

10. Hebrews 10:1-39



Part Three C. The Cause of Eternal Salvation (Hebrews 10:1-18)

In this central section the author's aim is to encourage the community to whom the oration is addressed to renew and deepen their commitment to Christ. Through demonstrating the superiority of the priesthood of Christ, he is assuring them that they will enjoy full communion with God if they continue to go to God through him.

A priest carries out his ministry in a sanctuary. Our author began by demonstrating that Jesus experiences and mediates to us something which the Levitical priests aimed at but never achieved: indestructible life with God in the eternal sanctuary of heaven (7:1-28).

A priest takes our offering and offers it to God. In the part just completed (8:1 - 9:28), he demonstrated that Jesus offered himself and in so doing removed from us all defilement that could prevent our experiencing full communion with God.

A priest mediates to us the blessings of God.

In this final section (10:1-39), he demonstrates that the blessing which Christ the high priest mediates to us from God removes us effectively, once for all, and eternally, from sin, and sanctifies us, drawing us effectively to our goal: the perfection of eternal communion with God.

Salvation is a topic that he has already touched on earlier in the oration:

‘Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit **salvation**?’(1:14).

‘How can we escape if we neglect so great a **salvation**?’(2:3).

‘It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their **salvation** perfect through sufferings’(2:10).

He prepared us for his development of the theme of salvation when he introduced the whole of this central section:

‘Having been made perfect he became the source of eternal **salvation** for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek (5:9-10)

This was picked up again in the final statement of the previous section: ‘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’ (9:28).

Hebrews 10:1-4

Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach. Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered, since the worshipers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

We have already heard that the Levitical priests ‘offer worship in a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly one’ (8:5). Paul expresses much the same thought: ‘These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ’ (Colossians 2:7).

We have already been told also that ‘the law made nothing perfect’ (7:19). Something else was needed if we who approach God were to enter the sanctuary and experience perfect communion with God. We cannot be in perfect communion with God until we are ‘cleansed once for all’. So long as we are conscious of sin, and until the burden of sin has been ‘taken away’, we cannot be at home with God. This burden cannot be removed by the blood of bulls and goats.

Hebrews 10:5-7

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’ (in the scroll of the book it is written of me) ” (Psalm 40:6-7).

Once again, our author goes to the sacred Scriptures where he finds a text in which God has indicated that the instrument that would effectively remove sin would be a human body. The text, says our author, refers to Christ.

Hebrews 10:5-7

“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, ‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’ (in the scroll of the book it is written of me) ” (Psalm 40:6-7).

Our author chooses Psalm 40 because (only in the Greek version) it speaks of the ‘body’. It is because Jesus shares our ‘body’, our ‘flesh and blood’ (2:14), and because as man he faithfully did God’s will, without sin (4:15), that ‘by God’s will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all’ (10:10).

Hebrews 10:8-10

When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), then he added, “See, I have come to do your will.” He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

The teaching that conventional sacrifices without obedience cannot be acceptable to God is traditional. Samuel speaks for this tradition when he says: 'Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams' (1 Samuel 15:22).

Likewise the psalmist: 'You have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise' (Psalm 51:16-17).

Hebrews 10:11-18

Every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, “he sat down at the right hand of God” (1:3), and since then has been waiting “until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet” (Psalm 110:1). For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. And the **Holy Spirit** also testifies to us, for after saying,

“This is the covenant that I will make with them
after those days, says the Lord:

I will put my laws in their hearts,
and I will write them on their minds,”

he also adds, “I will no more remember their sins and their lawless deeds” (Jeremiah 31:33-34). Where there is casting off (ᾠφεσις) of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

The priestly ministry required of him by God's will has been accomplished and its purpose has been achieved. We have yet to welcome the salvation that has been won for us. We have yet to respond perfectly to grace and to enter the sanctuary. In the meantime, therefore, Christ our priest waits for the full destruction of evil in our lives. This is why he continues to make intercession for us (see 7:25). But 'by a single offering' he has made salvation possible for us if we choose to accept it. He has carried out the ministry to which all priestly ministry aimed, but which previously it was unable to achieve. His self-offering has 'sanctified' us; that is to say, our sins have been taken away and thus purified we can enter definitively into the presence of God where we can enjoy the fullness of divine communion.

The Holy Spirit who inspired Jeremiah to recount God's promise and so to encourage us to look forward with keen expectation to its fulfilment, is now inspiring us to see that the promise has become a present reality as a result of the self-offering of Christ. The focus has moved from a past promise expressing God's will to the Christian community which is enjoying the fulfilment of the promise.

Earlier he concluded that 'without the shedding of blood there is no casting off defilement' (ἁφεσις, 9:22). He speaks again of this ἁφεσις (verse 18), defining it in terms of the casting off of 'sins' and 'lawless deeds', that is, deeds that are done against God's expressed will. The offering of Christ has decisively cast this defilement off, so there is no more need for any 'offering for sin'. Perfect unhindered access to God is possible for all 'those who approach' (10:1).

Hebrews 10:19-22

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have an accorded right to enter the sanctuary by the **blood of Jesus**, by the new and living **way** (ὁδὸς) that he opened for us through the **curtain** (that is, through his **flesh**), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart.

The author concludes with an appeal to those who are Jesus' brothers and sisters (see 2:11). Through the **blood of Jesus** we have been authorised to enter the sanctuary of God's presence. 'Through his flesh' he has opened up for us a new way leading to the life of perfect communion with God. This accent on Jesus' blood and flesh stresses, once again, that it was as one of us, sharing 'the blood and flesh' (2:14) that Jesus offered himself to his Father. He obtained eternal redemption for us, because 'he entered once for all into the Holy Place with his own blood' (9:12). It was through his offering of his blood that he has freed our hearts and minds from sin (see 9:14).

As our ‘champion’ (ἀρχηγός, 2:10), he did not bypass the struggle that is part of the human condition. Rather, it was as a man that he remained faithful. In challenging us to take the way that Jesus has opened up for us, our author is reminding us that we, too, cannot bypass our vulnerable humanity. We, like Jesus, will find our fulfilment in remaining faithful in the changing circumstances of our daily life, and amid the sufferings that inevitably come our way. The Eucharistic allusion expressed in the reference to blood and flesh will become apparent later in the exhortation.

by the new and living way (ὁδὸς) that he opened for us

In speaking of ‘the way’ (ὁδὸς, see also 9:8) our author causes us to recall the Exodus (ἐξοδος, 11:22; see Luke 9:31). We also recall that Christianity itself was called ‘the way’ (see Acts 9:2; 18:25; 24:14). It is a ‘new’ way, as our author has been at pains to demonstrate throughout the oration. It is a ‘living’ way, in the same sense that the water promised by Jesus is ‘living water’ (John 4:10), and the bread is ‘living bread’ (John 6:51), and we are built into the temple as ‘living stones’ (1 Peter 2:4). It is the way that comes from the heart of God, the source of all life, and that leads us back to this same heart where we will experience the full communion in love in which eternal life consists.

The right to enter the sanctuary that we have because of Jesus is mentioned also by Paul: ‘In Christ Jesus our Lord we have access to God in boldness and confidence through his faith’ (Ephesians 3:12). We can ‘approach with a true heart’, and not an ‘unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God’ (3:12), because, as we have already heard: ‘Christ was faithful over God’s house as a Son, and we are his house’ (3:6). ‘Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession’ (4:14).

Hebrews 10:22-24

in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us think of one another, to stimulate love and good deeds.

Approaching the sanctuary with a true heart, means living a life of faith, hope and love in community. These three characteristic Christian qualities have already been noted by our author, in the exhortation with which he began this central section of his oration:

‘God will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do. And we want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realise the full assurance of hope to the very end, so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises’ (Hebrews 6:10-12).

He begins here with faith and a reminder of our first entry into the Christian community when, in baptism, ‘our hearts were sprinkled clean’ (with his blood), the defilement of sin was removed (see 10:18), and ‘our bodies were washed with pure water’.

Peter uses similar language when he speaks of us as ‘chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood’ (1 Peter 1:2); and of ‘baptism which now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God’ (1 Peter 3:21-22).

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering

He speaks of hope, recalling his earlier call: ‘We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever’ (6:19-20). Love and good deeds belong together. How could we truly love Jesus without wanting to share his mission by loving others with his love?

Hebrews 10:25

not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. [Romans 13:12]

None of this is an individual matter. Belonging to the one Christ, we belong to each other. Hence the central importance of the Christian assembly in which we come together as Jesus' family to realise our communion in Christ.

Living as we are 'in these last days' (1:1), it will not be long till Jesus comes to take us into the sanctuary with him in an eternal life of love-communion with God. This sentiment is echoed by Paul: 'the day is near' (Romans 13:12). Likewise James: 'the coming of the Lord is near' (James 5:8).

Hebrews 10:26-31 (cf 6:4-6)

For if we wilfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy 'on the testimony of two or three witnesses' (Deuteronomy 17:6). How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and insulted the Spirit of grace?

For we know the one who said, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay.'
And again, 'The Lord will judge his people' (Deuteronomy 32:35-36).
It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

The terrible alternative to living a life of faith, hope and love in the Christian community is spelt out here in terms that echo the severe warning which he gave in the exhortation with which he began this section (see 6:4-6). Under the regulations governing cult in the first covenant, there were sacrifices for unintentional sin. However 'whoever acts high-handedly affronts the Lord, and shall be cut off from among the people. Because of having despised the word of the Lord and broken his commandment, such a person shall be utterly cut off and bear the guilt' (Numbers 15:30-31).

We have already heard that through Jesus' self offering we can be cleansed of the defilement even of deliberate sin. However, to 'wilfully persist in sin' is another matter. It is to reject the only sacrifice capable of cleansing us of our defilement; it is to turn away from what Paul calls 'the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation' (Ephesians 1:13).

How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by those who have spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which they were sanctified, and insulted the Spirit of grace?

This describes in Christian terms what it means to ‘wilfully persist in sin’ (10:26). It is to treat the Son of God with utter contempt. It is to desecrate the blood of the covenant, dismissing Jesus’ gift of himself when he poured his life for us. It is to be filled with insolent pride (ἐνυβρίζω) casting God’s offer of grace back into his face, rejecting the Spirit of love that invites us into divine communion.

We are reminded of Jesus' warning of the consequences of sinning against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:29). If we dismiss the Spirit of God, we will have rejected the only means by which we can find meaning in life and purification from sin. We will lock ourselves into sin and its consequences. We cannot continue in evil and avoid the consequences.

Hebrews 10:32-35

But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting. Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward.

He reminds them of their heroic past and how they remained faithful in the face of public abuse and violence, including losing their property. He does not say whether this was by official judgment, or simply by popular looting. This description of the persecution which they once suffered is too weak to describe the suffering of the Christians of Rome under Nero.

However it could apply to anywhere in the sprawling Roman empire, where sporadic persecutions instigated by the local populace were common. In the east, over and above the cult of the local deities, the various cities saw in the cult of the emperor a way of expressing their loyalty and gaining imperial favour. The Christians avoided public festivities and did not take part in the civic cults. When things went badly they proved easy scapegoats for public anger. They were accused of being atheists, and so of bringing about divine displeasure. It took little persuasion to stir the people up against them. This was in spite of the obvious love of the community which continued to attract people to it.

The struggles associated with the battlefield or with the stadium offer their own reward. The reward promised here is no ordinary prize. It is the communion in love with God which is the very goal of our existence and that for which we long. It is our heart's desire. Our author reminds them how, in the past, they followed the teaching of Jesus: 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven' (Matthew 6:19-20). 'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven' (Matthew 5:11-12).

As he has just said: 'Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful' (10:23).

Hebrews 10:36-39 - preparing for Part Four

For you need **endurance**, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. For ‘in only a little while – how little, how little’ (Isaiah 26:20) the one who is coming will come and will not delay; but my righteous one will live by faith’ (‘by his faithfulness’ Habakkuk 2:3-4). My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back’. But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so gain and are in possession of life.

These verses announce the following section of the oration. The ‘endurance’ called for (also 10:32) is the endurance shown by Christ (see 12:1-2). Like him, they are to ‘do the will of God’ (see 10:5-10). Many texts in the New Testament speak of endurance and what our author spoke of earlier as ‘the promised eternal inheritance’ (9:15): ‘Your endurance you will gain your souls’ (Luke 21:19). See Revelation 3:10.

We are among those who have faith
and so gain and are in possession of life.

‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him’ (1 Corinthians 2:9).

‘You are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls’ (1 Peter 1:9).

‘You will win the crown of glory that never fades away’ (1 Peter 5:4).

‘In only a little while – how little, how little’ seems to be alluding to a text which his listeners may have used to justify their withdrawal from public confession of their faith. Isaiah writes: ‘Come, my people, enter your chambers, and shut your doors behind you; hide yourselves for only a little while – how little, how little, until the wrath is past’ (Isaiah 26:20).

Our author links it with a text from Habakkuk which states that the righteous person lives by ‘his’ faithfulness’, understood as the faithfulness of Jesus, the one who is coming’. Jesus did not hold back. So he adds: ‘My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back’. It is their faithfulness that matters. If we cling to Christ we will be saved and live.