

**MOVING ON TO MATURITY**  
*The Miracle of Forgiveness*  
Hebrews 9:1-22

For the average person – an unbeliever, living in a post-modern age – the concepts of this passage that Gary and Layne just read for us are not only unbelievable, but border on the absurd, ridiculous and absolutely bizarre, if not repulsive.

Take for instance the idea of slaughtering millions of innocent animals as part of a religious ritual. Every now and then we hear tales of this happening today, in some Satanist cult or animistic ritual. But it is immediately and universally condemned, at least in Western society. In fact, today we'll spend millions of dollars to protect animals of every species.

The other day I heard on the news the attempt to get dolphins out of the bay where the canoe races are to be held in the Olympic trials. Great pain was taken and thousands of dollars spent to avoid their death. We see this all the time. In fact, animals are protected more than humans! In our society, we love to see horror movies full of blood and gore, but any such movie about killing animals would never be allowed to hit the big screen. And even if you do see a movie in which animals are killed, there is always a disclaimer at the end which reads: "no animal in this film was harmed." Can you imagine seeing such a disclaimer at the end of *Borne Identity* – "no human in this film was harmed?"

But not only does this passage speak of such things as the slaughter of bulls, goats and calves and the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, but there is also this almost obsessive interest in blood. In fact, in this passage alone it is mentioned eleven times. And it's not just here, but throughout the Bible. The Bible is a "bloody" book! It is the preferred way of describing death, since the word "blood" occurs five times more often than the word "death." In the entire Bible blood is mentioned over 400 times!

And what is even more strange in this passage is the idea of blood as a cleansing agent. We use water and soap to cleanse, not blood. For us, blood stains; it doesn't remove stains. And yet that fact doesn't seem to disturb us when we sing that famous hymn by William Cowper, "There is a Fountain:"

There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins;  
And sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains.

The average modern-day unbeliever would think that such words are as bizarre as animal sacrifice being practiced in some pre-historic tribe. And yet to most ancients, including the religions of Rome and Greece, blood held great significance. After all, it was an everyday experience. While we select our relatively bloodless meat produce in sterilized packaging in air-conditioned grocery stores, they slaughtered their cows and chickens on the spot with their own hands and knives. The sight of blood was an everyday occurrence.

By the way, in ancient history, covenants were confirmed by two individuals mixing their blood. We wouldn't think of such a thing today. And yet we have customs that recall the past. Each

time I do a wedding I ask, “Are there symbols of this covenant?” At that point, a ring is placed on what is called the “leech finger” of the man and the woman. What is the “leech finger?” It’s that finger next to your index finger. Why do we wear the wedding band there? Because in ancient times, this finger was believed to contain a vein that led directly to the heart.

So why all this emphasis on blood and sacrifices? The answer has to do with the miracle of forgiveness. But we can’t understand forgiveness, until we get our minds and hearts around several other concepts in this passage.

## SIN

The first concept we need to get a hold of in this passage is called “sin.” The word itself is mentioned no less than five times in chapter 9. Gary and Layne read that the high priest would once a year enter into the Most Holy Place carrying blood to offer for his own “sins” and for the “sins” of the people. We also read that Christ died to rescue those who had “sinned” and broken the old agreement.

This is a concept the average person might stumble over. This word “sin” is dusty and timeworn. The vast majority of people today no longer believe in such a concept. But you can’t understand Christianity without understanding the concept of sin.

What is sin? Sin means literally to “miss the mark.” One of the activities offered in certain high schools these days is archery practice. How many of you have taken archery lessons? The objective is simple. Shoot the arrow into the bull’s eye. But wouldn’t it be pretty lame to shoot the arrow and then go up and draw the bull’s eye around where the arrow landed?

And yet in relation to God, many people do just that! Many think that it is up to them to define the “bull’s eye” of what is right and wrong, rather than God defining it.

The great French philosopher and theologian Blaise Pascal once said, “There are only two kinds of [people] men: the righteous who think they are sinners and the sinners who think they are righteous.” What he means is this. Those who are truly righteous before God know that they are sinners, that they have “missed the mark.” But most sinners who are separated from God think that they are pretty righteous.

Our society is full of people who *think* that they are righteous. But it is all relative. They have “shot their arrow” and then drawn the “bull’s eye” around it. They define acceptability with God in their own terms. Their prayer is: “Lord, thanks that I am not like those *really* bad people that I see on the news every night.”

I like what C.S. Lewis says in his book *Mere Christianity*:

Christianity tells people to repent and promises them forgiveness. It therefore has nothing (as far as I know) to say to people who do not know they have done anything to repent of and who do not feel they need any forgiveness. It is after you have realized that there is a real Moral Law, and a Power behind that law, and that you have broken the law and put

yourself wrong with that Power – it is after all this, and not a moment sooner, that Christianity begins to talk.<sup>1</sup>

The miracle of forgiveness makes no sense unless we first of all know that we are guilty. And what tells us that we are guilty? This passage tells us that it is God's moral law working through our conscience.

I was visiting with a family in our church a few weeks ago. I noticed that they had placed a special collar on their dog that contains a beeper and two little prods. Around their yard they have an invisible fence. That invisible fence is a wire buried under the ground around the perimeter of their yard. This wire emits a signal. Whenever the dog approaches the wire, the collar begins beeping, warning him that he is near forbidden territory. If the dog keeps going, he'll get an unpleasant electrical jolt.

God's law is like that wire in the ground and our conscience is like that beeping sound on the dog's collar. Both tell us that we're approaching forbidden territory, that we're about to "miss the mark" of God's intentions for our lives. It tells us that, if we keep going, we're going to "miss the mark," that is, sin. If we ignore the beeping, we might eventually tune it out. We might even become desensitized to the little jolts of warning. They will, however, leave their effect.

Sin is like that. It leaves us with a guilty conscience before God. And a guilty conscience needs cleansing. Simply put, we need forgiveness.

## **SEPARATION**

That's the first concept we need to understand – sin. But we also need to understand the inevitable consequence of sin – separation.

Sin leads to separation. The Bible says, "For the wages (i.e. the salary) of sin is death..." What is death? Death is *separation*. Physical death is the separation of the spirit from our body. Spiritual death is the separation of our spirit from God's spirit. And eternal death is the separation of our spirit from God's presence eternally. Death means separation. And it is sin that leads to such separation.

Today, the average unbeliever doesn't struggle with this sense of separation from God. In fact, he may not believe that God even exists! But for the Israelite, living before the time of Christ, there was a constant visual reminder of separation from God. This reminder was the earthly tabernacle described in verses 1-10 of Hebrews 9.

Let's take a quick look at what was in this tabernacle. The description in these verses moves from the outer room of the worship tent, called the Holy Place, into the inner room, called the Most Holy Place.

The details here are not all that important to the author's point. In fact, he says that himself: "But we cannot discuss these things in detail now" (9:5). So why does he mention all of this?

The real point that he wants to get across is found in the following verses (6-10). It has to do with this idea of “separation.”

The Old Testament priests could enter regularly into the outer room, the Holy Place, to carry on their ministry. But only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place, and that only once a year on the Day of Atonement. Why? Because the Most Holy Place speaks of God’s very presence.

All of this was like a parable for those living during the time of the tabernacle as well as for you and me. The general population could not draw near to God individually, but only representatively, i.e through the high priest and then only once-a-year. Why? Because the perfect mediator (i.e. the perfect “go-between”) between God and man – Jesus Christ – had not yet come. This outer room illustrates the inner, spiritual condition of the people. The very fact that there was limited access into the Holy of Holies demonstrates that there is something better that is coming. As long as the first tabernacle was still standing, the way into the Holy of Holies, God’s very presence, was not yet revealed.

The Bible says that we are like sheep that have “gone astray.” That means that we have wandered *far* from God. Just like dumb sheep (and sheep are some of the dumbest animals around) we have separated ourselves from our good shepherd.

And so to understand the miracle of forgiveness, we need to understand the reality of sin as well as the consequence of sin, which is separation from God.

## **CLEANSING**

This brings us to the third concept of this passage. And this is the main point. You and I need cleansing before God. If separation from God is to be replaced by reconciliation (i.e. nearness) with God, we need our sin washed away, cleansed and forgiven.

It was on the Day of Atonement as recorded in Leviticus 16:1-25 that the High Priest would offer the most important sacrifices on behalf of the nation. He would first offer a sacrifice for himself and his household. It was only then that he presented the sacrifice on behalf of the people. Two goats were chosen. One was slaughtered as a sin offering for the people (Lev. 16:15). The other was considered the “scapegoat”. Over this one, the high priest would confess all the sins of the people and send it away into the desert (16:20-22). Then the high priest would take the blood of both the bull and the sacrificial goat behind the curtain into the Holy of Holies and sprinkle this blood on the atonement cover (16:15-16) of the ark of the covenant.<sup>ii</sup> Try to imagine what this was like. All around there was the stench of death. All around there was the sight of blood splattered on the altar. You could smell everywhere the odor of burning flesh.

We have to ask: Why all this emphasis on blood? I believe the answer is found in Hebrews 9:22: “In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”

Modern medical science has demonstrated the truthfulness of what the biblical writers were saying. William Cowper's hymn, and the many biblical references that support it, are not only good theology, but also good biology as well.

The other day, during my yearly physical (I am 54 next month!), I had my blood pressure taken. Katie Grady, who used to be here at CB, was my nurse. She took a device like this, a blood pressure test kit. She wrapped the cuff around my upper arm and began to pump until the pressure reached about 200 mm. of mercury. She left it there just long enough to get a proper reading.

This morning, however, we're going to do a little experiment to help us see the cleansing value of blood in our bodies. And I'm going to pick on someone. Daniel Kowatch, why don't you come up and help me with this? We're going to take Daniel's blood pressure. And I'm sure it's running pretty high since he had no idea I was going to call on him like this!

We're going to put this cuff on Daniel's arm and once we get it situated, I'm going to play "nurse." We're going to pump until we reach that level of about 200 mm of mercury. And maybe I'll even go a little further, up to about 300mm! Now what I want you to do, Daniel, is to begin to flex your fingers. Make a fist about 10 times in succession. Or how about this – try cutting this piece of paper with these scissors.

How do you feel in your fingers and hand? Are you feeling weak? Are your muscles beginning to cramp? Now I'm going to release the cuff. How does that feel? Do you have any pain now? Physiologically, you have just experience the cleansing power of blood.

What has happened here? While the blood supply to Daniel's arm was shut off, he forced his muscles to keep working. But as the muscles converted oxygen into energy, they also produced certain waste products called "metabolites" that are normally flushed away instantly in the bloodstream. But due to the constricted flow of blood, these metabolites began accumulating in the cells. They weren't being cleansed by the flow of blood. The result? Daniel felt the pain of retained toxins.<sup>iii</sup>

However, when I took off the cuff, Daniel began to, physiologically, experience the cleansing power of blood. The human body began to perform its janitorial process. This gives us some insight into a spiritual malady that pervades our bodies.

What Daniel experience *physiologically*, we can all experience *spiritually*. Spiritually speaking, we all have "metabolites" that can destroy our lives. This sickness is called "sin." Sin is a paralyzing toxin that keeps us from being all that God intends us to be. Just as our human blood cleanses harmful metabolites, God's forgiveness based on the shed blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from harmful ingredients – sins – in our life.

How can this happen? This passage tells us that, apart from the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness. Why? Because sin must be paid for. Under the "old agreement" (i.e. the Old Testament), it was provisionally paid for as those animals were sacrificed. We said last week it was like putting a purchase on your credit card. When you purchase something with your credit

card, is it paid for? No, not really, because later in the month the bill comes due. When these believers brought their sacrifices, they did so knowing that the sacrifices spoke of a far better sacrifice to come. God passed over their sin, knowing that one day the “bill would come due” so to speak. And it did, in the person of Jesus Christ. On that cross, he did what no animal sacrifice could ever do. He paid in full and forever the debt of our sin.

Remember that hymn we mentioned earlier, “There is a Fountain?” It’s based on Zechariah 13:1 – “In that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity.” The author of the hymn, William Cowper, had a mental breakdown and attempted suicide at an early age. He then spent 18 months in an insane asylum. It was during this time, however, that he read Romans 3:25. It says this:

For God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins and to satisfy God’s anger against us. We are made right with God when we believe that Jesus shed his blood, sacrificing his life for us. *NLT*

At the age of 33, Cowper placed his faith in Jesus Christ and experienced the forgiveness that Christ’s shed blood gives. What about you? Will you come to the “fountain” today? If you have never placed your faith in Jesus Christ, come...let him cleanse you of all sin and impurity. If you are a believer, but struggling with a guilty conscience, you come also. Confess your sin to God. Embrace the forgiveness that Jesus Christ alone can give. The Bible says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” We’ve all sinned. We’ve all missed the mark. But God stands ready to forgive.

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<sup>i</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, rev. and enlarged ed. (New York: Walker, 1987), 45-46 as cited by

<sup>ii</sup> There was one other sacrifice that this chapter mentions in verse 13. There he refers to the “ashes of a heifer.” In Numbers 19:1-21, God commanded his people to bring to Moses and Aaron a red heifer that was without defect. This heifer was then taken outside the camp and slaughtered. Its blood would be sprinkled seven times toward the front of the Tent of Meeting, i.e. the tabernacle. The animal would then be burned and its ashes preserved for later ceremonial use.

<sup>iii</sup> Illustration drawn from article “Blood: The Miracle of Cleansing,” by Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, *Christianity Today*, February 18, 1983.