

The Final Sacrifice

Hebrews 10:1-25

Also Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22:1-21; John 18:28-19:37

Almighty God, Most gracious heavenly Father, who gave your Son to be the Passover Lamb.

Pour out on us your Holy Spirit, that in reading the story of his Passion, we might recognize that Christ died for us, and claiming him for our Savior, might dedicate all that we are to his service.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Hughes Oliphant Old

Death by Crucifixion

On this day 2100 years ago darkness crept across the face of the earth like a death shroud. On every day from the foundation of the world man rose up in the morning and went out to his work. Each day had light sufficient to go about his business. But on this day the lights went out.

Crucifixion was a horrific death. That was intentional. Rome kept the peace all over the Mediterranean world by terrorizing its subject peoples. Thieves, murderers, rebels, and traitors would be tortured and hung naked on a cross for the birds to devour and people to mock, or shudder, or rejoice. Crucifixion of convicts certainly was cruel, but not unusual in the Roman world, but this one was different. This was the crucifixion of an innocent man. It was obvious to all – Roman, Jew, and anyone – that Jesus did nothing deserving of death. Pilate, the Roman governor, spent hours seeking to release him. But the crowd, driven mad with blood-lust, threatened to turn the whole city into an uproar. The only way to avoid a revolt was simply to execute this man Jesus. Had not even one of their own priests declared that it is better for one man to die than for the whole nation to perish? If the crowd got out of control and the Roman legions were sent in, not only would Pilate lose his job and his life, but the entire city would be destroyed. As awful as it sounds, crucifying one insignificant man was a reasonable price to pay for peace in the nation. And sure enough, Jesus' death was a sacrifice for the nation. Our epistle lesson explains that Jesus' sacrifice was terrifically effective. It accomplished a lot more than pacifying the crowds and saving the nation from Roman legions.

A Better Sacrifice

It is brutally shocking to hear the vicious crowds begging for Jesus to be crucified. It is chilling to hear the Jewish leaders coldly demand the worst death possible. It is appallingly wicked to watch Pilate sentence Jesus to a fate reserved for the worst criminals. It is clear that the worst criminals are on the other side of the bar – and so it has always been. For the crowds, the leaders, and Pilate are us. They are samples of the human race. We are just like them. The only reason we have not committed such atrocities is that we have had no occasion to do so. Evil lies buried in every human heart and expresses itself when it gets a chance. The mercy of God prevents us from having those chances. But evil is there, in us – still in us. God sees, God knows, God judges, and God condemns – long ago. We deserve nothing but death for our sins. But God was not willing to exterminate the whole human race, so He provided a temporary remedy – a stay of execution. God decreed that He would withhold execution from sinners if they offered a substitute to die in their place. Everyone knows this, and all cultures practice sacrificial substitution in some fashion. God delivered His approved method of substitution through Moses, and for a thousand years sheep, goats, and bulls had been offered in the temple in Jerusalem to God as a substitute for sinful man. Sinful men killed these innocent animals so that God would spare man the punishment due for his sin. God kept His word, and He accepted these sacrifices from His people. But it was obvious that a sheep or bull could not possibly be an adequate substitute for a man. They could illustrate the need for a sacrificial death to bear the punishment for sin, but they could not actually *bear* sin. Furthermore, the sacrifices did not solve the problem. Every day following the sacrifice men committed the same sins over and over. So back they went to the temple with their sheep or bull. God accepted their sacrifices and did not punish those people for their sin – but the sin remained. Mankind was trapped in a vicious cycle of sin and forgiveness and more sin and more forgiveness. There had to be a better way – and there was.

The prophet Isaiah says that God looked for a deliverer to save His people, and He was astonished that no one was qualified. There had been many great and godly men: Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, Elijah, and others. But they were men who were also trapped in the sin and forgiveness cycle. The heroes of the faith defeated powerful enemies, built a glorious kingdom, and conquered demons – but they were mere men. And the one thing they could do nothing about was the sin which was lodged in the flesh of everyone. So mankind staggered on, sinning and being forgiven until God came in person to save His people.

Jesus was no ordinary man. He was a man, alright. He was born, grew up, ate and slept like any man. But His Father was God and Jesus was God. This is the great mystery of the incarnation – that God became fully man without ceasing to be God. Jesus could do what no sheep or bull could do. Jesus could take the place of sinful man because He was a true man, and He could take the place of *all* men because He was God. Jesus was the permanent sacrifice that all previous sacrifices had represented. By His death Jesus took the punishment all men deserve. By hanging on a wooden cross, Jesus took the curse that lay over all mankind. But Jesus did more than take our curse and punishment. Jesus solved the root problem – the problem of sin in our flesh that caused us to commit acts of sin daily. Jesus crippled the power of sin and changed our basic nature. Our epistle lesson says, “the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us;... ‘This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds...’” (Hebrews 10:15-16) For the first time in history mankind has God’s law permanently etched into our hearts and minds. This does not mean that we always do what is right, but it does mean that we are *inclined* to do what is right. Before Christ, man was inclined to do evil, but he was restrained by God’s law. Now man is inclined to do right, even though he still falls short. But the cleansing power of Jesus is so strong, and our future is so righteous, God considers us as good as perfect. Verse 10 says, “we *have been* sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” When Jesus died, sin died. We *will be* perfect, and God *considers* us perfect already because the death of Christ is the fool-proof perfecter of mankind.

Justice at Last

Friday morning the greatest miscarriage of justice in all history took place. An innocent man – a perfect man, one who had never committed a crime or misdemeanor, one who had never – even once – sinned, one who had kept every jot and tittle of God’s law perfectly – that man was sentenced to death. And not just any death – the worst death possible, a torture so horrible it was illegal to give to Roman citizens – crucifixion. And so, innocent, blameless, holy Jesus was led out to Golgotha and hung upon a cross. And on that hill we see the greatest perfection of justice in history. For Jesus nailed to the cross was no longer the innocent, blameless, holy Jesus. He had become the most despicably wicked person ever to exist. Jesus took upon Himself the guilt of all the sins of all God’s people in all ages. And here is the mystery of the atonement. Jesus remained the perfect, holy Son of God while at the same time becoming the wickedest, vilest, most hated person ever to have existed – worse than Hitler, worse than Islamic terrorists, worse than slave-masters, worse than child-molesters worse than wife-beaters. If you could roll into one all the worst people you could imagine, Jesus as He hung on the cross would have been worse than that, because Jesus bore all the sins of all God’s children. And as Jesus hung there bearing all sins of all God’s children in all ages, God executed the judgment on that sin. Our Old Testament lesson in Isaiah tells us that it was the Father who killed Jesus. The heavenly Father who had said, “This is my beloved Son,” in that moment saw the unbearable ugliness and hatefulness of our sin. And God’s anger, which had been boiling for thousands of years, exploded on Jesus. God had warned Adam that he would die if he sinned. God served part of that sentence to every person who ever lived, but now the Father served the rest of the sentence on His Son. By evening Jesus was dead, justice had been served, and God’s anger was gone.

Good News for Us

Did you hear that? God's anger was gone! Completely, yes permanently gone! Verse 17 says, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." God never remembers our sin! Jesus did what sheep and bulls could never do. Jesus offered an *effective* sacrifice for our sin. The sheep and bull offerings were shadows of a true offering yet to come. They illustrated the need for a substitute to take the punishment for our sin, and God accepted those sacrifices temporarily. But those temporary sacrifices pointed to a permanent sacrifice to come. When Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sin, then the guilt of sin is gone – completely gone, permanently gone. If there is no guilt of sin, there is no need for a sacrifice. *Jesus was the final sacrifice*. Jesus did what no other sacrifice could do, and no further sacrifices are necessary .

The immediate effect of Jesus' death for us is that we now have access to the holy places. Until Jesus, no one could enter God's holy throne room. The one exception was that, for a moment once a year, the high priest could enter – but only for a moment once a year – carrying the blood of sacrifice. God's heavenly throne room was completely closed to people, and His earthly throne was in a small, dark room deep in the temple. No one could get close to God because His holiness would incinerate sinful people. Isaiah had a vision of God's throne, and it terrified him. He knew that he was doomed when he saw God, but God purified Isaiah so that he survived the encounter. Jesus' death purified us, so now all God's children can freely enter the divine throne room. On earth God is no longer locked in a small dark room deep in the temple. The church is God's temple on earth. Christians may roam freely and mingle with the Holy Spirit in the church without fear. Christ also gives us access to the heavenly throne room. We may approach God any time, but especially on the Lord's Day we join the angels and archangels around the heavenly throne in joyful worship. Jesus' death has opened the door to heaven and we may come and go as we please.

Three Invitations

Jesus' sacrifice has cleared us of the guilt of sin and purified us of the pollution of sin. So now we have free access to God and to heaven, and thus we are given three invitations. **First**, we are invited to draw near to God. This might seem an obvious and natural thing to do, but it is not. Non-Christians, who have no sacrifice for their sins, have good reason to fear God. But not God's children. We are free and clean! Jesus paid our debt. The Holy Spirit has cleaned us. We can march boldly, fully upright, into God's presence – and He invites us to do so. God wants us to come to Him. But we hold back. Christians used to live in the fear of guilt and pollution, and they struggle to believe the gospel. This good news seems too good to be true – and it *is* too good to be true. No one would make this up. But it *is* true. That is why God wrote this letter, and that is why God appoints preachers for the church – to announce, persuade, and remind us that the gospel is *really* true. And not only does the Father welcome us; Jesus defends us. Jesus is our high priest who sits at the Father's side and reminds the Father that you are pure and holy and delightful. Jesus urges you to come into heaven and join Him and the Father. That is why Jesus died. He died so that you might always be welcome in heaven.

Second, we are invited to hold fast our confession. All day every day you are being told that there is no God, Jesus did not rise from the dead, the Bible contains beautiful myths, sin is enjoyable, the lusts of your flesh are irresistible – all lies. Lies! But you are pummeled by these lies constantly until you start to crack. It seems impossible to withstand the constant attack of the world, the flesh, and the devil. But that also is a lie. You feel as though you are slipping, giving in to the inevitable, and just have to believe some of the lies in order to survive. That also is a lie! The truth is that when Jesus died He broke the power of sin and sent the Holy Spirit to comfort and preserve and empower you. You can hang on. Do you feel as though you do not have the power to resist? That feeling is true. You don't have the power on your own to resist. But our text reminds us that Jesus is faithful. You may feel overwhelmed by spiritual attacks, you may slip into acts of sin from time to time, but Jesus is faithful. Jesus is with you all through these hard times. Jesus will stay with you. Jesus will carry you through. You can hold on because Jesus is holding on to you. Trust Him!

Third, we are invited to stir up each other to love and good works. In addition to the personal presence of Jesus, God has given us each other to help each other. This is a challenge and takes some practice, but God will help us to grow in our ability to help each other. There are two common mistakes to guard against. One is to treat each other superficially. We might engage in pleasant conversation, but avoid any topics which might be difficult. This is not healthy. If this is your tendency, you don't have to stay this way. Jesus invites you to begin helping others and learn how to do so effectively. The other mistake is to bludgeon others with the law. We see faults in others – real or imagined – and we attack those people. This is not healthy either. The verb in verse 24 is energetic, but not aggressive. We should do more than offer lame advice: “Jack, you might consider getting drunk less often.” Neither should we beat up people: “Jill, you idiot! Don't you know it is an awful sin to get drunk every weekend!” Instead we are invited to encourage each other gently, enthusiastically, persistently to grow in godly behavior.

The Great Invitation

The most important encouragement we can give people is to join us with all the host of heaven around the throne on the Lord's Day. This is what Jesus died for. Jesus died so that *all* of us might join Him and the Father and the Spirit, with the apostles and prophets and martyrs, along with the angels – a vast happy throng singing glory to the Lamb, and to Him who sits on the throne. This is what we do every Lord's Day. On that Day heaven opens up and our spirits join the heavenly spirits in worship. Jesus died so that we might come with confidence, with joyful anticipation, in peace. And as we come, Jesus and the Father welcome us. You can hear Jesus saying, “Father, here come Jess Edgar and Rachel Hansell! I'm so glad they're with us today!” And the Father saying, “Yes, and there are Andy George and Jason Hansell! I'm so excited they're here. And look, there are all the people of Lehigh Valley Presbyterian Church!” And together the Father, Son and Spirit say, “Come everyone! Let's sing! Tell us your concerns. We can help you with those. And we have a wonderful supper for you. Come on in everyone!”

Turning Out the Lights

By Friday night it was all over. The debt of sin had been paid, the temple had been cleansed of the pollution of sin, the power of sin had been broken, and the sustainer of the world was dead. So God turned out the lights and left.

Prayer

Father, we thank you that when there was no one to save your people, you came in person. Thank you for settling the debt of our sin, for absorbing the curse of sin, for cleaning the pollution of sin, for breaking the power of sin. Thank you for doing for us what no one else could do, and thank you for welcoming us into your heavenly presence. But Father, although we are sincerely grateful for all this that you have done for us, we daily lose sight of your salvation. We allow ourselves to become distracted by the cares of this world and we forget how wonderful you are. Teach us to remind each other of our confession and to encourage each other to come to you. We ask through Him who died and rose again and sits by your side to vouch for us – Our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

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