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*<sup>24</sup>For Christ did not enter a handmade sanctuary, a representation of the true sanctuary. Instead, he entered into heaven itself, now to appear before God on our behalf. <sup>25</sup>And he did not enter to offer himself many times, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own. <sup>26</sup>Otherwise he would have needed to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once and for all, at the climax of the ages, in order to take away sin by the sacrifice of himself. <sup>27</sup>And, just as it is appointed for people to die only once and after this comes the judgment, <sup>28</sup>so also Christ was offered only once to take away the sins of many, and he will appear a second time—without sin—to bring salvation to those who are eagerly waiting for him.*

When people lay in their deathbeds, they often think more deeply about spiritual things than in their everyday life. Is there a life after this one? What's it like? How do we get there? And that last question is probably the one that causes people the most grief. People wonder if they have done enough to gain eternal life in heaven. They'll think back to the many good and charitable things they've done for others. They'll look back to how they raised their children or cared for an aging family member. But they'll also think back to the many times they've messed up, the times they served their own interests rather than their loved ones, a mistake that caused strife and hostility. And as they wrestle with how they stack up before God, they have at least a little fear. They are afraid that they will face judgement for the lives they've lived and the people they've mistreated.

As we continue in this last part of the church year, sometimes called the End Times season, we're forced to wrestle with that uncomfortable topic of eternity. We're forced to ask those same deathbed questions. But it's my prayer that as we hear God's word today, our response is not a fear of judgement, but a freedom that comes from the fact that in Christ we have the better covenant.

Jesus marks the change between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. This is the old deal that God had made with his people and the new deal. This is why the Bible is split between the Old Testament and the New Testament. In the Old Testament, after setting his people free from slavery in Egypt, God initiates a special relationship with the Israelites. He gives the 10 Commandments to Moses up on top of Mount Sinai. He lays out to his people the sacrifices they are to make, the way they are to worship, and the way they are to live differently than the nations around them. But in the New Testament Christ's redeeming work makes the change. God's relationship with his people is no longer tied to how well they keep God's laws. In fact, because of Christ, all those Old Testament worship and societal laws are no longer in effect, fulfilled in Jesus. The only Old Testament laws that stand before us are the 10 Commandments, and even these laws serve a different function in our lives than they did for God's people under the Old Covenant. A change has come. But as we know all too well, change is not always so easy.

The original readers that this letter to the Hebrews speaks to were Jewish converts to Christianity who were tempted to turn back to their old form of worship. Think about how culturally ingrained the old law was in their lives. Imagine how comfortable the people had gotten with the way they worshipped and lived. Add to that, there was pressure to turn back, pressure from family and friends, pressure from a society where the Jewish religion and culture were indistinguishable from each other. And so, the main issue of this transition from the old to the new was moving from the symbolism of the Old Covenant to the reality of the New Covenant.

Under the Old Covenant worship was centered around the Tabernacle tent while the people wandered through the wilderness and then the temple when it was built in Jerusalem. Every day the temple would be

bustling with people bringing animals to be sacrificed. There was plenty of concern about spiritual cleanliness. Their uncleanness separated them from God. So, two times a day priests would enter into the Tabernacle, and only after purifying themselves. All of this was a reminder that people cannot come near to God because of sin.

But one day each year was even more special. On the Day of Atonement, the high priest would enter into the innermost room of the Tabernacle, called the Most Holy Place. This is where the Ark of the Covenant was kept, that symbol of God's presence among his people. Now, the high priest would only enter into the Most Holy Place after making a sacrifice for himself 1st. If it was not the high priest or if he entered on any day other than the Day of Atonement, that person would die. The high priest would then make two sacrifices for the people. Both of these sacrifices involved goats. The first goat would be killed and have its blood spread on the ark of the covenant. The second goat would have the sins of the people confessed upon it by the high priest, only to be sent out of town as the scapegoat.

As you can see, Old Testament worship was a bloody affair. It served to remind the people that sin was not to be taken lightly. The day-in-and-day-out sacrifices served to remind the people that they were sinful and because of that sin their relationship with God was constantly stressed.

But in Christ the new had come. The writer to the Hebrews is proving to his readers did that Jesus is all they need. He's proving that Jesus really is the upgraded and perfected form of what they had gotten so used to with the Old Covenant. Like the scapegoat, someone has to carry our sins away from us. We can't undo our sins by living the right kind of lives. Our hearts and our hands are stained, and we have no way getting that stain out by ourselves. So too like the goat that was sacrificed and had its blood spread on the Ark, our sins require sacrifice. They require Blood to blot them out.

In both of these pictures, we see types of Christ, reminders of what God would do in the future. Jesus carries our sins from us as he is sent to suffer all by himself on the cross, apart even from his Heavenly Father. In the same way, Jesus sheds his blood for the sins of the world, paying the ultimate price for us, the price of death and the suffering of hell. These Hebrews struggled to see how Jesus fit in with their Old Covenant form of worship, but this letter makes it so clear. Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Covenant, keeping God's commands perfectly.

But Jesus is better than the sacrifices of the Old Covenant. The sacrifice he makes is a one-time sacrifice. We hear: "And he did not enter to offer himself many times, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own. Otherwise he would have needed to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once and for all, at the climax of the ages, in order to take away sin by the sacrifice of himself." This means all sin has been fully paid for. There's no need to keep on repaying it, to keep on sacrificing. This brings with it peace in knowing that Jesus' sacrifice covers over sin completely.

But why does it matter? It matters because between the old and the new we're moving from symbols of forgiveness to forgiveness itself. In the next chapter of this letter, we hear: "The fact is that the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sins." The bloody and fiery sacrifices of the Old Testament didn't actually do anything to forgive sin. Instead, they were a reminder. Paul writes to the Colossians, saying: "Therefore, do not let anyone judge you in regard to food or drink, or in regard to a festival or a New Moon or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were coming, but the body belongs to Christ." These sacrifices were the shadow of Jesus, the sign that the Savior from sin was still on the way.

You and I don't have to wonder each day if Jesus has really paid for our sins. We can be certain of the once-and-for-all sacrifice he's made. And what have we done to receive the benefits of this sacrifice? Nothing. We've received these benefits by faith, the faith that God worked in our hearts through the Means of Grace, through

word and sacrament. So, no more animal sacrifices. No more daily trips to have our sins forgiven. We've been cleansed in the blood of Christ.

Not only are the Old and New Covenants different in the way they're fulfilled. They are also different in their outcomes. Under the Old Covenant no amount of sacrificing allowed anyone but the high priest into God's presence. And, as mentioned before, these sacrifices needed to be made regularly. Therefore, forgiveness became an everyday affair, and the threat of judgment from God always hung over their heads.

But it's not so under the New Covenant. That round and round cycle of sin then sacrifice then forgiveness ends with Jesus. In Jesus, the sacrifice is made only once. There is no need for him to go back to the cross day after day for us. And this means that all our sins have been paid for, past, present, and future. We know we are welcomed into God's presence.

Listen to what happens when Jesus dies on the cross, making the one and only sacrifice for sins: "After Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. Suddenly, the temple curtain was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and rocks were split." The symbol of that well-needed buffer between a perfect God and a sinful people is shredded. Why? Because the sacrifice Jesus makes is enough. It's enough to pay the debt of guilt built up against God. It's enough to free sinners from their slavery under Satan. It's enough to open the kingdom of heaven to all who receive this gift by faith.

And that's the outcome that stands higher than the rest. Jesus went into the real Most Holy Place, heaven, for us. And he tears the curtains so we can enter in. What is the cost from us? Is it a life lived to the same standard as Christ's? No. If it was, the New Covenant would be no different than the Old Covenant. Sacrifices for sin would have to be continually made, sacrifices that would fall short and fail to actually pay for our sins. But we find ourselves freed from the fear of judgement before God in the cross of his perfect Son.

No sheep or bulls or goats or doves will be slaughtered on our altar in front of church. No sacrifices will be made, because the only sacrifice needed has already been made. And our hearts are joined with the Israelites who looked forward to the final sacrifice, as we look back at that sacrifice and see that eternity in heaven is ours in Jesus.

So, someday, when you lay on your deathbed, you will not ask, "Did I do enough for the Lord?" Because you'll know that every sacrifice you've made for Jesus, every good work you did in keeping with God's will, was only done in thanks for the sacrifice the world's Messiah made for you. Until that day, let us wait eagerly and joyfully, with our eyes always fixed on Jesus. Amen.