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Sermon

Our Privileged Position in Christ

Hebrews 10:11-25; (Daniel 12:1-4; Mark 10:1-8)

15/11/15

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Last week, we concluded our sermon series through the Letter to the Ephesians. This week, we return to the Lectionary series for the Epistle.

Today's Epistle from the Letter to the Hebrews strangely enough echoes some themes we have just covered in Ephesians. I said that the Chinese Christian, Watchman Nee, had brilliantly summarised that letter with three words. *Sit, Walk, Stand!* In the early chapters, Paul taught us of the position we have in Christ and how we are seated with him in heaven. He taught us to walk in the way and love of Christ. He taught us to stand against the Devil's schemes.

The writer to the Hebrews is concerned to show Jewish Christians that Jesus offers a better way than Judaism. After considering many aspects of religious practice he comes to the question of sacrifices. Although, we don't need convincing that there is no need to kill a sheep, goat, bull or pigeon as part of our worship, we can learn or be reminded of the great privileges we have in Christ.

V11: Under the Old Covenant, there was a schedule of sacrifices which had to be made as part of their worship and to deal with sin. The writer points out the Old Testament priests had to offer sacrifices every day, repeatedly. Yet, those sacrifices did not take away sin permanently.

However, Christ is different. He offered one sacrifice, himself. It was done once; it was effective for all time. That sacrifice was himself. Then, he sat down at the right hand of God the Father - job done!

The Privilege of Perfection

You remember the hymn: "Once, only once, and once for all." It is based on this text. Jesus died once. He died only once – it was not repeated. He died once for all people. The effectiveness of that death lies in the mysterious relationship between time and eternity. God dwells in eternity but intervenes in time. So his action in time can have eternal effect when he so engineers it.

So Jesus' sacrifice is better than the Jewish priestly sacrifices, by that one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy. You may think you know all that already – but we need to be reminded of so great a salvation. We need to be stirred up to value what he has done for us. If you are in Christ, he made you perfect for ever. That verb perfect is in the perfect tense in Greek – a tense that means the action is completed or perfected. So he has perfectly perfected you! That is how God declares each believing Christian to be.

I spoke last week about the breastplate of righteousness and how we all come under attacks of condemnation. We need to know the promise of God and believe it so we can be free of nagging condemnation and know our right relationship with God.

Wonderfully the Holy Spirit testifies (v17-18), "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more."

When we accept Jesus' death on the cross in our place God chooses to remember our sins and our lawless acts no more. It is not that he is forgetful but that he puts them out of his thinking. You don't need to worry that Father God looks at you and remembers all the bad things you have thought and done and failed to do. He remembers them no more. He casts them into the depths of the sea¹. They are out of sight and dealt with. Some of you need to know that. It is finished. You are perfected. Those things are forgiven. They are forgotten.

Verse 22 tells us we approach God "*having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.*" The washing refers to our baptism. The sprinkling of our hearts refers to the sprinkling with the blood of Christ which cleanses us from sin. This is clear in the context, because Old Testament priests sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice to cleanse from impurity.

The Privilege of Revelation

In verse 16, the writer quotes from Jeremiah 31 and tells us as he does that these are inspired words. He says the Holy Spirit testifies to us about this. What does the Holy Spirit say through Jeremiah? He says in the new covenant – the one Jesus said he was making with us – he would write his laws on our hearts and minds. They become part of us. Perhaps it is as the Holy Spirit fills us that he gives us that inner knowledge of his ways. Perhaps it is as we continue to grow in him.

When I came to Christ at the age of 20, I suddenly **knew** some things about God were true which I had only wondered about before. I knew that God was trinity; I knew he was my father, Jesus my saviour; I knew the Holy Spirit was living in me; I knew that I was a sinner but saved by grace. I knew Jesus had been born of a virgin. These were suddenly self-evident truths – but they had not been shortly beforehand. Maybe that is having his laws written on my mind?

The Privilege of Access

V¹⁹⁻²⁰ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body...

THEREFORE having dealt with sin, you have the privilege of access to God's presence. It was the spilling of his blood (the giving up of his life) which made this possible. In the temple you remember there was a veil which separated the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place. Only priests could enter the Holy Place to make the sacrifices. However, only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies to present the atoning offering before God. He could only enter once a year after careful preparation. They understood that he was exposed to the unprotected presence of God in there and whatever was unholy would be destroyed. Their fear for the life of the High Priest can be gauged from the fact that they tied a rope around his ankle. He had bells on the hem of his robe. If he stopped moving, the bells would stop tinkling and they would know he was dead. Then they could haul his body out with the rope!

The curtain separating off the Holiest of Holies was not an ordinary veil or linen weave. It was massive: The Jewish writer, Josephus, recorded that it was 10m wide, 20m high, 10cm thick. It weighed 4-6 tons. The fabric was 10cm or 4 inch thick!

We are given access into God's presence as if we were going into the Holiest of Holies. We have that access through Jesus. When Jesus died on the cross, his body was torn. As he died the veil in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, showing that now we had access to God².

So we are encouraged to draw near to God with sincere hearts in full assurance of faith. Do you see we come in confident faith of what he has done for us?

All we have reviewed here has been equivalent to the "SIT" of Ephesians – it is about our position in Christ. Then he turns to the "WALK" aspect.

¹ Micah 7:19

² Mark 15:38

Walk in Hope

Verse 23 “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”

We are given a hope in Jesus Christ of the glory of the resurrection; we are given the hope of various promises. We need to walk in the hope of those promises. Hope in the Bible is certain and future. There is no doubt in hope - it is just that the fulfilment of promise is still future. That is why we are to hold unswervingly to our hope in Christ. Stay on course; this is not a slalom, do not stray to the left or the right!

Walk in Mutual Encouragement

Verse 24 “And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds.”

There is a thought for us – how can we encourage each other in love and good deeds? Often it is easier when two act together. Anne is away this weekend on holiday, so I won't embarrass her if I give the example of Taste and See Meals. Anne brought that idea to us and has encouraged us to provide frozen meals for those who would be helped or encouraged by them. Then she gathers some of you together to cook and prepare them. She has been spurring others onto good deeds.

Why not consider, how you can encourage others to love and good deeds? Do it together and it is not so hard or scary – it would probably even be fun.

Walk in Faithful Worship

Verse 25 “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

This is an important one! Do not give up meeting together but let us encourage one another. Christianity is not a solo sport! We need each other. We need encouragement; we need to be serving others. Too often Christians stop going to church because they are hurt. But if we are hurt, Jesus tells us a) to get reconciled with the other person and b) to forgive them.

Anything less than that is sub-Christian behaviour. Brothers and sisters we need each other. I need you and you need me. Let us be regular in our meeting together and our mutual worship and prayer. This is not just my idea – it is an injunction from Holy Scripture. We need to take it seriously.

Finally, we are to encourage each other all the more as we seek the Day approaching. This is the Day of the Lord – when judgment comes and our hope will be fulfilled. Those very last days will be extremely demanding and last generation will need all the help it can get to make it through.

Gospel Reading Mark 13:1-8

And that subject brings us neatly to look at the gospel and Old Testament readings.

The Gospel portion we read relates to the destruction of the temple which happened in 70AD. What can we learn from this? Jesus warns them against being deceived. There would be tough times and there would be deceivers. People would speak in his name and even say they are the Messiah but they are false. There will be wars, earthquakes and famines but these are not the end.

There are many conspiracy theorists around. People build scary stories on flimsy evidence and mere coincidences. They get a lot of attention – especially with today's easy communications. A recent scare in Christian circles has been the Four Blood Moons book. This noted that there would be two eclipses of the moon in 2014 followed by an eclipse of the sun and then two more lunar eclipses in 2015 with all the lunar eclipses occurring on Jewish festivals. The author concluded that this was a divine signal warning Israel of a calamity (or maybe the second coming) last September. I had a look at it and found from the NASA website that none of the eclipses of the moon were visible in Israel but all were visible in America. So logically it could hardly be a warning to Israel if they could not see it!

Friends, although Jesus said he would come at an unexpected time, he also said the gospel would be preached in all nations before he comes³ and there would be a time of extreme suffering he comes again. So he cannot come today or tomorrow for those things have not happened.

³ Verse 10

I suspect some Christians are anxious that they might miss the Messiah. But he says don't believe those who say they are the Messiah – when he comes again it will not in secret but everyone will know about it.⁴

Daniel 12:1-4

In the passage from Daniel there is the promise of the resurrection, judgement and glorious resurrection life: Multitudes will awaken from the dust and be judged for everlasting life or for shame and contempt. The wise and righteous will be given some measure of glory – shining like the stars.

These things would happen far in the future, at a time when many will travel here and there and knowledge would increase greatly.

I don't think we are facing the Day of the Lord very imminently. But that prediction does mean that only recently have we entered times when Daniel's prophecy could be fulfilled. Only starting in the 19th century has travel increased significantly but more especially since the 1970s with the rise of cheap air travel. And it is said that knowledge now is expanding so rapidly that no one can keep up with it. It appears that here is a marker to indicate we have entered that general period.

The important thing for us is to be sure that we sit with Christ with access to the Father. Then we need to be regular in worship and encouraging each other to love and good deeds.

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⁴ Verse 26