

## MOVING ON TO MATURITY

*When Jesus Shows Up*

Hebrews 9:23-28

23 It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. 24 For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. 25 Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. 26 Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. 27 Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, 28 so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. Hebrews 9:23-28

Why doesn't Jesus just appear to me and make himself known?

Have you ever had anyone say that to you? "After all, if Jesus is real, why doesn't he just show himself? Why doesn't he just appear to me right here? If he did, I would believe, " they might say.

Such an attitude is not all that uncommon. In fact, even Jesus' immediate family members felt the same way. On one occasion, Jesus' own brothers told him to "show himself to the world! " ( John 7:4). In other words, "Appear! Show your power. And then the world will believe. " As we read on, however, in that same account we discover that his brothers were telling him this because *they themselves* did not believe.

But sometimes, even we who are believers ask that same question: Jesus, where are you? Why don't you just show up and help me in my time of need? My relationships are struggling, my body is aching, my emotions are all over the map, and my faith is failing...God, where are you? Why don't you show up?

The passage we've just read is all about Jesus "showing up, " i.e. appearing. In fact, it's mentioned three different times (verses 24, 26, and 28). Two of these "appearings " are before people on behalf of God. And one of these "appearings " is before God on behalf of people. Let's see what these "appearings " are all about and how this relates to you and me.

### CHRIST'S PRESENT APPEARANCE

Verses 23-24 are all about Jesus Christ *presently appearing* on our behalf. We have the children with us this morning, so I'm going to ask that all our children 12 and under read this passage with me. The words are on the screen, this time from the NLT:

That is why the earthly tent and everything in it--which were copies of things in heaven--had to be purified by the blood of animals. But the real things in heaven had to be purified with far better sacrifices than the blood of animals. For Christ has entered into heaven itself to appear now before God as our Advocate. Hebrews 9:23-24 NLT

Let's unpackage that last phrase: "to appear *now* before God as our Advocate. " One of the most neglected aspects of biblical study and teaching is the present is what Jesus is doing right now in heaven for you and me. Have you ever thought about it? We often talk about what Jesus did for us when he lived and died on this earth. And we talk some (maybe not as much as we should) about what Jesus will do when he comes back. But what about right now? What *is* Jesus doing right now, today, in heaven? The book of Hebrews has more to say about this than any other book of the New Testament.

The first clue as to what Jesus is doing right now is found in that last phrase: "to appear now before God as our Advocate. " The words "before God " literally means "in or before God's face. " We today use that expression in somewhat of a negative way. If a person is "in your face, " then they are always there. You can't get rid of them. In a similar but more positively, Jesus Christ is constantly before the face of God the Father. He is there as our *representative* or as our "advocate. "

What is an "advocate? " The apostle John answers that question when he says:

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have *one who speaks to the Father in our defense*-Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. 1 John 2:1-2

As our advocate, our representative, Jesus Christ is *for* us. That's what Hebrews 9:24 says, "Now to appear *for us* in God's presence. " As believers, we live under friendly skies. God's righteous anger against sin has been turned away. We have one who speaks in our defense.

I have a suspicion that this verse in 1 John 2 also helps explain Hebrews 9:23. Verse 23 tells us one aspect of Jesus' representative role in heaven that you have probably not thought about before. This whole idea of Jesus cleansing the heavenly things with better sacrifices sounds rather strange, doesn't it? After all, why would heaven need to be cleansed?<sup>1</sup>

Probably the best understanding of these verses is based on the job description of the high priest in Leviticus 16:16-19. Leviticus 16:16 says that the high priest "will make atonement for the Most Holy Place, and he will do the same for the entire Tabernacle, *because of the defiling sin and rebellion of the Israelites.* "

Just like those Israelites, we are worshippers, but we are also sinful worshippers. We are invited to come boldly before God's very presence (Hebrews 4:14-16). We can do what no Israelite could ever do – walk right into the Tabernacle, into the Holy Place and into the Most Holy Place, i.e. into the very presence of God. The way has been made clear. Jesus' blood has been shed. There is no obstacle to our communion. But, we come as sinners, as those in desperate need of forgiveness. We too have "defiling sin and rebellion " in our hearts. And it is in this sense that the "heavenly things " needed cleansing, just like the Tabernacle needed cleansing.

Jesus Christ presently appears before God as our advocate, our representative. But there is more. He is also there as our *intercessor*:

Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Heb 7:25

Jesus is “showing up “ for us before God the Father because he is interceding for us. When Aaron, the high priest, went before God, he wore what was called an ephod. In the shoulders of this garment were two onyx stones on which the names of the sons of Israel were engraved. These stones were called the “stones of remembrance. “ Why? Because each time the high priest would enter the Most Holy Place, he would carry the names of these fellow Israelites before God.<sup>ii</sup> And attached in front of the two shoulder pieces was a breast piece which had twelve precious stones, in four rows of three, one stone for each tribe of Israel. This was so that he could symbolically bring before the Lord each of the tribes of Israel every time he entered the Most Holy Place (Exodus 28:6-12). The high priest carried each Israelite and each tribe of Israel close to his heart as he entered the very presence of God.

Did you know that Jesus Christ does the same for you as a believer? The Bible says that he is the good shepherd (John 10) and just as a good shepherd knows his sheep by name, he knows you by name. Your name is on his heart. He is constantly lifting you up in prayer.

What is he praying? If his prayers while on earth are any indication of his intercession in heaven, then here’s what he’s praying for you and me. He prays that we would be protected from the evil one. Jesus says in John 17:15 – “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one. “

This is how he prayed for Peter wasn’t it. He says to Simon Peter before that time of great testing: “Simon, Satan has asked to sift you like wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. “ (Luke 22:31-32). And he prays that for you and me.

This is how I’m sure he is praying for our church and for every church: “ “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you “ (John 17:20-21). Think of it. Anything we do that hinders the unity of God’s people is a direct affront to the prayers of Jesus Christ!

Christ’s intercession for you and me should encourage us to intercede for others. I believe one reason that more of us don’t jump at the opportunity to pray together as a church family is because of a shallow, stereotypical understanding of prayer. The Bible says that both Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are in intercession for us<sup>iii</sup> and that as we pray, we are engaging in one of the most privileged opportunities we have as believers. We are joining our prayers with those of the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ as we come before the very presence of God the Father.<sup>iv</sup>

Believer, always remember this. No matter what you face in life, Jesus is *for* you. He appears before the very presence of God as your representative and as your intercessor. And he invites us to join him there before God’s throne of grace.

## **CHRIST’S PAST APPEARANCE**

What we’ve seen so far looks at the *present*. But the next few verses deal with the *past*. Today, right now, this very instant, Jesus appears before God on behalf of people, like you and me.<sup>v</sup> But he does this because in the past he appeared to people like you and me on behalf of God. That’s what we see in verses 25-27.

25 Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. 26 Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world.

But now he has appeared *once for all* at *the end of the ages* to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. 27 Just as man is destined to *die* once, and after that to face judgment, 28 so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people;

The significance of Jesus' past appearance, when he walked on this earth, can't be understood apart from his once-for-all death. That's what these verses are all about. Notice again verse 26: "...he has appeared once for all...to do away with sin..."; and again in verse 28: "so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many." But sandwiched in between these two statements is something about you and me: "...man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (v. 27a).

Death has become an increasingly popular subject these days. More and more people write about, talk about and make movies about death. Maybe they feel that if they can just talk about it, it will go away. Or at least the fear of death will vanish. It's sort of like Woody Allen who said, "I'm not afraid to die; I just don't want to be there when it happens."

In the 2007 film *The Bucket List*, two terminally ill men—played by Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman—take a road trip to do the things they always said they would do before they "kicked the bucket." In anticipation of the film's release, Nicholson was interviewed for an article in *Parade* magazine. While reflecting on his personal life, Nicholson said: "We all want to go on forever, don't we? We fear the unknown. Everybody goes to that wall, yet nobody knows what's on the other side. That's why we fear death"<sup>vi</sup>

We've all heard of My Space. Well now there's a MyDeathSpace. It was begun by a fellow in San Francisco in 2006. It's basically an internet site that gives the details of the deaths of MySpace members. You'll find details about the passing of Tim Russert and Heath Ledger. It's a sort of virtual graveyard without the tombstones or flowers. Some use the site to mourn, heal and discuss matters of the afterlife. So far the site lists nearly 3,000 deaths and receives over 100 hits a day.

I was one of those hits. I checked it out myself. One of the citations said this: "On a large enough time line, the survival rate for everyone drops to zero." Funny thing, isn't it? Isn't that what the writer to the Hebrews was saying nearly 2,000 years ago? Man is destined to die once. No exceptions. Every human faces the inevitable. It's like the old-timer visiting the West Coast who asked, "What's the death rate out here?" The reply: "Same as back east; one to a person."

And what comes after death? Judgment. Many fear death. But the vast majority don't even think about judgment. "For man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment." It's been said, "In the choir of life, it's easy to fake the words – but someday each of us will have to sing solo before God."<sup>vii</sup>

Peter reminds us that "the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men" (2 Peter 3:7, NIV). How do we avoid this destruction of the day of judgment? The answer is right here in Hebrews 9. It is by resting our faith in the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In Jesus' death, he suffered the judgment of

God against sin. As a result, he “takes away “ our sin. In fact, it’s repeated twice: “to do away with sin... “ (v 26) and “to take away the sins of many people “ (v. 28). There is no greater freedom than a clean conscience. The Bible says, “As far as the east is from the west, so far have you removed our transgressions from us. “

The forgiveness of sin spells life. Jesus himself said: “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes in him who sent me has eternal life and *will not be condemned*; he has crossed over from death to life “ (John 5:24).

Have you crossed over from death to life? If you have, though you will die physically, you will not die spiritually and eternally. You will live. And that is why Jesus “appeared “ the first time. He appeared to die that you and I might live.

### **CHRIST’S FUTURE APPEARANCE**

Jesus appears for us *now* in heaven. Jesus appeared in the *past* at the cross. And Jesus will appear in the *future* to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. Look at verse 28:

28 *b* and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

Jesus is coming back. Do you believe that? The fact that he will come again is just as certain as the historical fact that he walked 2000 years ago on planet earth. He came the first time to “bear sin “ on his own shoulders. That’s why when he was on the cross, bearing the sins of the world, he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me. “ Why did God the Father look away? Because Jesus bore my sin and your sin on his very person.

Jesus first appeared to bear sin. But he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation. But the catch is this: If you don’t trust him now to bear your sin, you won’t experience then his salvation when he returns.

He will bring salvation to those who are “waiting for him. “ The word “wait “ is used only seven times in the New Testament. And each time it refers to patient expectation of Jesus’ return.<sup>viii</sup> It literally means “to wait it out. “

The three appearances of Christ as described in this passage correspond perfectly to what was modeled in the Old Testament by the high priest in Israel. His first appearance on the Day of Atonement was at what was called the Brazen Altar where the sacrifice was killed. Only by passing by the Brazen Altar which spoke of blood sacrifice could he enter in the Holy of Holies. In the Old Testament, the high priest went into the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement while the people waited around the gate of the tabernacle. There were little bells on the high priest’s clothes so that the people outside could hear the sound as he moved around in the inner sanctuary. The people would anxiously wait for the high priest to emerge. That’s the imagery the speaker is developing here. In the same way, Jesus Christ, our great high priest, has gone into the true sanctuary, into the very presence of God the Father. We too, just like those Israelites, are waiting for he “reemergence, “ so to speak. We are anxiously awaiting his return. He will appear a second time, not to die for sin and not to put sin away, but to bring us the long awaited salvation that our hearts long for.

So if you're asking, "Why doesn't Jesus just show up?" "Remember, he has, he does and he will. Let's take him at his word and quit asking him to do what he already has done, is doing and will do as promised.

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<sup>i</sup> There are many different interpretations that have been offered of this interesting statement. Our friends in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church claim that this took place in 1844. Did you know that? They teach that in that year Jesus entered the heavenly sanctuary and began an "investigation" (they call it) into the sins of his people. According to their teaching, this "investigation" will end at the end of the age when Christ will cleanse those sins from the heavenly sanctuary and place them upon Satan. At that point the devil will be declared guilty, much like the scapegoat that we've spoken of on the Day of Atonement.<sup>1</sup> While I greatly appreciate many of our brothers and sisters in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, the Bible says nothing about such an "investigation" into our sins.

<sup>ii</sup> "Aaron will carry these names before the Lord as a constant reminder." Exodus 28:12 NLT.

<sup>iii</sup> Romans 8:26; Hebrews 7:25.

<sup>iv</sup> An example of believers who fail to join their prayers with the intercessory work of Christ is found in Mark 14:31-38 as Jesus prays in the garden of Gethsemane: "And they came to an olive grove called Gethsemane, and Jesus said, "Sit here while I go and pray." He took Peter, James, and John with him, and he began to be filled with horror and deep distress. He told them, "My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and watch with me." He went on a little farther and fell face down on the ground. He prayed that, if it were possible, the awful hour awaiting him might pass him by. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will, not mine." Then he returned and found the disciples asleep. "Simon!" he said to Peter. "Are you asleep? Couldn't you stay awake and watch with me even one hour? Keep alert and pray. Otherwise temptation will overpower you. For though the spirit is willing enough, the body is weak." Mark 14:32-38 NLT

<sup>v</sup> Whom does he pray for? Those who draw near to God through him (7:25)!! Jesus intercedes for believers and not for the world (John 17:9).

<sup>vi</sup> Dotson Rader, "I want to go on forever," Parade magazine (12-9-07), pp. 6-8 as cited by [www.Preachingtoday.com](http://www.Preachingtoday.com).

<sup>vii</sup> *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, ed by Michael P. Green (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1982), 207.

<sup>viii</sup> Romans 8:19, 23, 25; 1 Cor. 1:7; Gal. 5:5; Phil 3:20; Heb. 9:28