

Hebrews 9:1-14 // What to Do with a Guilty Conscience

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[0 : 00] Now, the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary.

The second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered Ark of the Covenant. This Ark contained the gold jar of manna, iron staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the Covenant.

Above the Ark were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now. When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room.

To carry on their ministry. But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance.

The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed, as long as the first tabernacle was still functioning. This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper.

[1 : 34] They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings, external regulations applying until the time of the New Order. But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not part of this creation.

He did not enter by the means of the blood of goats and calves, but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, so obtaining eternal redemption.

The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled in those who are ceremonially unclean, sanctify them so they are outwardly clean.

How much more then will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks, Catherine, and great to see you all. What a great passage.

[2 : 48] Let's bow our heads and ask God for his help as we come to think about what he's saying to us this evening. Father in heaven, you know each one of us here.

Knowing our hearts, knowing our innermost thoughts, would you shine the light of your word into the caverns of our souls.

Would you awaken dull consciences. Please pour out an abundance of grace and mercy tonight, as each of us has need, and guide us along the path to everlasting life.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, sometimes a face gives away what the heart is carrying.

A newspaper recently compared this photograph to Edward Munch's famous painting, The Scream. But what was really fascinating about the article was what it said.

[4 : 00] It said, The photographer captures the visceral anguish of having to live with what you've done and contend with the consequences that follow.

That's striking, isn't it? So why did that image grip so many people around our nation, around the world? Well, I think it's because most of the time we're very good at managing the image.

We curate ourselves. We keep things polished. We learn how to wear the mask. But every now and then, something slips.

And what's going on inside shows on the outside. And if you're honest, if you listened for a moment to your conscience, you'd know what that feels like.

Because most of us here know what it is. To carry something. Words we wish we could take back. Things that we've done, that have hurt people, that we love.

[5 : 09] Moments that we replay in our minds and think, if only. Well, the psalmist in Psalm 32 describes it like this.

When I kept silent, my bones wasted away. Your hand was heavy upon me. My strength was sapped.

That's what guilt feels like. Crushing. You can't unsay it. You can't undo it. It just sits there, imprinted on our consciences, gnawing away at us.

Accusing. Unbearably heavy. Well, the head of a large psychiatric hospital once said, I could dismiss half my patients tomorrow if they were assured of forgiveness.

Now, guilt doesn't lead to mental illness for most people, but that comment tells you something. A guilty conscience is a heavy thing to carry. So what do you do with it?

[6 : 15] What do you do with a guilty conscience? Hebrews 9 speaks directly into that contemporary question. In verse 9, it says, the old religious system could not clear the conscience.

But in verse 14, it says, the blood of Christ cleanses our conscience. That's the claim. So how does that work?

Well, before we see the answer, we need to notice two wrong instincts that we usually fall into. One is to minimize it, to brush it under the carpet, to say it's fine.

Sure, I've got regrets, but basically I'm a decent human being. You can imagine standing on Woodlands Road or University Avenue with a clipboard, canvassing opinion, asking passers-by, do you have a guilty conscience?

Most people, I suppose, would say, no, not really. I'm fine. Some might even bristle at the very suggestion, how dare you attack my self-esteem?

[7 : 28] Well, that's one instinct. Minimize it, bury it, suppress it. The other is the opposite. To be so absolutely wracked with guilt that it torments you, to replay it over and over and over in your minds, to punish yourself, to withdraw, to keep your distance from God, because how could you possibly come near after that?

Deny it or be destroyed by it. Those are the instincts. And into that very human experience, Hebrews 9 speaks.

Now, admittedly, at first glance, Hebrews 9 looks strange and perhaps even irrelevant. Tent, ceremonies, sacrifices, what's that got to do with the price of butter?

But right at the heart of Hebrews are two invitations. Chapter 4, Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence.

Chapter 10, Let us draw near. Those are the bookends, and in between, the writer explains why we can draw near.

[8 : 42] The center of the letter is this great claim. Jesus is the perfect priest. Not just another religious leader, a spiritual guru, a priest who does something so decisive that the way into God's presence is opened, so that whatever your past, whatever guilt you carry, it is possible for you to stand before a holy God with a truly clear conscience.

That's what Hebrews 9 is about. Now, if we're going to see why Jesus is such good news, we first have to see why religion, and even the very best that religion has to offer, was not enough.

So first big heading, a system that kept you at bay. Verse 1 says that the Old Covenant, the First Covenant, had two things.

It had regulations for worship, and it had an earthly sanctuary. In other words, it was a place to meet God, and there were rules about how and when you could approach him.

So the author headlines both in verse 1, and then he unpacks them for us in reverse order. So first, a restricted place.

[10 : 08] He says, verse 2, a tabernacle was set up. That just means a tent, a glorified tent. He describes it in its first room.

Now, imagine a tent. Old school tents were one compartment. You unzip it, and you're in. But modern tents, well, come to Dangerous Camping, and you see that modern tents are pretty fancy indeed.

Nowadays, you get much fancier, bigger tents, you unzip into the first section, and then you unzip another zip, and then you go behind that into the inner room where you sleep.

That's the picture here. Except this isn't nylon and poles. It's golden glory, a two-compartment tent. And the deal is that you can't get into the inner room without first going through the outer room. The first room was called the holy place, and he describes it in verse 2. In there, you can see a lampstand, a table with bread in it.

[11:12] These are just bits of furniture for worship. But then verse 3, behind the second curtain was a room called the most holy place. And that's different. That's where God lived, where God symbolically placed his throne on earth.

He had his footstool there, where God was camped, as it were, in the center of Israel. Now, if Eden was the original meeting place of God and humanity, then the tabernacle is like a miniature Eden. There's gold everywhere. There's the Ark of the Covenant. There's the cherubim, these warrior angels overshadowing it. It's the most wonderful place in the world.

But you cannot go in. And you can tell that the writer would love to go into more detail. You get the sense that he's a little bit of an anorak.

He could go on for hours and hours, given half a chance. But he says at the end of verse 5, no, no, we don't have time. His point is clear. There is glory. There is beauty.

[12:16] There is holiness. And there is a barrier. So he then goes on and describes in verses 6 to 7 what happened inside. When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry.

Now, imagine the rhythm of that. Daily activity. Morning sacrifice. Evening sacrifice. The candle wicks trimmed. The bread replaced.

In the first room, if you were a fly on the wall, it would feel like a place running on shifts. Think of a busy kitchen and service. Staff coming and going. The work never really stopping.

But verse 7. Only the high priest entered the inner room. And that only once a year. And never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins of the people that the people had committed.

Once. Once a year. Never casually. Never without blood. The entire calendar built towards this one day, the Day of Atonement. You can read about it in Leviticus 16 when you get home tonight.

[13:26] And even then, the curtain remained shut. Now, let's pause there. You might say, I'm okay. My conscience is clear.

I'm no worse than the next person. But think about this. Why is he describing all this? Why tell us this stuff? You can think about it like this.

The whole thing's a giant visual aid. The building preached a message. In picture language, it says to us today what it said to them then, which is this.

Every religious instinct that humans have about how to reach God is right here in the tabernacle. If sacred space could fix guilt, this would have done it.

If sacred ritual could fix guilt, this would have done it. If anything could cleanse a guilty conscience of all things, surely this would. But the reality is, even with the God-given religion of the Old Testament, even with that, you don't have access.

[14:36] So the whole thing's a big picture, teaching two hard truths. Truth number one, the way into God's presence was not truly open.

Verse eight says, the Holy Spirit was showing that the way into the most holy place had not yet been opened. In other words, the whole point of the picture of the two rooms was that so long as the first room is there, you couldn't get through into the second room.

Every priest who served there lived with the same visual message. You may come this far, but no farther. Access denied.

Even the priests stopped at the curtain. Only the high priest. Only once a year with blood. That's truth number one. The way into God's presence was not truly open.

Religion does not get you through the curtain. Truth number two, the conscience was not truly cleansed. Verse nine says, the sacrifices were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper.

[15:51] For all its elaborate rituals and fancy garments, the old system could cleanse the external, but could never deal with the internal guilt.

It could not wash what's really wrong with us on the inside. So year after year, sacrifice after sacrifice, the curtain still stands and the conscience remains guilty.

Here's the connection. The barrier outside reflects the problem inside. You don't have access because your conscience isn't clean.

Now bring that forward into today. If even this, this God-designed religious system, if even this didn't open the way, what makes us think, I'm a good person?

Well, I tried to be nice. I've explored spirituality. I've tried other religions. But you see, the logic is, if even there, in God's special place, with God's special rituals, if even there, the conscience wasn't cleansed, what chance do we have with self-improvement?

[17:04] Now, our culture knows that guilt is heavy, by the way. But instead of cleansing it, it seeks to redefine it. We don't sin anymore.

We struggle. We're not guilty. There's always something or someone else to blame. A character in a Ben Elton novel had his nail on the finger when he said this, nothing is anybody's fault.

We don't do wrong. We have problems. We have an excuse for everything and take responsibility for nothing. If guilt hurts, delete the category.

That's our culture's strategy. But the conscience doesn't disappear just because you edit the dictionary. You can rebrand sin.

You cannot silence the inner court of the conscience. For centuries, the tabernacle preached this. You don't have access and your conscience isn't clean.

[18:09] It's absurd to imagine just pitching up and waltzing into the throne room of heaven carrying all my guilt and shame and sin and thinking somehow that would be okay.

That's the problem Hebrews 9 wants you to feel. Because until you feel the weight of a guilty conscience, you won't rejoice at the unbelievably good news that's coming next.

A saviour who opens the way. Everything changes in verse 11. But when Christ came as high priest, you see the old system was a picture, now the reality arrives.

Three things are different. It's a different place, firstly. Verse 11 again. When Christ came as high priest, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with human hands.

The true tabernacle is in heaven. That whole two-room tent, all that Old Testament stuff was never the real thing. It was a copy, a shadow.

[19:18] That's what we were thinking about last week. Jesus didn't enter a symbolic holy place. After his death and resurrection, he went into heaven itself, into the very presence of God.

Not once a year, not temporarily, permanently. The high priest we all need is already inside the second room. It's a different place.

It's secondly, a different sacrifice. Verse 12. He didn't enter by means of the blood of animals, but he entered the most holy place once for all by his own blood, so obtaining eternal redemption.

Did you notice that from here on, the word blood keeps appearing in every verse? It's kind of counterintuitive, isn't it? The blood would wash us. Blood is messy. But right the way through these verses, there's the need for blood.

And again, it's kind of picture language, saying, without the death of a substitute, without someone paying the price for sinners, there is no forgiveness. forgiveness. And what the writer is saying is that every Old Testament sacrifice was a visual aid.

[20:36] The people, it could make the people outwardly clean, but they could never remove sin. They could never silence the conscience. But Jesus did what they never could.

He offered himself, his life for ours, his death in our place. And when Christ shed his blood, he genuinely paid for our sin.

He dealt with your guilt. He secured forgiveness once for all. Eternal redemption. And so therefore, it's a different result.

Here's the heart of it. Jesus hasn't just opened the way. He's made us fit to enter. Let me read verse 14 again.

How much more then will the blood of Christ cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God? A cleansed conscience.

[21:43] Let's just stop there. Let's pause and savor for a moment how good that is. A cleansed conscience. Jesus cleanses our conscience.

Washed clean by his blood. Because a guilty conscience is a dreadful thing.

You don't need to persuade you of that. You know that memory that resurfaces and your stomach tightens. That thing you wish you could undo.

That moment that you replay it gnaws away. It wakes you at 2am. It's no escaping the reality of it. You know what I'm talking about. It's an awful, awful feeling.

Because you realize how serious it is. You feel the weight of that burden pressing down and you can no longer bear it. And maybe for you it's the memory of one particular thing.

[22 : 46] Maybe something recently, maybe a long, long time ago and it's eating away at you. Or maybe for you it's more like a background noise, a low level kind of sense of unworthiness.

Or a nagging voice that whispers, you can't come near to God after that. But Hebrews says, the blood of Christ cleanses your conscience.

Not just wipes the record in heaven. but cleanses us within. The blood of Christ washes away all your sin and all your guilt and all your shame.

Now listen carefully. Jesus has gone right into that second room and through his blood we now have access to those holy places.

The curtain that once said, you may come this far but no further now says come in. The curtain is gone. So what do you do? What do you do with a guilty conscience?

[23 : 56] Well Hebrews 9 says to you and it says to me, whenever we are troubled by a guilty conscience, you don't minimize it, you don't excuse it, you don't pretend it doesn't matter, you don't suppress it, you don't self-medicate, you don't punish yourself and wallow in self-loathing, you come again and again and again to the blood of Christ.

Now for some Christians, here's where the struggle lies. We say we believe in forgiveness, but we try to pay for our sins emotionally.

Let me tell you what that looked like for me. Years ago when I first came back to church, I was growing. During the week, Bible open, praying, hungry for God, but then the weekend would come. Old trends, old patterns, and by Sunday afternoon I'd be lying on the sofa, ashamed, frustrated, disappointed in myself. I wanted to pray, I wanted to draw near, but it felt like I couldn't.

How could I face God after I'd blown it again? I felt like my conscience had pulled the curtain closed. And the tragedy was this.

[25 : 20] The very place I most needed to go, the throne of grace, was the one place I felt least able to approach.

I knew that Jesus had died for sinners. I just didn't know what to do with this sin, this failure, this time. It felt easier to sit at a distance and punish myself and to walk back in and receive mercy.

So let me say this carefully. For some of you, this is the struggle. The issue isn't that you don't believe the gospel, you do believe it, you know Christ died for you.

it's just that your heart hasn't caught up yet. The guilt still feels heavy, the shame still lingers.

Years later I heard a story that helped me to see what was really going on. A Christian psychiatrist told of a man absolutely crushed with guilt.

[26 : 29] He couldn't sleep, he couldn't eat, he felt like his life was ruined. And the doctor asked him, what about forgiveness?

The man said, I want it so bad. It turns out he's a Christian. A psychiatrist said, what does your church teach?

It teaches that Christ died, he shed his blood, so come to him. And the man said, he said, I am too bad for that.

And the psychiatrist said that he felt anger inexplicably rising inside him. What do you mean you're too bad? I don't deserve to be forgiven. Too right, you don't deserve to be forgiven.

The man looked visibly stunned. And then the doctor said, who do you think you are? who do you think you are to say that Christ's death isn't enough for you?

[27 : 37] Who do you think you are to say that Christ's sacrifice isn't sufficient? And the man that just stared at him. And then he began to cry because for the very first time in his life he realised that the problem wasn't that his sin was too big, the problem was that his appreciation of Christ's sacrifice was too small.

Some of us here tonight need that kind of moment to experience in our hearts what we already know in our heads, that the blood of Christ is enough.

Enough for that particular sin, enough for that memory, enough for those fantasies that you've entertained, enough for the things that you'd be ashamed to say out loud. Whenever your conscience accuses you, our instinct is to step back.

Hebrews says that is precisely the moment to step forward, not because you feel clean, but because Jesus' blood cleanses your guilt.

Come afresh to the blood of Christ. Now, time's up, but I want us to see that the big section of Hebrews that we're in ends like this in chapter 10, verse 19.

[29 : 09] Chapter 10, verse 19 says, Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, verse 22, let us draw near to God, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience.

Jesus has gone right into that second room, and he holds the door open for you. It is possible for you and I, whatever our past, whatever has happened to us, to go into that second room with a clear conscience into the very presence of our holy God.

So don't stay on the outside, don't stand at a distance, don't keep punishing yourself, draw near with confidence and live in the freedom and joy of a cleansed conscience to keep on serving our living God.

Amen, and let's pray. Father, so often we needlessly carry burdens.

We're conscious that we are sinners in need of grace. We make a mess of things in all sorts of ways. Thank you for Jesus.

[30 : 50] for his sacrifice that pays for our sins, for his blood that washes us clean and brings us through the curtain into your presence. would you grant to each of us repentant hearts.

Would you fill us with the joy of a cleansed conscience? In Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to respond now in song, and then we're going to move into a time of confession.

Thank you.