

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church Modesto, California
The Second Sunday of End Time – The Last Judgment
November 9, 2003

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Hebrews 9:24-28

²⁴ For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. ²⁵ Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. ²⁶ Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. ²⁷ Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, ²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. (NIV)

Dear Brothers and Sisters of our Lord,

About a year after I had become your pastor here, in the summer of 1999, I traveled back to our seminary in Wisconsin for a week. At the time, our church body had a program that would bring seminary graduates back after they'd been out working in a church for a year, to let us ask questions and share ideas and swap stories—to see how things were going for us. Well, at the same time I was at the seminary, the annual summer school at the seminary was taking place. Pastors from all over the country and the world were there at the same time I was, taking classes to continue their education. I was asked to lead one of the morning chapel services that week. What this meant was that I was the one to stand up in front of about 150 pastors and the whole seminary faculty and give a short devotion.

Now, in 1999, I had been here at St. Peter for a year, and the Sunday morning butterflies in my stomach were going away. I had been getting to know you, and I didn't find you that scary anymore. I knew you were gracious and kind and that you weren't going to throw fruit at me during my sermon. But when I got back to the seminary and had to stand up in front of my old teachers, I was nervous. I remember my knees shaking. Not that I thought they would throw rotten tomatoes at me or anything! But I was nervous. What would they think of me? How would I do? Would they be impressed? Or disappointed? Standing face to face with these men I respected—it was kind of a nerve-wracking experience.

Can you relate? Have you ever had to stand face to face with someone and wonder how you'd perform? Have you ever been in someone's presence and wondered, "What do they think of me?" Have you ever been put in a situation where you were being evaluated, tested, put on trial?

Today God's Word tells us that the day will come when we all will stand face to face with someone, and he will make a judgment about us. That someone is God. What will happen when we stand face to face with God? What will he say to us?

Did you know that the Bible tells us? It tells us what God thinks of us and what his verdict will be when we stand face to face with him. Let's find out what he says today by looking at a part of the Bible that often can sound strange to us, the book of Hebrews. Let's study what God is saying to us, because in this section he tells us what his evaluation of us will be when we stand face to face with him—which all of us here will do.

Standing Face to Face with God

The high priest did

Have you ever celebrated Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year? How about Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement? Me neither. I said that the Bible book of Hebrews sounds strange to us. It sounds strange because it was originally written to Christians who had been raised Jewish. These people knew all the Bible stories from the Old Testament, the stories about Abraham and Noah and Moses. And they knew the special rituals and holidays of the Old Testament too. They probably even observed these Jewish holidays as they grew up. But we don't observe these. Most of us—if not all of us—never have. The book of Hebrews is written to people who knew these holidays and their meanings. We don't. So let's take a brief crash course this morning. Specifically, we want to learn about the Jewish festival called the Day of Atonement.

At the time of Moses, the Lord had told his people, the Israelites, how to worship him. He told them to construct an ornate and beautiful tent, called the Tabernacle. This was to be their church, the center of their worship. (Why a tent? Remember, for over 40 years, the Israelites were nomads, wandering around the Sinai Peninsula between Israel and Egypt. Their church had to be mobile.) This was the church, but if you were an Israelite, you were not allowed to go in it. No—you could stand outside the courtyard and observe. You could hear the sounds and smell the smells. But you weren't allowed in. Only the priests were. And the innermost room of the Tabernacle—that room was called the Most Holy Place—that room could only be entered by the High Priest, sort of the head pastor for the whole people. And he could enter that innermost room only one day a year, the day called the Day of Atonement. For in that room was a special, beautiful chest, a box, which represented the LORD's presence among his people. It was called the Ark of the Covenant. To go in that room and stand in front of the Ark was to stand face to face with God.

On the Day of Atonement, the high priest had special duties, all laid out in detail by God. One of the things the high priest was to do was to take blood into the Most Holy Place with him. Not his own blood, but the blood of a bull. He was to sprinkle this on the Ark of the Covenant. This strange action was to show that someone had to die to pay for the high priest's sins before he could stand face to face with God. Then the high priest took blood from a goat and sprinkled it on the Ark. This was to show that someone had to die to pay for all the people's sins in order for them to survive in the presence of God.

The high priest did this year after year, as long as there was a Tabernacle or Temple. And from this yearly ritual, God wanted people to learn some critical things about standing face to face with him.

- To approach God, you need a go-between. You don't dare waltz up to Almighty God, the Maker of heaven and earth, and say, "Hey, Big Guy. How's it goin'?" You don't dare. Moses' two nephews, who were both priests, tried this. They came into God's presence in a way that God had not authorized. Know what happened to them? God sent fire out from his presence and burned them up. Get the point? God was saying, "You may approach me only through my chosen representative, the high priest."
- To approach God, you need blood. The Lord is absolutely holy. He cannot stand unholiness. He hates sin. Therefore he says that to be close to him, all a person's sins must be paid for with death. "Without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness," God says. No sinful person (and that's what you and I are) may stand face to face with God and live unless blood has been shed to atone for their sins. People need someone to go into the presence of God, to stand face to face with him, on their behalf. We sinners need a go-between, a mediator, an intermediary. Kids, have you ever done something to make your parents mad? (Be honest!) Have you ever come up with this idea: "Instead of me going to them and telling them what I did, I'll send my cute little brother to tell them! He can apologize for me. I don't want to stand face to face and get punished—too scary!" In a more serious way—because this involves our eternal life or death—we sinners need a go-between, someone to stand face to face with God for us. And he needs to bring blood that has paid for all our sins.

Jesus did

Go forward in time from the days of Moses now, from about 1400 BC to about AD 30. The place is just outside Jerusalem. A sacrifice is being made. But this time it's not a bull or a goat who is dying and shedding his blood. It is a man. It is a unique man, for this person is both a human and he is the Son of God. This man is going into the presence of God the Father. He is doing so as a representative not only of the Israelites, but of the whole world—a go-between, a mediator between the one, holy God and all the people who have ever lived or will ever live. And he is coming into his Father's presence with blood. Not the blood of bulls and goats, but his own blood, which comes from his thorn-pierced brow and his nail-punctured hands and feet and side. This man is the eternal Son of God, Jesus, the ultimate high priest and the ultimate sacrifice all in one.

When Jesus died on the cross, he was fulfilling in the ultimate way what the Day of Atonement had foreshadowed for centuries. He was the go-between, standing face to face with God on our behalf, for us. And the blood he offered was his own. It was his holy, precious blood, poured out through his innocent suffering and death. That blood actually pays for our sins. Listen again to the reading from Hebrews for today, and see if it makes sense:

For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.

Jesus is still our go-between. Now risen from death and ruling over everything in the universe, Jesus is our mediator at the heavenly throne. Whenever we sin—remember,

God can't stand sin—Jesus is there standing face to face with the Father for us. He is there saying, "Father, I poured out my blood to pay for his sins. Therefore, do not hold those sins against them." And the Father listens to the Son he loves. And he forgives and loves us as sons and daughters.

The high priest stood face to face with God, and so did Jesus. Jesus did it for us. That couldn't be more important, because we also must stand face to face with God.

We will

Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment... This verse tells us that when we die, we will stand face to face with God. The Bible tells us that at death our bodies will separate from our souls, and that our soul will go either to heaven or to hell. And wherever we go, that is our final destination. You've heard the saying "Prepare to meet your maker"? It's trite, but it's true. So we will stand face to face with him, either when we die or when Christ comes again at the end of time, whichever comes first.

What makes all difference in world that Jesus stood there for us already. We should have been the ones answering to God the Father for our guilt. But we will never have to, because someone did that for us—Jesus.

So when we stand face to face with God, we don't need to fear. What will God think of us? He's told us: Because Jesus paid for our sins already, we don't have to. We are forgiven. What we said earlier was true: "We have come into the presence of God, who created us to love and serve him as his dear children. But we have disobeyed him and deserve only his wrath and punishment." But what I said is equally true: "God has forgiven all your sins. By the perfect life and innocent death of our Lord Jesus Christ, he has removed your guilt forever." What will we plead when we stand face to face with God—that we've tried to be good, so he should sweep any sins under the rug? No – we will plead that Jesus has been perfect for us, that he has shed his blood for us. "By the perfect life and innocent death of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have removed our guilt forever."

You know, we have no guarantee that we will make it home from church today. We could die before we get there. Who knows when death may overtake us? Only God. The fact that we don't know when or how we will die scares us. But deep inside God wants us to have peace. Peace through Jesus.

Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people.

The world will

Jesus is coming again. We will have to stand face to face with him. So will the whole world. And Jesus says that that will not be a happy day for many people. The reading from Malachi said that today in stark terms. And our opening hymn was right on: "But sinners filled with guilty fears behold his wrath prevailing... They trembling stand before his throne, all unprepared to meet him."

Jesus doesn't want people to dread his coming or be condemned when he comes. So he reaches out in love to them to save them. How? Through you and me! Through the good news that we share: "Christ Jesus has paid for all our sins. We are reconciled to God."

Jesus wants everyone in the world to look forward to Judgment Day with joy. He wants all to look forward to receiving a not guilty verdict, a verdict that comes to us through faith in him. He wants all to be able to say, "Jesus, your blood and righteousness my beauty are, my glorious dress. Mid flaming worlds, in these arrayed with joy shall I lift up my head." He will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. Rescue is on the way. Jesus is coming to free us finally and completely from all that can hurt us. We know it; let's let the world know it.

I went back to the seminary in Wisconsin in September to give a presentation. The whole seminary faculty was there again. Yet as I stood before them, I wasn't as nervous this time. Maybe I'm just getting a little older, a little more confident. I was also very well prepared, ready for what was coming. That readiness calmed my fears.

Are we prepared to stand face to face with God? Are we ready? Yes! If we die today, we are. If Jesus comes today, we are. Are we ready because of what we've done? No—we are ready because of what *Jesus* has done, dying and rising for us, bringing us from death to life. Believe the good news. Believe in Jesus, the ultimate high priest, who stands face to face with God for you with his atoning blood. Look forward with a smile to standing face to face with God, your Savior. Amen.