

Scripture: Hebrews 9:1-28

Message: Sacrifice: Meaning and Fulfilment

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When you come to worship on a Sunday morning, you will typically see three pieces of furniture in the front of the sanctuary. We become so used to seeing them that we might not even notice them. Unless they are gone or decorated in some way; then we might notice them. In the centre is the pulpit, and on one side is the baptismal font and on the other is the communion table.

The pulpit is typically in the centre because we believe the Word of God to be central to our worship. Through his Word, God reveals himself. He informs us about our relationship with him by Word and Spirit.

The sacraments of Baptism and Communion or the Lord's Supper are visible signs and seals of what God teaches in his Word. They direct our attention to the promise of the gospel, the good news of forgiveness in Jesus.

To understand these signs and seals, we need to read chapters like Hebrews 9 where it talks about sacrifices and blood and making things clean with blood. That just sounds wrong, to say it like that. It's an odd picture, the idea of making things clean with blood. The idea of blood being sprinkled over people sounds more *unclean* than clean. Definitely *not* very sanitary. What was God up to with all this imagery of blood?

For one thing, God wants to make it clear that he takes sin seriously. Sinning against God or against other people is not something to be shrugged off or treated lightly. Right from the start of time, in the Garden of Eden, God told Adam that if he disobeyed him he would surely die.

In our reading from Hebrews, the author interprets the requirements of the law in saying, "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." In the covenant between God and his people Israel, blood from animals was often shed.

When the sacrifices were offered, the blood symbolized the payment or covering for sin. Sin broke the covenant relationship, as if God was saying, "If you sin, there will be blood. Someone, or something, must pay." But God also gave the provision that the brokenness or sin could be covered by the blood of an innocent animal. The animal died in place of the person who sinned. The blood was sprinkled to indicate that the people were covered,

cleansed, and the relationship was restored.

(For an interesting video teaching of this topic, see <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/sacrifice-atonement/> )

But the blood of the animal did not *pay* for the sin. It covered it. It was a sign pointing to a more complete payment that would be made someday.

That is why Jesus' words at the institution of the Lord's Supper are so powerful: "This is *my* blood of the covenant." Jesus is connecting his death on the cross to this covenant relationship with God, sealed by blood. Jesus says, "My blood pays the price for sin." The teaching of Hebrews helps us understand the meaning of Jesus' sacrifice. The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all our sin. It is not a temporary covering through an animal, but a final payment by a person, one of us, someone who was perfect. He paid for sin with his life; he shed his blood for all sin, for our sin.

To help us understand the picture and remember and apply it to our lives, God has given us the sacraments. We don't sprinkle the blood of a sacrifice or the blood of Jesus, but we have the same message in the water of baptism and the bread and cup of communion.

In baptism, we use the symbol of ordinary water. This is not special holy water that must be purchased at a Christian store. It is not holy water from the Jordan River in Israel. Nor does this water receive a special blessing to give it some extraordinary power or quality. The water in the baptismal font is plain tap water, from the same source as the water used for Sunday morning coffee and tea. Yet God takes this plain water and, in the context of the sacrament of baptism, gives it a new meaning and symbolism.

The most obvious symbol is the idea of washing. The water of baptism speaks to us of the washing away of our sins. When we sin, when we do bad things, it is as if we become dirty. Our sins are like dirt—the more we sin, the dirtier we are. But the water used in baptism is a sign that reminds us that, through the blood of Jesus, through his death and resurrection, our sins, like dirt, are washed away.

When we are baptized, God proclaims his promises for forgiveness of sins and new life by the Holy Spirit. As we grow older, we learn more about what God has done and continues to do for us. Parents and others in the church family teach us about God and the promises which God made. We teach our children. But our baptism and Christian parents don't save us. We have to choose how to respond to those promises, to believe and live that new life or

to turn away from our God and Saviour. As you see the water of baptism, remember that God made those promises to you.

Baptism is one sacrament. Communion or Lord's Supper is the other. We have the symbol of bread and a cup that direct us to think of Jesus' body and blood. It is a reminder that Jesus gave himself as a sacrifice for our sins. "This is my blood of the covenant," said Jesus. In Hebrews we read, "He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption."

Look at what we see here in Hebrews 9. It's a picture of Jesus, crossing over the threshold of heaven, entering the Most Holy Place. He is carrying his completed ransom payment for the sins of the human race. He is entering into the very presence of God, his Father, but wearing our flesh and blood, and carrying the payment for our sins in his outstretched hands.

He had gone on a mission and completed it. Sent by the Father to offer himself in death for the sins of all people, he has done what he set out to do. He took upon himself our human nature so that he could also take on himself our sin. He became cursed and suffered for our sake. He died and rose from the dead for our sake. He returns to heaven in victory, for our sake – mission accomplished.

And the picture the writer of Hebrews paints for us is of Jesus approaching the throne of God carrying to the Father his completed work on our behalf. We read in verse 26: "He appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself."

*Once for all*—No more work is needed. No more payment. No more endless rituals and sacrifices. His death covered it all. "It is finished!"

God the Father says: "Well done! It's sufficient! It's complete!"

Whenever we celebrate baptism and Communion, we proclaim that victory. The payment for sin is made. The payment for *your* sin is complete.

We are talking symbols here. We don't bathe in a tub of blood. We don't eat flesh and drink blood. We understand these symbols as we understand the idea of sacrifice for sin. We understand these symbols and the good news as we understand the idea of someone paying the price to cover and forgive *our* sins. Jesus gave himself, once and for all, for us. "But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself."

Someone had to pay for sin with their life: me, you or someone else. It is no longer an animal. Jesus made that payment. Once and for all.

How are you responding? Have you claimed those promises? Are you living the wonder and peace of forgiveness? Are you living a new life by the Holy Spirit, saying 'no' to sin and living in obvious obedience to your Lord and Saviour?

This new life is the resurrection life that is ours through Jesus. We live this as our new identity in Christ. We can daily live in the joy of forgiveness. We live in a way that reflects the new life that is ours. We not only *remember* what Jesus did for us in dying and rising again. We renew our commitment to live this new life, to read God's Word, to praise him in all we do, to love our neighbour and help those who are struggling.

What does that look like in your life? Share with someone over a cup of coffee and tell them one or two expressions of resurrection life that are part of your life. This is not bragging about how good we are; this is testifying to the life of Christ in us. This is encouraging each other to live that resurrection life. This is celebrating the power of the blood of Christ at work in our

This is the good news! Believe it. Don't hold on to sin or guilt. Don't try to pay for it yourself. The payment is complete. Claim God's forgiveness. Remember God's promises. Live that new life in Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.