

*In the Newberry Award winning book by Ruth White that is titled *Belle Prater's Boy*, there is a character who is an old blind man named Blind Benny. Gypsy and Woodrow, the main characters of the book, would sometimes hear him singing as he walked around town at night. He was born blind in a small town in the hills of Kentucky. When he was twelve both parents died and he had nobody to care for him. That's how he became the town's "sin eater."

There was an unusual tradition in this small town. When a person died, people brought food and spread it out as a banquet on top of the casket during the wake. They believed that all the dead person's sins went into the food. Then they picked someone in town, usually someone pretty desperate, to be the "sin eater." Whenever there was a death they called the "sin eater" to the wake to eat the food. It was the sin eater's job to eat the food and take the person's sins into himself so that the dead person could go to heaven clean and free.

For fifteen years Blind Benny was the "sin eater" of that town. He was shunned and scorned by the townspeople because he had all those sins inside of him which he had eaten. But Blind Benny began to worry, "Who would eat my sins?" Nobody. Nobody would take the chance of eating all the sin eater's sins.

One day Amos Leemaster told Blind Benny that this was all superstitious nonsense. And he offered him a way out. Amos gave him a room over his hardware store where Blind Benny would have plenty to eat. "You won't ever have to eat sins again!" he told him. And Blind Benny was given a new lease on life.

Like Amos Leemaster, the writer of Hebrews says, "*And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins.*" The biggest problem with the sacrificial system of the Hebrew people was that it didn't really work. And it became obsolete because of Jesus, superseded by a higher, better and perfect system in Jesus Christ. Jesus bridged the gap between the creatures and the Creator.

Jesus brings us a New Covenant saying, "There is no reason to continue offering a sacrifice for sin." We no longer have to worry about our relationship with God, because God in Christ has made us righteous. We no longer have to focus on the ritual purification of our sins. We can now focus on a life of service to others. The sanctuary is no longer a place where only the high priest may go once a year, but rather a place where every believer can enter God's presence because of the sacrifice of Jesus' blood.

It's not easy to explain the relationship of a number of passages in Hebrews to the Platonic philosophy that was popular in the first century. However, if you have ever seen the movie *The Matrix*, the book of Hebrews and the movie *The Matrix* both describe a parallel universe. Thomas Anderson, played by Keanu Reeves, lives in two worlds. The first is a virtual reality world created by complex computer programs; the other is the world of the real. Almost all the philosophers mentioned in the book saw obvious parallels to Socrates' famous analogy of the cave and to Descartes' questioning of the world of our senses. So

reading a bit of philosophy can help a person make sense of *The Matrix* movie from philosophical and theological angles.

The book of Hebrews goes to great lengths to show that Jesus was the ultimate high priest who entered the “*more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands,*” that is, the *real* tabernacle in heaven. There he made the real sacrifice for sins that superseded the inferior sacrifices made by human high priests here in the shadow world. Not by shedding the blood of goats and animals, but by shedding his own blood. Jesus became the final and ultimate sacrifice for our sins. After explaining his lofty theology, the writer turns to a paragraph of exhortation. His writing almost sounds like formal resolutions sometimes made in political assemblies. He starts with several propositions, saying, “when” and “since,” and then he turns to the “therefore” statement in verse 14: “*For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.*”

He concludes in verse 18 saying, “*And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.*” Then he continues in verse 19 saying, “*Therefore, brothers and sisters...*” In these verses he states three assurances. The first is the assurance to have **confidence** before God. He says, “*since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus....*” God does not want us to cower in fear every time we think of God. Instead, we are to have confidence to enter God’s presence. Jesus said we are not to be slaves, filled with fear, but friends. John 15 says, “*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command. 15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends...*” (vss. 13-15). Friends do not have fear as the basis of their relationship, but love and trust.

The second assurance the author of Hebrews gives is the assurance of **faith**, saying, “*and since we have a great priest over the house of God,*” he states, “*Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water*” (v. 22).

The third assurance is that of unwavering **hope** in verse 23. “*Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.*” Then the writer turns to three ways in which we are to express our faith outwardly.

First, we are to express our faith by good deeds done in love. Verse 24 says, “*And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds....*” If Jesus “went about doing good,” so should we. This is the same as what is emphasized in the book of James that we looked at in September. It seems that many people took Paul’s emphasis on faith alone and abused the concept. They were suggesting that one could have faith in Jesus and then live any old way they please. But James makes the necessary correction by saying that we need faith and good deeds. At one point James says, “*But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’ Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds*” (James 2:18).

Secondly, we are to express our faith by meeting together, presumably in worship. Verse 25 says, and “*not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*” Too many of us are guilty of an attitude toward worship that

makes it optional. “Maybe I’ll go to church today”— “maybe I won’t.” We should never neglect the opportunity to meet together in worship and fellowship. One church member wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper and complained that it made no sense to go to church every Sunday. “I’ve gone for 30 years now,” he wrote, “and in that time I have heard something like 3,000 sermons. But for the life of me, I can’t remember a single one of them. So, I think I’m wasting my time and the pastors are wasting theirs by giving sermons at all.” This started a real controversy in the “Letters to the Editor” column, much to the delight of the editor. It went on for weeks until someone wrote this clincher:

“I’ve been married for 30 years now. In that time my wife has cooked some 32,000 meals. But for the life of me, I cannot recall the entire menu for a single one of those meals. But I do know this: They all nourished me and gave me the strength I needed to do my work. If my wife had not given me these meals, I would be physically dead today. Likewise, if I had not gone to church for nourishment, I would be spiritually dead today!”

Sometimes when we have had a big meal, perhaps like the one we usually have on Thanksgiving, we may leave the table feeling like we will never need to eat again. But in a few hours, we find ourselves back at the refrigerator. The same should be true of us spiritually. We need to regularly come to worship in this place so that our souls can be nourished again and again with the Bread of Life.

Finally, we are to express our faith by encouraging one another. Verse 25 says, “*But encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*” The writer of Hebrews points to real forgiveness, not some ineffective ritual of “eating” sins, not some sacrifice of animals to whom our sins are supposedly transferred, but the real forgiveness made by the real High Priest—in the real heavenly sanctuary. When we have found such real forgiveness we will be freed to live our lives in faith, hope and love.

There was a little boy visiting his grandparents on their farm. And he was given a slingshot to play with out in the woods. He practiced in the woods, but he could never hit the target. And getting a little discouraged; he headed back to dinner. As he was walking back, he saw Grandma’s pet duck. Just out of impulse, he let a stone fly, hit the duck square in the head and killed it. He was shocked and grieved. In a panic, he hid the dead duck in the woodpile, only to see his sister watching. Sally had seen it all, but she said nothing.

After lunch that day, Grandma said, “Sally, let’s wash the dishes.” But Sally said, “Grandma, Johnny told me he wanted to help in the kitchen today, didn’t you, Johnny?” And then she whispered to him, “Remember, the duck?” So Johnny did the dishes.

Later Grandpa asked if the children wanted to go fishing, and Grandma said, “I’m sorry, but I need Sally to help make supper.” Sally smiled and said, “But , Johnny told me he wanted to help.” And she whispered to him, “Remember, the duck?” So Sally went fishing, and Johnny stayed to make supper.

After several days of Johnny doing both his chores and Sally’s, he finally couldn’t stand it any longer. He came to Grandma and confessed that he killed the duck. She knelt down, gave him a hug and said, “Sweetheart, I know. You see, I was standing at the window, and I saw the whole thing. But because I

love you, I forgave you. “But I was just wondering how long you would let Sally make a slave of you.”
(www.vanguardmag.com)

Jesus Christ, like Grandma, is standing at the window. He sees all of our sins, but because he gave himself on the cross—one sacrifice—we can be forgiven. If you haven’t gotten the point of Hebrews yet, let me repeat it one last time: **Jesus is the greatest!** He has taken care of all our sins. Let us give thanks to the Lord! Amen. (*Much of this sermon is taken from a sermon by Mickey Anders at <https://www.sermonwriter.com>.)