



Guilt Forgiven, Conscience Cleansed

Series: Hebrews – An Anchor for the Soul

Hebrews 9:1-14

July 31, 2016

Pastor Nick Shaffer

Alone... With Yourself I don't know how many of you have ever watched the TV show, "Alone." It is the only reality show where I have actually watched a season from beginning to end and it is a really interesting concept. The gist of the show is basically this. Ten people are placed in the remote wilderness of Vancouver Island, separated from one another by several miles. Each contestant is provided with certain survival items -- they supplement that with 10 items that they are allowed to bring along -- and they are given a couple of cameras to record their adventures and their thoughts. The contest is to see how long someone is able to last out in the wilderness all by themselves and to the winner goes \$500,000. The last winner made it 68 or so days.

It is a pretty interesting show. Watching people solve problems, their ingenuity and resourcefulness, their various approaches to gathering food, creating shelter, all of it is really amazing. You can imagine how difficult that would be and it is. But what is more difficult is being alone... with yourself. What I find to be most intriguing is that over time, as the days progress, and the people are talking to their cameras, you get a glimpse into their reasons for being there, their mindset, and the state of their conscience.

It is interesting to see these people bare their souls and their reasons for being there -- one to escape the guilt she feels over her son's death, another his ingratitude for a good job and his poor treatment of his family, another her guilt over a violent past that she cannot shake, another his guilt over failing to provide for his wife as he should. On and on it goes. The conscience is a powerful thing.

Everyone has one. It affects the way that we live, how we think, how we act, why we do what we do. It has an effect on our relationships, our work, even how we approach God.

Conscience is that inner knowledge of who and what we really are and especially the sense of our responsibility and accountability for our motives and our actions as a creature made in the image of God and in light of the account that we all must give to our Creator. People may try to cover over their conscience by dedicating their lives to proving God doesn't exist. Some sear their conscience by giving themselves wholeheartedly to sin. Others try to silence their conscience through drugs or alcohol, through giving money to charitable organizations, by philanthropic acts, by religious rituals or bargaining with God, through religious participation, by turning over a new life or trying to make amends for past failures, by following a strict moral code, through some sort of pilgrimage or personal journey to enlightenment, or giving vast sums to a therapist who will tell them what they desperately need to hear – that they are OK. Men and women will try anything and everything to imaginable to relieve or avoid or suppress a guilty and burdened conscience. But in the end, these measures are only temporary and offer nothing of eternal value that can actually cleanse the conscience of the guilt that every human being rightly feels.

In our modern times we are told that guilt is just a feeling, a wrong feeling for anyone to have. But that simply is not true. The truth is, we are guilty. In and of ourselves, on our own merits, we are guilty before God, guilty before the Judge of the Universe, guilty of rebellion, of wickedness, of defilement – guilty of sin. The Bible declares that all of us are guilty before the bench of God's holy justice, ***“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”*** (Romans 3:23, ESV) We are plagued by pride, self-pity, bitterness, lust, envy and jealousy, covetousness, malice, rejection of authority, self-interest and selfishness – what verse 14 calls “dead” works. Though we live in a modern, pluralistic age – the age of science, the age of heart transplants, genetic manipulation, the age of social media, cell phones, and YouTube, and the age of no moral absolutes, that problem hasn't disappeared – our consciences rightly condemn us and alienate us from God. Psychologist Erich Fromm says, “It is indeed amazing, that in as fundamentally irreligious a culture as ours, the sense of guilt should be so widespread and deep-rooted as it is.” But it's not amazing. The truth is that we are not animals; we are human beings made in the image of God and deep within us, no matter how we might try to suppress it, we have consciences that accuse us, that witness to our sinfulness with evidences of real and true guilt, true moral culpability that alienates us from God and brings us under His just penalty of eternal punishment. It makes us naturally to dread God, to dread seeing Him in His holiness or being seen by Him in our sin. Where can we find real relief? How can someone with a guilty conscience draw near to God? How can our guilt be dealt with and our conscience cleansed? The writer of Hebrews is going to answer that question for us today.

Let's set this in the overall context of the letter. The Hebrew Christians were tempted to leave the Christian faith and return to Judaism in order to avoid the reproach and the hardships they were experiencing for their faith in Christ. But no matter how attractive that may be for the moment, for their current circumstances, to leave Christ for the old Jewish religion, or anything for that matter, would be spiritually fatal. He's moved through several arguments in this letter, several arguments for the superiority of the person and the ministry of Jesus Christ over everyone and everything else, the superiority of the new covenant over the old, and he is continuing his argument here. And the two key verses in this text, the central idea of this text is captured in these two verses: Verse 9 which says, **"According to this arrangement, (the ministry of the old covenant) gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper,"** (Hebrews 9:9, ESV) and verse 14, **"how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God."** (Hebrews 9:14, ESV) He's going to begin his argument in this section by talking first about the weakness of tabernacle worship in the old covenant.

Weakness of Tabernacle Worship in the Old Covenant (1-10) Look with me again, starting in verse 1 and let's read this together. **"Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. For a tent was prepared, the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant. Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail."** (Hebrews 9:1-5, ESV)

Here in these first five verses, the writer of Hebrews describes the basic construct of the tabernacle. He doesn't go into real detail with the Hebrew Christians because they would have had an intimate knowledge of the way the tabernacle was constructed and the meaning of each of the pieces of holy furniture that was in it. We don't, so let me give to you a little detail. If you want more detail you can find it online in the sermon series on Exodus that we did on Wednesday night.

The tabernacle was the portable tent and courtyard that was commanded by God to be built by the nation of Israel as the center of their corporate worship and national life. Whenever

the nation encamped, it would be erected in the center of the nation and the various tribes would encamp in assigned positions around it. If you were to approach the tabernacle, you would see first the white linen walls that enclosed the entire court of the tabernacle, 75 feet wide by 150 feet long. That whiteness was a sign of its holiness and the sacredness of what took place inside.

Coming through the gate, the first thing that you would see would be the bronze altar of burnt offering where all of the various sacrifices of the old covenant would be made. That was as far as the average Jew could advance and it was the place where they would bring whatever offering they were making. They could go no further. Behind that and to the right was the bronze laver, a washbasin for the priests that was for their exclusive use in serving the Lord.

Directly behind that was the tabernacle, an oblong tent 15 feet high and wide and 45 feet long. It was covered by three layers. The innermost layer, the inside, consisted of beautiful, gorgeous woven tapestries of blue, purple, and scarlet yarns and linen. Over that, to protect it from the elements, were two layers of animal skins. Inside, the tabernacle was divided into two rooms by an ornate and extremely thick veil, woven with the same colors as the tent but with the addition of gold and embroidered with cherubim -- angelic creatures that serve God. The outer room was called the Holy Place and the inner room was called the Most Holy Place of the Holy of Holies.

The writer describes what was in the Holy Place. He speaks of a large lampstand with seven branches made of pure gold that gave light to the room. Inside that room, was also the table of the "bread of Presence" which contained 12 loaves of bread, one for each of the tribes of Israel. He is equally brief in his description of the Most Holy Place. In there he describes the altar of incense, representative of the prayers of the people that ascended to God. And he speaks of the Ark of the Covenant, a great chest that was overlaid with gold in which was the tablets of the law, the old covenant, the rod of Aaron that budded to testify that his line was to serve in the tabernacle as priests, and a jar of manna that God provided to feed the Israelites in the wilderness. On the top of the Ark was a great lid, the gold plate that covered the Ark and was decorated with two cherubim with forward stretched wings covering the top. This was the throne of God on earth, the place of His manifest presence, the place where His glory would rest with the Israelites. It was called the mercy seat because it was here that the high priest would sprinkle the blood of the annual sacrifice for

the sins of the nation on the Day of Atonement – the highest and holiest day of the year. We'll talk more about that in a minute.

Two things before we move on. One, is that each of these aspects of the tabernacle were intensely prophetic of Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews doesn't talk about this, but each piece pointed in some way to the Son of God and His ministry – the lampstand to Christ as the Light of the World, the bread of presence to the truth that Jesus is the bread of life, the table of incense to the intercession of Christ for His people, the mercy seat to Christ's saving work on the cross, the tablets of the law to his perfect obedience to the will of God, Aaron's budding staff to full flowering of Christ's priesthood after the order of Melchizedek, and the manna as His full provision for the needs of God's people. The writer of Hebrews doesn't mention this directly, but the underlying significance, the fact that all this pointed to something greater is there.

Second, if you are a student of the tabernacle, you may notice that the table of incense was not actually in the Most Holy Place, but was instead directly in front of the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. What's the deal? Does the writer of Hebrews just get this wrong? Why does the writer put the table of incense in the Most Holy Place? He is thinking about this in a theological sense, the connection of the table of incense with what took place in the Most Holy Place and in the worship of the High Priest that he offered on behalf of the nation. And to that he turns next.

He says, ***“These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people.”*** (Hebrews 9:6–7, ESV) Here's the point that he is making. The worship of God, drawing near to God, was the domain and the ministry of the priests. Again, the average Israelite would never see the inside of the tabernacle, the first room, the Holy Place. Not every priest even got to enter in, only those who were fortunate enough to be chosen by lot. And the second room, the Holy of Holies, forget about it. Only the high priest got to go in there, and that only on one day, the Day of Atonement that is described in Leviticus 16. It was the greatest day of the Jewish calendar, when sacrifices were made to cover the sins of the last year. Under the cover of incense, after making sacrifice for his own sins and the sins of his family, taking the blood of a bull, he would enter into the Most Holy Place and sprinkle the blood of the bull that had been sacrificed for his own sin and sprinkle

it there on the mercy seat and on the ground. Then he would go outside of the tent where there would be two goats – one for a sacrifice and one that would be scapegoat. The sacrificial goat would be slain and he would do the same thing with its blood, enter into the Most Holy Place, again under the cover of the incense, and sprinkle the blood on the ground and on the mercy seat, for the unintentional sins of the people that they had committed in the last year. Then he would go back outside and lay his hands on the scapegoat and confess all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all there transgressions, all their sins, placing them symbolically upon the goat and then he would send it away to wander in the wilderness, symbolically carrying the sins of the people away. It was incredible ritual carried out in this glorious setting, right? But here's the thing.

The writer of Hebrews says, ***“By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing (which is symbolic for the present age) – the age of the old covenant that he is talking about. (Hebrews 9:8–9a, ESV)*** In all of this old covenant worship, the message being sent was that full access to God, full communion with God, full enjoyment of God and His presence, full acceptance with God, was unavailable to Israelites as a whole. These offerings and these sacrifices never really gave the forgiveness of sins, the cleansing of guilt, and true communion with God. Don't get me wrong. These acts of worship were not worthless – not at all – they covered the sins of the people, God was patient toward them, God dwelled with the nation as whole behind the thick, separating veil, but the offense and the guilt was never taken away. These sacrifices only pointed to One, who by the sacrifice of His own blood could deal with the guilt of sin and bear sins away and open the way of acceptance with God forever. The old covenant, as glorious as it was, and as faithfully as it proclaimed the future coming of Christ, could never deal, in an eternal and spiritual sense, with the guilt of sin. It was a stop-gap measure until Christ came. As a result, the old covenant, as it was designed, actually erected a protective barrier between the Holy God and sinful men. It kept men at a safe distance. Andrew Murray writes: ***“The veil was a symbol of separation between a holy God and sinful man: they cannot dwell together. The tabernacle thus expressed the union of two apparently conflicting truths. God called man to come and worship and serve Him, and yet he may not come too near – the veil kept him at a distance... Love calls the sinner near; righteousness keeps him back. The Holy One bids Israel build Him a house in which he will dwell, but forbids them entering His presence there.”*** The whole point of the tabernacle system was on one hand to show God's intent to have fellowship with His people, while on the other, showing that the way was not yet open.

Moreover, it dealt only with unintentional sins – sins of omission, sins of commission where you were overtaken by temptation in a moment and sinned against God. What about intentional sins? All of the sins that grieve our conscience are more or less intentional sins, premeditated and willful, right? There was no provision in the old covenant’s sacrificial system for premeditated and willful sin. That’s the whole point of Psalm 51 where David cries out to God for his mercy after his adultery with Bathsheba and the cold-blooded murder of her husband Uriah. David’s conscience accused him day and night. His guilt was real. He knew he was a sinner who deserved God’s judgment and he confessed it: **“For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.”** (Psalm 51:3–4, ESV) He knew there was no sacrifice for what he had done: **“For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.”** (Psalm 51:16, ESV) What could he do? Only one thing – come to God in repentance and throw himself on God’s mercy and that’s what he did: **“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”** (Psalm 51:17, ESV) David understood that his only hope was in a repentant heart and God’s grace, in something greater than the sacrificial system – ultimately the blood of Christ.

In fact, the writer of Hebrews goes on to say, **“According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.”** (Hebrews 9:9–10, ESV) The point that the writer is making is that all of these gifts and sacrifices were merely symbolic, external, they couldn’t reach to the conscience, and cleanse the conscience of sin, again because they were ceremonial in nature. They only covered sin for a time, waiting until the glorious salvation of Jesus Christ. A clear conscience in the absolute sense of the word was missing. Without the sense of a clear conscience, you cannot come near to God, truly near, fully near to God. You just can’t.

Think about it. A spiritually astute Hebrew understood some things. He understood that the way of God wasn’t just open to sinful human beings. No-one was just entitled to draw near to God, to come into God’s presence. Sin makes that impossible. He thought about and eventually understood why the sacrifices had to be offered repeatedly, year after year – they covered but didn’t expunge the guilt of sin. He knew that there was some kind of disconnect between the removal of sin’s guilt and the ability of the blood of a soulless, amoral animal to accomplish that task. He understood that the events of the Day of Atonement did some good, covered over the sin of the last year, but he thought about the

year to come and if he would live until the next Day of Atonement. He was conscious of his sin, grateful that he could approach God in as much as he could, but his relationship to God was indirect and mediated by priests and not intimate and direct. It was impossible because his sin and the consciousness of his guilt was never taken away. It weighed upon his heart. That is how the writer of Hebrews described life in the old covenant. The way was not yet open to God – not yet – but now the time of reformation has come in Jesus Christ, a time of renewal and completion, a time announced by the event that took place in the Temple, the permanent version of the tabernacle, when Jesus bled and died upon the cross. Matthew writes, **“And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.”** (Matthew 27:50–51, ESV) Now the way is open to God through Christ’s incarnation, His sinless life, His atoning death, and his glorious resurrection where he dealt with our sin and our accusing conscience.

Christ’s Glorious Redemption and a Purified Conscience (10-14) Look at what the writer says here: **“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) 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 9:11–12, ESV)

This is what the old covenant prefigured and what it awaited, true redemption, full forgiveness. The writer of Hebrews is deliberately picturesque in His description of what Christ has done for His people. Reaching back to the analogy of the Day of Atonement, he pictures Christ entering, not the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle of the earth, but the Most Holy Place in the universe, the very courts of heaven itself. He pictures Him entering, not under the cover of incense and bearing with Him the blood of goats and calves, but entering on the basis of His own shed blood, having secured an eternal redemption for His people, and there he sat down.

That is what that phrase translated as “thus securing an eternal redemption” literally means. It is an aorist verb, indicating something that has already been accomplished. Jesus entered into the presence of God the Father in heaven, having already accomplished the eternal redemption of His people through His own blood shed on the cross. He came on the worth of His own blood into the presence of God on our behalf to declare our eternal redemption. Some people get the mistaken notion that Jesus carried a basin of His own blood into heaven just like the priest did. No, no, no. Jesus appeared in heaven not to secure our redemption, but having already secured it.

What the sacrifice of a million or more bulls and goats could never do, Jesus Christ did. He accomplished our redemption, our freedom, our deliverance. The once and for all sacrifice of Christ has set us free from the enslaving power of sin and guilt, from the penalty of sin, from the condemning wrath of God against our sins and from the crippling power of an accusing conscience. And he did it by means of His blood shed for us, by means of His sacrifice of Himself. A lot of people are put off by the bloodiness of Christianity, how we talk about the blood of Christ and sing of being washed in the blood, or how His blood can make the foulest clean. It just belies their ignorance of their true condition and the holiness of God. Nothing else could satisfy the righteousness of God; nothing else could atone for the guilt and depth of our sins, nothing else could satisfy the wrath of God rightly directed at us; nothing else could deal with the infinite stain of mine or your personal sin – not money, not good deeds, not ritual or ceremony – nothing but the blood of a perfect substitute, nothing but the blood of a perfect sacrifice, nothing but the blood of the perfect, spotless, blemish-free, Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Jesus did not deal with “feelings of guilt;” He dealt with our actual guilt before God and He paid for our sins in His body on the tree – all of them, the unintentional and the premeditated and willful, past sin, present sin, future sin – He paid for them all and took them all away and opened once and for all the way into the presence, into full communion, full access, full and final acceptance with God.

That’s why the writer of Hebrews says, ***“For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.”***

(Hebrews 9:13–14, ESV) His point is this. If the blood of bulls and goats, which covered sin, and the ashes of a heifer – mixed with water and sprinkled upon someone that had come in contact with a dead thing... if those things could purify the flesh, if they could outwardly cleanse someone and make them ceremonially clean and able to participate in Israel’s worship, how much more will the blood of the spotless Son of God, without any blemish, accomplish – the purifying our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

He starts with the lesser and moves to the greater and his point is that the blood of Jesus Christ transcends everything in the old covenant. Christ’s sacrificial death was not merely physical in nature but he offered Himself, through the eternal Spirit. In other words, the sacrifice that Jesus offered up was not merely bodily but in spirit. Christ’s physical

sufferings, though they were horrific, were nothing compared to the spiritual agony of His alienation from God the Father as God's wrath poured down upon Him in spirit. He tasted spiritual death for us. In His Spirit, He drank in full the cup of God's wrath, and endured the all the wrath of an infinitely Holy God, for all who trust in Him by faith. It is by His death we are redeemed.

And two wonderful things come from this gracious and loving work of Jesus -- He **purif(ies) our conscience from dead works to serve the living God**. Oh, beloved, this is so great, so glorious. He purifies our conscience. What is it that crushes our conscience, that keeps us from God? It is the sense of our past sin and the sinfulness that is still in us. But Christ's blood has the power to cleanse this great weight from our souls. His death preaches to us that the debt has been paid for all our sin -- all of it. An infinite atonement has been paid for it, to relieve us from the burden of so great a guilt. Oh how we need this.

If you realize how your actions and words have injured the heart and soul of others; how your neglect of love and your selfish pursuit of personal gain have meant pain and hurt for real people; if you realize how many men or women have real reason to resent you, to wish they had never met you; if you take stock of all the ways you violated God's holy law, and when you realize that all of these things are sins not only against people but against a holy and loving God, your conscience will cry out against you and it will disturb your soul to realize what and who you are and deserve. You will crave, desire, yearn for the cleansing that only Christ can give you and He does. Our conscience tells us what we must think of ourselves, but the blood of Christ tells us what God thinks of us, united to Him by faith in His son. You are clean. Your sin is forgiven and forgotten. That's why the song of the redeemed is "**Worthy is the Lamb who was slain.**" (Rev. 5:12, ESV) You are free. There is nothing left to be done.

But free for what? What is this all for? It is not simply for our own benefit, so we can just go on our way care-free, so that we could escape our deserved judgment, much less so we can construct a quiet, easy, mediocre, unencumbered, and affluent (don't forget affluent) Christian existence. The purpose of our guilt taken away, our consciences cleansed, is so that God would have a people for the service and praise of His Holy Name. We were redeemed to serve God and it is in serving Him that we find true freedom.

We have been set free from dead works – the things that those with a burdened conscience and still under the guilt of sin pursue so religiously – building kingdoms that will fall, buying things that never satisfy, serving sin that leads to the grave, trying in vain to find significance or merit with God, feverishly trying justify themselves and their glory, pursuing whatever they can find to salve a guilty conscience, all the while real spiritual life out of the grasp of their flailing fingers. Not so for the Christian. We have been set free to serve God, offering worship, prayer, gifts, praises to His worth, testimonies to His goodness, gospel declarations, and the fruit of holy lives that bear the marks of His grace, presenting ourselves daily to Him as living sacrifices. That is where true life is found.

Can I just tell you that many professing Christians get this backward? They pray and preach and sing and worship, serve in ministries, work at VBS, trying to earn the favor and the merit of God and they find themselves exhausted. And do you know why? None of these things earn merit with God. None of them. They are the fruit of a life that is anchored in the sufficiency of Christ, that is anchored in the merit of Christ, that does not strive to make yourself acceptable to God, but knows that you are accepted and loved, through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, because of the cleansing power of His blood. Let me close with four questions.

Four Questions How is your conscience today? It affects the way that we live, how we think, how we act, why we do what we do. It has an effect on our relationships, our work, even how we approach God. Is your conscience before God clean? It can be. Just trust in Jesus Christ. Believe in Him; believe in the power of His sacrifice. I am saying this to believers and unbelievers alike. What burden of sin are you carrying? What is it, that if someone knew it about you, would cause them to be shocked? What burden of guilt do you believe that you just cannot bring to God. You can! The blood of Jesus was shed for just that sin – to forgive and expunge just that sin. That is the power of God in Christ, the power of the new covenant.

Why are you serving God today? Is it to merit favor with Him? Stop it. All the favor you need is in Jesus Christ. Center your life on Him and service will not be a burden but the highest joy.

Are you faithfully walking with Christ, your conscience clean, continually reminding yourself of the cleansing power of His blood and walking in the enabling power of the Spirit? Then, press on and do not ever let go of Jesus Christ as the anchor of your forgiveness and acceptance with God.

How can our guilt be dealt with and our conscience cleansed? Only by the blood of Jesus.

© West Salem Baptist Church, 2016

Permissions: You are free to reproduce and distribute this material but you may not alter its contents in any way or charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. If you are posting online, a link back to this original document is preferred. Anything beyond these guidelines will require prior approval by West Salem Baptist Church.