

7. Sacrificial offering – the shedding of blood – was fundamental to Israel’s covenant relationship with God, beginning with God’s covenant with the patriarch Abraham. That first covenant was ratified (initiated) with sacrificial blood (Genesis 15), but also permanently secured with it (Genesis 22). In both instances, the “blood of the covenant” originated with God Himself (Genesis 15:9-10, 22:6-14); though it wouldn’t be actualized for another two millennia, the covenant principle of inheritance by the death of the testator was already present in Abraham’s designation, *Yahweh Yireh* (Jehovah Jireh): “*Yahweh will provide.*”

The God of Abraham had promised to provide what was required to uphold His covenant, and He secured that promise and reiterated it throughout the generations of Abraham’s descendents. Now, at last, every dimension and shadow of Israel’s covenant life with Yahweh had reached its destiny and obtained its fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah; *Yahweh had kept His word by providing Himself in the person of His incarnate Son*. Jesus embodied the covenant in Himself, being Yahweh unto Israel, and Israel unto Yahweh. But because that covenant relationship served the divine purpose for the creation, Jesus’ status as “the covenant of the people” involved Him being God unto man and man unto God, but ultimately Creator unto creature and creature unto Creator. God’s intent, fleshed out through Abraham and his “seed,” was to reconcile and gather to Himself all things in the heavens and earth in Jesus, and so realize His eternal purpose to be “all in all” (cf. Ephesians 1:9-10; 1 Corinthians 15:20-28).

The Hebrews writer recognized the scope of the fulfillment that had come in Jesus, but he chose to communicate it to his readers with a particular focus on the imagery of the high priestly ministration on Yom Kippur (9:23-28).

- a. Verse 23 begins with a conjunction that carries the sense of *therefore, thus, or accordingly*, so that the statement that follows it represents an inference drawn from what precedes it. Put simply, the writer was drawing on the cleansing provision of the Sinai covenant (specifically, the provision of Yom Kippur) to show the corresponding, yet superior, effect of Jesus’ death: The sacrifices of Yom Kippur provided the necessary cleansing of everything associated with the earthly tabernacle and its ministration (“the copies of the heavenly things”); it follows, then, that the heavenly realities behind the copies should be cleansed with better sacrifices – sacrifices appropriate to the substance behind the shadow.

This raises the obvious question of why “heavenly things” need to be cleansed. Apart from what the writer meant by “better sacrifices,” why would he believe anything associated with the heavenly realm required cleansing? The key is that he was speaking metaphorically. That is, he recognized that the tabernacle and Levitical system prefigured what God would eventually accomplish in Jesus. He didn’t believe that there was an actual tabernacle in heaven with the same sort of furnishings as the earthly copy, let alone that such a heavenly counterpart needed to be cleansed with actual blood that Jesus carried with Him into heaven. The writer’s point is that Israel’s cleansing rituals were symbolic acts that prefigured the actual cleansing of all things that would take place in the future.

And so the expression, “heavenly things,” refers to the ultimate reality symbolized by the tabernacle, its furnishings, and its function. Those earthly things served the relationship between God and His covenant people (through whom He intended to be the God of all people), and their need of continual cleansing spoke of the fundamental problem in that relationship and the inability of the mediating system to rectify it. God’s design for His creation depended on His relationship with His human creature being reconciled and perfected; thus the divine-human interface – represented by the sanctuary, its appointments and ministration – needed to be cleansed in truth. This is what the writer meant when he insisted that the heavenly things needed to be cleansed with a better sacrifice: *True cleansing based in a superior sacrifice – cleansing that reaches beyond the surface to the inner man (vv. 13-14) – was required for the ultimate reality of divine-human communion (i.e., the true, enduring sanctuary) to be actualized.*

So F. F. Bruce comments: *“While ritual purification was adequate for the material order, which is but an earthly copy of the spiritual order, a better kind of sacrifice is necessary to effect purification in the spiritual order. If we envisage the heavenly dwelling-place of God in something like material terms (and, surrounded as we are by the material universe, it is difficult to avoid doing so), we shall find ourselves trying to explain the necessity for its cleansing in ways which are far from our author’s intention. But we have already had reason to emphasize that the people of God are the house of God, that His dwelling-place is in their midst.”*

- b. Thus we understand his statement about Messiah’s priestly ministration in a heavenly sanctuary (9:24-25). This repeats the same imagery drawn from the high priest’s ministration on Yom Kippur (9:11-12), but here the writer added a new dimension. He’d already emphasized that Jesus performed this offering with His own blood, but here he made explicit what he only hinted at before. The fact that Jesus “obtained eternal redemption” means that there would be no further sacrificial offering: *“now **once**, at the consummation of the ages, He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself”* (9:26). The “better sacrifice” – the sacrifice suited to the substance symbolized by the shadow – is the one that is truly effectual; the one that brings perfect and everlasting cleansing.

- Whereas Israel’s high priest brought the blood of the prescribed offerings before Yahweh every year without fail, Jesus, the high priest of the new covenant, has offered His own blood once for all time and for all people, not just the children of Israel. Indeed, Jesus *couldn’t* have repeated His offering, since it involved His own death. Israel’s high priests could repeat their offerings, because they involved the blood of bulls and goats. In Jesus’ case, a repeated offering would have involved His annual suffering unto death throughout human history (“since the foundation of the world”), which is obviously impossible and absurd (vv. 25-26). There could be no second attempt at atonement for Jesus, but there was no need, for He had effectually “put away sin” by His one act of self-offering.

- The former high priests appeared before Yahweh annually, but did so only *briefly*. Jesus, on the other hand, appeared once with the blood of His sacrifice, but with the result that He now ministers *perpetually* as High Priest in God's presence (v. 24). Indeed, He ministers as *Priest-King*, sharing Yahweh's throne as true God and true Man, having all authority in heaven and earth (1:1-2:18, 8:1-2, 10:11-13; cf. also Romans 8:31-34).

The above observations, framed by all that the writer has presented to this point, help to clarify his meaning regarding the concepts of the "*consummation of the ages*," and Jesus "*putting away sin*."

- 1) Most English versions render the first expression with the phrase, *the end of the ages*, and this has led to some confusion and speculation as to why the writer would refer to Jesus' first coming in this way. He came in the *middle* of the age, not at the end of it, and some have therefore concluded that the writer wasn't talking about Jesus' atonement for sin, but His *eradication* of it when He returns at the end of the age.

But he was clearly referring to Jesus' first coming, when He offered up Himself as the sacrifice for sin (v. 26b). So his expression, the "end of the ages," doesn't connote an absolute endpoint, but a completion that conjoins two "ages." In context, it speaks to the resolution that binds together the eras of *promise* and *fulfillment*. In other words, the writer was saying that the "Christ event" – most specifically, His atoning death – brought to a climax the former age of promise and preparation, and ushered in the new age of the "kingdom of God" – the everlasting era of the new creation. Thus the writer's expression is synonymous with Paul's "*end of the ages*" (1 Corinthians 10:11) and "*fullness of the time*" (Galatians 4:4), and Peter's "*last times*" (1 Peter 1:20; cf. also Hebrews 1:1-2). It emphasizes the finality associated with *fulfillment* (*completion* and *accomplishment*), not the chronological end of the present age.

- 2) The same sort of eschatological finality (fulfillment of promise ushering in a new reality) defines the concept of "*putting away sin*." Here, too, the writer's language underscores this perspective. For he didn't speak of *forgiveness* or *cleansing* from sin (which he does in the wider context), or use the terminology of *atonement* (which has the sense of propitiation in the New Testament). Rather, he referred to the *nullification* of sin, using the same expression as before when he spoke of the disannulling of the "commandment" that prescribed the Aaronic priesthood (7:18-19), and, by implication, the covenant based on it (7:11-22).

By using this particular language on these two occasions (and nowhere else), the writer was connecting the "putting away" of sin with the "setting aside" of the former covenant and its priesthood. Most importantly, he was ascribing to both the same conclusive and final annulment.

Jesus' death *annulled* sin, but this annulment doesn't entail its eradication at the present time. It does mean, however, that God, in His Son, has made a conclusive disposition of sin; in Paul's words, God *condemned* sin in the flesh of Jesus (Romans 8:3); He judged it and put it to death, such that it is a conquered and emasculated foe; it no longer holds its former invincible power over God's image-bearers, and so the rest of His creation.

Thus the writer was making an *eschatological* point, not an individual and personal one. That is, he was speaking about Jesus' death in relation to sin *as such*. His concern here wasn't atonement for individual sins and transgressions, but the disannulment of sin itself as it embodies human deviation from the truth.

- c. Jesus' death unto the judgment of sin is the premise behind verses 27-28. Death and judgment were correlated in His experience, but so it is with all men: "*It is appointed for men to die once, and after this judgment.*" This statement is familiar to many Christians, not least because it's commonly cited in evangelistic discussions to make a point about the certainty of human death and God's judgment. The intent in referencing it is to make the unbeliever realize that death is coming, God is going to judge him when he dies, and there won't be a second chance to repent and be saved. This practice is so common that most Christians have been conditioned to understand this verse in this way, and so never consider that the writer was making a different point. (This is a good example of the adage that a text without a context is a pretext for a proof-text.)

Treated in context, the statement expresses a general principle regarding human existence – one that applies to Jesus as much as every other human being. And that principle is that death is in store for everyone who lives. Birth implies death, and death closes out a person's life, which allows that life to be revealed and assessed for what it actually was (whatever the person might believe about himself). This was the writer's point, but he was applying it specifically to Jesus: His life – a life of pure love for His Father and His will that culminated with the supreme act of self-giving in bearing the sins "of many" – was assessed (judged) at His death, and this judgment yielded the appropriate outcome of resurrection and glorification – that is, the consummate human *life* for which man was created; the regal and priestly human existence of man as God's true image-son.

The writer didn't say all of this, but it's embedded and implied in his assertion concerning Jesus' Parousia and its glorious outcome (9:28). Jesus' death and the judgment (assessment) that followed has resulted in the inauguration of a new creation. This new reality (the everlasting "kingdom of God") is now bearing its fruit (Matthew 13:31-33), with a view to the last day when that fruitfulness is complete at Jesus' appearing. At that time, the judgment associated with His death will be fully vindicated: Jesus died once to *condemn* and *conquer* sin; He will appear a second time as the Living One to execute God's *final disposition* of sin and death. Both will be eradicated from the creation, ushering in the full deliverance ("salvation") for which the created order waits (Romans 8:18-25).