

Hebrews Series Handout 12
April 17, 2016
Observations about Paul's Theory of the Atonement
as Reflected in the Book of Hebrews
Teacher: Jack Crabtree

- A. The unmistakable emphasis in Paul's thought in the argument of Hebrews is to the effect that Jesus will intercede on our behalf, not that Jesus died on our behalf.
1. The brief introduction to Paul's main argument—intended to get right to the nub of why the Messiah's death is appropriate—is not to state that “Jesus is the payment for sins.” Rather, it is to state that “Jesus was appointed by God to be our true high priest.”
 - a. See ¶19–¶20 (5:5–5:10).
 2. If Paul held the theory of the atonement that we traditionally have held, then this is a completely surprising fact. Why would he not forcefully emphasize the DEATH of Jesus (as the payment for our sins) as the basis of our salvation if he held the traditional understanding of the atonement?
 - a. This ought to raise a serious question with regard to whether Paul does in fact hold the traditional view of the atonement.
- B. The whole direction of Paul's primary argument in Hebrews overwhelmingly contributes to the above emphasis.
1. The direction of Paul's argument runs like THIS: Since God unmistakably promised a new priest, it follows that the priests under the Mosaic covenant could not effectively secure forgiveness for the children of Israel. Further, it follows by implication that there must be a new covenant that involves a new and different sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins.
 - a. Hence, Paul's argument begins with and therefore HIGHLIGHTS the intercession of a more distinguished priest as the basis of forgiveness.
 - (1) This is odd and unexpected if Paul holds the traditional understanding of the atonement.
 2. The direction of Paul's argument does NOT run like this: Since God unmistakably promised a new sacrifice for sins, it follows that the animal sacrifices under the Mosaic covenant were not effective in bringing about the forgiveness of our sins. Further, it follows by implication that there is the necessity of a new and different priest to bring this more effective offering.
 - a. Hence, Paul's argument does not begin with and therefore HIGHLIGHT the need for a superior sacrifice as the basis of forgiveness.

Observations about Paul’s Theory of the Atonement as Reflected in the Book of Hebrews

- (1) This is odd and unexpected if Paul holds the traditional understanding of the atonement.
- C. Nowhere in the entire argument does Paul ever mention Jesus’ death on the cross without connecting it to Jesus’ intercessory role as our priest.
1. Paul frequently mentions in his argument how central to our forgiveness is the fact that Jesus is our mediator, intercessor, and priest.
 - a. For example, ¶36 (7:18–7:25)
 2. Nowhere in his argument does Paul ever mention how central to our forgiveness is the fact that Jesus offered the right sort of sacrifice without at the same time connecting it with Jesus’ role as our mediator. But Paul never mentions Jesus’ death without connecting it to Jesus’ advocacy and intercession as priest.
 - a. Note ¶45 (9:11–12) > It does not say that Jesus obtained “freedom from death in the age to come” by “his blood.” Rather, it says that he obtained “freedom from death in the age to come” by his “entering one time into the sacred precincts with his blood.” That is, our freedom from death was secured through his intercession, using the blood offering as a tool of that intercession. It was not secured through his death.
 - b. Note that 46.1 (9:13–9:14) is the nearest Paul ever gets to attributing our salvation to Jesus’ death. However, even here Paul immediately, in 46.2 (9:15), follows it by stating that our receiving eternal Life is the result of Jesus’ being the “mediator” (that is, our intercessor) under the New Covenant.
 3. As we already mentioned above, this fact reinforces the fact that Paul places the emphasis on Jesus’ advocacy, not his death. As we saw above, this is an extremely odd and unexpected emphasis if Paul held the traditional view of the atonement. This is exactly what we would expect if the effective advocacy theory of the atonement is what Paul believes.
- D. In speaking of the better hope that is offered by the new and different covenant, Paul says nothing at all of the new and different sacrifice in ¶36 (7:18–7:25). The only thing he mentions is the new and different priest who is permanently installed until the end of time. It is this more distinguished PRIEST that makes offers a better hope, not a more valuable and precious sacrifice.
1. This is inconsistent with Paul’s holding the traditional view; it is not inconsistent with his holding the effective advocacy theory.
- E. In ¶37 (7:26–7:28), Paul seems to be speaking to the issue of what, ideally, we need in order to solve the problem of human sin. Note that his answer is to stress the ideal and fully

Observations about Paul's Theory of the Atonement as Reflected in the Book of Hebrews

qualified priest that we need. He does not stress the ideal and fully satisfying (to God) offering that needs to be offered.

1. This would have been the perfect place in Paul's argument for him to make the point that we needed God, with his infinite nature, to become man and die an infinite death so that the debt to divine justice might be fully paid and God's righteousness fully satisfied. But he does not give even the slightest hint at such a point. Quite clearly, Paul is not arguing on the basis of the traditional view of the atonement.
- F. Everything in Paul's argument would tend to suggest that this is how he saw the sacrifices and offerings offered up by Levitical priests: They were an essential aspect of HOW those priests sought to propitiate God's wrath as they appealed to God for mercy on behalf of the worshipper. Everything points to Paul seeing Jesus, in his priestly role, as doing exactly the same thing: He offered up himself as a propitiatory offering in order to propitiate God's wrath *as he appeals to God for mercy on our behalf*.
1. Therefore, no offering is seen to have an effect on God independently of the priest who offers it up. The offering is a "tool" that the priest uses in his act of appealing to God for mercy. Either his appeal will be successful, or it will not be successful. The success of his appeal will, in part, be contingent on whether his offering truly will propitiate God's wrath. That is, is the offering he brings sufficiently delightful to God that it can eclipse God's wrath toward the worshipper?
 - a. The propitiation of God's wrath, alone, is not sufficient to secure God's mercy and forgiveness. God's wrath can be propitiated without him deciding to grant forgiveness. God's granting of forgiveness is ultimately seen as a response to the priest's appeal. The priest requests mercy for the worshipper and, hopefully, God responds by granting the priest's request, for God's wrath has been softened by the propitiatory offering that the priest has brought. Hence, it is the priestly intercession that ultimately results in mercy and forgiveness being granted, not the offering that the priest has brought. The offering is a tool that the priest employs in the course of making intercession, but it is the intercession, not the offering, that leads to the granting of forgiveness.
 2. This whole point above is in utter contradiction to the traditional view of the atonement.
 - a. On the traditional view, Jesus' propitiatory death is, in itself, totally sufficient to result in forgiveness. Jesus' death *obligates* God to forgive.

Observations about Paul's Theory of the Atonement as Reflected in the Book of Hebrews

- G. Paul unquestionably frames Jesus' intercession as an appeal to God for mercy; Paul never even hints at framing Jesus' intercession as putting forth the proposition that I am now somehow actually deserving of a blessing, having been rendered so by Jesus' death.
1. Paul explicitly connects Jesus' death with his intercession for me; he never connects Jesus' death to the justice of my being granted eternal Life.
 - a. Odd and unexpected if he embraces the traditional view.
 2. Paul does mention Jesus' death and suffering as somehow qualifying *him* for his role as my priest and advocate; but Paul never mentions Jesus' death and suffering as somehow qualifying *me* for the blessing of eternal Life.
 - a. See ¶20 (5:8–5:10)
 - b. Again, this is very odd and unexpected if he embraces the traditional view.
- H. *Nowhere* in the entire argument does Paul ever explicitly argue that Jesus' death somehow compensated God, repaid him, satisfied him, or otherwise fully made up for the injustice of my sin against God.
1. This is very odd and unexpected if he embraces the traditional view.
- I. *Nowhere whatsoever* does Paul mention, in the context of this argument, how critical it is that Jesus be the infinite God who died, or that Jesus' death constitutes an infinite payment.
1. This is an irresponsible omission if Paul embraces the traditional view.