

Hebrews 9:24-28

²⁴For Christ did not enter a handmade sanctuary, a representation of the true sanctuary. Instead, he entered into heaven itself, now to appear before God on our behalf. ²⁵And he did not enter to offer himself many times, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own. ²⁶Otherwise he would have needed to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once and for all, at the climax of the ages, in order to take away sin by the sacrifice of himself. ²⁷And, just as it is appointed for people to die only once and after this comes the judgment, ²⁸so also Christ was offered only once to take away the sins of many, and he will appear a second time—without sin—to bring salvation to those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Sermon for Ascension (Easter 7), May 16, 2021; St. Paul's, Green Garden

Text: Hebrews 9:24-28

Theme: "Christ's Ascension Proves You Receive Blessings"

In the name of Jesus the one through whom we receive blessings, dear fellow redeemed,

You have certainly heard and probably read the account of the stoning of Stephen the young deacon in the early church in Jerusalem. You have read of his bravery when he faced the angry mob making false accusations against him. When you hear or read it you get the sense that there was no one there on his side. Yet you read how he boldly accused the Jews of being stubborn since they would not listen to Jesus, just as their forefathers had persecuted and killed the O.T. prophets. And you have read how he boldly faced death when they stoned him. You have also read how the apostle Paul endured stonings and beatings and plots against his life. Have you ever wondered how those early Christians endured such persecution? The stress must have been enormous. Didn't they get discouraged?

Today, you and I and other Christians endure ridicule. We can surely be discouraged when we see God's truths trampled almost every day. But every Christian, past and present endures only in one way and that is to look to those things God promises us about the future. And whether we are always conscious of it or not we need to look not only to Jesus' death and resurrection. Here the writer to the Hebrews also tells us we need to look to Jesus' ascension to heaven. When you wrap a package to send in the mail, you don't simply fold the paper around the object you want to wrap. You use strong tape to make sure it gets to its destination safely. In other words you wrap it up securely.

This is the importance of Jesus' ascension to heaven. He could not stay here on earth after he rose from the dead. He had to ascend to heaven to assure us that our redemption is complete, that there is nothing left to do. This is how we and

Page 2

every believer have endured trial and persecution. His ascension wraps our future up securely. God leaves no doubts. “Christ’s Ascension Proves You Receive Blessings.” Blessings you receive now because of his sacrifice; Blessings you receive at his second coming.

The writer here explains to first century Jewish Christians how everything Jesus did really completed the picture of those O.T. sacrifices. On the Old Testament Day of Atonement, the High Priest slaughtered a goat and took some of its blood in a basin into the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle. There he sprinkled the blood on the Atonement Cover of the Ark of the Covenant. The writer wants to show us the Most Holy Place was intended to represent the presence of God in heaven. It was the place where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. The High Priest entered there ONCE a year with the blood of the goat to point ahead to the once for all sacrifice of God’s chosen Savior.

It is most important to note that what the High Priest did in a symbolic way, Jesus did in fact. He entered the true and real Most Holy Place—heaven. And he did not go there for his own good. Listen to the author, ²⁴**For Christ did not enter a handmade sanctuary, a representation of the true sanctuary. Instead, he entered into heaven itself, now to appear before God on our behalf.**” Jesus ascended to heaven FOR US. You see, those O.T. priests could only do something that pictured the real thing.

Worshippers in OT times brought animals for sacrifices which the priests slaughtered for them—but these were pictures or symbols. Each sacrifice pictured how God atones for our sin through an innocent victim. This is how HE restores our relationship with him. Jesus IS the sacrifice. When he did it all, he ascended to heaven and showed himself to God FOR US. When he ascended, he was saying to the Father, “I AM your beloved Son, just as you said at my baptism and my transfiguration. I have done everything you required; I have redeemed the human race. And the writer wants us to notice that he says Jesus appeared before the Father in heaven FOR US—FOR YOU!! He speaks to God for each of us.

So when you come to confess your sins before your Lord, believe what Jesus says: “Your sins are forgiven.” He speaks to the Father in your defense. He can do this because he shed his blood as the true Lamb of God.

His sacrifice on the cross really completes the picture of all those O.T. animal sacrifices. Each of those sacrifices was really a step into the future to show a present reality to each believer. The reality then as now, was that God’s promises are real. That meant even for O.T. believers their forgiveness before God was real. The writer wanted the first century Jewish believers to know the promises God made had not changed. The O.T. sacrifices were important because they pointed

Page 3

to Jesus—they showed how God keeps his promises. Imagine a painter who starts painting all along the outside edge of the painting. He gets closer and closer to the center. As he fills in the details and gets closer to the center you can see what he is painting. But then he leaves the most important image in the center blank for a while. Yet as you look at the picture you know what's in his mind. Whether you could complete the picture or not, YOU know how it will end.

In the same way, the High Priest was a picture of Jesus. He brought the blood of the sacrificial goat before the Ark of the Covenant into the Most Holy Place, an earthly imitation of Gods' throne room. Those first century Jewish Christians who had seen the Day of Atonement enacted over many years should have been able to step back and complete the center of the painting because now they had seen it. Good Friday was once for all—on that day Jesus poured out his blood. On that day he said, "It is finished." On that day the once-for-all sacrifice was completed. That day was FOR YOU. And the writer really seems to say, every day since then has also been for you. Jesus paid for your sins once. It IS finished!

Think of all those ancient sacrifices as a large spiral. Through the ages, as God's people made more and more sacrifices, they got closer to the center of the spiral. And finally, when Jesus was born and lived, they were right in the center of the spiral and all the dots were connected; all the blank spaces were filled in. Then we see Jesus who suffered under Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. We see him descend into hell to declare victory, rise from the dead and then ascend to heaven to sit at God's right hand. When the spiral reaches the very center then we see—Jesus did all this for you. He only had to do it once. This is assurance for you. If Jesus had not completed what God wanted him to do he would have had to suffer many times. But God wants us to know it is completed—it is for you. Put your confidence in everything Jesus did and don't doubt.

And we should not underestimate the importance of O.T. sacrifices. They were important to point to Jesus. So God did not want his people to go through the motions as if the sacrifices were just some mindless letting of blood—some duty to be fulfilled. No! The sacrifices pointed them to their Savior who would free them from their sins against God. So we, too, need to remember that worship is not just some ritual we have to do to make sure we stay in good with God or that we fulfill some obligation so God won't be angry with us. If we worship with that kind of heart we no longer honor our God. Worship that is mindless is a mockery of all that God has done for us. When we worship without thinking or we allow distractions or selfishness or earthly worries to cloud our eyes we need to come back to our Lord for forgiveness. Then we need to see his sacrifice for us and cling to the truth that Jesus who ascended into heaven goes to his father with his

page 4

own blood given and shed for us. And we receive the sacrament of Holy Communion with joy and thankfulness that Jesus willingly suffered for us. You see, Jesus' ascension proves you receive blessings. You receive blessings now, day after day, because of his sacrifice for you. But those blessings don't end. You receive them also at his second coming.

Now let's be sure we understand something clearly. Not one drop of animal blood could take away even a fraction of any of a person's sins. No matter how many bulls and goats and rams a person may have slaughtered and offered to God they did not bring peace of mind or heart to the sinner. If an OT Israelite faced death or judgment day with the idea "I belong to God because I do this sacrifice" he had it completely wrong. It has never been about what WE do. God always does it FOR US. This is a concept that the sinful nature will never trust or believe. And when we start trusting our own deeds, or if the OT Israelite started to trust those animal sacrifices as the way to heaven, then our consciences should scream at us, "But have you done enough?" And my honest answer will always have to be, "No! How can I—I am a weak imperfect human being." This is why you and I need Jesus. He HAS restored our broken relationship with God.

So how will you face God on the day of your death? Or how will you face Him Judgment Day? You don't need to look ahead with dread. You don't need to pretend it doesn't exist or refuse to think about it hoping it will never come. The writer plainly tells us ____

it is appointed for people to die only once and after this comes the judgment." There is no getting around it. But don't despair because we have something far better than our own deeds. We have something better than wealth and riches; we have something better than O.T. ritual sacrifices. "**Christ was offered only once to take away the sins of many.**" And we need to understand the word "many" does not mean Jesus paid for a limited number of sins of a limited number of people. "Many" means "God so loved the world" that he gave his one and only Son.

We confess in the apostles' creed, I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day he rose from the dead. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead." As we confess in the creed, we need to be sure we connect Good Friday and Easter with Jesus' ascension.

Jesus ascended to heaven FOR US. He comes into the very throne room of his Father with his own death, his own blood, as proof that he paid for our sins.

Page 5

Since he is the all powerful Son of God he has the power to take up his life from the grave. His life was pure and holy before his father. It is still pure and holy. So the Father sees Jesus' holiness and the holiness of his sacrifice for our sins. Jesus did not do this for the Father. He knows all things. Jesus ascended to his father FOR US. We now know beyond question, God has the proof that Jesus did it all for us. When God sits on his throne on Judgment Day and the books are opened he will see your name written in the book of life. When he sees your name he will see only holiness and innocence in your life.

This means you can wait for him, not only without fear; you can wait for him in confidence and joyful anticipation. When he comes a second time the writer says he will come not to take away our sins. He will not come in connection with sin at all except to condemn those who do not believe in him. When he comes at the last day he will fulfill the promises he made. He will come to save us from the evil, wicked world that Satan tries to use to drag us to hell. Yes, wait for him in faith, wait for him with confidence. You can do this because he ascended to heaven for you.

In contrast, the world does not wait for him. In fact the world does not want him to come because it fears judgment. But you do wait for him in faith. You believe that when he comes he will take you to your eternal home. And you can be confident that he is not only your great high priest; he is your king who takes charge every day of your life to protect you from Satan's temptations and false accusations. Jesus protects you from every evil attack of Satan or the world, whether that attack is spiritual or physical. And have confidence that he is your prophet who continues to protect you with the truth of his word. When the world would tell you that Jesus was nothing more than a good man; when it would tell you that Jesus can't take away your sins or that he won't come again; when it wants to shake your confidence in any word of Jesus, then go back and look at his life and his words in scripture. There find confidence when he says because I live you also will live. Find confidence in his words, "I am the way the truth and the life. Find confidence in his words, "**I am going there to prepare a place for you.**³**And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.**" This is the goal that Jesus has for you. This is what Jesus wants. This is what Jesus gives you because his ascension shows how he gives you his blessings. Amen.