

“No Blood, No Forgiveness”

Hebrews 9:20-28

By chance are any of you fans of the *Star Wars* movies? Here are the *Star Wars* movies in order of their release date: *Star Wars* in 1977, the first film in the franchise; *The Empire Strikes Back* in 1980; *Return of the Jedi* in 1983, which completes the original trilogy. After this I get a little lost to be honest. *The Phantom Menace* in 1999, the first film in the prequel trilogy; *Attack of the Clones* in 2002; and *Revenge of the Sith* in 2005 which is the end of the prequel trilogy. Then in 2015 *The Force Awakens*, followed by *The Last Jedi* in 2017 and finally *The Rise of Skywalker* in 2019.

Why would I bother to list those films for you today? I want to make sure at the beginning of this sermon you know the difference between *Star Wars* and the book of Hebrews. For many today there is no significant difference. That is, both are myths. And a myth is a story (it need not be true in the sense that it really happened), a story that provides symbols for interpreting the world. You don't need Truth, with a capital T. You only need a symbolic system to help you order your world. Now this may sound like fancy head talk that comes from a philosophy class or a class in advanced linguistic anthropology. But it's not. It's straight out of the news about *Star Wars* and the meaning for kids.

Here's a sentence from an announcement about *The Phantom Menace*: “For some pre-adolescent boys, *Star Wars*...functions as a kind of religion, giving them spiritual nourishment and opening the door to questions of redemption, forgiveness and morality, sometimes more potently than their formal religious upbringing ever has. They're finding their myths in an unexpected place.”

What interests me most about this is not that *Star Wars* is a kind of religion for some people or that for some it seems more exciting than what kids learn in Sunday School. What interests me is that some people assume that finding one's religious beliefs is like finding “myths in an unexpected place.” The question becomes not one of ultimate Truth, but rather of what story or symbolic system works for you personally. Most of us have not found a myth, but rather ultimate Truth, in the biblical story of the God of Creation, in the

incarnation of a real person who is the Son of God, in our redemption through his real shed blood, and in Christ's real resurrection from the dead. This is Truth. Or if you prefer, you can find your "myth" in the story of *Star Wars*.

The central focus in a philosophy class or in the movie theater is not usually Truth, but rather finding a satisfying myth, a story that helps you interpret the world, to make it more livable and, if possible, enjoyable. What this may begin to sound like is comparing not only *Star Wars* but entertainment in general to religion. That may be what religion is for many people: a kind of entertainment, a symbolic system, a cluster of metaphors, narratives and experiences that touch you deeply and help you make some sense of your life. But, if that is so, Truth is a not even given a consideration.

If that kind of thinking were confined to a few scholarly books or a few advanced classes, I wouldn't bring it up. But since I know it's in the air that we breathe, I think you need to consider and realize that as you read Hebrews 9 and as I preach this sermon, neither the writer of this book nor the preacher of this sermon thinks that way. We are not offering you another "myth" you can pick from a list to help your life go better. The writer of this book and the preacher of this sermon aim to describe real persons and historical events and divine intentions that really happened in history. My aim is to reveal an unseen heavenly realm that is above history and is more real than all that we can touch or see in this life. This story is more real and more exciting and more terrifying and more life-changing than *Star Wars* will ever be, no matter how many sequels they make. I urge you, in Jesus' name, to hear the strangeness of this passage as it depicts the strangeness of reality and truth.

For thousands of years, God ordained that the death of his Son, Jesus Christ, would be foreshadowed and anticipated in the course of the history of the Jewish people through their animal sacrifices as well as their tabernacle and temple worship. The Hebrews' writer says in verse 23 that these things—the tabernacle and vessels and relics—were all "copies" of an even greater reality in heaven. As copies they could be ceremonially cleansed by blood from the sacrifice of calves and goats. That's the way God established it.

Hebrews 9 also shows how God's covenant and blood are inextricably linked: *"In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood."* He connects blood with the covenant by citing a well-known saying from ancient literature, probably familiar to his readers: *"Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins."* That's sort of like saying, "If you want to make a cake, you have to break eggs." Only here, he says, *No Blood, No Forgiveness.* The sins of our inhumanity have cost more human lives and spilled more blood than we are willing to admit. Forgiveness is what the world desperately needs!

In the next verse (23) we read, *"It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices."* And the way in which they were purified required sacrifice, the blood of animals. For the heavenly things themselves and to cleanse them, there will have to be *"better sacrifices."* These *"better sacrifices"* are what Christ offered once for all in his own death. And with this one great offering, verse 24 says, Christ *"did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence."*

At first this is troubling, but then tremendously comforting. It's troubling because it raises the question why the heavenly holy place would need to be purified at all. You see, verse 23 says, *"It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices,"* and *"the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these."* Why is that? Is heaven defiled? Is there sin in heaven? Some have claimed it's because Satan was there. Others have suggested that it's because there are *"spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms"* as Paul describes in Ephesians 6:12.

Maybe. But I think the most important thing to see is what verse 24 focuses on. Why did Christ enter [this heavenly] holy place with his better sacrifice—the sacrifice of himself? Verse 26 provides the answer: *"He has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself,"* to appear in the presence of God *for us.* The phrase *"once for all"* holds the key as to why there must be purifying in heaven. It is FOR US. It's because *we* are going to be there.

What an extraordinary comfort; and how wonderfully encouraging. If you love the mercy of God and see the misery of your own condition, you will love this. Verse 24 clearly says that Christ enters the holy place of heaven with his better sacrifice *“to appear for us in God’s presence.”* Well, of course! This means that he will purify us there. WE are in need of cleansing. And to the degree that we might defile heaven, Christ in this sense purifies heaven.

Scripture is speaking to those of us who, in our lucid moments, feel somewhat dirty and irreparable so that we would only pollute heaven if we got there. How many people hesitate to trust in Christ because of this? I pray that we will all see the great invitation we are given. This is God’s way of saying: Come in, you dirty ones. Come in, you defiled, you sinful ones. Come in, you who are soiled or have been stained by others. Come into my heaven for my Son is here! And he has not died in vain. He stands guard over my holy place, not to keep you out, but to make you clean so that you can be with me in perfect peace forever. Come in! This is why he died. *“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance,”* said my Son (Luke 5:32). Come in!

He appears in the presence of God *for us*. Then in verses 25-26 comes the description of how Christ achieved this great welcome for defiled sinners in heaven. You see it isn’t to be taken for granted that there should be a welcome for sinners in heaven. God is holy and pure and perfectly just and wholly righteous. He hates sin and lives in absolute perfection. Yet the whole story of the Bible and of the book of Hebrews is how such an awesome holy God can and does welcome people like you and me into his presence. How can this be? The whole history of God’s people is all about answering this very question.

The Jewish high priests came into the holy place each year with animal sacrifices to atone for the sins of the people. But these verses say, *“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. Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world.”* If Christ followed the pattern of the priests, then he would have to die every year—forevermore. Verse 26 contains the description of how Christ did it; how

he really made a sacrifice great enough to cleanse all the sinners who answer the call to enter the fellowship of God in heaven. And Hebrews 9 reminds us of four different aspects of his sacrifice that show us the glory of Christ:

First: Christ did this great work ONCE—not repeatedly but once and once only. It is enough. Unlike *Star Wars*, the death of Jesus will never do a rerun, or need a sequel, because it is so great that it cannot be improved on.

Second: The death of Jesus is not just one event in a line of similar historical events. When it happened, history came to its climax. The first coming of the Messiah and his second coming are in the Bible one great final act at the end of history. It's not just a merely human event. It is the consummation of history.

Third: Not only was his sacrifice once for all. Not only did it mark the consummation of the ages. But it was a sacrifice of the most valuable person in the universe—the chosen Messiah, the Son of God.

Fourth: Christ gave himself at the consummation of the ages “*to take away the sins of many*” (v. 28). He took care of the entire issue of sin. It is done away with. All our sins are canceled, nullified, covered, because the Son of God did away with sin.

This is the good news of the Glory of Christ so that no matter how dirty with sin we may be, we will see the light of his glory, and we believe. Come to him, so Jesus our Lord can finish what he started. Charles Wesley writes about this very thing in his beloved hymn, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”:

*Finish then, thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be;
let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee:
changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love, and praise.*

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.