

### c. *The generous bequest*

The sharers in this heavenly call are here told of the legacy that will come to them. The three words are rich in meaning. It is a promised, eternal inheritance: ‘promised’ describes its certainty, ‘eternal’ its quality, and ‘inheritance’ its content.

Consider first the *certainty* of the inheritance. This generous bequest is *promised*. Here the author is introducing us yet again to one of his favourite words and ideas. Throughout his letter he is at pains to point out that the gift of God’s grace through Christ’s work does not depend upon anything we do, but upon what he says. If it is *promised* inheritance, then it is as good as ours, because the God who does not lie has declared it on oath (6:17–18), swearing by himself that we shall receive it. In that case, we shall.

What of the *quality* of the inheritance? It is *eternal*, another important word in Hebrews.<sup>4</sup> It cannot waste away or be taken away. It is not exposed to the ravages of time. Hebrews was written to Christians on the verge of persecution and suffering. But, although their opponents rob them of earthly possessions and even physical life, their heavenly inheritance and eternal life were alike imperishable. Their treasures had not been laid up in the banks and repositories of the Roman world, but in the place where Jesus had told them to deposit their true riches, in heaven itself.<sup>5</sup>

And what of the *content* of this bequest? It is God’s *inheritance*, promised to and reserved for God’s people. The idea of inheritance which appeals most to our author is that of the inherited place which God has prepared, the land of promise. But all the blessings are not reserved for the future. Hebrews also delights in the present inheritance. The ‘last days’ are here, the new age has begun. In Christ we have entered ‘the world to come’ and ‘the powers of the world to come’ are already very much in evidence.<sup>6</sup> This immediate inheritance of believers is specially emphasized here when he refers to our *present* redemption. His death *redeems* man *from the transgressions under the first covenant*. We have already noticed that redemption (*apolytrōsis*) is a slave-market word. Until Christ comes we are slaves to sin, but through his work we are

<sup>4</sup> Heb. 5:9; 6:2; 7:24; 9:12, 14–15; 13:20.

<sup>5</sup> Mt. 6:19–21.

<sup>6</sup> Heb. 1:12; 2:5; 6:5.

released from this tyrant's captivity so that we are set at liberty, free to serve God as his righteous slaves.<sup>7</sup> These blessings are ours now. The testator has died and once that death has taken place the priceless benefits of that legacy are ours.

<sup>7</sup> Rom. 6:16, 18, 22; Gal. 3:13; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14.

## 2. Its unrepeatable nature (9:25–10:4)

When Hebrews describes the work of Christ, it insists, again and again, that it is *once for all* (*hapax*). One of the essential features of the Old Testament sacrificial system was its unfinished nature. Such sacrifices were *continually offered year after year* (10:1). They served as a necessary reminder of man's sin *year after year* (10:3). And in doing just that they performed a most important and necessary function. Whenever the sacrifices were offered, man realized his spiritual need. Although these animal offerings could not fully meet such need, they pointed *inward* by exposing man's sin, and *forward* to a time when adequate provision would be made for man's pardon and reconciliation.

Our writer reminds his readers that such provision has most certainly been made. The period of anticipation is now over and Christ *has appeared*. The high priest had to go into the holy place year after year, but this perfect offering of Jesus is not a repetitive sacrifice. He has appeared *once for all* at the end of the age. This word *hapax* is repeated again in verse 28: 'Christ, having been offered *once* to bear the sins of many'. In the old covenant sacrifices the priest offered animal blood. He went into the sanctuary *with blood not his own*; no priest offered himself. But our great high priest has offered *the sacrifice of himself*. This *once for all* sacrifice of Christ needs no repetition because it is so completely effective; it produces spiritual results of a kind impossible through the offering of animal sacrifices.

By his sacrifice Christ has done two things with our sin. He has put it away and he bears it away. This is first expressed in legal terms (it is annulled) and then in priestly terms (it is carried away as an offering is carried up to the altar).

### a. Sin's power is annulled for us (9:26)

Our high priest has *put away sin by the sacrifice of himself*. The word used here, *athetēsin*, 'put away', 'abolish' (NEB), 'do away with' (NIV), literally means that Christ came 'for the disannulling of sin'. It is the same word as that used in 7:18 when our writer says that the law concerning priesthood was 'set aside (*athetēsis*) because of its weakness and uselessness'. In other words, by Christ's death it is not only that the devil is deposed and the power of death overcome, but also that sin is vanquished. Jesus came to rob sin of its tyranny and its suffocating stranglehold on man. Obviously, sin is still at large in the world, just as death and the devil are still active, but all three have been robbed of their

former hold on man. In Christ we are free from their enslaving power.

*b. Sin's penalty is removed from us (9:28)*

Christ died 'to bear' or 'take away' (NIV) our sin. This verb is commonly used in the Septuagint to describe the priest's task in bringing the sacrificial victim and laying it on the altar.<sup>3</sup> The language and ideas used here, therefore, deliberately recall this priestly action, and are used in this sense elsewhere in the epistle.<sup>4</sup> Its New Testament parallel is found in Peter's words that Christ carried our sins up to his cross.<sup>5</sup> 'Christ "carried to the Cross" and there did away with sin and sins' (Westcott). Moreover, in God's redemptive purpose sin has been carried away by Christ in the same way as the Levitical scapegoat bore away the iniquities of the Israelite people into the wilderness. Symbolically the high priest had to lay both his hands on the scapegoat as he confessed the sins of the congregation: 'and he shall put them upon the head of the goat, and send him away.'<sup>6</sup> As was the case for these Hebrew people, our guilt is 'taken away',<sup>7</sup> and our sin is purged.

Surely there is also another picture here, drawn from prophetic literature. Our writer deliberately intends to recall in this verse the famous Servant Song passage from Isaiah where it says that 'he bore the sin of many'. Almost identical phraseology is used here in Hebrews and in [Isaiah 53:12](#). When Christ took our sins to his cross, he took upon himself the penalty and punishment due to us because of them. He 'suffered the "curse" of them ... which is separation from God: and endured their penal consequences'.<sup>8</sup> All this has already been achieved for us in the unrepeatable sacrifice of Christ at his cross. The tense of the verb 'to bear' (*anenengkein*) implies something done once for all. It is his finished work. We cannot add to it by our works; we can only trust in it by his grace.

In these verses the first and second advents of Christ are united. *He has appeared ... to put away sin (9:26)*. *He will appear ... to save those who are eagerly waiting for him (9:28)*.

<sup>3</sup> [Lv. 14:20](#).

<sup>4</sup> [Heb. 7:27](#); [13:15](#).

<sup>5</sup> [1 Pet. 2:24](#).

<sup>6</sup> [Lv. 16:21-22](#).

<sup>7</sup> *Cf. Is. 6:7*.

<sup>8</sup> E. G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of Peter* (London, 1955), p. 180; *cf. Dt. 21:23*; [Gal. 3:13](#).

F. F. Bruce helpfully suggests that even this may have its origin in the priestly background of the writer's argument. 'The Israelites who watched their high priest enter the sanctuary for them waited expectantly for his reappearance; that was a welcome sign that he and the sacrifice which he had presented had been accepted by God ... So our author thinks of Jesus as going into the heavenly holy of holies, to reappear one day in order to confirm finally to His people the salvation which his perfect offering has procured for them.' Westcott had expressed the same idea by emphasizing that here our writer has pointed out that he 'once for all was offered (9:28); and in due time, coming forth from the Divine Presence, He will proclaim the consummation of His work'.<sup>9</sup>

Once again the letter emphasizes that nothing of this spiritual magnitude and sense of completion was offered to Jews under the law. Those *who are eagerly waiting for him* know that when he comes *to save* it will be to complete their salvation. No salvation of that kind was available to people under the law; its most faithful adherents knew nothing of the pardon, certainty and peace, which those ☩ first-century Christians possessed. The law was but a *shadow* (10:1) and not the true form or image (*eikōn*). These old covenant sacrifices are not only shadows; they are ineffective, they cannot 'make perfect' (*teleiōsai*) or bring to spiritual maturity or completion those who *draw near*. In the teaching of this letter Christ's work is brought to perfection or completion (2:10; 5:8) and this results in the completion of the perfect work of God in the heart and life of the believer. The law 'made nothing perfect'; sacrifices 'cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper'. But by his sacrifice, Jesus 'has perfected for all time those who are sanctified'.<sup>10</sup>

Our author states that it is *impossible* for the sacrificial blood of animals to effect the total cleansing which man needs (10:4). He here rejects not only the sacrificial system of Old Testament times as an adequate way of cleansing, but clearly, by implication, writes the same judgment, 'impossible', over every other religions system as a means of present forgiveness and eternal salvation. This claim takes us to the heart of a difficult subject, one which demands an appreciation of other people's deeply held religious

<sup>9</sup>Westcott, p. 303.

<sup>10</sup> [Heb. 7:19; 9:9; 10:14.](#)

convictions as well as a concern for their eternal destiny. But the issues cannot be baulked. What does our author have to say to us in contemporary society, surrounded as we are by a multiplicity of competing religious ideas? Topics of this kind cannot now be left to our missionary friends working overseas. Adherents of all the world's main religions are to be found in most western cities. Islam is now reckoned to be the second biggest faith in Britain, as it is also in Europe. The impact of other religions is widespread and, in many cases, effective. How does a Christian reconcile the uncompromising message of Hebrews with the challenge of other faiths?

It needs to be said that the Christian who wishes to witness to adherents of other religions will become, first of all, a careful listener. He will not rush in, hastily judging and condemning the treasured views of others. He will seek to understand and respect the convictions of someone he genuinely desires to befriend and not simply to convert. Love will demand that he listens so that the doctrines held by his Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or Sikh neighbour are not grossly misunderstood and misinterpreted.

Secondly, the believer will want to go on to commend whatever he recognizes as good in the religion of his friend. It will hardly compromise the distinctive qualities of Christianity if we acknowledge the positive qualities to be found in other faiths. For example, as R. W. F. Wootton has reminded us, we 'may well find much to admire in the Hindu's reverence for life and search for peace, in the Buddhist's longing for enlightenment and moral excellence and in the Sikh's practical goodness to those in need, and be challenged in our own faith and practice thereby'.<sup>11</sup> We have noted that the author of Hebrews writes appreciatively about Judaism even though he cannot recognize it as *the* way of salvation. Its laws expose our sin (10:2-3), its history illustrates our dangers (chapters 3-4) and its heroes exemplify our faith (chapter 11).

Thirdly, it may be possible for the dialogue to focus initially on man's basic problems of guilt, fear, loneliness, moral failure, meaninglessness insecurity and the like. Other religions may represent 'a variety of human attempts to explain the phenomena of life, to reach out after ultimate reality and to construct some system of thought ... which will satisfy man's needs'.<sup>12</sup> With some kind of common ground in the basic needs of

<sup>11</sup> P. Sookhdeo (editor), *Jesus Christ The Only Way* (Paternoster, 1978), p. 74; see also P. Sookhdeo, *Asians in Britain* (Paternoster, 1977).

<sup>12</sup> J. N. D. Anderson (editor), *The World's Religions* (IVP, 1975), p. 232.

humanity the Christian may attempt to build bridges much in the same way as the apostle Paul did at Mars Hill, starting with the literary heritage and vague beliefs of his Greek neighbours, before going on to mention their frustrations and then God's distinctive revelation in Christ.<sup>13</sup> Although the Christian believer will not *rush* insensitively to the distinctive doctrines of his faith, he will not be ashamed to declare them, though always in the spirit of love and genuine concern. He has no need to be embarrassed about the uncompromising nature of his faith. Other religions, with the possible exception of Buddhism, are just as definite and dogmatic. But we will surely recognize that in presenting our gospel it may be necessary for us to reserve certain truths until our friend is in a position to receive them. Discharging a salvo of 'proof-texts' will only cause our unconverted friend to take up defensive positions. He needs to be understood, loved and helped.

Ultimately, however, we will come to the uniqueness of Christ and this letter is, at this point, important authority for Christian faith and practice. We shall be compelled in the end to confess, graciously but firmly, that eternal life cannot be found outside Christ. It is, to use our author's word, *impossible* for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins and it is just as impossible for man to achieve his salvation by the five pillars of Islam, or by Hindu resolutions of renunciation, or by Buddhist ethics, or by Sikhism's patterns of self-salvation. The passage we have considered forcefully underlines man's desperate spiritual need. His sin must be 'put away'. Christ 'has appeared' on earth, God's Son, to effect that saving miracle *by the sacrifice of himself*. It cannot possibly be that though his death was necessary for the salvation of some, most could equally attain it by other means. Our author is convinced that such a view is *impossible*. Man is not only needy; he is condemned (9:28). Christ will appear a second time, not then as the incarnate redeemer but as eternal judge. By that 'single sacrifice for sins' (10:12) men and women can be saved immediately and for ever. The religious pluralism of contemporary society, with its competitive ideas of salvation, must not be allowed to obscure the distinctiveness and assurance of the Christian gospel. New life for all is in Christ alone but, as our writer is about to show, it was procured at the greatest price.

### 3. Its immense cost (10:5–10)

<sup>13</sup> Acts 17:16–31.

In these chapters the new covenant is proved from prophecy and the quotation from [Jeremiah 31](#) is repeated to bring this main central section to a close ([10:16–17](#)). At this point, however, our writer turns from prophecy to psalmody and in a moving passage puts the eloquent words of [Psalm 40](#) into the mouth of the [Lord Jesus](#) at his incarnation. The words of [Jeremiah 31](#) expound the better covenant; the words of [Psalm 40](#) explain the better sacrifice. The verses here record a conversation of great beauty. [Jesus](#) is addressing the Father. He is saying that God does not now require the repetitive and impersonal sacrifices of the old covenant. God took far greater pleasure in the surrendered life of one eager to do his will. Once again the writer is using Old Testament Scripture, honoured by Jews and Christians alike, as a proof that something far better has taken place by Christ's sacrifice than could have been accomplished by *sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings*.

But whatever does this Psalm mean when it says that these sacrifices were neither desired by ([10:5](#)) nor pleasing to God ([10:8](#))? Surely God instigated the sacrificial system of the Old Testament? Undoubtedly what is meant here is the same kind of thing as is proclaimed most eloquently by a number of Old Testament prophets. Jeremiah, for example, said that in the day when the Hebrew people were brought out of Egypt, God did not give instruction about sacrifices until he had first issued this prior command: 'Obey my voice.' In other words, sacrifice is no substitute for obedience. No offering is acceptable to God if it is not an expression of loving devotion.<sup>14</sup> He cannot be bought by gifts. He looks for covenant love, righteous behaviour and a [contrite heart](#).<sup>15</sup> As Westcott puts it: 'In themselves ... the sacrifices gave no pleasure to God. Their value was in what they represented.'<sup>16</sup>

In quoting [Psalm 40](#) our writer has followed his usual custom of citing the Septuagint version, where there is a variant reading. It does not translate the Hebrew of [Psalm 40:6](#) as 'thou hast given me an open ear', but as 'a body didst thou prepare for me'. Some expositors have seen in the 'open ear' of [Psalm 40:6](#) a reference to the boring of the slave's ear in [Exodus 21:6](#) and [Deuteronomy 15:17](#), a symbol of willing obedience on the part of a servant who, because he loves his master, does not want to be released from his service. Whether it has this background or not, the 'open ear' and the 'surrendered

<sup>14</sup> [Je. 7:21–23](#); [1 Sa. 15:22](#); [Ho. 6:6](#).

<sup>15</sup> [Mi. 6:6–8](#); [Is. 1:10–20](#); [Ps. 51:16–17](#).



body' amount to the same. Christ has opened his ear to God's word and surrendered his body for God's work. It was his constant desire to fulfil in deed what had been written of him in the word. The 'book roll' was the scroll of the law. Christ knew that this law perfectly recorded God's appointed purpose for his life and he was determined to bring it all to completion. Such fulfilment was possible only through obedience. He surrendered his body for God's saving plan. Christ came to do God's will and *by that will we have been sanctified*. Once again our writer is leading us to Gethsemane ('Not my will, but thine') and underlining the immense cost of our sanctification. That pure and spotless body (7:26) was offered for us *once for all*. Yet again that affirmation (*ephapax*) comes dramatically at the end of the sentence to give it special emphasis. Moreover, *once for all* may refer here not only to the sacrifice which has been offered, but the sanctification it has effected. Something more is achieved by Christ's death than the removal of guilt. *We have been sanctified*. And the verb is in the *perfect* tense. It is actually done. Our sanctification is perfectly accomplished by Christ for all time.

#### 4. Its sanctifying effect (10:11–18)

Earlier in the letter we have noticed that, whilst Paul wants the world to know how man can be *right with God*, our author thinks about how man can be *clean before God*. These ideas of purification and sanctification have their background in the Old Testament tabernacle and temple, so important in this letter. In Jewish faith certain things, people and days were *hēgiasmenoi*, purified, not just so that they would be clean, but 'clean for God's use', 'set apart' as 'holy' and for his work alone. In these verses we are reminded that our sanctification has been achieved by Christ's work and is attested by the Spirit's word.

##### a. Christ's finished work (10:11–14)

In the concluding sentences of this main doctrinal section we are confronted again with these arresting contrast-pictures which have formed the main substance of the writer's argument throughout the letter. The priests of the old covenant stood (10:11) in God's presence, their task unfinished. But Christ is seated, his work complete (10:12). They presented their sacrifices repeatedly. He offered a single sacrifice, effective *for all time*. The priestly sacrifices could *never take away sins*, but his offering was *for sins* and for

our sanctification. A few verses earlier our sanctification was presented as an accomplished fact, ‘we have been sanctified’ (10:10). Here (10:14 and in 2:11) sanctification is portrayed as a continuing process, ‘... by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are *being made holy*’ (NIV).

But apparently there are those who will not take advantage of this sanctifying work. Instead of becoming his purified worshippers whose sins have been taken away, they choose to be his resistant *enemies*. Possibly this repeated allusion to Psalm 110:1 (cf. 8:1) has been introduced here to remind the readers that not all are Christ’s friends. It may be anticipating a serious passage later in this chapter (10:26ff.). Such apostates will discover how fearful a thing it is to fall into the hands of the living God (10:29–31).

*b. The Spirit’s reiterated word (10:15–18)*

It is not simply that God has spoken in the past. As we turn to this word the Holy Spirit *bears witness to us* in the present. Once again he uses Jeremiah’s new-covenant passage.<sup>16</sup> In chapter 8 he quoted it in expounding the essentially new things which have been accomplished by Christ. Here it amplifies the theme that it is not only new but perfect. The heart of this new relationship is focused on what we choose to remember (10:15–16) and what God chooses to forget (10:17).

We know that if this continuing process of sanctification is to be a reality in our lives, we shall need the Holy Spirit’s constant reminder (10:15) of that indwelling word which is written in our minds. In Old Testament times the word of the law was external, written on tablets of stone, but God’s new Israel treasure it in their hearts. The Spirit not only tells us what to do, but provides the strength to do it.<sup>17</sup>

The greatest message this word conveys to us is the assurance of forgiveness: *I will remember their sins and their misdeeds no more*. The writer has reached the end of his argument about the superiority of Christ’s person and work. If, in Christ, we have a forgiveness of this range, certainty and efficacy, there is no need whatever for the continuation of the former sacrificial system. The sacrifices are not merely superfluous; they depreciate and disparage the only sacrifice acceptable to God and effective amongst men.

<sup>16</sup> Je. 31:31–34.

<sup>17</sup> Acts 1:8; Eph. 3:16.