

THE HIGH-PRIESTHOOD OF JESUS – ADVANCED COURSE (3-4)

Hebrews 9:16-10:18

We pick up where we left off a couple of weeks ago in the middle of this sermon-within-a-sermon. In 9:15 the Preacher mentioned the death of Jesus. This gives him his opening into the next section of his advanced course on the high-priesthood of Jesus in which he develops the concept that purification from sin required blood sacrifice. We see again the pattern used since 7:1 of setting out the old system, then contrasting it with the new.

The Preacher begins with a pun. Up to now he has been speaking about ‘covenants’. In Greek this word can mean either a binding agreement made between two parties, (the way the word has been used for the last two chapters), or a will. He now observes that a will only takes effect when someone dies – otherwise it’s just a piece of paper. In the same way this covenant he has been speaking about is nothing without a death of some sort. This is just as true of the Old Covenant as it is of the New. The Old Covenant, the preacher tells us, was inaugurated by a blood sacrifice. “This is the blood of the Covenant, which God has commanded you to keep.” These are Moses’ words at Sinai in 9:20 which describe the events recorded in Exodus 24:3-8. Under this old law which backs up the old covenant just about everything had its blood-sacrifice ritual. The Preacher goes so far as to say that under the old system there was no forgiveness without the shedding of blood (9:22).

Don’t apply this too rigidly. Remember this book is not a theological treatise, but a sermon to encourage those whose faith was weakening under the pressures of everyday living in a hostile world. The Old Testament has many examples of forgiveness without bloodshed. His words are like an everyday saying: “No blood, no forgiveness!” “No pain, no gain!”

His words are a reminder that God’s covenant promises come with a price. Grace may be free, but it is not cheap or easy. If this was true of the old covenant then it is even more true in the new.

In 9:23 The Preacher turns to the New Covenant. If, he claims, it was necessary to offer sacrifices under the old system, which is just a pale copy of the heavenly, how much more so under the new system. Indeed, “better sacrifices” (9:23) were required. It was, of course, Jesus who offered this better sacrifice (9:24). Once more the Preacher goes over some familiar ground, reminding the congregation of what he has already told them in previous verses, that Jesus is not like the old priests. They went time after time into the tabernacle. Year in and year out they made sacrifices that, in the final analysis, could never cleanse the sinner. But Jesus entered once and made one sacrifice. Jesus is not condemned to an eternity of crucifixions, a ceaseless round of suffering. No,

“it is finished” (John 19:30). Frances Pott says, “the strife is o’er, the battle done; then is the Victor’s triumph won; the song of triumph has begun, Alleluia!” Jesus was offered once, and it is enough (see 7:27-28).

We have heard all this before. The Preacher is doing what all preachers do – repeating himself. But as he goes over the same ground and new feature is introduced. In 9:28 the Preacher tells us that this same Jesus, who was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many, is coming back. Pay special attention to why Jesus will appear a second time. Contrary to those doleful preachers who conjure up a picture of a wrathful and punitive Jesus coming back to kick sinners and take down names, (you know the type: “You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I’m telling you why. Jesus Christ is coming again!”), the preacher knows that Jesus’ return is good news.

He underlines this good news by quoting a common belief, everyone dies, after which they face judgement. To the first hearers of this sermon this came under the heading of ‘stating the obvious’. This is not a Christian message. It was taught in the synagogues and in the schools of philosophy. Here the preacher uses it as an illustration. Jesus, too, dies only once. But in his death he has undone the pattern of death followed by judgement. In Jesus’ death the power of sin is defeated. So his return is not to punish, but to rescue. He does not have to come back to deal with sin – he has already done that. Instead he is coming again to gather his brothers and sisters, those who do not fear his coming but who trust in him and “who are waiting for him” (9:28), and take them home. No longer is it true that, “People are destined to die once, and after that to face judgement.” Now the truth is, “It is appointed by God that Jesus did once for all and then comes saving mercy,”

Moving straight into our next section (10:1-18), the Preacher once more goes over old ground. By now, all the themes are familiar. The verses contain no new surprises, but as he draws close to the end of this sermon-within-a-sermon, the preacher drives home the central claim of the whole sermon so far – “In Jesus Christ you are forgiven.”

Still following the pattern of old compared to new, the Preacher sets out a problem. The old system, he states, never worked, it left the sinner inwardly guilty. If it had worked they would not return time after time. In short, the old sacrifices may have ritually cleansed the person outwardly, but they left a feeling of guilt (10:2). In fact the whole system was like a sledgehammer to the human spirit, pounding away, day after day, year after year, constantly battering away on the theme of sin. This could never heal anyone. All it did was drum into the people that they were sinful, sinful, sinful – guilty and unacceptable to God.

We, of course, do not observe the Day of Atonement, but many know the underlying reality the Preacher describes. Churches are often more effective at preaching sin than they are proclaiming grace. Sunday by Sunday, month by month, year by year, sermon by sermon, beats out the message of sin. Every Sunday becomes a “Day of Atonement”. Once again, we are told we do not measure up and so, over time, we become convinced we will never measure up. As a counsellor, I soon discovered most people do not need to be told they are sinners that they have messed up.

The old law-based pattern of religion, whether it occurs in the ancient desert tabernacle or here in BBC, condemns people to come to worship with a guilty conscience. We try to absolve our guilt by bringing sacrifices with us – repeatedly –

“Lord didn’t I give of myself generously to serve in this or that capacity?” “Lord, didn’t you hear me pray for the people and work of this church?” “Lord, didn’t you notice when I spoke out for righteousness at work this week?” “Lord, at least I come to church, twice, not many do that!” “Lord, I know I’m not perfect, but I do the best I can. Doesn’t it count, Lord? Doesn’t it count?” Over and over we make our offerings, but it doesn’t work. It is never enough, never adequate. So we keep our distance from the “Holy of Holies”, leave with a guilty conscience and return with another sack full of good deeds and intention the following week – or we stay away altogether.

The preacher turns to Psalm 40 for a quotation to declare the good news that this never-ending cycle of guilt-sacrifice is over. Jesus though tested in every way as we are, remained obedient and faithful. Then he placed his own faithful life on the altar for us, and it is enough. “By God’s will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all.” (10:10)

I tell you: in the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

What else can the Preacher do at this point, he bursts into a hymn of praise (10:12-14). What works and repeated priestly sacrifices could not do, Jesus accomplished with “one sacrifice” (10:12). Having won the war he has now taken his seat at the right hand of God. All that remains is the ‘mopping-up’ operations, as “he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool.” (10:13) And who are these enemies? They are the lasting manifestations and effects of sin – disease, poverty, warfare, hunger, loneliness, anger, despair and even the final enemy, death. All of these will be his footstool as a result of his, one, perfect sacrifice. And all this is not just of academic interest, for alongside this the preacher reminds us once again that God has established a new relationship, one not based on laws written on stone, however impressive that might be, but one where God’s laws are in our hearts. (10:16 cf Jeremiah 31:33)

The Preacher comes to the climax of this sermon-within-a-sermon. Everything he has been proclaiming since 7:1 comes into sharp focus. Because of the ministry of our great high-priest, “holy, blameless, pure, set apart” (7:26), the curtain separating us from the Holy of Holies, has been parted. The way to God is open. We can approach with confidence because he has said, “I will remember their sins no more” (10:17).

I tell you: in the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

Earlier the Preacher quoted the well known saying, “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (9:22). In other words, “No costly sacrifice, no forgiveness.” But Jesus, the great high priest, has made the unblemished offering, the sacrifice on behalf of all. So then, pick up your bed and walk. Rise and put oil on your face. Your warfare is ended, your sin is pardoned. Because of what Jesus accomplished, never again do we have to say to ourselves, “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” What we are free to say is, “Where we have been forgiven, sacrifice is no longer necessary” (10:18)

I tell you: in the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

Amen

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Sunday evening, 10 December 2006