Jesus our Mediator
Hebrews 9:15-28

The writer of Hebrews is writing to his friends, and they're under pressure, they're feeling the heat for their Christian faith and they're considering going back to Judaism, going back to temple worship and animal sacrifices and the Jewish priesthood, and leaving Jesus behind. And the writer is encouraging them not to do that.

And one of the reasons he's been giving them not to do that is that these externals of religion – like the temple, the buildings, the sacrifices, the priesthood are just shadows of a greater reality; as he says in v25, they're 'copies of the heavenly things.'

Now, imagine someone who has never left their home country, but near where they live is a Legoland. And this Legoland has a nice lego brick model of London, and this person has seen it. And you're talking to him and in the course of conversation he tells you that he's been to London. But you know he's never set foot in London, so you tell him, 'no you haven't!' And he says, 'yes I have, I've been to Legoland. I've seen Big Ben, and the Houses of Parliament, and the London Eye, and Buckingham Palace.' And you say, 'yeh, but that's not the real London, that's just Legoland, it's just a copy.'

And the writer's been saying, 'look, don't drift back into the stuff of temple worship, or the externals of religion, because these are just copies of something far greater. Because all these externals of the Old Covenant were just pointers that something greater and better and more glorious was coming. So why would you want to go back to the shadows, when the real thing has come, which is Christ?

Now, of course all these details of Old Testament worship and sacrifices might seem more than a little lost on us, after all, what possible relevance could the religious practices of people living over 2000 years ago possibly have for me – I mean if they wanted to sacrifice sheep and goats and splatter blood everywhere, great, but that's got nothing to do with me.

Except that what the writer's talking about is how can we connect with God, how can we be in relationship with him? And that of course is something that is incredibly relevant to all of us. If there is a God, how can I know him, how can I enter into a friendship with him, how can I experience him. And that's essentially what all this talk about covenant is – a covenant is a binding agreement between two parties – an agreement that's built on relationship and the writer's saying look, God has established a new covenant, a new way that you and I can relate to him, and know his friendship in our lives, and the old was just a shadow of this, and in v15 he tells us that Jesus is the mediator of that new covenant.

Now, just think about it, what does a mediator do? If you've got a relational breakdown, say in a marriage, or at work, and there are these two individuals, or parties and they're just not speaking the same language and they're got to the point where they need someone to help bridge the gap between them – you employ a mediator, someone who can bring them together, someone who can act as a go-between. Someone who can help restore the relationship.

And the writer's saying that Jesus is that mediator: that in our relationship with God we need someone to bridge the gap and be a go-between between us and God. And you might think, yeh but surely I can just go to God on my own terms and relate to him as I like and just deepen my relationship over time, that's how any normal relationship works, isn't it?

Well, the writer tells us first what Jesus achieves as our mediator and then how he does it. Two points: Receiving the inheritance, and dying to give.

Receiving the Inheritance
V15: 'Therefore [Jesus] is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.'

I don't know if you've seen that car bumper sticker – it's generally stuck on the back of some big expensive car, or some large motoring caravan – that says, 'we're spending our children's inheritance.' They've spent their life working, building up the nest egg which they could pass on to their children and grandchildren and instead they've blown some of it on some expensive toy.

Now, as you get older there's an expectation, however limited, that when the older generation dies you might stand to inherit something, that they haven't spent it all on toys. But in what sense can you inherit anything from God? And if you could, what would you want to inherit from him anyway?

Well, you might start out thinking – well, a bit more money wouldn't go amiss, then I could buy some toys. Or if not financial security, it might be health, or someone to love and be loved by, that's what I want; or to have your family flourish.

But of course all those are passing aren't they? All the blessings of this life are going to come to an end. As the writer says in v27, 'It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.' And so from an eternal perspective, suddenly all the toys in the world don't seem so appealing. If this life is all there is, then sure, eat, drink and be merry, give me an inheritance that means I can live this life to the full and then, 'puff', I'm gone. But if this life is not all there is and we live in the shadow of death, if death is unavoidable, as it is, and if then there is the judgement – no reincarnation, no second chances, no court of appeal, then things take on a different hue, don't they? In the light of death and judgment and eternity, what inheritance would you want?

In his book, 'A Brief History of Thought', the atheist French philosopher Luc Ferry says that all of philosophy, and all the questions and answers of philosophy are aimed at addressing one single issue, the fear of death. Even atheism tries to address the fear by telling you there isn't anything to fear, your life's meaningless anyway. And yet, there is this gnawing doubt, this unsettled unease deep inside when we think about our own death.

And the writer says that Christ has come as a mediator, to make it possible for you to receive an inheritance that is of far greater value than money, or anything else that's passing away. He's already told us in chapter 4 that that inheritance is a Sabbath day's rest – a deep inner rest that knows we are accepted and loved by God, a rest that quiets the unease and restlessness of our hearts. And then in chapter 13:14, he's going to tell us that rather than real estate in the here and now, Jesus makes it possible for us to inherit 'the city that is to come.' To become citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem – the place of eternal peace and security.

So this inheritance, which the writer says is eternal, because it's never going to fade away like an earthly inheritance, answers our deepest need and this fear of death – so that we can know that it is well with our souls, that God loves us and calls us and welcomes us now and for all eternity.

Now, we're reading one of Agatha Christie's Miss Marple books to our girls at the moment – it's 'A Murder is Announced'. And the plot line is that there is this lady, Miss Blacklock, who stands to inherit a vast fortune from a will if another elderly lady dies. But if Miss Blacklock dies first then someone else gets to inherit the fortune, and low and behold an attempt is made to murder Miss Blacklock, before she can inherit the money. And the question is – who tried to murder her? Who gets to inherit when the old lady dies if Miss Blacklock is already dead?

Well, murder mysteries aside, for a will to come into effect, the person who made it has to die, don't they? You only receive your inheritance once the person has died. And having spoken about Christ enabling us to receive an eternal inheritance, the writer says in v15-17 that this is possible '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 is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive.'

Now, hang on a minute you might say, I get the bit about why Jesus would want us to receive an inheritance, I get the bit about him granting us inner rest and eternal rest, but why the death stuff? Why doesn't God just say, 'here, receive it, it's yours.' Why does anyone, let alone Jesus, need to die so that I can know peace with God and a relationship with Him? I mean, isn't all the talk about blood and death rather primitive?

Dying to Give

Now I doubt any of us would disagree that sin damages, even destroys relationships. You hurt someone, you wrong them, you behave in a certain way and it can have serious, negative repercussions in that relationship. That's not something any of us would debate – we know it from experience – either from our parents' marriages, or our own relationships.

Now, whilst we accept that for human relationships we tend to think that things should be different with God. We tend to think that those things we shouldn't do but still do, or those things we should do but don't do, or those wrong attitudes and thoughts we have, that they really have no effect on our relationship with

God. Or at least, we think we can pick and choose and decide for ourselves what is right and wrong, and if we do do something wrong there's this inner tendency to justify ourselves, and we put it down to a little weakness on our part, or we try and shift the blame and it's someone else's fault. But the Bible tells us that ultimately it's God who sets the objective standard of right and wrong, and that ultimately he's the judge and just as sin breaks and damages human relationships so sin has resulted in this breach in our relationship with God. And it's that breach, that break in relationship, that lies at the root of our fear of death, because we are alienated from the giver of life.

And there's the problem, because in the ancient world, the penalty for breaking or breaching a covenant relationship was death. Now to you and me, that seems totally alien. I mean, just imagine if you wanted to draw up an agreement, a contract with another party and you go to the solicitor's office, and having drawn up the contract he brought in a sheep and slaughtered it in front of you and then started splattering the blood everywhere, you'd think he'd gone mad.

But in the ancient world, if you were entering into a covenant relationship with someone, you'd take a sacrificial animal and cut it in half. And then you'd separate the two pieces and you'd walk through the middle of the sacrifice saying, may this be done to me if I fail to keep this covenant, if I break this relationship. No expensive lawyers and their sharp suits in those days!

And the word for covenant and the word for a will are the same word in greek, and the writer is using a play on words – because just as someone needs to die for a will to take effect and the inheritance to come your way – so a death had to happen when a covenant was broken.

So the writer reminds his friends in v18 that 'not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood'. And he tells them how when Moses instituted that first covenant, he took the blood of sacrificial animals, and sprinkled the blood of the animals on the people and on the book of the law, on the tabernacle and all the equipment used in the tabernacle. And then he says in v22, 'Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.'

You see, under the old covenant, death and being cut off from God were the penalty of sin and of not keeping the covenant, and God provided these animal sacrifices and the blood of the sacrifices both as a reminder of the consequences of sin, but also as a means of atoning for the sin.

Maybe you've seen the kind of advertising that tries to persuade people to give blood. Often they'll use a line like 'give life, give blood'. And in Leviticus 17:11 it says, 'the life of the flesh [of the animal] is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.' Forgiveness could be granted because someone – a substitute sacrifice, paid the price for sin with its life. If the sinner himself wasn't to die for his sins, a sacrifice had to be substituted in his place. The animal's life for his life.

Now, you might hear that and think, 'yes, but how can that possibly work? I mean how can a bit of animal blood splattered about really cleanse from sin, or obtain forgiveness? If sin is so serious, if this breach in relationship is so serious, surely offering an animal is just too easy?' And besides isn't this the root problem of religion? There's the ritual, and the ceremony, and the blood, but none of it has any power to change the heart or cleanse the conscience of the people involved. And in that sense it doesn't matter whether we are talking animal sacrifices, or religious washings, or fasting or meditation or positioning your body in certain ways whilst breathing deeply, religion is concerned with the external.

And that's exactly the writer's point here. He says in v23, '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.'

The external stuff of the Old Covenant, the tabernacle and the temple and the priesthood, were just shadows, copies, pointing to a greater reality. And the blood of the animal sacrifices, that was also pointing forward to something far more significant as well. And whilst the blood of animals worked for the purification of the external stuff, the greater reality, mankind's relationship with God – God dwelling with man and man with God, and healing the breach in that relationship required a sacrifice far greater.

And the writer says of Jesus in v26, 'But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages [this is the turning point of history] to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.' You see, the incredible message of the Bible and of the gospel, is that God loves you so much, he loves mankind so much that he has made the ultimate sacrifice to restore us to him, to redeem us, to pay the price to free us from the penalty of our sin and the consequences of our broken relationship.

You see, using the picture of the making of a covenant, it is God who has walked through the two pieces of the sacrificial animal, and has said let this be done to me, if you fail to keep this covenant. And at the cross Christ took upon himself all the curse and all the punishment for our failure and for our sin, that the breach in relationship between us and God might be healed. He has become the mediator, who brings us back to God and restores our relationship with him and enables us to receive our inheritance of rest, by offering himself as our substitute, in our place.

And so, as the writer reminds us in v20 that Moses said, as he sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice, 'This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded you', so Jesus on the night before he went to the cross took a glass of wine and said, 'this is my blood of the covenant [the new covenant] which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.' (Matt 26:28). And the writer says that in becoming the ultimate sacrifice of atonement, Jesus 'put away sin' (9:26), literally he annuls it, he cancels it. So there is nothing in your past, or present or future that can keep you from entering God's presence and knowing his love and grace and friendship. Sin's power over you, to accuse you or condemn you or curse you or bring judgment upon you, has been broken at the cross, by the once

and for all sacrifice of Jesus. He has done for you what you could never have done for yourself, what no amount of external religion could ever do. In the word's of Jim Packer, Jesus death has 'turned God's 'no' to us into a 'yes'.

And in finishing, the writer once again uses the picture of the Jewish High Priest going into the temple on the Day of Atonement, and taking the blood of the sacrifice behind the curtain, and entering the Most Holy Place, where God dwelt, unapproachable on all but one day of the year. And he tells us in v24, that '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.' Christ has won that access for us.

But this isn't just about what Christ has done in the past, or is doing in the present, it's also about the future. Because he ends by saying, v28, '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.'

On the Day of Atonement, as the High Priest entered the most Holy Place, the crowd outside the temple would wait, hoping, longing that the sacrifice of atonement would be accepted and that he would come out again. And when he did, he would come out of the temple and stand before the crowd of worshippers and pronounce forgiveness upon them and they would all gather round him in joy. Just to capture something of their eager waiting for him to come out again, just listen to the this poem, written by the scribe Joshua ben Sira that describes how he felt when he witnesses the High Priest Simon the Just on the day of atonement sometime around 200 BC, as he knows that God has accepted the atoning sacrifice (Lane 127):

How glorious he was when the people gathered around him
as he came out of the inner sanctuary!
Like the morning star among the clouds,
Like the moon when it is full;
Like the sun shining upon the temple of the Most High,
And like the rainbow gleaming in glorious clouds;
Like roses in the days of the first fruits,
Like lilies by a spring of water,
Like a green shoot on Lebanon on a summer day;
Like fire and incense in the censer,
Like a vessel of hammered gold adorned
With all kinds of precious stones;
Like an olive tree putting forth its fruit,
And like a cypress towering in the clouds.

(Sirach 50:6-10)

Now if that was what it was like for shadows and copies, what will it be like when the real High Priest reappears? When he comes to save those eagerly waiting for him.