

Last Judgment—B
Hebrews 9:24-28
Jesus is Lord Over Sin

How much do you know about the American Civil War? Do you know where it all started? Where were the first angry shots fired? Do you know the answer to that? Charleston Harbor. It was at a place called Fort Sumter, which was a Union fort, and the recently seceded state of South Carolina really wanted that Union garrison out of there. After various threats and warnings had gone unheeded, on April 12, 1861 at 4:30 a.m., probably still dark, a bombardment was unleashed by a Confederate shore battery aimed towards the Fort. For 34 straight hours, that bombardment continued.

At first the Union Fort returned some fire and ironically, nobody was hurt in the whole thing, at least by enemy fire. I think somebody was hurt by an internal accident, but none of the guns hurt anyone else. But Major Anderson, the Union Commander of Fort Sumter, realized that his position was untenable and so he arranged for a boat to back up to the Fort and he evacuated his 68 soldiers and the flag. That's what he got away with. And the flag still exists, but it's all shot. You can see it at the Fort Sumter Museum.

But you know what? Nobody really had an idea of what that war was going to cost. Up to this point between the North and the South there had been intense and often bitter debates, but they were economic debates, moral debates, and geographic arguments. After Fort Sumter, there would be blood, and it now became a contest to the death. Nobody knew that 600,000 people were going to die before the conflict was over.

In his second inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln said: "It seems the will of the Almighty that over all these years, all the blood that has been extracted from mankind by the lash," meaning the lash of slavery, "now is going to have to be paid for by an equal amount of blood extracted and drawn by the sword."

When South Carolina was debating secession and contemplating that this might plunge them into war, one of the southern legislatures pulled out his handkerchief and kind of waved it and said: "If there should be war, it could easily be mopped up by just this one handkerchief." Well, it was far more than that. Both sides, North and South, drastically underestimated the cost of what war would bring.

It strikes me that when Adam and Eve declared war against God they did not have any idea what they were going to plunge their world and the world of their descendants into. When Adam and Eve decided that God was a liar and could not be trusted, that they did not want to accept his sovereignty over their lives, or give him their obedience and cooperation, when they wanted to determine their own morality, their own sense of right and wrong, their own purpose for existence, they essentially declared war on God. He had said: "*You will surely die,*" and they said: "We will not surely die. There will be no cost to our rebellion."

I wonder what Eve would have thought as her hand was reaching for that fruit if she could've watched someone dying of cancer and God said: "This is what you're going to do to the human race." I wonder what she would have thought as she's reaching for that fruit if she could have seen a woman miscarry or give birth to a stillborn baby. What would she have thought if she could see two armies hacking and stabbing, punching and kicking and bayoneting each other in those ugly trenches of the Civil War in our country? Would she have pulled her hand back and said: "No, I won't do that"? She had no idea and recklessly declared war on God and brought on her and her husband and the human race what I like to call the "Triple Curse" of sin.

Curse number one is pain. Your life was meant to be pleasurable as God designed it, and now you will suffer pain. God told Adam: "Your job was supposed to be fun. Now you will sweat when you work. Now the weeds will fight you. The only thing the ground will willingly bear is weeds. By the sweat of your brow, you will wrestle a living out of the ground." And to Eve, to every woman and to all of Eve's daughters, the way God wired his women on this earth is in their relationships. Women derive their greatest sense of fulfillment from being connected. Of all of the relationships you have, your guy, your man, is number one. He said to Eve: "*Your desire will be for your husband and now he will rule over you.*" In other words, your husband who is supposed to be your protector and leader will sometimes become your tyrant and boss you around and hurt

and abuse you. All of the women who have been abused by men over the years can now all wail at the same time to mother Eve for what she recklessly did. God said to Eve: *"In pain, you will give birth to children."* No woman's heart can protect her against the way her own children can hurt her. She's a city without walls when it comes to her kids. That big ouch of giving birth the first time is only the first of many, many more pains yet to come.

The second curse is death. God said: *"The day you eat of it, you will surely die,"* and they said: "We don't think so." Just like the Union threatened: "Don't fire on the Fort," and the Confederacy said: "We're not scared of you Yankees" and they unleashed this terrible bombardment. God said: *"You will surely die"* and the moment their rebellion took place, they began to die. They became mortal and their bodies started ticking with that falling apart of tissue that we call the aging process. They thought he was bluffing. He was not. He was dead serious. "If you declare war on me, I will declare war on you and I will kill you." I might as well come right out and say it: The curse of death is not because we haven't found a cure for cancer. It's because God is angry with the planet. You can argue with that all you want. I'm simply stating a fact. Like, the sun is out today. It's so simple—it's up there. We know it's up there. Whether there are clouds or not, the sun has risen.

The third thing that God said is that his anger is everlasting and the concept of hell and damnation is even worse than the grave because the grave at least makes it stop. But damnation goes on and on. This is the curse that Adam and Eve brought. This is the curse we're stuck with.

The final insult, the final depressing fact is that it is hereditary. Just like a mother who drinks heavily while she's pregnant is risking giving birth to a fetal alcohol child. Or, if she's snorting a lot of white powder up her nose, can give birth to a cocaine baby who's already addicted to a chemical substance in the womb, which is so unfair! What could be more unfair than that? It's not fair that you were stuck born into Adam and Eve's rebellion. Frankly, it wasn't fair that an awful lot of people who did not want war on either the North or South were dragged into war by others. It just is a fact, it happened. Now, what to do about it?

It's my thrill to announce to you today the most marvelous good news you will ever hear and it's the core of the Christian message. We have declared war on God and he has declared war back on us, but simultaneously with that bad news, there is a contradictory companion message in the Bible originating already back to the time of Adam and Eve—that God still loved his rebellious children, and frankly, it doesn't get any better than that. He loves us anyway, in spite of his anger. And he worked out a way for his holiness and our sinfulness to be able to still come together and have a relationship. And he found a way to defeat the enemies and curses that weigh us and bog us down. That is called the "gospel," and it is the greatest news you will ever hear. It might seem like these two impulses in the heart of God are contradictory and I guess frankly, they are. Is God condemning sin or forgiving it? Really, he is both. And where those two things come together is on the cross of Christ on Calvary.

Now, it pleased God to wait for many thousands of years before he actually did send that Savior. It was many thousands of years from the time of Adam and Eve until the time when Jesus Christ actually came. In the meantime, God's message to people that there would be forgiveness for all of their sins and relief from their guilt through a coming Savior was just as real to them then as it is to you and to me today. It's all resting on the spoken and written promises of God.

But he wanted to help people before the reality actually came. He wanted to help them to visualize what this drama would be like. Now if you talk to educators, one of the things they will tell you is that when you want kids to understand something, they have multiple ways of learning. If you just talk to them, they may retain at best 10% or 15% of it. But if you talk to them and give them something to look at, you ratchet it up even a little more. And what really helps is if you enable them in some way to participate in a physical or hands on activity. Now to communicate the idea that there is a plan for forgiveness of sins through sacrifice and death, through the blood and death of a substitute, God invented a drama, a divine drama, a beautiful ritual, enabling people not only to hear his message of love, but to visualize it, to see what it would actually be like. What he did was through the old covenant, the most highly developed of these dramas, God designed through Moses a meeting place where he would encounter his people and bring them the forgiveness they needed. And that place was called the Tabernacle, later the Temple, and here's what it means.

Message number one: “I am here for you. I’m in your midst.” So, it’s a love message first. Second: “But you keep your distance. No one goes into my building unless you are one of the priests. I will allow priests only into my presence.” In the holiest place, where the Arc of the Covenant is found in a windowless dark room where the bright cloud of the presence of God would gather, “only the high priest may go in there and then only once a year. And then with his eyes averted, sprinkling, throwing blood all over the place and swinging incense, clouds and billows of incense, so that he can’t really look at me. He has no right to look at me. You may approach me in that way and the only thing that makes the priests holy enough to stand before me without getting electrocuted by 8 billion volts of my holiness is I will accept the blood of a sacrificial victim in place of him before he comes in here. I will take the blood of a lamb or a goat in place of him.” And so: “*Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness,*” the Bible says. “But I will allow it to be a substitutionary shedding of blood.” And so, that was reenacted over and over again. Think of the rivers of blood that flowed for a millennium and a half, reenacting the drama which was still not the reality itself, it was not Christ. But it was teaching people about what was going to happen.

Then when Jesus came, he himself took on both of those roles as the intermediary between this awkward meeting, between holiness and sin. And Jesus, in himself, became the priesthood once for all. And he’s the perfect person for it. True God 100%, true man 100%—all of both. Not like a centaur or a mermaid or something like that where you’re half and half. All of both, fused together, so that he could represent both to the other. And he stayed human, to be our cotter pin, that links us together and holds God and us together. He simultaneously also became the sacrificial lamb. By the spilling of his own blood, he once and for all made a payment to guarantee our access to God and so that his forgiving love may flow into us.

Now, all of that is kind of a preliminary to our sermon for today based on Hebrews 9. I hardly even know how to boil this down because Hebrews 9 is a brilliant essay on how God used the Lord Jesus Christ as a permanent priest, as a bridge or a go between to take care of our most pressing need, which is the curse of sin. I really hope that you can carve out a little time later today and read the whole chapter for yourself and get it into context. It’s splendid, just splendid, because it helps to do three things for you. I’ll say this at the end, but I’ll tip you off where I’m headed. It does three things for you. It does something for your conscience right now, it does something for your fear of the future and your confidence as you look ahead, and it does something for your life by changing the way in which you live.

Now, in verse 24, it says: “*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.*” So, like the priests, he went into the Most Holy Place—but not the Most Holy Place as in the temple. His great work on Calvary did not involve the temple. He went into heaven. The temple, after all, is a symbolic representation of heaven. Jesus entered heaven, the ultimate dwelling place of God.

How? “*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. Otherwise 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*” (25-26). Does this make sense to you? Do you follow the drift? It’s a kind of closely reasoned essay on the concept of a priesthood bridging God’s holiness and our sinfulness. What happens is there is a gigantic exchange. Our unworthiness, our sin, which we’ve acquired in a hereditary way and then added to by a thousand, by ten thousand, by a hundred thousand sinful thoughts, words and deeds as we’ve joined in the rebellion of Satan, we are now able to put all that bad stuff on the Substitute, and the Substitute’s innocence then gets put on us. Sometimes this is called the “Great Exchange.” Sounds totally unfair. Sounds like a rip off deal to me. That’s like: “I get all your money and you get all my debts.” Does that sound like fun? Anybody want to sign up for that? I would like to meet any of you who would like my debts in exchange for your assets. But that’s what Jesus did. He gave you all his treasures, which was his holiness, his relationship to his Father, his perfect record of obedience, you get to have it. You get to put your name on his report card. It’s considered cheating in the education world. In God’s court he says: “It’s my gift. I will make an exception for you.” He allows us to put our bad stuff on him. Normally blaming other children for your own

sins is not allowed at home or at school either, is it? Except God allows you to do that in his court. You're allowed to blame Jesus for everything that's been wrong in your life.

That's where your clean conscience comes from. That's how you can sleep well tonight knowing that no matter what's going on in your life, it is not because God hates you. All of his anger did come crashing down on you. But it did crash down on the priest, on the sacrificial victim, who's that cotten pin, linking us together with God. That's what it means that Jesus is Lord over sin. He has conquered that brutally dangerous, deadly curse that haunts you every day of your life. And you now have a cleansed conscience.

There is a very significant difference between these old covenant dramatizations, or visual aids, and the actual work of Christ himself, which they were intended to typify. In the old covenant, the temple and the tabernacle before it were used over and over and over again and the sacrifices were offered repeatedly, even on a daily basis. Christ came and did it one time. This is a thrill for you and me, for here is the reality, the only real way to take guilt out of your life.

You've maybe tried other ways to get rid of those guilty feelings. Maybe by making excuses, blaming other people, getting really busy so you don't think about it too much, working all the time so you're really tired, or maybe you found that alcohol and drugs really work to numb yourself so that you don't think about your problems. This though is the one way that works.

Listen to what Scripture says in verse 25: "*He did not enter heaven to offer himself many times,*" that's Jesus, "*as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own. Otherwise he would have needed to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all, at the climax of the ages, in order to take away sin.*" Whose? Mine and yours. "*By the sacrifice of himself.*" That's his gift to you, to announce to you that by his work, what he has done on your behalf, takes the pressure of self-improvement off of you. You don't have to try to get God to like you by trying to change yourself or by your own personal efforts and performance. He bought the favor of God and gives it to you and it's yours by faith.

"*Just as it is appointed for people to die only once,*" one time and "*after this comes the judgment,*" one time, "*so 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*" (27-28). Now you know, the Day of Judgment which is coming, the day of accountability, kind of fills people with some nervousness. And I'll just be totally honest, it makes me nervous sometimes, too, because I figure that God is going to treat me the way I treat my kids. Like when they are bad I yell at them. And I figure that maybe God's going to come and yell at me for a while too so I'm not eager for Judgment Day. But this passage of Scripture says that's not what I'm going to hear. I will hear only my Savior's voice welcoming me home and telling me: "Well done."

First of all, it removes from you the crushing burden of your own guilt. It's just gone. You may go digging around in it again, like a dog goes digging around in smelly old stuff in the garbage pile behind your house. But it truly is gone. You are forgiven completely and purely. You are now in God's eyes as holy as though you were Christ himself because of what he's given to you through the blood of Jesus.

Secondly, as you look ahead, your future is guaranteed through the work of the Son. When Jesus comes back, remember that his blood has taken away all the eternal consequences of your sins, too. God will do a: "Sins? What sins?" routine with you when you stand before him and you are not going to get yelled at.

And thirdly, this frees us up to serve the living God right now. You know, you may be related to some people who drag themselves through life with a lot of guilt. And you know there are all kinds of dumb ways to try and get rid of guilt. You can stay busy and don't think about it, you can stay half-drunk. That will get your mind off of it, won't it? You can take some drugs, legal and illegal. You can work obscene hours. Like, work twelve hours every day and you're so tired you never worry about the future. You don't have any energy to think ahead or worry about God. But that doesn't last, that doesn't work for long. You can try to justify yourself. One of my favorites is picking somebody farther down the moral food chain than me. I wouldn't pick any of you because you would probably embarrass me and put me to shame. But, I'll just go read the papers or I'll drive around the city a while and I'll compare myself to somebody who carjacks cars or beats up old grannies and breaks in their houses or holds up liquor stores. That's who I can compare myself to in order to

feel morally superior, like I'm somebody compared to "him" or "her." That doesn't work. None of that stuff works.

You see how this changes everything? Now you are set free because your Lord Jesus is Lord over sin, over your sin. You are set free from the guilt that drags you down, set free to serve him. Not to get him to like you, because he already he likes you. You're set free not to do things that will pave your way to get into heaven, because you've already been declared an heir and citizen of heaven.

Since you know people who struggle with guilt and because you have this precious gift of freedom, you can become a broker of God's mercy and you can give away to other people what you have received for free yourself. Somewhere in your world are people who struggle with guilt that has been unresolved and is unrelieved and you can share with them what the Lord Jesus has so wonderfully shared with you. You can give away what you've been given. Amen.

Lord Jesus, help me today. I have not yet quite forgiven myself for some of the things that I've done in my past and it helps me to know that you love me and have forgiven me. I have had trouble liking myself again after things that I've done and it helps me to know that you like me. Thank you for caring about me, forgiving me, and telling me that I have worth before you. Thank you for inviting me to live forever in your home. Thank you for making me feel like I belong with you. In Jesus' name. Amen.