

“OUR HOPE: JESUS IS ALL YOU NEED”

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Hebrews 9:1-15

Now even the first covenant had regulations of divine worship and the earthly sanctuary. ²For there was a tabernacle prepared, the outer one, in which were the lampstand and the table and the sacred bread; this is called the holy place. ³And behind the second veil, there was a tabernacle which is called the Holy of Holies, ⁴having a golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden jar holding the manna, and Aaron's rod which budded, and the tables of the covenant. ⁵And above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat; but of these things we cannot now speak in detail.

⁶Now when these things have been thus prepared, the priests are continually entering the outer tabernacle, performing the divine worship, ⁷but into the second only the high priest enters, once a year, not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance. ⁸The Holy Spirit is signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed, while the outer tabernacle is still standing; ⁹which is a symbol for the time then present, according to which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience, ¹⁰since they relate only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation.

¹¹But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; ¹²and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. ¹³For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, ¹⁴how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

¹⁵And for this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, in order that since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant,

those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.

Did you ever stop to think that members of the early Christian church never read the New Testament? For that matter, neither did the disciples. And for a very good reason. They didn't have it. Their Bible was the Old Testament. When Jesus sat down with His leadership team following His resurrection to teach them what scripture actually said about Him, it was the Old Testament from which He taught.

When, on the road to Emmaus, Jesus listened to two of His disciples talking of the tragedy of recent happenings, He replied to them by assuring them these events were not tragedies. Nor had they caught God off guard. Rather, they were things foretold in scripture. “*And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures*” (Luke 24:27).

Later, when the two disciples had rejoined the others in Jerusalem, Jesus appeared to the eleven and gave them an all-night Bible study, during which time He taught them from all three major divisions of Old Testament scripture: “*The Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms*” (Luke 24:44). Jesus took their Bible, the Hebrew Old Testament, and “*opened their minds to understand the Scriptures*” (Luke 24:45). He gave the Old Testament back to them as a new book with new meaning. At long last, they were able to grasp the significance of everything which had happened to Jesus, and to see how it fit into God's great plan of the ages as foretold in their Bible.

It's important to keep all this in mind as you work your way through the book of Hebrews, lest you miss the importance of the Old Testament references which appear in chapter 9. A tent in the wilderness and the rituals performed there may seem pretty dry stuff until you recall data regarding them was included in those scriptures of which Jesus said, “*It is these that bear witness of Me*” (John 5:39). Then these antiquities suddenly excite our interest. They have something to do with Jesus!

One of the homey bits of knowledge my father passed on to me was a saying which read: “Never take a fence down till you know why it was put up.” Applied to the passage before us, this maxim suggests to me that an understanding of the Old Testament scheme will help us realize why, at long last, the good Lord put it aside. So, with this purpose in mind, let’s continue our study.

From the scene and substance of Christ’s ministry in chapter 8, our writer moves on to deal with the sacrificial nature and sufficiency of Christ’s ministry. He draws these conclusions: Jesus is all you need. He is the indispensable person. So, appropriate the power available to you through Him. Achieve your full potentiality in Him. Go on from victory to victory.

One of our author’s helpful literary devices is his habit of giving us a key to unlock puzzling passages. In chapter 9, we have a case in point. Two verses clarify what he is driving at in this rather lengthy parenthesis (7:1 – 10:18). “*For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?*” (9:13,14).

If I were to give this chapter a subtitle, it might well be: “How to Handle a Nagging Conscience.” There’s a good deal of misunderstanding about the functions of conscience. It has been called, “a little red light in the soul.” Or, as one youngster put it, “Something inside which feels bad when everything else feels good.”

Conscience is that internal voice which monitors your attitudes and actions. It does not determine what is right or wrong. That is established by training. But once you know what is right or wrong, your conscience assesses the quality of a given attitude or action, gives its verdict and then goads you into doing what you think is right and avoiding that which is wrong. However, conscience has no power to determine the outcome. That is decided by your will.

Conscience can become warped. When that happens, it is a faulty guide. The Bible reveals several kinds of out-of-kilter consciences. Jonah had a dull conscience. Jacob, an elastic conscience. Pilate, a weak conscience. Saul of Tarsus, a misguided conscience. It is not always safe or sufficient to live by your conscience. It requires training. A marksman will hit his target only if the two sights of his rifle are correctly aligned with the bull’s-eye. Similarly, your conscience gives a correct verdict only when it is correctly aligned to and trained by the living and written word of God.

For the Jewish Christians to whom this book of Hebrews was written, the problem was not a conscience troubled with guilt spawned by wrongdoing. The nagging conscience plaguing them was one which needed to be purified from “*dead works*” (9:14). Barclay provides a bit of historical background which clarifies what I mean. “In the very earliest days, church and temple, so to speak, coexisted. We find Peter and John on their way to the temple at the hour of prayer as the most natural thing in the world. We read of them preaching in the temple courts as the obvious place in which to preach (Acts 3:1). At first there was no reason why a man should stop going to the temple just because he had begun going to church. So there was an age of transition in Jerusalem.

“But, bit by bit, something began to emerge,” explains William Barclay. “It began to be clear that devotion to the temple ritual was not an innocent extra. It was something which obscured the true meaning of Christianity. A religion of grace cannot be a religion of sacrifice; a religion based on the triumphant adequacy of Jesus Christ cannot have additions to Him and to His sacrifice. And so there came a time when there had to be a clean break.”¹

Try to imagine the quandary of these Hebrew Christians. The temple had been laid out by God. The Old Testament law had been written by God. The sacrifices had been prescribed by God. Were they to turn their backs on the only God-given religion on earth and surrender themselves lock, stock and barrel to One whom their leaders called an imposter? By throwing their traditions

overboard, weren't they giving up more than they gained? If those ceremonial cleansings and ritual sacrifices had value in the past, didn't they still have merit? And, if they stopped doing all these worthwhile things, how were they to handle the problem of a nagging conscience plagued with guilt over good deeds left undone? They were really between a rock and a hard place!

Some of them solved the problem by what we might call the old-time religion approach: What was good enough for Pappy is good enough for me. Goaded by sub-Christian guilt over supposed sins of omission, the good deeds of ritual cleansing and sacrifice left undone, these fledgling followers of Jesus shifted into a high gear program of religious activity designed to make certain they pleased God and were acceptable to Him.

We may smile at their naivete, but is there any perceptible difference in motivation between their ritual washings, dietary precautions and what have you, and the equally misguided contemporary Christian's continual round of ceaseless activity designed to help gain a sense of acceptance before God? None at all. Christ plus anything equals heresy! Though we have a lot of learning and growing to do after our salvation experience, nothing can add to what Jesus has done as a means of salvation. Jesus-plus just isn't possible.

Many twentieth-century saved sinners fall for the same old con job. Perhaps you have, too. You blow it with God in some area of your life. A short time later, Satan, who usually camps on the shoulder of most of us Jesus folk, whispers in your ear, "You're not worthy of all God has done for you. At least, not now. After what you've just done. Or left undone. In fact, if you face the truth about yourself, you'll admit you're not acceptable to God at all. You better get busy and do something to square accounts. Otherwise, you'll never be sure God approves of you."

If you buy the devil's drivel, you'll set out on a feverish campaign designed to improve your situation. To rack up brownie points with God. To strengthen your standing in His sight. For awhile, you may perform like Super Saint himself. But in the process, you'll wear yourself to a frazzle -- going to meetings; serving on committees; passing out tracts; even teaching Sunday School -- hoping thereby to win the affection, approval and acceptance of God. You may be

doing the right things, but you will be doing them for the wrong reason. As a result, you end up frustrated. Joyless. Uncertain.

As one lady said to her pastor, “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I do all I can to serve the Lord, and I still feel guilty. Then I feel guilty about feeling guilty.” Precisely. It is discouraging to see all this laudable effort dismissed as “*dead works*.” It’s disconcerting to learn such effort, as a means of earning another spiritual merit badge, just doesn’t register with God. He simply isn’t impressed by feverish effort.

The Futility of Activity

What’s the answer? A secularized Christianity takes the “We’re number two” approach. Believe in Jesus and try harder. That sounds deceptively pious, but it is dangerously pagan. If we listen to what the writer of Hebrews says, we will quickly recognize the utter futility of activity when it comes to getting or staying in tune with God.

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regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation” (9:1-10).

The tent (or tabernacle) in the wilderness was meant to be an object lesson pointing to Jesus, as shown in figure 1.