

On Earth, But Not as in Heaven

sermonaudio.com

Hebrews

By Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson

Bible Text: Hebrews 9:1-28
Preached on: Sunday, April 7, 2013

First Presbyterian Church
1324 Marion St
Columbia, SC 29201

Website: www.firstprescolumbia.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/fpccolumbia

O gracious God and Father, how blessed we are to sense that we are in your presence, and that you who are surrounded by glory and majesty, endless praise, in whose presence the ransomed church of God sins no more, but we who are frail creatures of dust and feeble as frail, by trusting in you, may be ushered into your presence by the power of your Spirit, and sense that this is our destiny to glorify you and to enjoy you. And we pray that something of the glory and joy of heaven may flood our souls today, and that as you have given us your word, and we are able to read it and to meditate upon it, we pray that we may feel that we are doing this before the face of heaven itself, that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have triumphed in Christ, and angels and archangels wondering what they shall discover today as they look upon us, as you see into our hearts. Lord, draw us out to yourself. We love to sing your praises in familiar words, to seek your face, to be led thus in prayer, to triumph in the gospel and now we come for this further blessing that like our Lord Jesus with the two on the road to Emmaus, you will come here by the power of the Holy Spirit and open our minds to your truth and as you alone are able to do, where man's eloquence and insight fails, cause our hearts to burn within us as you teach us along the way. So hear us and enrich and bless us, we pray, for our Savior's sake. Amen.

Please be seated.

Now we are studying in the letter to the Hebrews these Sunday mornings, and today we've arrived at Hebrews 9:1 through 28. You'll find the passage in the Pew Bible, page 1,005, or our children's Bible on page 1,497. We noted earlier on in our studies how the author of this letter is not only teaching us, but he's also in his rather clever way testing us. He says, "There are some things I need to tell you that in some ways are difficult for me to teach, but the problem is not that what I want to teach you is of no interest, it is that you've lost your taste to learn more about Christ." And so in these last weeks, we've been tested, haven't we? And chapter 9 that we're coming to today certainly is a test, because it is, if I may say so, prime Aberdeen Angus steak, Hebrews 9, of the very strongest meat. And if ever there was an occasion you need your Bible open and your thinking cap on to follow along, then it may be today. But it is lovely to be stretched, is it not? You may find a few spiritual muscles aching, but if we're able to digest the steak, we will feel a lot better afterwards and by God's grace grow.

So Hebrews chapter 9, he has been teaching us that Jesus is the apostle sent by God and he is the high priest of our salvation and he is continuing that second theme.

1 Now [he says speaking of the new covenant] even the first covenant [the Mosaic covenant] had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. 2 For a tent was prepared, the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place. 3 Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, 4 having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant. 5 Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things [he's just been describing, the holiest place in the tabernacle and then later in the temple] we cannot now speak in detail. 6 These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, 7 but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people. 8 By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing 9 (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, 10 but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation [until the gospel time]. 11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) 12 he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. 13 For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls, with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, 14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. 15 Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant. 16 For where a will is involved [and how he moves from a covenant to a will, we will see in a few minutes], the death of the one who made it must be established. 17 For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive. 18 Therefore not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. 19 For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, 20 saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you." 21 And

in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. 22 Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. 23 Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. 24 For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. 25 Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, 26 for then Jesus would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. 27 And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, 28 so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Somebody in the congregation said to me just a few days ago that they were glad that we were studying Hebrews, particularly Hebrews on Sunday mornings because Hebrews, they said, was their favorite letter in all the New Testament. I think I expressed a little surprise, not that I don't love the letter to the Hebrews, but it always is a surprise to me if somebody says it is their favorite letter because I think that it's one of the two books in the New Testament that contemporary Christians find just a little strange and even alien from our life. The other, of course, is the book of Revelation. It is as unusual to hear a normal person say that Revelation is their favorite book in the New Testament as it is to hear a Christian say that Hebrews is their favorite letter. But they have something very much in common, and that is that they both teach the gospel to us by using word pictures, the book of Revelation with its dramatic war pictures and its great message, which is essentially Jesus is winning and Jesus will win in the end, and then this remarkable letter to the Hebrews that has a similar message, Jesus is able to save you and Jesus will save his people to the uttermost. And that is because Hebrews describes itself in chapter 13 as a word of encouragement. That's the very same phrase that was used to the Apostle Paul, you remember, when he went into the synagogue and they asked him there if he would bring a word of encouragement, a word that expounded Scripture to help believers understand the truth and apply the truth to their lives.

So Hebrews is a wonderful word of encouragement to us, and it is chiefly so because it's all telling us about the Lord Jesus. If you see that, then Hebrews actually will become one of your favorite letters in the New Testament because it teaches us so much about the Lord Jesus, that he is the apostle that God has sent to bring us to heaven and that he is the high priest whom God has sent to open the way that we might get there. And here he's wanting to emphasize to us that Jesus is so marvelous because he is a far greater priest than all the priests of the old covenant and he mediates a new covenant in his blood that is far superior and brings far greater blessings than did the old covenant. And so he's teaching these Christians who are tempted to go back to the old. He's teaching these Christians, as good teachers often do, by way of comparison. He's saying, "Do you see

that? Well, let me tell you that the Lord Jesus is far better. Do you see that? Let me tell you that the Lord Jesus is far greater. So if you have the Lord Jesus, why would you settle for less? If you know him in his greatness, why would you go back to that which by comparison is paltry?"

And this is what he's doing here in chapter 9 by a series of comparisons between the old covenant and the new covenant, between the old worship and the new worship. And there are, I think, essentially three big comparisons he makes that help us to see the greatness and grandeur of our Lord Jesus Christ as our high priest. The first is this, he says Jesus ministers in an entirely different location and with an entirely different frequency of sacrifice than did the Old Testament priests and he's telling us here that the whole Old Testament ritual underscores this difference. Look at what he says in verses 1 and 2. He says there were regulations for worship under the old covenant and there was an earthly place of holiness and he goes into some lengthy description of what that place was like. He says, you remember there was an outer court in which the priests made their sacrifices. You remember, of course, they were a rather special group of people. They belonged to one particular tribe. Not anyone could be a priest, but there were some who could be priests, and in that outer room they made their sacrifices day in and day out in relationship to the sins of the people. But then there was only one of these priests, the high priest, and only on one day of the year, the day of atonement described in Leviticus 16, he was permitted to go through the curtain into the inner room, into the holiest place of all. And there once a year he would offer sacrifice for the sins of the people as we've already seen. He would wear special robes with bells round those robes to help the people understand that in the presence of a holy God where he could so readily be struck dead if the sacrifice was unacceptable or if he had not gone through the detailed regulations down to the last detail, and they would hear him moving in the room, and then he would come out to the relief, the joy of the people and pronounce the benediction and the hope that this God of infinite holiness would in his mercy provide them with forgiveness was kept alive for another year.

But of course the point that he wants to make is this: they do that simply on earth. They did that every single day of the year. One of them was allowed to do it on one day of the year, but what was true if you were a believer in these ancient days, what was true for you is you were certainly not allowed to do it unless you were of the special family, and even within the special family unless you were the chosen one, the high priest. Says the author, by this arrangement the Holy Spirit teaches us that the way into the presence of God was not yet opened for all the people of God. And so if they were to know about the forgiveness of their sins, they knew about it simply by these earthly arrangements, and those earthly arrangements actually in their very nature reminded them that these sacrifices weren't actually taking away their sins, otherwise they would never need to be repeated. But by comparison, says the author, our Lord Jesus has gone into the very presence of God. That is why when he died the great temple veil was torn in two from the top to the bottom to say that this temple no longer functions for a divine purpose because Jesus has fulfilled all the purposes of God to which this temple pointed and no longer do priests need to stand daily at altars making sacrifice because Jesus once and for all has sacrificed himself upon the cross.

What a glorious day that must have been for anyone who had eyes to see, but now the real sacrifice had been made and, of course, there were those who had eyes to see. They saw the blood of the bulls and the goats, the other sacrificial animals. They could see how can the blood of an animal sit on the scales and outweigh the sins of a man? It was impossible. This blood was unworthy. It was powerless to do that. But when our Lord Jesus Christ through the sacrifice of himself in the power of the eternal spirit on the one altar of Calvary laid himself bare to the holy judgment of God as a sacrifice for the sins of all of his people in every place for all time, then you see the author is saying, we understand that he has gone into the very presence of God with his sacrifice and he needed to do it only once, and because he has done it only once, the sacrifice we need for our sins has been finally made. That's why we sing,

"Not all the blood of beasts,
On Jewish altars slain,
Can give the guilty conscience peace.
Or wash away the stain.

But Christ, the heavenly Lamb,
Wipes all our sins away;
A sacrifice of nobler name,
And richer blood than they."

And he's saying, "If this is what our Savior has done, why would you not fix your eyes on him? Why would you even consider drifting away when you had caught sight of such a glorious Savior?"

So Jesus offers a greater sacrifice in a different location and he does it only once but second you notice, the writer tells us that Jesus offers a better sacrifice and it has better effects. "The old sacrifices," he says, "they just deal with external things. It's the blood of animals and it deals only with external things. Moses sprinkles the people. The blood is shed in all parts of the holy place and then in the most holy place, on the place where they believe they could meet with God, but," he's saying, "you do understand that Jesus has offered a far better sacrifice, don't you? And this sacrifice brings with it not external benefits but internal benefits. This is a sacrifice," he says, "that can bring the forgiveness of our sins." And that's what we need, isn't it? That's what you need. This is the sacrifice that cleanses not just external things, makes you feel that you've done your duty as God has given you commandments and responsibilities but you know as we often sing with great gusto, "But oh to experience it in the depths of our hearts, his blood can make the foulest clean, his blood avails for me."

And that's why what he's saying here is so relevant to us, I think, isn't it today? You remember that dramatic scene in Shakespeare's Macbeth where one of the chamber women and the doctor are watching Lady Macbeth and she's rubbing her hands together and the doctor asks how long she's been doing this and the gentlewoman says she's seen Lady Macbeth do this frequently. And then as they watch, Lady Macbeth looks into her

hand and she says, "Yes, here is a spot." The doctor takes out his little book, you see. He says, "I'll write this down so that when I go away I'll be able to analyze this and see what's really amiss." And there is Lady Macbeth and she's rubbing at her hand and she says these famous words, "Out, damned spot! Out, I say! Here is the smell of the blood still!" All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Well, my friend, she could be here in abundance this morning, couldn't she? Blots on my conscience, the things that come back to me in the night and become monsters that haunt me, the memories from the past that I'm not able to rub out and I know no matter how much I try to put in the scales to mount up the balancing acts of righteousness that will outweigh the guilt of my sin. None of them can remove the blood because all I'm trying to do is balance the scales when what I need is the forgiveness of my sins that says peace from God to my guilty conscience.

Of course, complicity in murder was her problem, but unless we call Jesus a liar, you and I have been complicit in murders as well, haven't we? An angry word, a deceitful action that half destroyed the life of another, a false suggestion that brought down their reputation, and so we can go through all of the commandments and recognize that since we have not loved the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and strength or our neighbor as ourselves, we come to God with dark blots on our consciences. And some of us it may be whenever this matter is raised in a pulpit like this, immediately the shutters go up, don't they? We're like that by nature. We don't like a physician touching us where we hurt, a dentist probe going to the very place where we felt the pain and are jumping at the nerve. But you see, at least we understand with our physicians and our dentists that if that doesn't happen, all we're going to be left with is the pain.

And so one of the things this author is doing here, he's saying to us, he's saying, "I beg you, feel the pain. Feel the pain of your sin. Allow the word of God that he's spoken about earlier to be like a sharp two-edged sword that goes right through into your conscience so that it brings you to say it's true, there's a dark blot on my soul of sin that has never been forgiven. I've never come for forgiveness. I think I've told you before of the older minister I knew who told me how he had been called out in the middle of the day to meet a physician at a hotel because this physician, she was a lady, was deeply troubled and in the course of the conversation, he said to her, "Have you ever asked for forgiveness?" And she became utterly furious, picked up her purse, stamped out of the room. I say to you, what would you expect a gospel minister to say? What would you expect a gospel minister to say? We don't pay our ministers, my dear brothers and sisters, to be nice men, but to help us to heaven.

And this passage is saying if we're ever going to get to heaven, then we need to feel the wound of our sin and our guilt and our shame and stop however much we hide ourselves from others in our sin, stop hiding from him. How foolish that would be when he has done absolutely everything that we need, if all these blood sacrifices could not cleanse the consciences of those who made them, there is nothing that you will ever be able to do that will cleanse and quieten your conscience but the great good news of the gospel is he has done everything you need to pardon sin, cleanse conscience, and set you free from that terrible bondage of hiding from God all your life, being able to go into his presence

and know that because you're clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, you're actually as righteous there as Jesus himself is righteous there. And so you can sing. It's not just a figment of the imagination, "Bold I approach the eternal throne and claim the crown through Christ my own."

So he's saying that Jesus ministers in a different location with different frequency. Jesus offered a better sacrifice with better effects, and then he tells us that Jesus mediates a better covenant that brings us a far better inheritance, and this is where that part of Hebrews 9 that may seem to us English readers a little complicated is actually quite simple. The word for "covenant" in this author's mind is a word in Greek that outside of the New Testament could and would be translated as "testament" or "will." And you see, he's using that idea of the blessings of this new covenant and he's saying, "Actually it works just like a will because we don't receive the benefits of the will, the testament unless the person first dies." And he says this was true under the old covenant. There were benefits to be received from the sacrifice of these animals. They pointed to something great that God was going to do and you wouldn't have those benefits without the shedding of blood. But he says there are lasting eternal benefits that are now released into the possession of believers because Jesus has shed his precious blood and because he has shed his precious blood, everything he has written into his will for us.

Do you remember how he tells us part of that will in John 17:24? He says, "Father, here is my last will and testament. I want those you have given me to be with me where I am to behold my glory." Now you don't get that by animal sacrifice. But he's saying, "Father, this is my last will and testament and I, Father, I am asking now as I pen this last will, my desire is that when I die for their sins, that will open the door right into your presence to see my glory."

I told the 8:30 congregation and I imagine some of you have heard that I told them this, you know that I am a great lover of Rembrandt. What you do not know is that my family actually owns Rembrandt's "Paul," and Rembrandt's "Jesus stilling the storm." My family owns "Paul" and "Jesus stilling the storm," and what will please you beyond words will be if I tell you that I am leaving our "Paul" and our "Jesus stilling the storm" to First Presbyterian Church when I die. And you are, you want to know how much that's worth? About \$100. They're just prints. Took my life in my hands telling that twice on the same Sunday morning. They're just copies. I still love them and I wouldn't have them unless they told me there was an even greater portrait of Paul, picture of Jesus stilling the storm. And that, you see, is what he's saying is the difference between the old and the new. In the old they had the copy. In the old they had the working model. But now we've got Jesus. Jesus is absolutely priceless.

And so he's saying, "Now that you've got Jesus, don't you see how great Jesus is?" Even those of us who have no Jewish background, who have never lived within the ambiance of the Old Testament Scriptures, we can see how great our Savior Jesus must be. And so he summarizes all this in one of the most beautiful paragraphs in the New Testament when he says to them after bringing all this out, he says, "Just think about it like this. Think about the three appearances of the Lord Jesus. He appeared first in his incarnation to put away our sin. He appears now," he says, "at the right hand of the majesty on high to

secure our salvation and to hold onto us as we live through this life with all its dangers and challenges, and one day he will appear to wrap up history and come again for his people and bring in the glory and majesty of his kingdom. He's done everything we need, everything we need to know our sins are forgiven and our conscience is cleansed, everything we need to have an absolute assurance that we're on our way to heaven, and everything we need to have access into the very presence of God and to enjoy what Christians have often called the priesthood of all believers." And he's saying, "So don't stop at the externals." And it may be that you and I have different externals and we've stopped too early. I mean stop too early by going to church, stop too early by trying to live the best life we can, stop too early by saying to ourselves, "I need to do something that will make up for the sins of past," and he's saying, "Don't stop too early. Come right on to Jesus Christ and he will give to you everything you could possibly need to be brought from this dark world of sin and guilt into that bright world of grace and glory where so many of our dear ones today live in joy."

My friend, you've got a Christianity that guarantees that you will be there, that will enable your ministers when you die not to say in the gentle southern way, "She passed," which if you're not southern always makes you ask, "But passed where," which is the real question. But to be able to say, "Our sister, our brother has passed right into heaven." And for all our loss and the pain and the sorrow, we are really able to say with a full heart, "She really is in a better place with Jesus." Well, that's the confidence, the joy the gospel holds out to us and so it would be so foolish, wouldn't it, to stop short or to drift away. May God, may God help us to see him and fully embrace him.

Heavenly Father, we thank you today for the riches of your grace to us in Jesus Christ for the wonder of the gospel and, yes, also for passages like this that we feel we need to chew on and keep chewing on until their secret is disclosed to us and we're brought to a great sense of how glorious our Savior is. So bless us Lord, cleanse our consciences from dead works, bring us right into your presence, give us the great assurance of full and final salvation in our Savior Jesus Christ. And we ask it in his name. Amen.