

¹¹ Every priest stands day after day ministering and offering the same sacrifices time after time, which can never take away sins. ¹² But this man, after offering one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God.^[a] ¹³ He is now waiting until his enemies are made his footstool. ¹⁴ For by one offering he has perfected forever those who are sanctified. ¹⁵ The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. For after he says:

¹⁶ **This is the covenant I will make with them**

after those days,

the Lord says,

I will put my laws on their hearts

and write them on their minds,

¹⁷ **and I will never again remember**

their sins and their lawless acts.^[b]

¹⁸ Now where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer an offering for sin.

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have boldness to enter the sanctuary through the blood of Jesus— ²⁰ he has inaugurated^[c] for us a new and living way through the curtain (that is, through his flesh)— ²¹ and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water. ²³ Let us hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, since he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider one another in order to provoke love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching.

A New and Living Way

There is more than one way to skin a cat. That's what they say but I've never skinned a cat. The idea behind this phrase is that there are many ways to do certain things. That can be true for many things. That's true for sermons as long as you have a beginning, middle, and end, not necessarily in that order, you've got a sermon. But for more complex operations there is a specific way and order in which they must be done. Sometimes there is only one way.

We don't like that. We don't like to be restricted or confined to a single path. We like our freedom. We like things to be done my way. And the Hebrews thought salvation could be another way. In fact they wanted to go back to the old way of skinning a cat. There was the temple, the priesthood, and the sacrifices. It was known as the way of holiness. This is the way the priest would walk from the altar, laver, holy place, and on into the most holy place through the curtain. It worked or so they thought. But when this new and living way was opened the old was shut, gone for good.

Moreover this old way was inadequate to take away sin. It did not cleanse hearts. It did not remove sin. It foreshadowed the fulfillment of the promise. A new and living way has been opened through the blood of Jesus.

So why did they want to turn back? In 65 AD Nero came to power and pressure was starting to build. Property was confiscated and Christians were thrown into prison persecuted for their faith. Judaism was a legal religion and offered something familiar and safe. But they weren't in danger of just losing everything, they faced the danger of losing their faith, the hope they have, eternal life. They were wandering off toward another way. They were not holding on to the hope that they had.

So their pastor put before them what they had. He moves them from the indicative to the imperative and he does so by comparing and contrasting the priests and their ways. The old way involved - V. 11 *Every priest stands day after day ministering and offering the same sacrifices time after time, which can never take away sins.* On one hand the Old Covenant priests stood daily offering sacrifices again and again. These sacrifices could never take away sin (10:3,4). Rather these sacrifices served as a daily reminder of sin and what sin deserves, death (10:3). But our New Great High Priest, Jesus, *"But this man, after offering one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God. He is now waiting until his enemies are made his footstool. For by one offering he has perfected forever those who are being sanctified."* Jesus our Great High Priest offered one sacrifice for all sin and he was done. The way was opened. And he sat down in the position

of power and authority until his enemies are made a footstool. This is a position of subjugation and humiliation. This will happen at the end of time.

But until then, *The Holy Spirit through the Word testifies*. The Holy Spirit is doing something. Through means he speaks to us. Even through these words of Jeremiah he still speaks to us about this New Way, *"I will put my laws on their hearts and write them on their minds, and I will never again remember their sins and their lawless acts. Now where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer an offering for sin."* Here the writer quotes from Jeremiah 31 where Jeremiah revealed, *"The days are coming when I will make a new covenant..."* The way of salvation in both covenants is the same. A person is saved by faith in Christ. The believer under the Old Covenant looked ahead to the Christ as the fulfillment of all the types and pictures of the old covenant. The believer under the new covenant looks to the accomplished work of Christ. Under the Old Covenant the Lord provided many ways for the believer to receive forgiveness. Through many offerings and sacrifices the penitent could be assured of forgiveness. But it was temporary and passing.

This New Covenant would be based in Jesus' blood. We have in strongest possible terms, *"I will never again remember their sins."* It's gone. There is removal, remission, release from sins. They've been sent away through this offering. While under the Old Covenant sins were never removed, now they are. Verse 19 continues, *"Therefore."* Since we have unlimited access, since God remembers our sins no more, since we have a Great High Priest we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by or with the blood of Jesus. *He is the New and Living way.*

This is not the dead way, the way of death, with dead animals, dead blood, dead furnishings. This is the living one who now opens the way of his flesh. The old way involved a fence and an altar. The people of God could only go as far as the altar and they couldn't touch it. Beyond the altar was the bronze laver. Before and after the priest went into the tabernacle he washed his whole body (a daily baptism) and then he was able to enter the Holy place to stand before the altar of incense and represent the people. Once a year on the Day of Atonement he entered the Most Holy place. He did so with blood. And he would enter through the curtain. There were two curtains separated by about three feet. Enough room to walk between. You enter one side walk between the curtains and stand in the Most Holy Place before God. This was the way of holiness. And the blood that remained was made holy and taken back out via the way of Holiness. There was a way to stand before God. But it was restricted with limited access, only open to a few.

We don't face the same pressure as the first century Christian, yet. But there is a growing hostility towards the Christian faith. In many nations Christians are pressured to go another way and many do. They've turned away from the new and living way. It's no secret that Christianity in America is in decline. Maybe Americans don't like to be restricted. God's way is too narrow, Jesus does say, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life, nobody comes to the Father except through me."* Maybe, I want my way. After all Sunday is my only opportunity to sleep in, my only day without stress. I'm preaching to the choir. You're here.

And God has opened a way for us to enter into his presence. It's as if the Altar, Laver, Incense, Table of Showbread, and Ark have been combined in one. God comes to us in Word and Sacrament. He works through means and opens a way in which we are sprinkled with blood and washed in our hearts. We come to church to receive these gifts. But do you really need to go to church? Maybe you've heard bumper sticker theology, *"Don't go to church, be the church."* or *"Faith is not a ritual it's a relationship."* There is even the nonsense of self-proclaimed theologians, *"The bible never actually tells us to go to church."* They've never read Hebrews. The problem with these phrases is that they contain a hint of truth and then they completely miss the point. Yes, the church is more than buildings and by-laws.

The church is the gathering of people. You cannot be the church by yourself. The church is the gathering of people, praying, praising, hearing and receiving. There may be many ways to skin a cat but there is only one way to gather together as the church. The church are those people gathered around the throne of the lamb, joining with the whole host of heaven, the Saints Triumphant. Gathering for worship is what it means to be the church and so in a

very real way you cannot be the church unless you go to church. The church is not a building but a people a people gathered to v. 19-25 *encourage, build up, confess our hope, watch out for one another*. But that's not so easy is it? I've heard it said, "The problem with the church is the people." And it's true; sometimes we struggle to get along. The church militant has been known to be the only army that shoots its injured. Sometimes holding onto those promises can feel like you're all alone. The writer of Hebrews encourages us not only to draw near to God but to draw near to one another. The closer we get to God, the closer we'll be to one another.

We too fail to grasp the importance of God's people gathering as one body around his word and altar to be served by our Great High Priest. Going to church is more about what Christ does for us than what we do. To be the church is to be fed and nourished by the blood of Jesus.

Let us receive this wealth of Christ. Let us hold on to it. The writer states: "*Let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*" Here the author links our faith with the act of confession, repentance, and the Lord's Supper as well as baptism. These two sacraments of the Church allow Christians to receive forgiveness of sins and have the full assurance of faith. He points us to the way we enter God's presence. Our hearts are sprinkled clean and the only thing that was ever sprinkled in the Old Testament was blood. We are given the blood of Jesus to take to heart and our bodies are washed in baptism. This opens a way to God. At Jesus baptism the curtain was torn, the curtain that separates heaven and earth. At his death another curtain was torn from top to bottom and the way was open.

God came down to earth. He drew near to us because we could not draw near to him. We had an evil ugly conscience that only saw bad and only expected bad things from God. Our conscience was perverted calling good bad and bad good. But all that changed through the working of the Holy Spirit. All that changed as Jesus' life, death, and resurrection was applied to us. Our Great High Priest stood up for us. He drew near to us. He offered himself once for all, and then rose taking his blood to heaven before God and then he comes to us with a most holy life giving gift.

Let us hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, since he who promised is faithful. We join our voices together and hold on to the confession of our hope. Our hope isn't here on earth. It isn't found in our possessions, health, wealth, or happiness. Our hope isn't even found by the number of people in church.

But your presence is encouraging. The sound of one voice added to another in our hymns, confessions, and prayers is a joy. The confession of our hope is that Jesus lived, died, and rose for us. He opened a new and living way to stand before God, to bring our cares and concerns before him. To confess means to speak the same thing together. It's a joy to sing loudly with one another. You might not always be joyful when you come but we carry one another's burdens and hope you leave feeling loved. And as we get to know one another we get to know our needs and joys and how we might be able to help one another as the body of Christ.

There may be many ways to skin a cat but there is only one way to be the church. That is to gather to receive what God has to offer. Going to church is more about what Christ does for us than what we do. It's about Jesus providing a way for us to stand before the Father with him. That way is through his flesh and blood, a new and living way. Amen.