



Bible Study

February 3, 2016

Hebrews 9:11-14

Luke 2:25-38

Hebrews 9:11-14 (NKJV) -

But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Luke 2:25-38 (NKJV) - And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law, he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said: "Lord, now lettest thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word; For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to Thy people Israel." And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him. Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." Now there was one, Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, and had lived with a husband seven years from her virginity; and this woman was a widow of about eighty-four years, who did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. And coming in that instant she gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

Commentary -

The first five books of the Bible are called, in Hebrew, the Torah. While this word is often

translated as 'Law', and the Pharisees in particular interpreted it as such, it might more accurately be translated as 'instruction' or 'teaching'. These five books represent the beginning of God's revelation of Himself to humankind, in teaching us how we ought to live, and to live together in community. While many of the specific details of daily life prescribed by the Torah may now seem obscure or even bizarre, all of these commandments were intended to teach and instruct the people of Israel, and us, concerning the state of our world, who God is, and how it is that we are able to come to know Him. This idea would, in fact, become critically important in St. Paul's teaching, as he pointed out that even the Pharisees, of whom he had been one, who knew the Torah better than anyone, were focused entirely on fulfilling the letter of the commandments, and missed the Spirit who animates them, by missing what those commandments were intending to teach.

A good portion of the Torah was aimed at teaching that the wages of sin is death, that once we as human beings become immersed in sin, we are being led down a path that leads to destruction. By choosing sin, we forfeit the Life with God for which we were created. In many cases, this reality was communicated through the Torah by commanding the death penalty for particular serious sins. This was not because those who ruled Israel, or her God, took some delight in putting human beings to death. On the contrary, God again and again reminded His people that He took no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Rather, it was to show the severity of the cost of sin, and give additional encouragement for God's people to avoid that sin. To help make this point, the Torah contained its provisions for dealing with even these sins. This was primarily done through offering a sin offering as a 'ransom for one's life'. This redemption through the offering of an animal was not something that functioned mechanically or automatically, but was a teaching tool. When God's people attempted to use it mechanically, again and again He would remind them that He does not love the blood of bulls and goats, but that what He was truly after was a contrite and repentant heart.

Another, related commandment in the Torah served to both remind the people of God of their origins and what the Lord had done for them, and also teaching this same truth regarding one's life. It pointed back to the Passover, in which, in Egypt, to redress Pharaoh's murder of the infant children of Israel, He took the lives of all the firstborn within Egypt, both of men and animals. Those of Israel (and even those who were not ethnically Israelite) who believed in the promises of God were told to sacrifice a lamb, to eat that lamb with their families, and to paint their doorposts with the lamb's blood. This blood redeemed the firstborn of the cattle, flocks, and families of Israel. In order that this memory and lesson would stay real to His people, He established this as a lasting ordinance, that He had purchased the firstborn of His people in that moment, and their lives belonged to Him. To that end, every firstborn male animal was to be offered as a sacrifice to the Lord. Every male human who was firstborn to his mother also belonged to God, but two birds were offered as a ransom.

The Torah, as we have said, was not an end in itself, but a teaching tool, and the ultimate aim of its teaching, as expanded upon by the Prophets and Apostles who came afterward, is Christ Himself. This is true not just in a wooden sense, that as we see in today's Gospel and yesterday's feast, Jesus was brought by His earthly parents to the Temple on the 40th day and there dedicated to God through the offering of two birds. Christ did fulfill this commandment in that sense, by being obedient to it. However, He proceeded to then fill the promise of it to overflowing, as today's epistle reading from Hebrews points out to us. Christ did not merely buy back our life from death as a ransom, leaving us free until we sin again. Rather, Christ gave His life as a ransom for many, utterly overcoming death once and for all. The new covenant relationship in which we live with God is in Christ's blood, not that of a lamb, bull, or goat.

Because death has been overcome, this means that it can never again exercise any claim over us. Likewise, without the power of death, without the destruction and condemnation that come from sin, sin can no longer truly ensnare us if we have come to follow Christ, and have received the same Spirit through whose power He arose from the dead. This does not, of course, mean that we are now free to sin without consequences. Rather, we as Christians have finally truly been set free to be able to serve

God in our lives in this world, and spend eternity with Him in the world to come. Through Christ's death we have received the remission of sins, and through repentance we are now set free to do good for the first time, always remembering that we are not our own, but that we have been bought with a price, in order that God might be glorified in our lives.

Questions to Ponder -

- 1) Ss. Symeon and Anna waited for decades to see our Lord as an infant. They yearned and prayed for nothing more than the redemption of Israel, and after those dozens of years of waiting, they got only a glimpse of the savior. When you pray, what sort of things do you pray for? Do you spend time in prayer and fasting aimed at truly important things, or do you ask only for solutions to crises? Are you patient and persistent in prayer, or do you give up, or grow angry with God if your requests aren't answered the way you want them to be, immediately?
- 2) The Theotokos had already been blessed to have been chosen to be the mother of the Lord, but at Christ's presentation at the Temple, it was prophesied that a sword would pierce her heart. She had already faced a pregnancy out of wedlock; the suspicion and doubts of her neighbors. Now she had the joy of a healthy son, whom she knew to also be her Lord. But the road ahead of her would not be an easy one. For her first of all, to follow her Son would mean to follow Him to the Cross. Do you expect your life as a Christian to be smooth and easy? Do you become frustrated, angry, and impatient with life's suffering and trials? Have you seen how patience in suffering is able to bring you closer to Christ, who likewise suffered patiently?
- 3) In today's epistle, we hear about Christ's sacrifice, and how it purifies us from our past sins. We also hear, however, that we have been cleansed for a purpose: to serve the Living God. Does your faith have purpose in your life? Is 'Christian' simply part of your identity, like being a member of an organization and going to meetings, or is being a Christian, following Christ, something that you actively pursue?

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