

WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW CHRIST HEBREWS 13:9-16

SEPTEMBER 30, 2012

Imagine being a new Jewish Christian living in Jerusalem approximately thirty-five years after the ministry of Jesus. The elaborate ceremonies of the Temple are continuing, and as the Day of Atonement is approaching, you and your family are wondering: should we fast? Should we participate in this most holy day of the year? Will our sins still be covered if we don't? And what about our other religious customs and ceremonies; what place do they have in our lives, now that we are Christians?

If the teachings of Judaism were well engrained in your thinking, the burden of these questions would have been enormous. But then you begin to read the book of Hebrews. As you come to chapters 9 and 10, you find a full description of the temple ceremonies that the high priests were to perform on this most holy day. You also find a most remarkable Christian critique: Jesus is our High Priest, and His once-for-all sacrifice is far superior to the ongoing and futile efforts of the Jewish high priests. For Jewish Christians, you now realize, the Day of Atonement is obsolete. You no longer need to set aside the tenth day of the seventh month each and every year.

But what exactly are the implications of this teaching for you, and for all who desire to follow the Lord Jesus Christ? The answer to that question is laid out in the passage that is before us this morning. It is a passage in which our author is doing three things:

1. He warns against any teaching that seeks to elevate the ceremonial distinctives of Judaism above the internal workings of God's grace (vv. 9-10).
2. He exhorts all who have professed faith in Christ to leave the camp of Judaism and to wholeheartedly identify themselves as followers of Christ (vv. 11-14).
3. He encourages all believers to continue to participate in the true Christian sacrifices of praising God and serving others (vv. 15-16).

A. The Warning: "Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings . . ." (vv. 9-10). Because of the verses which follow (vv. 11ff), the concern that is central in our author's thinking appears to be doctrines about "ceremonial foods" (v. 9, NIV). He argues against such teachings by (1) comparing them with the workings of grace, which truly nourishes the heart (v. 9a); (2) noting that ceremonial foods are of *no* spiritual benefit (v. 9b; Cf. 1 Corinthians 8:8); (3) observing that the altar which Christians have offers a greater privilege than the one used by the Levitical priesthood (v. 10). In this context *the Christian altar represents the cross of Christ, upon which the blood of our sin offering was shed*. With this understanding, the point of our author becomes clear. On the Day of Atonement, the priests could not eat any part of the sin offering. But we can partake of our sacrifice through a spiritual reception of Christ by faith (see the teaching of the Lord Jesus in John 6:48-58). We today have a higher privilege than the priests under the Old Covenant ever had!

B. The Exhortation: “Let us go to Him outside the camp . . .” (vv. 11-14). Again, the backdrop of these verses is the Day of Atonement, from which our author is drawing an analogy: just as the animal carcasses were burned outside the camp of Israel (Lev. 16:27), Jesus also experienced something quite similar. He suffered the shameful death of a common criminal outside the gate of Jerusalem. Therefore, those who have professed faith in Christ have obligated themselves to follow Him. As He died in disgrace outside the city, so should these Hebrew Christians be willing to be disgraced by turning unreservedly from the camp of Judaism to the Lord Jesus Christ. Were they willing to accept His reproach as they faced rejection from family, friends, and their religious traditions? The same question must be asked by all who seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ today! Such Christian commitment and endurance is founded upon the realization that this world is merely a temporary dwelling en route to a heavenly and eternal city (v. 14; Cf. 11:14-16; 12:22-24).

Jesus, I my cross have taken
All to leave and follow Thee;
Destitute, despised, forsaken,
Thou from hence my all shall be.
Perish every fond ambition,
All I've sought or hoped or known;
Yet how rich is my condition,
God and heaven are still my own.
(Henry F. Lyte, 1824)

C. The Conclusion: “Through Him, therefore, let us offer up a sacrifice . . . (vv. 15-16). Here then is the proper ritual of the Christian faith: the sacrifice of praising God continually (v. 15) *and* the sacrifice of kind and loving service to others. “Never forget to show kindness and to share what you have with others, for such are the sacrifices which God approves” (NEB). Founded on the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ, Christianity is sacrificial through and through (1 Peter 2:5; Romans 12:1).