

The Fifth Sunday of Lent
April 2, 2006
Hebrews 9:11-15

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Christ Is the Perfect High Priest

...he offered the perfect sacrifice
...with the perfect result

***NIV Hebrews 9:11** When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation.¹² He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.¹³ The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean.¹⁴ How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!¹⁵ For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance-- now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.*

Fellow Christians,

Today's epistle comes from the letter to the Hebrews. To understand what's written here, it's helpful to think like a Hebrew. That's because many of the references in these verses were familiar to the Hebrews, but not so familiar to us; references like the high priest, the tabernacle, the Most Holy Place, and animal sacrifices—goats and calves and bulls and heifers.

It would also be helpful if you would try to think like a person of Jewish ancestry who has converted to Christianity, but now—during a time of persecution—is considering a return to Judaism. Returning to Judaism would possibly provide some relief from persecution, but it would also mean abandoning faith in Jesus. So the author of this letter has been eloquent, persuasive and persistent as he establishes the superiority of Jesus. Jesus is superior to the angels, he's superior to Moses, he's superior to the Old Testament priests, and he's superior to the animal sacrifices made by those priests. Here in chapter 9 of Hebrews we get to the heart of the argument for the superiority of Jesus. He is our perfect high priest.

It was God's idea to have priests in Old Testament Israel. God told Moses to anoint his brother, Aaron, and his sons as priests. Priests stood between God and the people of Israel. They represented the people before God, interceding for them and offering

sacrifices. And they represented God to the people, teaching the people God's law and blessing them.

Earlier in this chapter of Hebrews the author refers back to what took place on the great Day of Atonement. It was on that one day of the year that the high priest entered the innermost sanctuary of the temple, the Most Holy Place, first with the blood of a bull for his own sins, then with the blood of a goat for the sins of the people. By sprinkling the blood of the goat on the atonement cover of the Ark of the Covenant, the high priest was making atonement for the sins of the people. It was a beautiful ceremony, rich in meaning. With good reason the Hebrews regarded the Day of Atonement as the highest festival of the entire year.

And the next year...they did the same thing all over again. That's because, as the hymn we just sang says, "Not all the blood of beasts on Jewish altars slain, could give the guilty conscience peace or take away the stain." It wasn't just that the animal sacrifices didn't take sins away, but it was also the case that the priests themselves were sinful human beings. In the Passion history we meet some awful high priests, men like Caiaphas and his father-in-law, Annas, whose plotting and cynical manipulation made them miserable excuses for priests. But every merely human priest is sinful. Even Aaron, the brother of Moses, showed his sinful weakness when he complied with the wishes of the Israelites and constructed a golden idol for them in the shape of a calf. As it says in Hebrews 7, **"For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever."** (7:28) So this morning let's investigate this perfect high priest further. As we do, we'll see that **Christ is the Perfect High Priest** because he offered the perfect sacrifice with the perfect result.

1. Christ offered the perfect sacrifice

Christ, our perfect high priest, offered the perfect sacrifice. It says here, *"When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not part of this creation."* The author said much the same thing at the beginning of the previous chapter: **"We do have such a high priest,"** he says there, **"who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle, set up by the Lord, not by men."** (8:1-2) Here we should think of Jesus, our great High Priest, serving not in the sanctuary of the tabernacle or the temple here on earth, but in heaven. After all, the earthly tabernacle was simply a representation of the heavenly sanctuary. Jesus had done the priestly work of offering his own life for our sins as he hung suspended from the cross at Golgotha. But here we see Jesus in heaven, serving as our intercessor.

What makes Christ the perfect high priest is that he offered the perfect sacrifice. It was a perfect sacrifice, first, in that it was made by the holy, sinless Lamb of God. God's will was that the animal sacrifices that the Hebrews brought were to be unblemished. That is, they were not to be sickly or suffering from some deformity or injury. In this way these "unblemished" sacrifices anticipated the coming of Christ, who was true unblemished sacrifice. He was holy, without sin. Lies never crossed his lips. He never indulged in

sinful anger, even when his enemies mocked and taunted and tortured him. His mind never even played host to a sinful thought, not even for a moment. This is the priest we needed: **“holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners.”** (7:26)

Unlike Aaron and his successors, Christ didn't need to offer sacrifices first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people. Christ was without sin.

There's another facet of this perfect sacrifice that's worth examining. We read here, *“He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.”* When Jesus appeared as our great high priest, he didn't come bearing the blood of some beast, like the merely human priests did. The basis for his intercession is his own blood. That is, he gave his life for us. This makes Christ both the priest and the sacrificial victim. His blood does what no amount of animal blood, what no amount of money, could do, and cleanses us from all sin.

I suppose this whole thing can sound like a rather dry excursus on some obscure Jewish rituals. Animal sacrifices, high priests, the tabernacle. How relevant is that? But that's precisely what the author is saying. They aren't relevant anymore—so don't go back to them! His goal in comparing Jesus to the priests and sacrifices of the Old Testament is to emphasize how much better Jesus is—to underscore the superiority of Christ.

I don't know that the temptation to disown Jesus and convert to Judaism is much of a temptation for us. But if we attempt to do without the priestly work of Jesus, the effect is the same. What do I mean by “doing without the priestly work of Jesus?” That happens whenever we think our own merits and goodness are sufficient for us to stand before God. There's an old saying that says that a man who serves as his own attorney has a fool for a client. The same could be said for the person who attempts to serve as his own priest. If what we intend to offer to God is the good we've done (or tried to do), no matter how impressive it might sound, that plea will surely fail. We're sinners and our merits are insufficient. How much better to place our faith in Christ and let him be our mediator! As St. John says, **“If anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but for the sins of the whole world.”** (1 John 2:1-2)

The priestly work of Jesus was not easy to watch. Jesus, as he offered his life on the cross, underwent a kind of torture that we can only faintly imagine. He was in the words of Isaiah, “Stricken, smitten and afflicted.” We see him dying as our great high priest on the tree of the cross. But if the sight of the agonized Savior is perplexing, the result of his suffering for us is not. It is comforting. Jesus offered the perfect sacrifice with the perfect result.

2. ...with the perfect result

“The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean.” The author's reference here is to something described in Numbers 19. It had to do with ceremonial uncleanness. According to the law of Moses, if you touched a dead body, you rendered

yourself ceremonially unclean for seven days. In fact, if you were defiled in this way, then you also defiled anything you touched. But sometimes touching a dead body was unavoidable, or it happened accidentally. What could the ceremonially unclean person do to become clean again? According to Numbers 19, the priest would slaughter a red heifer. He would burn that heifer in its entirety and then someone would gather up the ashes. When someone who was unclean came to be cleansed, some of those ashes would be mixed with water. Then a ceremonially clean person would take a branch of hyssop, dip it in the water and sprinkle the unclean person with it on the third and seventh day. After that, the person being cleansed would wash his clothes and bathe and he would be clean again. That's what the author of Hebrews is referring to when he speaks of the ashes of a heifer sanctifying the unclean so that they are "outwardly clean."

I render myself unclean at times. So do you. This happens not because we touch a dead body, but because we sin. Our hearts are unclean and from our defiled hearts issue all manner of sins: evil thoughts, lies, unkind and uncharitable words, greed, idolatry, misuse of God's holy name and under-appreciation of his holy Word. In the sight of our holy God, we are all like an unclean thing. So what do we do about our uncleanness? Rather than going to the priest for a jar of water mixed with the ashes of a red heifer and having it sprinkled on us, we go to Jesus, our perfect high priest. We confess our sins and trust his merits. We find comfort in knowing that he intercedes for us at the very throne of God. As it says here, *"How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"*

I'm not sure you're going to rush home and read Leviticus 16 or Numbers 19 to get more information on the sacrifices practiced by the Jews. But the concern so many years ago is still our concern today: How can I find peace for my guilty conscience? Our sins testify against us and our conscience reacts by accusing us. Shall we look for animals to sacrifice? No, those days are past. The laws that commanded such sacrifices are obsolete. Should we serve as our own mediators and intercessors, then, pleading our own merits and goodness? That would be an even worse idea! There is one answer for sin, one remedy for an aching conscience. It is Jesus, our great high priest. He is the one who effectively pleads our case. Our perfect high priest offered the perfect sacrifice of his own blood for the perfect result of eternal redemption. Amen.