

June 16, 2019

Lesson 3: The New Covenant's Sacrifice

Scripture: Hebrews 9:11-28

Context:

Our lesson on covenant moves from the gospels to another book in the New Testament. The book of Hebrews is an interesting book in that it is not really a letter, even though people label it as such. Most scholars claim that Hebrews appears to be a sermon that is rabbinical in design, Christian in content, and heroic in length.¹ The book would have been read aloud in a congregational setting.

This particular chapter focuses upon covenant and alludes to Christ as the chief high priest. The allusion comes from the early days of the first covenant when the old priests moved through a temporary tent to place their offerings.² Yet now Jesus Christ comes as the high priest who offers himself as a gift with his own blood on the altar. He was the sacrificial lamb who gave himself for others.

The text reminds us that whenever the Christian community gathers for worship, it follows the high priest who is present in all places and all spaces. The text continues on to describe in detail how Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant and this new covenant is a rainbow sign of the generosity of God, the eternal kindness of a God who will not leave humanity weary and without hope.³ No longer will the priests have to stand in the holy spaces chanting prayers, sacrificing animals, and keeping track of who has brought their animal and who has neglected to do so.

The author of Hebrews helps to tie the understanding of Jesus's role as priest and the new covenant by explaining how it correlates to the sacrifices of old. The old covenant was built on blood as Moses would take the blood and remind the people that all the sacrifices were a sign of the promise God had made with them. Taking the blood of calves and goats and then mixing it with the law would solidify that something holy had taken place and the sins of the people were expunged.

Yet the hard part of this sacrifice is that there had to be blood and there had to be death. Someone was going to have to experience pain in order for the sacrifice to have its full effect. Covenant was not something that was easy and without a price. The animal had to give their life. The owner had to sell them and give them up. Each person who had to give a sacrifice had to give up money in order to buy the animal. The priest had to do the messy task of killing it as well as cleansing the altar time and time again. Covenant was something that would cost all parties involved.

With Jesus as high priest, the dynamics change. No longer is it costing the people anything with the covenant. Jesus has offered himself and now all have access to the covenant between God and humanity.

¹ Thomas G. Long, "Hebrews," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY, 1997), 94.

² *Ibid.*, 96.

³ *Ibid.*, 98.

Application

Hebrews is a book full of allusions and images of God that give us a better picture of how we might see the holy each and every single day. In the case of today's scripture reading, we learn about how Jesus's role as chief high priest transcends and transforms the understanding of sacrifice and even worship. Jesus shows us that covenant transforms everything.

What I love about this passage is that it focuses that in the definition of covenant, something is given that is unending. Jesus gives himself with a promise that his death will forever be the high sacrifice. For us, this means there is nothing we can do to earn his love or good will. Even as we sin and mess up, we are covered by the greatest sacrifice one gives with their life.

As we think about covenant, we are reminded that Jesus gave the greatest gift when it came to covenant. He gave his life so others might live. He took the messy part of covenant upon himself and we are given an unending reward that thankfully is not dependent on us.

Writing this post actually makes me think a lot about worship. Often, I have heard people believe that worship is about enticing people to come. "Maybe the preacher needs to series on things like marriage." "Maybe we need more music in the worship service; you know more upbeat and peppy songs." "We need a special orchestra for certain worship services." Time and time again, I hear that worship is relegated to an attraction that is to be used to fill "the butts in the pews."

However, from this scripture passage we learn that Jesus gave his life as high priest not to attract people, but because he loved them. He wanted us to stop seeing life as some kind of contest that was about "winning" or making a show. He wanted us to see that the gift of himself was sufficient for that new covenant.

This should remind us that corporate worship is not about us or about raising the numbers. Worship is about glorifying God and giving thanks with the gifts and talents we have been given by God. It is about experiencing the holy in the midst of the mundane and giving thanks that we have a God who will never leave or forsake us.

This pertains not only to worship, but to the ways that we lead life everyday. Life is not always about us. We cannot control people and we cannot always have our way. We are called to love people, even the most messed up ones. It may mean that we end up taking the high road in certain situations and making decisions that will cost us. It may mean that we have to sacrifice certain things in order to make room for other things.

Yet the best part of all is that we do not have to give up our lives for our own sins or transgressions. Jesus has done that for us and he is the chief priest who takes the sins of the world upon him. He is the one who does all that hard work so that we may be able to live.

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