

Hebrews 9, Part 2

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During our time on earth, it is extremely common for us to make plans based on what we expect will happen in the future. For example, we might e-mail a friend who lives in another state and make lunch plans with him for next Wednesday. Ordinarily, we wouldn't eat with him because of the distance between us, but next Wednesday, we know that we're going to be on a business trip in his hometown. We set up lunch with him in anticipation of that event.

Of course, things don't always work out according to our vision of the future. We might not realize that some emergency is going to pull us 500 miles in the opposite direction and lead us to cancel lunch with our friend. Nonetheless, a surprising amount of time, things do happen as we anticipate, and that enables us to plan.

If we, with our puny human intellects, are able to base plans on something that hasn't happened yet, then how much more is God, with His perfect intellect, able to do the same thing? Unlike us, He is never hindered by inaccurate predictions. He knows everything that is going to happen in every second from now until the end of time. There are no surprises for God. On the basis of that perfect knowledge, He is able to set plans in motion that rely on an event that will happen thousands of years in the future. It is likely, in fact, that this has happened in each one of our lives. It's not at all hard to imagine God answering our prayer today by changing the weather in England 500 years ago. God can anticipate every effect that that change will have, so He is able to use it to provide for us and untold others.

God does the same thing on a much larger scale in His execution of the plan of salvation. The entire Law of Moses anticipates and relies on the fact that Christ would die 1500 years after Moses met with God on Sinai. This is mind-boggling to us, but the Hebrews writer helps us unravel it. Let's look at this in the second part of Hebrews 9.

The Effects of Christ's Death

The writer begins this study by considering the effects of Christ's death. We see him lay out his thoughts on the matter in Hebrews 9:15-17. This passage is famously difficult to understand. It is probably the most complex three-verse segment in the entire book of Hebrews. Much of the problem comes from Hebrews 9:16, where the Scripture tells us that in order for a covenant to take effect, the one who made the covenant must die. That sounds fine on its face, but even a brief study of covenants in Scripture seems to indicate that the statement is untrue. After all, when Abraham made his covenant with God, Abraham didn't die, God didn't die, and yet the covenant they made was valid.

In order to get this all to make sense, we first must understand something about the Greek word "covenant". That word, *diatheke*, doesn't only mean an "agreement between God and man". It also means "will" as in "will and testament". In this context, the Hebrews writer is using it in both the agreement sense and the will sense at the same time.

To understand how this works, we need only turn our attention to the way that a human will functions. Let's say that I were to die tomorrow. After my death, two things would happen to my assets. First, they would be used to pay off my creditors. Money would be taken from my estate to pay the credit card bill, pay off the mortgage, and so on. After that, the remainder of my estate would be distributed to my heirs according to the terms of my will. However, none of this happens for as long as I remain alive. My will only takes effect once I pass on.

What this text is telling us is that the same thing took place when Christ died. The Law of Moses didn't just function as an agreement between God and man. It also functioned as a will and testament. First of all, under that will, God paid the debts that He had incurred to the righteous people who lived under the first covenant. After all, under the Law of Moses, God clearly promised the Israelites forgiveness of their sins, provided that they met the terms of the agreement. Many Israelites, from David on down, did exactly that. They lived the way God wanted them to. However, all of their sacrificing of bulls and goats under the terms of the Law could not take away their sin. Until Christ died, God had no way of giving those righteous Israelites the forgiveness He had promised them. However, the death of Christ changed all that. His blood was powerful enough to grant that forgiveness and close the books on the Old Law entirely.

That was the debt-paying stage of the effects of Christ's death. Next came the promise-fulfilling stage. Just like my will promises benefits to my heirs, the Old Testament promised benefits to the heirs of salvation. Once the debt to the nation of Israel was taken out of the way, all of those promises could be enacted. Not only did the blood of Christ purchase redemption for the righteous under the first covenant, but it also inaugurated the second covenant. Because Christ has died, everyone who listens to the call of the word can receive their eternal inheritance through Him.

Blood and the Law

The Hebrews writer teaches us more about this covenant-inaugurating function by discussing the purposes of blood under the Law. This discussion appears in Hebrews 9:18-22. To the writer's audience, and certainly to us, it might seem strange that God could not begin a new covenant with a new people without blood. After all, when I signed all the

paperwork for my mortgage refinance, although I might have felt like I was signing away my firstborn child, the loan officer didn't bring a sheep to the conference room and cut its throat on the table. That being the case, why does our agreement with God require blood at its beginning? In answer, the Hebrews writer points to the way that the Israelites' covenant with God was enacted at Mt. Sinai, as described in Exodus 24. When Moses came down from the mountain carrying the book of the covenant, he read God's laws to the people, and they agreed to do them. That all seems very logical, right? Next, though, Moses takes basins full of sacrificial blood and sprinkles that blood on the people.

In order for this to make sense, we need to look at things from the perspective of the ancient Middle East. Back then, when two parties enacted a covenant, they commonly ratified the covenant by killing animals and doing something with the blood. This is why the Hebrew word "covenant" comes from the word "to cut", because whenever they made a covenant, they cut the throat of some unfortunate animal. We see Abraham doing this as part of his covenant with God in Genesis 15. Strictly speaking, these were not sacrificial animals. When two kings of that day made a covenant with each other, they would do the same thing. Instead, the purpose of the animal was to stand in for the covenant breaker. When Abraham or an Assyrian king killed the animal, he was saying, "If I violate the covenant, may my lifeblood be shed like the blood of this creature." It's also why circumcision was the seal of the old covenant. Circumcision sheds blood.

Basically, under the Old Law, blood was the engine that made everything go. It had to be there to purify the people so that they could solemnize their covenant with God, and it had to be there every time they sinned if they wanted to be forgiven. Without something as humble as the blood of beasts of burden, the Law of Moses could not function.

The Blood of Jesus.

Today, the blood of Jesus fulfills the same two functions in our better covenant. The writer explores this concept in Hebrews 9:23-26. We've seen before that the sacrifices in the Israelite tabernacle were an imitation of what ought to be happening in heaven. Here, we learn that the same thing is true of the covenant ceremony on Mt. Sinai. When Moses sprinkled blood on the people, he could reach their bodies, but he couldn't reach their souls. The power of the blood of Christ, however, is such that it could travel with Him into the presence of God, and that is where our covenant is ratified.

All of this should be a solemn reminder to us of how significant that covenant is. The blood that consecrates our agreement is the blood of the Son of God. It was shed 2000 years ago, but it is still binding today. We come in contact with that blood when we are baptized, and that blood has the same effect on us that the blood of Abraham's covenant had on him. It consecrates us as God's covenant people, but it also means that if we violate our covenant with God by disobeying His word, our lives will be forfeit. If we choose to do evil, the same blood that purified us will destroy us.

Within that covenant, Christ's blood accomplishes a forgiveness of sins that is equally complete and equally powerful. Every year, the Israelite religious establishment went through the same dreary ritual. Another bull died, another goat died, another layer of blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat, and at the end of the day, it really didn't mean anything. It was like making the minimum payment on a million-dollar credit-card bill. Sure, it kept the spiritual creditors off the backs of the people for another year, but in each one of those years, the balance of sin grew larger. Even if the Law of Moses had continued until the end of time, the balance would never have been paid off.

What Jesus did with His blood, though, is to purchase the entirety of the debt. All of those 1500 years of transgressions were redeemed in a single stroke. Even after Jesus got through with that, even after he paid for the sins of millions of people, His blood still had power remaining. In fact, it had so much power remaining that it could pay for every sin that every faithful member of the covenant would commit between His death and the end of time. Basically, the blood of Jesus wrote a blank check for the sins of everyone who ever had loved God or who ever would love God. Once Jesus did that, He had nothing left to do. He will never make another sacrifice, because His one sacrifice paid for all.

This, brethren, is the power that we're dealing with every time we seek forgiveness of sins. Through the power of one act, Jesus obliterated millennia of transgression, and that shows us how silly it is to worry whether our sins will be forgiven. That's like having Bill Gates offer to buy us a meal and then wondering whether he's got enough money to cover our tab. The power of the blood of Jesus is orders of magnitude greater than we could possibly ever need. The point is not that we should start to take sin lightly. The point is that Jesus' blood is more powerful than we can imagine.

Naturally, Jesus engaged in such an awesome display of power for a reason. The Hebrews writer tells us why in Hebrews 9:27-28. First of all, almost in passing, he points to a truth that every human being must recognize. Simply because we are human, we must accept the inevitability of our own deaths. No matter how much medical science advances, we will never beat the Grim Reaper, and what's waiting for us on the other side is the day of judgment.

The life of Jesus has followed a similar track. Just as we are, Jesus was appointed to die, as a sacrifice for the sins of the human race. Just like each one of us, He too is going to appear at the day of judgment. However, His fate is certainly not going to be decided there! Indeed, it is His appearance that is going to set the end of the world in motion. When He comes on that day, though, it will not be to destroy us. Instead, it will be to save us. His sanctifying work has already begun in our lives. On that day, He will complete it, so that we may share eternal life with Him.