

The Sacrifice to End All Sacrifices
Hebrews 9:24-28
November 11, 2018

“He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.”

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

November 11 is the day we think about the sacrifices that were made by loved ones who served in battle so that we may live in freedom. To live freely is a great blessing – free from servitude and bondage, free to go where we want, free to choose our own leaders, free to make our own decisions about where to live, whom to marry, where to work. A free country is truly a great blessing. But, of course, freedom itself isn't free. It's costly. It takes great sacrifice and today we remember and thank God for the sacrifice of those who have defended our freedom.

The concept of sacrifice for freedom is not a new idea. It goes way back to the time of the Old Testament. It happened year after year, goat after goat, commanded by the Lord. It takes us back to the Day of Atonement, when once a year, the people of Israel gathered outside of the tabernacle in the wilderness. After proper washing, vestments and other preparations, the high priest would appear before the people at the sacrificial altar. He would sacrifice a goat and collect the blood. He would take a portion of that blood and sprinkle it on the people, marking them as the one for whom the sacrifice was made. Then he would take the rest of the blood in a basin and enter into the Holy Place of the tabernacle; and on this one day of the year, he would push through the curtain into the Holy of Holies. He would enter into the presence of God on earth. The steps were rehearsed for months before, because inside that curtain there was only darkness; and rabbinic literature tells us that he entered with a scarlet cord tied around one ankle, trailing out behind him past the curtain—in case he made a mistake, died in the presence of God and had to be pulled back out.

Once inside the Holy of Holies, he poured out the blood of the sacrifice before the Lord at the mercy seat: this demonstrated to God that the sacrifice had been made. Once he was finished there, he went back outside and reappeared before the people. The empty basin testified that the blood had been poured out. The fact that he was still alive testified that God had accepted the sacrifice—and that their sins were forgiven and were free from God's wrath and penalty for sin.

Notice the three appearances: first, the high priest appeared before the people to make the sacrifice. He then appeared before God in the Holy of Holies on behalf of the people. Then he appeared a second time before the people so that they could see with their eyes that the high priest lived, that the sacrifice for their sin was acceptable to God.

It happened year after year, goat after goat. Time went on. High priests died and were succeeded by the next. Vestments grew old and needed to be replaced. More goats were required. The main purpose of this annual feast, however, was not to teach that blood had to be shed again and again in order for sins to be forgiven. No, all of this pointed to the truth yet to be revealed: all those sacrifices pointed to the one Sacrifice that would atone for the sins of the world. All of those high priests through the centuries pointed to the Great High Priest who would make that sacrifice and present the blood to the Lord. And that tabernacle on earth pointed to the throne of God on high.

In other words, all of this was given by God to point to Jesus, who would both **make** the Sacrifice and **be** the Sacrifice for the sins of the world.

This is what our text today is all about. Hebrews 9 speaks of Jesus, and note the three appearances that it mentions. In verse 26, our text proclaims that Jesus “appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.” This is about the cross, where Jesus sacrificed Himself for the sins of the world, and note a couple of phrases in this verse.

First, Jesus appeared “once for all...to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.” Unlike those goats of old which only did the job for a while, Jesus’ one death on the cross has paid for the sins of the world once for all. There is no further sacrifice to be made. You do not live your life in fear, wondering if the good works that you do are enough of an offering to add to His sacrifice in order to earn forgiveness. The sacrifice has been made, once for all. Your sins are atoned for. Rather than living in fear, you rejoice to do good works in thanksgiving because your sins are already forgiven. With that “once for all,” we also note this: Jesus does not need to return in order to be sacrificed for sin again. In some corners of Christendom, it is taught that the reason for His presence in the Supper is so that we can offer His body and blood back up to God again; but there is no need for such a sacrifice. At the cross, Christ made the sacrifice for your sin, once for all. It is finished.

The other interesting phrase is that Jesus “has appeared once for all at the end of the ages.” His death on Calvary took place at the end of the ages—two thousand years ago. The cross is not just a marker of one era of history before we move into a whole different epoch: the cross is the culmination of history—it is why the Lord let this sinful world continue. The past twenty centuries have been permitted by the Lord to allow more to hear His Gospel and be saved; but there is nothing left to be done before the Lord returns. We are living in the “end of the ages.” If the Lord returns today, then blessed be the name of the Lord. If the Lord carries another millennium or two, then blessed be the name of the Lord. His sacrifice when He first appeared—His death on the cross, was enough to pay for all the sins of the world, no matter how long the earth continues its laps around the sun.

So, like the high priest on the Day of Atonement, Jesus appeared, in the flesh—before the people and among the people, to make the sacrifice for sin.

Then, risen from the dead, He ascended into heaven. Why? Verse 24 tells you: “to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.” Here is the second appearing. In the Old Testament, the high priest entered into the presence of God to demonstrate that the sacrifice had been made. This also pointed to Jesus: He has now appeared in the presence of God on our behalf, to declare that He has made the sacrifice for our sin. He retains the wounds in His hands and side, and He sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty. What of the right hand? He is His Father’s “right hand man,” to be sure, executing His Father’s will for us. But there’s more: in ancient courts, the criminal’s advocate—his defense lawyer, sat to the right of the judge, defending his client’s innocence. That is what the Lord does for you now: sitting at the right hand of God the Father, He intercedes for you. He shows Himself to be the Lamb of God, who was slain—and declaring that He has died for your sins, He therefore declares you innocent before His Father.

This is important, because judgment is coming. This world will end. The Last Day will come and the final judgment take place. But you have nothing to fear: Jesus already declares that He has made the

Sacrifice for your sin, that you are justified—not guilty—before God. Therefore, the Last Day holds no terror for you, but only deliverance to heaven.

Thus, our text speaks of another appearing: He “will appear on earth a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.” On the Last Day, Jesus will not deal with your sin—He’s already taken it away. Rather, He comes to take you home.

So, way back on the Day of Atonement, the high priest’s three appearances pointed to Jesus. His actions were “copies of the true things,” in that they pointed to the Truth who is Jesus. Because of Jesus’ first appearance on the cross, you know that the Sacrifice has been made for your sin. By His second appearance before His Father in heaven, you know that God no longer holds your sins against you. And by His third appearance on the Last Day, you know that you are not forsaken. The Lord will come to deliver you to eternal life in heaven.

II. Your Appearings

In the meantime, as you await the Lord’s return, you have your appearings, too: they are all accomplished in Christ.

You do not appear before God to make a sacrifice for your sin, because the sacrifice has already been made by your Savior. However, you were joined to that sacrifice in Holy Baptism. As St. Paul says in Romans 6:

“We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His” (Romans 6:4-5).

That’s a remarkable truth. Jesus “appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself” on the cross. At your Baptism, He joined **you** to His death and resurrection. His cross became **your** cross, His death **your** death. His appearance at the end of the ages became **yours**.

Because Christ appeared at the cross and died for you, you make your appearance before God. This is what I mean: those who are evil cannot stand before the face of God—He does not shine His face upon them. But He looks upon you—the Lord sees you, and He sees you as one who is cleansed by the holy, precious blood of Jesus. So now the Lord shines His face upon you—looks upon you with favor; He is gracious to you and gives you His peace. That’s the reason why that benediction at the end of the service is for you: because you are His baptized child, the Lord gives His grace and mercy to you. You are at peace with Him. And because you are at peace with Him, the Last Day and final judgment hold no terror for you. The Lord has already declared that you are innocent for the sake of Jesus, who already bore your guilt and suffered your sentence.

So, because of your Baptism, the Lord looks upon you. You have appeared in His sight. Because the Sacrifice has been made for your sin—and given to you by water and the Word, you are numbered among His holy people, His royal priesthood.

As His priesthood, you now appear in His presence at the altar. This is your second appearing. We do not have a Holy of Holies like the tabernacle, a dark room behind the curtain where the Lord dwells; that is of the Old Testament. Now, the Lord is present in other means—namely, His body and blood in the Holy Communion. You do often what the high priest did only once a year: you come into the

presence of God. You commune with Him. You receive His body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins. You depart in peace. But while you are with Christ in that Sacrament, do not forget—this is your Savior who now appears “in the presence of God on your behalf.” Jesus, who is with you in the Supper, is also at God’s right hand interceding for you. He looks at you and declares to His Father, “that one, do you see her down there at the communion rail? She is Your beloved child, because I have taken her sins away.” There is never a moment where the Father ceases to shine His face on you, because the Son ceaselessly intercedes on your behalf.

You have a third appearing to mirror those of your Savior: it is yet to come. It is when Jesus appears again, this time in glory, “not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.” Should He return this day, you will stand before Him as one redeemed and innocent—not as one who has held onto his sin and now awaits condemnation. Should He tarry for a while and it is given to you to die, you know that your death is just a sleep. And when He returns in glory, He will raise you up in glory, that you might appear before Him in righteousness and purity forever.

Those are **your** appearings. You appeared before God in Baptism, when Jesus joined you to His death and resurrection. You appear before God at His Supper, where Jesus visits you, really present to give you His body and blood. And because you are His, you will appear before His throne in eternity, alive in Him forever.

That is the message of our epistle from Hebrews 9. Your sin enslaves you—otherwise you could easily give it up. But our Lord Christ made the ultimate Sacrifice for you and gives you forgiveness freely, that you might be set free. He is coming back. He will return and appear in glory. But before He appears in glory, He has already appeared in shame on the cross—in your place, for your sin. Now, He appears before God in heaven, pleading and interceding for you. Therefore, when He does appear in glory, there is no fear for the penitent child of God. Christ has died, Christ is risen and Christ is coming again—for you. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen