

Hebrews: The Supremacy of Christ Over All Things
A Community of the Cross
Hebrews 13:9-16

Text:

Hebrews 13:9-16 (ESV)

⁹ Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them. ¹⁰ We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. ¹¹ For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. ¹² So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. ¹³ Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. ¹⁴ For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. ¹⁵ Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. ¹⁶ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Introduction:

If you and I were alive on this day in 1st Century Jerusalem, we would be participating in one of the most popular events of the year – the Jewish Passover. Some 2 million people would have been crammed into our city's walls as they hustled and bustled about in the atmosphere of euphoria. Distant kinships would have been rekindled; country folk would have enjoyed the city marketplace. It would have had all the trimmings and trappings of a major gala event. Children would have been running around in playful glee with all the emotions of pent-up anticipation released in full scale.

The central focus of the town would have been the massive temple mountain where hundreds of Levitical priests, dressed in the vibrant and cheerful colors of their ritual garb would be working feverishly as they prepared and slaughtered some 200,000 Paschal lambs. Only with great difficulty can we imagine what the fully functioning temple must have been like with its elaborate rituals, its sizable corps of priests, the crowds, the continual sacrifices of large numbers of animals, and the associated blood and gore. Historical records indicate that the blood flowed like a stream through the streets and out into the Kidron Valley.

And had you and I been in 1st Century Jerusalem in the year 30 A.D. we would have witnessed another phenomenon. In one of the corners of the Temple Mountain a governmental proceeding was drawing to a close as a portion of the city's crowd cried out for Pilate to crucify an imposter; to crucify a liar; to crucify a blasphemer. A man, named Jesus, from Nazareth, had come to be hated by the citizens of Jerusalem and they wanted him dead. Now don't think for one minute that all the events surrounding the Passover and the Day of Atonement stopped so that the entire city could concern themselves with one simple criminal, oh no! I imagine that as much as possible, everything, for the most part, continued right on. The priests carried on with their ritual

sacrifices; the people with their celebrations while a few, a mob, concerned themselves with Jesus.

Now, two of the gospel accounts point out a certain fact that the author to the Hebrews draws upon some thirty to forty years later. Both John (cf. 19:20) and Matthew (21:39) mention the fact that Jesus' was taken outside the city, beyond the walls and hanged on a cross atop the place of the skull – Golgotha. This is a very fitting fulfillment to all the sacrificial animals that atoned for the sins of the people.

According to the Law of Moses (Lev. 4:21; 16:27), the Levitical priests were to take the carcasses of the sin offerings and burn them on a fire outside the city gates. These were animals that the priests could not eat. So the writer of Hebrews finds an interesting parallel. At the very moment in time and history the Levitical priests were slaughtering lambs, offering their blood for a sin offering, and burning their bodies outside the city walls; so Jesus was at that moment hanging on a tree outside the walls as the ultimate sin offering.

Look at v. 11:

¹¹ For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. ¹² So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.

This phrase in v. 12, “in order to sanctify the people through his own blood,” is a reference to a mighty truth he has already firmly established in chapters 9-10.

- Hebrews 9:11-12 (ESV)
¹¹ But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) ¹² he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.
- Hebrews 10:11-14 (ESV)
¹¹ And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. ¹⁴ For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.
- Hebrews 10:18 (ESV)
¹⁸ Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

The author of Hebrews sees this as a kind of sovereign irony: Jesus suffered outside the gates as our perfect and once-for-all sacrifice. Which raises another irony: If Jesus was the final, the ultimate sacrifice that brought real and true forgiveness, then what is the purpose of the Levitical activity in his day 30-40 years after the fact?

Remember that the temple is still standing. The priesthood is still serving. But for the Christian, he knows it is all futile.

Go back in your imagination to this day in 30 A.D. We have encountered another strange phenomenon at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon. The sky would have been eerily dark and the ground would have begun to rumble in an earthquake. Then, within a matter of moments, the city would have been abuzz with the news that the veil in the temple that had long kept mankind separate from God's presence had been torn in two from the top-down.

Where was the high priest the moment that happened? Where was the very high priest who had just yesterday handed over Jesus to Pilate? Where was the high priest, whose job it was to apply the blood to the horns of the altar, when that veil suddenly, and without warning, ripped in half? I wonder. What really went through his head? What were the thoughts that he told to no one? I wonder.

But now, imagine with me, if you will, what was the reaction of the high priests to this renting of the veil? Did they all of sudden have a burst of truth and succumb to the rumors of Jesus' identity and give-in? Did they recant and quit? Of course not. I imagine that they immediately were sent in search of the veil repair kit so as to begin stitching it back together so that the ceremonies could go on as usual.

Here is the irony for the author of Hebrews: for years and years the invitation to come into God's presence was always joined with a divine stiff-arm. "Come into my presence," was the invitation, "but don't come too close" was the divine stiff-arm. If a Gentile went one step beyond the Court of Gentiles, he was met with death. If a Jewish man went one step beyond the holy place, he was met with sudden death. If any priest, other than the high priest on the Day of Atonement, accompanied with blood, went beyond the holiest place, he was met with death. All around were the signs of a divine stiff-arm. "Come, but don't come too close." The veil was in fact a sign of separation. The ordinary person was not allowed into the very presence of God, only the priests, and especially the high priests.

Where is the irony? With this new sacrifice in Jesus, outside the city walls, there is now a kind of altar from which normal forgiven citizens can eat that the still practicing priests cannot. Look at v. 10: "We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat." Just as the priests were forbidden to eat of the carcasses of the animals that made up the sin offerings, so they are forbidden from eating from the altar that symbolizes Jesus' atoning sacrifice. But we can eat of it! There is a bit of irony here, isn't there?

The word eat is most obviously to be taken in a symbolic way for partaking in all the benefits of Jesus' death. None of those who still find themselves under the old system can partake of Christ's benefits. Listen here! This is profoundly important in our understanding of the intent of this paragraph to the sermon as a whole. For twelve chapters, he has been preaching to these Christians to not turn back to Judaism. He has argued for twelve chapters that Jesus is supreme over all things. Now he is compelling them to not turn back – to not join up with those impotent priests who have no share in the blessings of Christ.

Instead, far from compelling them to not turn back, he is urging them forward to come and join in Christ's reproach – "Come join him outside the gates. Come suffer with him!" This is his pastoral plea! "We are a community of the cross. Take up yours!"

Look at v. 13: “Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured.”

I think that in v.14 he is again re-shaping the argument he had through chapter 11. Remember how he said of Abraham in 11:10, “He was looking forward to a city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God”? Well, here in v.14, he says, “Go join Christ in his reproach, because here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” He urges this group to take drastic strides forward in their perseverance.

This makes me think that when he calls them in v. 7 to “remember their leaders, those who spoke to them the word of God; to consider the outcome of their faith and imitate them,” he means to consider the martyrs. “Be like them. Live for the real city, not this transient city.”

Folks, we are a community of the cross. We live our lives upon the foundation of the cross. Let us not be afraid to bear our reproach as we carry our crosses.

But as a community of the cross, we very quickly and naturally become a community of celebration. “A community of celebration” is John Stott’s description of the church in his book, *The Cross of Christ*.

We move here into a third irony our author sees.

Have all sacrifices ended, then? Or, let me ask it differently: Is there no more sacrificing? After all, five times throughout the book, the author has used the term *hapax* to state that Jesus is that final, once for all sacrifice (cf. 7:27; 9:12, 26, 28; 10:10). Jesus has brought an end to atoning sacrifices. There need never be any more sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins or for the meriting of favor before God. Those kinds of sacrifices are done.

However, not all sacrificing is done. There is still a kind of sacrifice to be rendered by Jesus’ followers. He lists three in vv. 15-16:

¹⁵ Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. ¹⁶ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

1. Sacrifice of Praise
2. Sacrifice of Good deeds
3. Sacrifice of Sharing

John Stott says, “The uniqueness of Christ’s sacrifice does not mean, then, that we have no sacrifices to offer, but only that their nature and purpose are different. They are not material but spiritual, and their object is not propitiatory but...the expression of a responsive gratitude.” As Stott says, the community of the cross is truly a “community of celebration.

The table that we eat from in the Lord’s Supper, then, is entirely different from, say, the altar of the Catholic Eucharist. Ours is not an offering up to God of Jesus all over again; but it is an offering up to God as the sacrifice of praise.

When we eat we *ponder* his sacrifice

When we eat we *participate* in his benefits

When we eat we *proclaim* his death

When we eat we *praise* his name.

“We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat.” But we do!

May we eat as though participating in Christ’s blessings and offering up to God the sacrifice of praise – the fruit of our lips as we call on his name.

Amen!