 17), we see in these verses (v 22) the clear evidence that baptism was an essential part of the worship life of the community that hears this homily. There may be a more developed theology of the relationship between Christ’s death and the believer’s baptism behind this passage, but it is not nearly as explicit as it is in Romans 6.

For the first time we see clearly that life in the new covenant has implications for the community of faith, the community of the baptized. They are to stir each other up to good works (v 24); faithful obedience is the responsibility of the Christian community not only (or even primarily) of the individual believer.

The exhortation not to miss church (v 25) is probably in part just as simple and familiar as that. But as we shall see, there is a larger issue at stake. Our author is afraid not only that some of his audience may neglect church going but that they may forsake the community of faith altogether.

Steadfast against Sin: Hebrews 10:26-31

The larger context of the exhortation becomes abundantly clear in these verses. The author's fear is that some believers will fall away from life in the New Covenant. Now our author's familiar reminder of "how much more" effective the new covenant is than the old, takes on an ominous tone. If you could be put to death for violating the old and inferior covenant, how much more should you expect judgment when you desert the new and superior covenant ratified by the blood of Christ. A passing reference reminds us that even in Hebrews there is not only concern with blaspheming against Christ but with offending "the spirit of grace." This is the same spirit who has testified through the Psalms and through Jeremiah to the sufficiency and finality of Christ's sacrifice.

As is his wont, our author bolsters his somewhat terrifying admonition by quoting scripture, Deuteronomy 32 and Psalm 135. The final admonition may have scriptural background but provides for us the author's own equally ominous eschatological warning: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

Remembrance and Hope: 10:31-39

Rather like the apostle Paul, and like effective preachers from the first century to the twenty first, our author moves from his exposition of scripture to a kind of exegesis of the experience of his hearers. Their own story validates the gospel promises. They have run the race faithfully; God forbid they should abandon it now.

There is no way of knowing whether the homilist has particular incidents in the life of the community in mind or whether this is a more general exhortation based on the common experiences of first century Christians.

One senses in these verses two claims. Perseverance is itself a kind of reward; the fruits of a faithful life. And perseverance will assure the reward promised to the faithful on the last day. The author draws on Habbakuk and Isaiah to validate his claim and to underline his promise. We are again drawn forward into consideration of what remains to be consummated in God's will for believers and for the world.

We are immediately drawn forward into the powerful description of the believers' appropriate attitude and action in the light of what Christ has already accomplished and in light of the judgment and mercy yet to come: "But we are not among those who shrink back and are lost, but among those *who have faith* and are saved."

Questions

1. How does the image of the "new and living way" relate to what the homilist has been doing in his reflection on the death and exaltation of Christ?
2. In our pluralistic world, what might be other ways of explaining and honoring the gifts of our own Christian faith tradition without insisting that it is always better than everybody else's (perhaps especially better than Judaism)?
3. Hebrews suggests that we already have a taste of God's promises with a High Priest who intercedes for us. We also have hope of a fuller consummation yet to come, in the gift of God's rest. How do you understand the relationship between the gifts we already enjoy as Christians and the gifts for which we hope—even beyond our own history?

Reading

P. J. Leithart, "Womb of the World: Baptism and the Priesthood of the New Covenant in Hebrews 10.19-22," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 70 (2000) 49-65.

J. Proctor, "Judgement or Vindication? Deuteronomy 32 in Hebrews 10:30," *Tyndale Bulletin* 55 (2004) 65-80