

What Are We Waiting For?
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Text: Hebrews 9:24-28 NRSV

24 For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. 25 Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; 26 for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. 27 And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgment, 28 so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Title

What Are We Waiting For?

Last week we talked about the great cloud of witnesses, and how we are currently surrounded by them. This image is just one of the many ways in which the author of Hebrews wants to say: What we think of a separate is actual one, united whole. That unity is only understood and experienced through Jesus Christ.

Looking back earlier in this NT book, we see the author trying to explain how **separate things are actually united things because Jesus Christ is Present in them**. And as we are found in Christ, we are part of this unity too!

Before this starts feeling like a lecture in metaphysics, let's ground our reflections with some definitions and some concrete experiences. First, the definitions. There are a couple words we like to use when we talk about Christ's work on the cross. One is atonement, and another is reconciliation.

Atonement: In Christian thought, the act by which God and man are brought together in personal relationship. The term is derived from Anglo-Saxon words meaning "making at one," hence "at-one-ment."

Atonement = At-One-Ment

There is a separation or alienation that needs to be overcome if human beings are to know God and have fellowship with him. As a term expressing relationship, atonement is tied closely to such terms as reconciliation and forgiveness. (Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible)

Reconciliation: Restoration of friendly relationships and of peace where before there had been hostility and alienation. Ordinarily it also includes the removal of the offense which caused the disruption of peace and harmony. This was especially so in the relation of God with humanity,

when Christ removed the enmity existing between God and mankind by his vicarious sacrifice. (Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible)

Reconciliation = Friends Again

If Christ's work on the cross makes it possible for us to be one with God again, and to be friends with God again, then we can look at another word – the word *sin* – and see it as the opposite. At the most fundamental level, sin is separation.

Sin = Separation

Anything that separates us from God and from one another is sin. And when I think about all the ways in which we are divided from one another and actually encourage more division and animosity – between nations, in our politics, between races, between younger and older generations, between sexes – well, I am arguing that sin is a much bigger part of our experience than we think. I may have avoided stealing, killing, cursing, or watching porn this week. But wherever there is division between me and my landlord, me and my ex-wife, me and the person on social media who posted something that infuriates me... man, I am swimming in sin. And it is exhausting!

(Core)

Sin is just another word for separation. In giving himself, Jesus Christ brings into unity everything that is divided.

I want to be one God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I want to be one with the people around me. I want to be one with the creation that suffers under the effects of human carelessness. I so want to feel right with the world.

This is a deeply human impulse of course. Intuitively we know that where there is deep separation, there is a huge cost. So how do we become One again? This is where a couple concrete examples come in – one historical and one contemporary.

Historical Context: Blood Sacrifices in the Holy of Holies

The historical experience was one that was very familiar to the first readers of Hebrews. It was the work of offering sacrifices to God in the temple by the priests to atone for sins. Each year on Yom Kippur, a priest would go into the innermost part of the Tabernacle or Tent of Meeting. Later it was the innermost part of the temple in Jerusalem. This was called the Holy of Holies. A sacrifice would be made on behalf of all Israel to make amends all their sins over the last year. The priest had the role of standing-in for the people, representing them to God. The Priest was the mediator between God and God's people.

The author of Hebrews goes to great lengths to describe how the Holy of Holies was – as all first-century people would know and understand – a human-made replica of its heavenly prototype. Everything associated with the Holy of Holies and the Day of Atonement represented a perfect version in heaven. The whole point of the Book of Hebrews is to say:

Jesus Christ is superior to any means of getting right with God. Through his work on the cross, Jesus is the perfect mediator between us and God. Jesus is the perfect sacrifice, given once and for all for all the sins of the world. Only Jesus, the perfect Son of God, could be both high priest and sacrificial offering. Only Jesus could enter the heavenly holy of holies and make union with God possible for us.

That is the historical context. Now let's think of a contemporary situation: Dialysis.

Contemporary Analogy: Dialysis

When a person's kidney's fail and can no longer do their job of drawing toxins out of the body from the blood, dialysis can keep them alive. Through a process that can take several hours, a patient is connected intravenously to a machine that draws the patient's blood, cleans it, and put it back in again. It is a painful, tedious, and exhausting process. It must be repeated, usually two or three times a week. I served as chaplain to a dialysis unit for a few months. All the patients there were weary and exhausted, not just from the disease but from treatment. For some, it felt like a kind of prison sentence.

Dialysis is a very imperfect replacement for functioning kidneys, but it can keep a patient alive indefinitely. That said, people who go on dialysis are usually hoping that this will be a temporary situation. Perhaps there is a chance the kidneys can regain function. But more often, the patient is on dialysis hoping to be a candidate for a kidney transplant.

The way sacrifices in the Holy of Holies cleansed people of their sins and made it possible to be right with God (albeit temporarily) dialysis makes it possible for the blood to be cleansed and a person to live a relatively normal life (albeit temporarily).

In both cases, what is longed for is union. Dialysis patients long for a day when they can receive a kidney that is united with their bodies and they can live full and healthy lives again. We long for the day – the author of Hebrews tells us – when Jesus Christ will return and we will be reunited with him. On that day, Jesus won't come to clean us up from our sins. He has already done that! That work is complete! On that day, we will be **saved!**

(Core)

Sin is just another word for separation. In giving himself, Jesus Christ brings into unity everything that is divided. We eagerly wait for **salvation** – that is, *the full experience of that unity*.

In Christ, our sins have been atoned for completely. In Christ, friendship with God is assured totally. Because of the cross, salvation is ours absolutely.

And yet, we still experience sin. We still feel the separation. So I ask you:

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Where do you feel separation or isolation in your life right now? **How might you look at the broken relationships in your life differently, knowing that Jesus addressed it completely, once and for all, at the cross?** What could you do to live into this reality?

As we come to the Lord's Table, we can see it in a new light because of Hebrews 9. We now know that we don't need to keep offering animal sacrifices over and over again. Instead, Jesus directs us to celebrate this meal – His meal – over and over again... to do so in remembrance of him and his perfect work on the cross. This simple meal is a reflection of a heavenly prototype. We call that the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. Jesus is the Bridegroom and we are the Bride. We share this meal now in anticipation of that great Feast.