



23: Why Did Jesus Die?

In the second half of chapter 9 the writer of the book of Hebrews turns us back to thoughts about the new covenant and continues to weave them into his overall argument that the new way — Jesus' way — is better. He does it by showing us the link between the new covenant and Jesus' death and he does that by telling us why Jesus had to die.

And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.

For where there is a testament, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is in force after men are dead, since it has no power at all while the testator lives. Therefore not even the first covenant was dedicated without blood. For when Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water, scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you." Then likewise he sprinkled with blood both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry. And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission.

Therefore it was necessary that the copies of the things in the heavens should be purified with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another — He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.

Hebrews 9:15 – 28

His Death Paid For Sin

The words, "And for this reason" point to the end of verse 15, not to what has previously been said. Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant, died "for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant." The phrase "transgressions under the first covenant" refers to those all those violations of the Old Testament law that the Old Testament sacrifices were unable to pay for. Jesus had to die to pay the necessary ransom.

His Death Secured The Promises Of The New Covenant

Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant, also died in order "that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance." In other words, by dying He ensured that the promises of the new covenant could and would be delivered to the people He, as their Mediator, represented before God.

His Death Ratified The New Covenant

In verses 16 to 18 we're given another reason why Jesus is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death when we're told that He died because when God makes a covenant there must be a death. Even the first covenant called for the shedding of blood. Jesus had to die so that the new covenant could come into force.

The word translated "testament" in the NKJV is the same word that's translated "covenant" elsewhere. One understanding of verse 16 depends on the idea that a testament or will, by which property is bequeathed, only becomes effective when the testator dies. If that's what the writer had in mind he is saying that the first covenant required the shedding of blood because an inheritance cannot be paid out until the death of the testator has taken place and likewise Jesus, the heir of all things, had to die so that the benefactors of the new covenant might receive their eternal inheritance.

- ◆ *What difficulties do you see with that understanding of verse 16?*

An alternative understanding takes the view that the writer is thinking not about wills but about covenants but it only makes sense if you see that the writer isn't making a general statement that applies to all covenants. He's talking only about covenants made by God. He's saying that when God makes a covenant a sacrificial victim must die before that covenant can be ratified. He brings up the first covenant — the covenant made at Sinai in the days of Moses — as an example, making the point that that too called for the shedding of blood. (verses 19 – 22).

- ◆ *Which of these two ways of understanding these verses do you think fits best?*
- ◆ *We aren't told the answer here but why, do you think, does the ratification of a covenant made by God require the shedding of blood?*

Blood Had To Be Shed

In the rest of the chapter, verses 19 to 28, the writer emphasises how necessary the shedding of blood is for the ratification of a covenant.

Verses 19 to 22 describe the way laid down in the days of Moses by which the people, the tabernacle, the book of the law, indeed "one might almost say" all things were to be cleansed. They had to be sprinkled with blood. Whenever the Old Testament High Priest sprinkled the blood of a sacrifice he proclaimed the meaning of his action; "This is the blood of the covenant which God commanded you." His words were a reminder to the people that it was by blood that the blessings of the first covenant were secured for them. The lesson his actions and words were intended to teach is spelled out: "without shedding of blood there is no remission."

Incidentally, those words proclaimed by the High Priest were alluded to by Jesus when He instituted the Lord's Supper: "This is My blood of the New Covenant."

But Not Any Old Blood

In verses 23 and 24 the writer brings out the idea that the blood shed must be appropriate to the purpose of the sacrifice. The symbolic sacrifice of an animal might have been enough to ceremonially cleanse the Tabernacle, which was itself a symbol, but the cleansing of the true "heavenly things" called for something much better.

- ◆ *In what sense, do you think, did "the heavenly things" need to be cleansed?*

Once Was Enough

From verse 25 down to verse 28 another question that might well have come into the minds of the first readers of the book of Hebrews at this point is answered. The priests of Old Testament times offered sacrifices continually, so how do we explain the fact that Jesus' sacrifice was only offered once?

"...not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another — He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many."

Hebrews 9:25 – 28

The term "end of the ages (verse 26)" is a Jewish way of speaking that we've come across before. The Jews spoke of the time of the Messiah as the last of the ages or "the latter times."

Jesus Died But Jesus Will Return

The point having been made that with regard to Jesus' sacrifice of Himself once was enough, the writer concludes with a reminder that He will return to the world again. But He will not return to offer another sacrifice. His return will have nothing to do with removing the penalty of sin. He will return to complete the salvation of all "who eagerly wait for Him".

"To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation."

Hebrews 9:28

- ◆ *What does it mean to eagerly wait for Jesus?*
- ◆ *What does the writer mean when he says that Jesus will return "for salvation"?*