

Coming in Great Humility and in Glorious Majesty

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[0 : 00] Now though, let's turn to God's Word for this morning, and our reading is Hebrews chapter 9. It's on page 1006. I'm going to read verses 15 to 28. Page 1006.

Hebrews chapter 9, verse 15. Therefore, he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.

For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. For a will takes effect only at death, since it's not in force as long as the one who made it is alive.

Therefore, not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and he sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you.

And in the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. Indeed, under the law, almost everything is purified with blood.

[1 : 36] And without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins. Thus, it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites.

But the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has entered not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly as the high priest enters the holy place every year with blood not his own. For then, he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundations of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been, having appeared 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.

Amen. Amen. And may God bless to us this, his word. Now, if we could turn again, please, to page 1006 to the Hebrews passage, Hebrews chapter 9.

[3 : 19] And let's have a moment of prayer before we look at the passage. Amen. Father, as we turn from the praising of your name to the preaching of your word, we ask that you will take my human words with all their limitations, that you will use them faithfully to unfold the written word, and so lead us through the living word, the Lord Christ himself, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Man shall live forevermore because of Christmas Day, says the carol.

No, he won't, says the Bible. He'll live forevermore because of Calvary, because of the resurrection, because of the ascension, because of the sending of the Spirit and the coming of the Savior on the last day.

We must not separate the two comings. We must not divorce Christmas from the rest of the story as if it had nothing to do with the big story.

It's hugely significant, of course. The stories in Matthew and Luke of the coming of the Savior are among the most beautiful, moving, and powerful stories in the world.

[4 : 43] But when the early church celebrated the season of Advent, it wasn't primarily as the build-up to Christmas. It was rather a reminder that the coming to Bethlehem pointed forward to the coming in the last days, which will culminate in the prince coming to reign.

At the first coming, the young Prince of Glory landed incognito behind the enemy lines, met the serpent dragon of Genesis 3, and gave him a deathly blow.

But that was only the first part of the process, if you like. And when he comes again, as we've just sung, he will not be coming incognito.

He will come in glorious majesty. And my title today is Coming in Great Humility and in Glorious Majesty. That's taken from the words of the great English reformer Archbishop Cranmer in his Advent Collect, which Rupert used in his opening prayer, which talks about our Savior coming in great humility, and on the last day, coming in his glorious majesty.

And we're going to look at this Hebrews passage, particularly the last few verses, which focus that very powerfully. This is not the beginning of a series, though I'm hoping to begin a series on Hebrews in the Sunday evenings of the new year.

[6:13] Some people, as Rupert says, wonder if I know there is a New Testament in the Bible, and this is a helpful reminder that I do. Although I suspect when we start on Hebrews, it will be the same as what happened with Revelation a few years ago.

You'll end up thinking Revelation is in the Old Testament. And Hebrews. By the way, I wish this is never going to happen. I wish I could persuade people to call this book the Scriptures.

That great expositor Alec Matias said, if you'd said to Jesus, what do you think of the Old Testament, you'd have a puzzle for a moment. And then said, oh, you mean the Scriptures. But I don't know why you call them that.

Anyway, this is bringing together the great event of the coming in great humility to Bethlehem, and the coming in glory at the end of time.

Hebrews is a book about the last days. It begins, God who spoke to our fathers by the prophets, as in those last days spoken to us in his Son.

[7:14] And the last days is the whole period between the comings. I want to ask two very basic questions. First of all, why did he come the first time?

And secondly, why will he come again? We're going to stay particularly concentrated on the last few verses of the chapter. We had to read quite a bit more in order to give it context.

But I'm going to concentrate particularly on verses 23 to 28. Why did he come the first time? Now, there is no book in the New Testament that shows more how staggeringly new this event was as God invaded time and space.

This is not a prophet. This is not a messenger. This is not an apostle. This is God himself becoming human. And yet, no book shows us more powerfully how it fulfilled the Old Testament, how it fulfilled the Scriptures, how we cannot fully appreciate what Christ did if we confine our reading and thinking to the New Testament.

The background of this passage here is the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16. Christ entered, verse 24, For not into the holy places made with hands, but into heaven itself.

[8:36] Now, in the book of Leviticus, chapter 16, we read about the Day of Atonement, which was essentially a kind of spring cleaning almost.

All the sins of the year brought and laid before the Lord by the high priest as he went into the most holy place, the holy of holies, the third division of the tabernacle and then the temple.

Only he was allowed to enter it and only once a year. And he made atonement there with the blood of bulls and goats for his own sins and for the sins of the people.

There would be anxious moments as the people waited for the high priest to reappear. After all, his two sons, if you read the earlier part of the book of Leviticus, had barged into the holy place, the most holy place, offered what was essentially Egyptian sacrifices, and were destroyed for their arrogance and their impiety.

So you see, until the high priest emerged, there was no guarantee God had accepted that God had forgiven their sins. He had to do it every year.

[9:47] Aaron, his successors, year after year, century after century. But Christ did this once for all. This is one of the great words of the letter of the Hebrews, once for all.

So, three things then about his first coming. What did he do when he came the first time? The background, I see, the great Day of Atonement. And the first thing, if you look at verse 23, puzzling and difficult verse, that it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves were better sacrifices than these.

Christ came the first time not just to save souls. He did, and that is wonderful and glorious. He came to bring in a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth.

You see, when on the Day of Atonement, the tabernacle itself and the altar had to be purified, Aaron himself had to have his sins forgiven.

But it seems to be at least part of the point of this difficult verse is that the heaven itself had been afflicted by man's sin. Remember, biblical history revolves around two representative figures, Adam and Christ.

[11 : 15] And Paul, in particular, brings this out quite clearly in Romans and in Corinthians. When Adam sinned, not only did he and all of us become subject to death, but creation was under the curse.

Creation was groaning, as Paul says. So when he comes, when he came again, and when he, sorry, when he came the first time, when he comes again, he is going to restore Eden, remove the curse and restore Eden.

There may be a hint as to what this puzzling verse means, the book of Revelation chapter 12. In that chapter, Satan is cast out of heaven because of the victory of Christ on the cross. And we are told that the followers of the Lamb defeated Satan by the blood of the Lamb. That doesn't mean, of course, repeating as a mantra, Oh, Satan, I defeat you by the blood of the Lamb. But that the blood of the Lamb had this powerful effect of restoring creation itself. So you see, it's nothing, how big a thing it is.

[12 : 22] How big a thing Christmas is. It's not just about lowly cattle shares and shepherds and so on. It's about the beginning of the restoring of creation. I'm almost slightly amused when I read the last chapter of Hebrews, and he says, I have written to you only a short letter.

I think if we had written a letter as long as Hebrews, we'd feel we'd done justice to our subject. But when you think of the vastness of the subject, it is only a short letter, because that is the theme of all eternity.

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain and redeemed us, but not just redeemed us, but redeemed the universe by the blood of the Lamb.

In one of C.S. Lewis's science fiction novels, these are novels where he projects the gospel onto the background of the whole universe, and God is known under the title of Maleldiel.

One of the characters there, for the first time, comes across blood, and in trembling amazement, he says, was this the substance with which Maleldiel redeemed the worlds?

[13 : 35] See, it's not just redeeming us, it's redeeming the worlds. That's the first reason he came, not just saving souls, but new creation. The second reason, of course, is the obvious one, to put away our sin.

We are told, verse 26, he appeared once at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself, and then in verse 28, not to deal with sin.

Sin is what separates us from God. Sin is what would prevent us entering the new creation. Nothing that defiles shall ever enter the holy city, says John at the end of the Bible.

Now, put away doesn't mean brushing under the carpet. Putting away means getting rid of. The psalmist says, as far as the east is from the west.

So far has he put our sins away from us. That means an infinite distance, of course. There is no geographical point called the east and another one called the west. So, when God forgives us, he completely removes our sins.

[14 : 50] Not just our guilt, but the sinful nature. Now, of course, that does not mean we become perfect. And John reminds us if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

But, if we confess our sins, that has to be done daily. There will never come a time on earth when we do not have to confess our sins.

And that is what began when Jesus came to Bethlehem, but not just to Bethlehem, as I say, not just Christmas Day, it's Easter Day as well, of course.

Trace, we the babe, says one of our carols who has retrieved our loss from his poor manger to his bitter cross. And that goes on to talking about singing with the heavenly hosts in the days to come. He's put away our sin. And this is something that, in a sense, happened before the worlds were created, chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world.

[15 : 56] But it particularly happened at Calvary. To him who loves us, says John in Revelation, and has washed us from our sins. To him who loves us in eternal fact, and has washed us.

What happened at Calvary? In the middle years of the 20th century, there was an outstanding preacher in Edinburgh called J.S. Stewart, who also, in his, part of his time, was Professor of New Testament at Edinburgh University.

And one day in one of his classes, an earnest American student said to him, Professor Stewart, when were you converted? And he replied, 2,000 years ago.

Wonderful answer. Of course, Christ has to come into our lives now, but we must never make the event of us coming to Christ more important than the event of him coming to save us.

He came not just to save souls, he came to put away our sins, and thirdly, he came to appear on our behalf. This is in verse 24.

[17:03] He entered heaven now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. And this is the greatly neglected doctrine of the ascension. You'll hear many sermons on the cross, many on the resurrection, very few on the ascension.

But the ascension is a hugely important part of the gospel. What happened at the end of the 40 days? Jesus appeared for 40 days. What happened then? Where did he go?

Did it all fizzle out then? No, the great importance of the ascension is that he went into glory to appear on our behalf. I mean, this is a staggering phrase.

It's not at all staggering to imagine that he ascended into heaven. Not at all. It does not beggar belief that God having raised him from the dead that he should then ascend and this is wonderful phrase on our behalf.

Why did he go to glory to appear in glory for us? That's why when Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within, upward I look and see him there who made an end of all my sin.

[18:12] Since, says Hebrews earlier, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us come with confidence to the throne of grace.

Are we crushed with memories of past sins which God has forgiven and for which we can't forgive ourselves? Isn't this such a feature often of Christian life?

This crushing sense of guilt. Well, look upward and see him there who made an end of all our sin. Don't make an end of some of our sin.

Doesn't make an end of the odd sin that's excusable. Made an end of all our sins. Remember, all our sins were future when he died. When you came to him, he not only knew your past and your present sins, he knows our future sins.

And that once for all sacrifice gives us grace to cover all our sins. Why did he come the first time? He came the first time to redeem the world.

[19:17] He came the first time to forgive our sins. He came the first time so he might be a great and merciful high priest. And the second question is, why will he come again?

And our eyes at last shall see him through his own redeeming love for that child so dear and gentle is our Lord in heaven above. So our carols so regularly bring together these new coming.

And this coming will not be in great humility. This coming will be in glorious majesty. Every eye will see him. Look at verse 27 and 28.

Just as appointed for man to die once and after that comes judgment. So 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.

This time it is not to deal with sin. He dealt with that at Calvary. That is why the doctrine of purgatory is so wrong. The doctrine of purgatory has an imperfect understanding of what Christ achieved at Calvary.

[20:31] Jesus paid it all, as the old hymn says. I don't have to pay a bit more. So why is he coming then? First of all, he is going to complete the work of defeating the devil.

Now this is picking up an earlier part in Hebrews chapter 2 verse 14. He came to undo the works of the devil. And that's so important because, after all, one of the reasons we feel such guilt and such despair is because the devil is at work.

Chapter 2 verse 14, Since the children took share in flesh and blood, he himself partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

You see, just as in this earthly life we continue to battle with sin and will continue to battle with sin, so we will continue to battle with the devil. At his first coming, Jesus defeated him, and his final defeat is certain, but as the chapter already referred to, Revelation 12 says, he is even more deadly, not because he can win, but because he knows his time is short.

That's so important, that's so important to remember. So he'll complete the work, because by defeating death, sin, death, and the devil, that will complete the work begun of redeeming the

universe, as well as redeeming souls.

[22 : 06] secondly, he will come to judge the living and the dead. That is what Cranmer says once again in his great Advent prayer. Christ, having been offered, will not deal with sin.

He himself came to die, and that death was a judgment on sin, not his own sins, but our sins, because he stood in for me.

That is why the doctrine that's sometimes called penal substitution is so much at the heart of the gospel. Let me put it this way. When we talk about the death of Christ, we've got to be very, very careful.

We don't try and reduce it to a formula. That's why we're given various pictures in the Bible.

Justification, that takes us into the law court, and an acquittal.

Redemption, that takes us into the slave market, we are free through it. Adoption, being made members of God's family. These are all metaphors, they're all pictures. But I believe substitution is not a metaphor, not a picture.

[23 : 10] This is what actually happened. Jesus stood in for you, and Jesus stood in for me. Just as happens in a football match, a player doesn't go on to represent another player, he goes on to play in his own right, so to speak.

And in a play, when an actor isn't able to perform, then the understudy takes his place. That's what Jesus did. He died, death followed by judgment, judgment on the sins of humanity.

And verse 27, interest just appointed a man to die once, and after this, the judgment, in a room here for reincarnation, or the Buddhist idea of the transmigration of soul through many centuries, death is followed by judgment.

judgment. And the judge will be the one who died. Paul says to the Athenians, God has appointed a day which he will judge the world in righteousness, and he's raised the judge from the dead.

Milton says in the world's last session, the dreadful judge in Middle Europe will spread his throne.

As we'll sing in a few moments, every eye shall now behold him robed in glorious majesty.

[24 : 30] So he's coming to complete the work of defeating the devil. He is coming to judge the living and the dead, and finally he is coming to bring about full salvation.

Christ having been offered once to spare the sins of many will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those. Now sometimes we talk about the three tenses of salvation, saved in the past, being saved in the present, and finally to be saved on the last day.

But not until then. And I think that saves us from two errors. First of all, expecting too much in this world. Some people, you know, the kind of prosperity gospel and its offshoots, that because Christ has saved us, Christ wants us to be happy, Christ wants us to have plenty of money, Christ wants our families to be beautiful, intelligent, a credit to us, Christ wants this, that, and the next thing.

None of these things are promised in Scripture. On the other hand, don't let's expect too little. God in his grace gives us anticipations of the world to come.

There are windows into eternity from time to time. Now C.S. Lewis said, God gives us some pleasant holidays and wonderful resting places on our journey, but never allows us to mistake them for the real thing.

[26 : 03] So it's full salvation, the full likeness of Christ. When we see him, we will be like him, for we shall see him as he is. What about those who are eagerly waiting for him?

It's a bit alarming, isn't it? Did you get up this morning saying maybe Christ will come today? I like to pretend I did. I most certainly didn't.

I got up thinking what a dark, cold morning it is. Now Christians often in an earlier generation would talk that way. But I think the problem about that is it's placing too much emphasis on our feelings.

You see, very often we don't feel that Christ came the first time. Very often we don't feel he died for our sins. Very often we don't feel that he rose again or is coming.

I think the point of this is much more those who for whom this is the goal of their lives. Those who believe that the final verdict is not given in this world.

[27 : 15] That the final reality of our salvation is yet to come. There will be moments of course when people do look forward to the coming of Christ. But I think it's far more to do with this settled conviction because this is what keeps us going in the Christian life.

The fact that there is a goal. You can put up with an awful lot if you know that things are going to work out in the end. And not just our being home weathering will be just fine but another event.

Remember the gospel story centered around events. coming at Bethlehem. The death on Calvary. The resurrection on the third day. The ascension to heaven. Ascending of the spirit. And the coming for which we look. Not primarily feelings then but the goal to which we are looking. And to quote Tranmer once again as we finish. So that when he shall come again in his glorious majesty we may not be ashamed before him at his coming. Amen. Let's pray. [28 : 28] Father may the Christ who made the worlds. The Christ at the heart of the scriptures. The Christ who came in great humility at Bethlehem and who will come again in glorious majesty. May that Christ be the center of our lives and particularly at this Christmas may we indeed through all the other things we do may we indeed look to him and look forward to his coming again in glory. We ask this in his name. Amen. Amen.