

Hebrews

Hebrews 9:1-22 - A clear conscience

By Hebrews 9, I imagine the Christians in Hebrews are beginning to wonder what they're supposed to do about the previous chapters. Because in those chapters they've been warned about drifting away (2:1), reminded about the failings of their ancestors (3:12), notified that they too could fall short of entering God's rest (4:1), and that God knows their every thought and attitude and he doesn't miss a thing (4:12). They'd been well and truly cautioned too, that their understanding of God's teaching about righteousness was infantile (5:12), and if they continued in that vein they'd be subjecting Jesus to public disgrace (6:6).

And if they were thinking it was a whole lot easier in the good old days of Moses and the old covenant, and maybe that was the way to go after all, then they were wasting their time on what had become "weak and useless" (7:18), and placing their bets on a horse that was "obsolete and aging" (8:13).

But being Jews, that was the past they were familiar with, and comfortable with too. A bit like Christians today being faced with a changing church culture that's hard to relate and adapt to, and hankering for the good old church traditions they grew up with that provided them with structure and comfort.

And the author of Hebrews takes this into account with the Christians in his care too. He's been tough on them, yes, but in **Hebrews 9** he acknowledges the good things they had in the old covenant that gave them structure and comfort too.

Those were the days, for instance, when they had the tabernacle and in it "the Most Holy Place" with its "golden altar of incense and gold-covered ark of the covenant...above which were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the place of atonement," **verses 1-5**. And once a year they had the high priest "offering sacrifices for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance," **verses 6-7**. It was all very structured, very familiar, and very comforting. And for that time back then it was all very fine and very good too.

But for Christians living in "the present time," **verse 9**, that entire set up was now to be viewed as "an **illustration**," not a practice to be continued any longer. And why was that? Because, **verse 9** still, "the gifts and sacrifices being offered (in that old system) **were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper.**"

All those sacrifices and ceremonial washings, and obeying all the food laws, and fasting on the Day of Atonement, and all the other things God had them do in that old system, didn't deal with a pesky conscience.

The old covenant was still very good, because all those gifts and sacrifices did at least keep sinning Israelites alive, but they were still left with the nagging feeling that they were **on the outside looking in**. And they had good reason to think that, because every year when the high priest entered “the inner room (the Most Holy Place)” on the Day of Atonement, he was **on his own** (verse 7), while the rest of the Israelites had to watch from a distance, unable to enter the Holy Place with him. As an Israelite, then, you never had that feeling of being truly “in” with God. And how troubling that must’ve been, because for all your diligent obedience to the regulations that God himself had required and imposed, there was still something missing. There was still that something inside you that longed to be able to “approach God with freedom and confidence,” as Paul phrased it in Ephesians 3:12.

But it was not to be, not in that old system. Which is what that old system was **meant to illustrate** - that there is nothing we humans can do to enter through that curtain into the Most Holy Place to experience the wonderful conscience-free relationship with God that our inner being cries out for. Or as **Hebrews 9:8** says, “The Holy Spirit was showing (or illustrating) by this that **the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed** as long as the first tabernacle was still standing.”

So anyone resorting back to that system, in the hope that maybe it was the solution after all to a troubled conscience, was banging his head against a brick wall. And if that was a shock to the Christians in Hebrews, imagine the shock for Christians today too, who - to quote one author - “try to put their conscience to rest **by an intensive program of religious activity** - which may range all the way from bead-counting and candle-burning to serving on committees, passing out tracts, and teaching Sunday school classes,” in the hope that, by “a continual round of activity they can win a sense of acceptance before God.”

That pretty well describes much of my Christian experience too. Which is a bit embarrassing, because God filled up the Israelites’ lives with a continual round of intensive religious activities - **NONE** of which, as we read in **Hebrews 9:9**, put their consciences to rest or won them a sense of acceptance before God.

And the Israelites got a reminder of that every year too. Because another year would go by and they’d all gather again on the Day of Atonement, having to watch the high priest enter the Most Holy Place on his own again, and them **still on the outside** looking on. And the tension too, waiting to see if the high priest would appear again, and the sigh of relief when he did, because they all got to live for another year.

But another year of what, though? Well, **more** intense religious activity to stay in God’s good books, but never enough to clear their conscience.

But it served as an “illustration” for us Christians today (verse 9), that “the way into the Holy Place” and a wonderful conscience-free relationship with God is **NOT** by an intensive program of religious activity.

But the author of Hebrews does acknowledge again, in **verse 13**, that “The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean did sanctify them.” So, yes, that intensive program of religious activity - all those “ceremonial washings” and food and drink regulations mentioned in verse 10 - did serve a purpose. But what purpose? **Verse 13** still, “so that they were outwardly clean.” That old system cleaned the Israelites **outwardly**, making them at least look different to their pagan neighbours - like going to church on Sundays today makes Christians look different. But does going to church on Sundays and going through all the Sunday service rituals every week “clear the conscience of the worshipper”?

And that’s important, because a clear conscience is what creates that wonderful free relationship with God. It’s a conscience free of guilt, even when outwardly we’re **not** perfect in our behaviour. But how on earth is that possible?

The author of Hebrew explains how in **verse 14**. It’s by “Christ offering himself unblemished to God **that cleanses our consciences** from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God.” Ah, so this is “the way into the Most Holy Place” for that lovely conscience-free relationship with God. It’s not by what **we** do; it’s by what **Christ** did.

It’s because, **verse 12**, “he entered the Most Holy Place once for all **by his own blood**, that he obtained eternal redemption.” So when **he** went into the Holy of Holies, like the high Priest on the Day of Atonement, he came out shouting, “Roll up, roll up, consciences free forever everyone, consciences free.” Meaning that, I can be just like those Christians in Hebrews - faced as they were with an embarrassing list of all my failings - but because of what Jesus did I can have a perfectly free conscience and know that God fully accepts and loves me.

Which is the point the author of Hebrews wants to get across in **verse 15**, that “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.” In other words, in this new covenant opened up by Christ’s death, there is no need for guilt to make us feel we’re out of sorts with God anymore. We are free of all that.

So if the Christians in Hebrews were still being bothered by their conscience, they only had to remind themselves that in the new covenant the conscience has been deactivated by Christ’s blood. What power has a conscience got against Christ’s blood? Because of his blood we have **forgiveness**, **verse 22**, so confronted with that, our conscience has nothing to say. We’re free of its nagging stabs of guilt at last.

But for what purpose? It surely can’t be, “Oh well, I can do whatever I like because it won’t affect my relationship with God.” And it certainly doesn’t mean that in **verse 14**, where the author of Hebrews says “our consciences have been cleansed from acts that lead to death **SO THAT we may serve the living God.**”

Freeing us up from the nagging of our conscience is meant to open up a whole new relationship with God. Instead of thinking we have to do all sorts of religious stuff to make up for our failings, or worry that God doesn't love us if we mess up like the Christians in Hebrews did - both of which just kill a relationship with God - we are now free to wonder how and where we can serve God.

And NOT serve to make him love us more, because the old covenant shows us that our activity adds nothing to our acceptance before God. Our diligent efforts "to do something for God" never make him think one bit better or worse of us. God does not love us because we serve him. It's the other way round: we serve him because he loves us. And he loves us because there's nothing in the way between us anymore. Jesus' blood took care of that. So we're free to serve God because we want to. We can now tickle God pink by what we get up to in wanting to serve him. We can bring him enormous delight, and especially when all it takes is the Holy Spirit giving us a little nudge in the right direction and we're onto it like a shot, like a dog sprinting off at full speed to grab a ball thrown by its owner.

And this is what the author of Hebrews wants to get across to those Christians, because it explains how we enter God's rest. It's not by the nagging of a guilty conscience to get us to work harder or do more for God. It's by Christ's blood. That's how "the way into the Most Holy Place" has been opened up, so as Christians **we aren't like those Israelites** on the outside looking in on the Day of Atonement. We are totally "in" with God, fully in his presence all the time, loved, forgiven, and all memory of our sins and failings eradicated.

That's the "eternal inheritance promised to us" in the new covenant, **verse 15**, "now that Christ has died." That's when the new covenant's totally conscience-free relationship with God was put into effect. It was by Christ's blood, also **illustrated** for us in the old covenant because, **verse 18**, "even the old covenant was not put into effect without blood." Even it required blood too. In fact, **verse 22**, "Nearly everything (in the old covenant) was cleansed with blood, because without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." And why is forgiveness so important? Because that's what makes a conscience-free relationship possible, knowing that the one you wronged has forgiven you. The air between you has been cleared. You can carry on as if nothing happened, all memory of the wrong forgotten.

Which is what the author of Hebrews is hoping the Christians in his care will cotton on to, that Jesus' shed blood had totally cleared the air between them and God too. So they could carry on with all memory of their wrong forgotten as well. It didn't mean denying that they'd let things slide on their end, but instead of going on a conscience-fuelled guilt trip, the author of Hebrews had two words for them: "Think blood." Because Christ's blood had totally freed them from guilt. They could move on with a completely clear conscience, free to serve God in love and joy and peace.

Because for them, unlike the Israelites in the old covenant, **the way into the Most Holy Place had been disclosed.**