

## Hebrews 9:27-28

### Destined to Die Once

*Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.*

I can now tell you that my desk at work is made of wood or, perhaps more accurately, laminex and reconstituted pulp. I know because last week I cleaned my desk of all the paper that had covered it. So I can now see my desk. It has been said that a clean desk is a sign of a cluttered desk drawer. But no! I did not move the paper from the top of my desk to my desk drawers. After I had gone through all those papers I actually felt like I was much better organized than before. Currently, however, my study at home is a mess. I need a day to sort through all the mess of paper that has piled up on the floor near my desk and on my desk. The trouble is, of course, that much as I try to keep on top of things from day to day and week to week it all tends to slip away from order to disorder. I know that it won't be all that long before my nice tidy desk at work will become another mess to sort out. I know that when I clean up my study at home that this will not be a "once for all" clean-up.

Wouldn't it be nice to mow the lawns "once for all" and not have to worry about the grass growing back? Wouldn't it be nice to get all of the weeds out of the garden and all the bindi out of the grass and not have to worry about them growing back again?

But this is frivolous. What about your irritable spirit? You have been expressing your anger or frustration to family members and others close to you. There was that moment when you felt in such a good mood that you were actually nice and pleasant. Freeze the camera. Wouldn't it be great to hold that moment and stretch it? Wouldn't it be great if the real you was not the normal complaining, irritable "you", but the uncomplaining, appreciative gracious and kind "you" that you can sometimes be? Maybe your problem is not irritability but something else. But the trouble is that when we hit the right note we find we can't hold it. It's never "once for all". We ever find ourselves slipping back into wrong ways of feeling, thinking and acting, ways we are ashamed of or, at least, should be ashamed of. Wouldn't it be great if all that is wrong about you and wrong about me could be put right once and for all time?

Our text is about what has been done to put things right in your life and my life. The fact that we are still struggling with character flaws and problems in our relationships and sinful thoughts and actions shows that we have not yet experienced the full benefits of what has been done. However, our text is telling us that what has already been done was all that needed to be done to make you the person God wants you to be. Indeed, the day will come, when Christ "*will appear a second time*", when your experience will fully align with the reality of what has already been done. That's why you are waiting for him. You long for Jesus to reappear, to come back, because you ache to experience salvation fully and completely. You yearn for everything that is wrong about you to evaporate from your experience of thinking and acting. That will happen when Jesus brings salvation, that is, if you are one of those who longs for the salvation only Jesus can bring; if you long to be the person God wants you to be.

The writer tells us that Christ "will appear a second time", that is, when Jesus returns at the end of human history as we know it. This means Christ has already appeared a first time. Indeed, the context of the verses we are looking at direct the spotlight at Christ's first appearance. So in verse 26 we read: "*But now [Christ] has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.*"

Our text doesn't say "But now Christ has *died* once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself." No! It says, "*But now Christ has appeared once for all at the end of the ages...*" Christ "appeared" when he became man and lived among us. This doesn't mean Christ only appeared to be human. Anaxagoras stated, "Appearances are a glimpse of the unseen." Rather, the Incarnation, the reality of Christ becoming man and living among us, is the *appearing* of One whom none had ever seen. Likewise, we can't see Jesus as the risen Lord with our physical eyes. However, "*he will appear a second time*". For the day will come when we see him with our own eyes.

Let's go back to the first time when Christ appeared, when people saw him with their own eyes. The writer tells us that Christ "appeared once for all *at the end of the ages*". That's exciting! We are in the last days, the closing scene of the play, the last chapter of the book. Very soon the curtain will come down, the credits will begin to roll, the last page will be turned. Then Christ "will appear a second time".

I went with Jessica to see a play recently. I know she enjoyed it. I found it kind-of-interesting but my seat wasn't very comfortable. So though I was glad to be there with Jess I was looking forward very much to the end of the play, just as you, perhaps, are already longing for the end of this sermon. Do you have that same longing, that same restlessness, for the Lord to say the last words of this drama we call history? Are you waiting, yearning for Jesus to appear a second time, to see him face to face, and experience salvation totally and completely?

If you and I are not longing for Jesus' second appearing it is because we have not assimilated the significance of his first appearing: "*he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.*" Both of Jesus' appearances are concerned with the eradicating sin from our lives, with uprooting the roots of evil so thoroughly and completely that they will never ever grow back again.

How content are you with being you? How content am I with being me? I was listening to a podcast by Dr. Paul Tripp. He was a counselor and considered himself particularly good at counseling husbands who had problems with anger. But he had never seen himself as having a problem in this area. One day a friend asked him a series of questions about what he had learned from a conference they had both been to. As Tripp answered these questions he was shattered to realize that he himself was an angry man. His own marriage and family life had been seriously damaged for many years by the anger he had expressed to his wife and children.

Have you come to terms with who you really are? Have I? Do we see ourselves as radically sinful people who long to be set free from our sins? Not just in some abstract way removed from the nitty-gritty of everyday life, but completely freed from being a sinful you, a sinful me. We read: "*now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself*" (v26). We've just had the

Olympics. How do we see Jesus? Like some great athlete we watch perform some amazing feat and win a gold medal? Maybe to us he is like the greatest athlete who ever lived! Over time I've become less enthralled by the Olympics, partly due to my cynicism about drug cheats, but also because I've seen it all before. When we think of Jesus' accomplishment on the cross is he just like a great athlete that we look at from a distance as but spectators? Let's get this straight. Jesus did not appear to create a spectacle. He was born into this world, he was raised as a boy, he lived and ate and wept and laughed among us for 33 years for one purpose - to do something that would change your life and my life for ever. Using the language of Isaiah 53 our writer reminds us that Jesus was sacrificed "to take away the sins of many people", that is, to take away the sins of all people, since here "many" means "all", everyone. He died for you, for me, to deal with all that is wrong and twisted in your life and in mine.

In saying Jesus "*appeared once for all at the end of the ages*" we have a double-play on the word *appear*. Go back to verse 24: "*For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence.*" The incarnation and the Lord's return are the two appearances of Christ to us. But there is also an appearance that Jesus makes "*for us in God's presence*". He appeared to us in these last days so that he might appear for us in God's presence. He came to live among us so that he might die. It is as the one who died for us that he appears for us in God's presence.

Why is this necessary? Because people like you and me are so messed up that there's a limit to how much of our sinful feelings and thoughts and actions God will tolerate. God told Adam and Eve that if they stepped out of line, as they did, they would die - he would set a limit on their earthly existence. That's why they died. That's why you die. Our text states the obvious, that "*man is destined to die*". The word "destined" is elsewhere translated "laid up". Paul speaks of a crown of righteousness "laid up" for him or "in store" for him. In one of Jesus' parables a faithless steward returns a coin which he says he "laid away" in a piece of cloth. We have food stored away in our cupboards, fridge and freezer for later use. It will all get eaten at some stage. Have you ever thought of your life as a life stored up? You are part of a vast inventory that will not stay on some warehouse shelf forever. You will die. The time will come when God will claim your life like a warehouseman takes an article of stock off the shelf to fill an order. Further since your death is "laid up" or "destined" you have no control over when you will die. A Denver newspaper reported how a 26-year-old man was stabbed to death when he put on a bullet-proof vest and his uncle plunged a knife into his chest to test the body armor. The protective vest failed to withstand the blade of the knife. I recommend that you put on the protective vest of a healthy lifestyle, good diet, good food, etc. But protective measures don't change the fact that you will die and you had better be good and ready when it happens. I've taken out a double-indemnity policy. I took it out without understanding what it was. The insurance man explained that when I die, they bury me twice.

I might be buried twice or three times, but I will die once. Some smart Alec quipped, "I intend to live forever - so far so good." Do not make the mistake of living by the maxim "You only live once". No, no, no! Rather, live by the maxim, "You only die once". In this life your first priority is to make sure you are ready to die and ready to face what comes after death. If that is not your first priority then you are a blind fool.

Death itself is an expression of God's judgment. Death is horrible. But death is only the dark and ominous doorway into far greater horror. So in verse 27 our writer tells us: "*man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment*". But here the writer does not mean that after death man dies and then faces one of two possibilities - going to hell or going to God's heavenly kingdom. Flick to 10:27 where the writer speaks of those for whom there is "*only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God*". He warns in 10:31: "*It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*"

That's the context. Sin makes people the enemies of God. The enemies of God will be consumed in the raging fire of God's anger. For the enemies of God there is "*only a fearful expectation of judgment*". So when you read in 9:27 "*man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment*" then realize there is no hope expressed in those words. They are completely black. This is a terrifying truth. For sinful man to die is but the beginning of disaster. Forget those misleading stories about ecstatic near-death experiences which are not the same as the real thing. Death is to be feared not because death itself is terrible, which, of course, it is, but because of what follows death, namely, facing the God we have treated with contempt.

This is why Christ, after sacrificing himself and rising from the dead, appeared for us in God's presence. In the Old Testament God gave us a model to help us understand how this works. In the Old Testament God's people, even though radically sinful, were able to have a relationship with God because of the sacrificing of animals. The blood poured out by those sacrificed animals was essential for maintaining the relationship between God and his people. In verse 22 we are told: "*In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.*"

If you protest this was all repulsive and horrible and cruel then you've got the idea. The Old Testament model shows that your sin and my sin is not as trivial as you and I want to think it is. In God's eyes it is utterly revolting, abhorrent. The way you and I see our lives is distorted because "*our hearts are deceitful and desperately corrupt*". But the way God sees things is the way they actually are - and one day the blinkers will be off and we will see ourselves as God sees us. That will be an utterly unbearable experience for most people. The killing of Christ, the perfect Son of God, was the most evil thing human beings have ever done and, if you could but see it, you were there when they crucified my Lord and so was I. We all indirectly were responsible for all the atrocities human beings, like you and me, committed on the most wonderful person ever to grace this earth. Yet it is precisely the horror of what was done that day which God uses to save people from the horror of judgment after death. That is why Jesus, as our high priest, like the high priest in the Old Testament, went into the very presence of God, not with the blood of animals but with his own blood having been shed for you, for me. For those of us who believe this and totally depend upon what Jesus has done for us, we do not wait in dread of death and the terrible judgment that normally follows death. Rather, we wait for him who brings salvation.

In saying that Christ was "*sacrificed once*" to take away our sins a contrast is being made with the Old Testament model. Models never correspond perfectly to the reality that they represent. So it was with the Old Testament model. For in the Old Testament they had to keep the blood flowing if there was to be continual

forgiveness. In the Old Testament rivers of animal blood flowed. But when Christ died on the cross he did so as one who came into the world for this very purpose, to sacrifice himself once and for all. His blood, unlike animal blood, did not secure a temporary forgiveness for us, but a permanent, eternal forgiveness. He bore our sins on the cross and when he appears again, for a second time, he will consummate the process set in motion by what he did on the cross, taking away our sins in the fullest manner possible, as we experience the greatness of the salvation he brings.

Are you waiting for him to appear this second time? Are you longing, yearning to see Jesus face to face, remembering the words of 1 John 3:2-3:

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.

“Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev 22:20b).