The Land of Beginning Again

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On Hebrews 8–9, the Priest After the Order of Melchizedek, the Covenant Written on the Heart, and the End of the Guardrails Between Us and the Throne

A Dream I Wish I Hadn't Had

I am going off-script today, which is not how I normally do this. I had a dream early this morning, and it shook me badly enough that I have decided the rest of this chapter is going to be the response to it. I will try to tell it briefly, because the telling matters less than the application.

In the dream, I was somewhere like the Smoky Mountains: that kind of resort area, mountains rising up on either side, a tourist town in the valley. My children and grandchildren were all with me, and we were enjoying the scenery together. And as we walked, we kept encountering those barkers who stand by the sidewalks and call you up to their villas, "Just come look at the property. Spend a free night. Take the tour. We will give you something nice if you do." Timeshare-sales pitch operations. I had no interest in going. "I have been there, done that, got the t-shirt." But the kids were enthusiastic. "Oh, it sounds great. Let us go up."

So they went up. My wife was uneasy about it, so she went up after them. I stayed down in the valley at the hotel. And in the middle of the night I heard the thunderous sound of the earth giving way. The mountain where they were collapsed entirely. And I knew, instantly, that everything was gone.

Everything. Every person I had spent thirty-four years raising. Every grandchild they had brought into the world. My wife. The accumulated reservoir of every relationship that had constituted my actual life. All of it gone in one moment because they had trusted the barkers and gone up the mountain the barkers had directed them to.

When the rubble settled, I went looking for any survivors. The only people I could find, alive, among the boulders and the rocks, were the same scam-artist barkers who had lured my family up there in the first place. And they were making jokes. I walked away from the rubble down a road, alone. And I woke up at five-fifty in the morning.

Be Clear About What God Is Telling Us

I sat with the dream for a long time before getting up. And after I told my wife what I had dreamed, she said something I want to repeat carefully. She said: “You need to be more clear, Rob. The voices that are speaking out in this world right now are so compelling and so convincing. We have got to be extremely clear about what God is telling us.”

Now let me say what I am not talking about. I am not talking about some kind of antiquated religious dogmatism that is super-confident about the small print and uses it to bludgeon people who do not share the same vocabulary. That kind of clarity drives kids and young people away. I have done my share of that kind of clarity. We are all in some kind of recovery from it.

What I am talking about is the original gospel, the news that an entire generation of pagans encountered and that caused them to change their way of being and go in a different direction. The news was a story about a man who sacrificed himself for the sins of the world, and that somehow this redeemed them. The sins did not get smaller because of the news. The sins were as many and as deep as they had been. But the people who heard the news felt that

something on the inside had changed for them, and they responded by changing their way of being in the world.

That kind of clarity is what we need to be carrying. Not the small-print dogmatism that produces the next generation's deconstruction. The original gospel-clarity that produces the next generation's actual transformation. And in a moment when the barkers on every sidewalk are calling our children up onto mountains we have already learned are going to collapse, we owe our families the clarity of telling them what God has told us.

The Stuff We Skip

I have been reading through Hebrews on Wednesday evenings, and the eighth and ninth chapters are the chapters where modern Christianity tends to dismiss the underlying argument. Old ceremonial language. Tabernacle furniture. Animal sacrifice. Priestly garments. Day-of-Atonement ritual. "Archaic. We cannot possibly understand it. Skip ahead to chapter ten."

And the skipping is exactly the problem. Hebrews 8 and 9 are doing the load-bearing theological work that makes the rest of the New Testament intelligible. If you skip chapters 8 and 9, you have no framework left for understanding why Jesus's death does what the apostles say it does. You are left with a generic religious moral sentiment that the historic ceremonial language was supposed to actually explain.

And the underlying question Hebrews 8-9 is wrestling with is the question of conscience. The ancient man and woman were as gripped by conscience as our contemporaries are. They knew, in the same way we know, that there was something on the inside that needed to be addressed, something the outward life could not get at.

Let me put it concretely. I got on my bike the other day in ninety-four-degree heat at something like two hundred percent humidity, and rode for an hour. The sweat was pouring off

of me by the end. Now imagine I came home, walked straight into the bedroom, and crawled into clean sheets. None of us would do that. We have a built-in recognition that the body needs to be addressed before contact with what is clean. Or imagine spending a day in the garden with your hands deep in the dirt, then going directly to the kitchen to prepare dinner, then directly to bed. None of us does that either. We have an instinctive recognition that the outside has to be cleaned before contact with what is clean.

And every one of us has the same instinctive recognition about the inside. There is something within us that needs to be addressed before we can rest cleanly with what is clean. The conscience knows what the body knows. The outside-cleaning has an interior parallel that the cleaning of the body cannot reach.

What I Carried for Twenty Years

And let me tell you what I have carried. I did something when I was fourteen or fifteen or sixteen years old that I carried with me for fifteen or twenty years after the fact. Not because anyone reminded me of it. Not because anyone else even knew about it. Because the interior diagnostic, the conscience, kept replaying it across every quiet moment for nearly two decades.

That is the kind of dirt that goes deep. And the only thing that can deliver you from that kind of conscience-burden is an encounter with a God who can reach at the deepest level where the dirt has lodged. Not a behavior-modification program. Not a self-affirmation practice. Not a culturally-approved therapeutic vocabulary. The actual deliverance from the actual interior dirt that the conscience knows about: That is what the rest of Hebrews 8 and 9 are pointing to, and it is what the surrounding world genuinely needs.

The world right now needs deliverance from this burden of conscience. Look at the contemporary categories: suicide rates at historic highs, drug overdose rates at historic highs,

self-harm at historic highs, depression and anxiety at historic highs across both old and young populations. The interior of the surrounding population is groaning. And the conscience-burden underneath the groaning is exactly what Hebrews 8 and 9 are addressing.

The Internal Wounds

And the interior wounds we carry produce predictable behavioral patterns. Sometimes fight. Sometimes flight. Sometimes freeze. That is the animal-kingdom diagnostic that the whole creation, according to Paul in Romans 8, is groaning under as it waits for the redemption of all things. The deer in the headlights freezes. One more leap and the deer would be safely off the road. But the deer freezes: the fatalistic interior response saying, “This is just how it is. Let the car run me over.”

I have watched animal-rescue videos, the human capacity at its best showing up alongside the animal-kingdom suffering. A school of orcas approached a fishing vessel once, behaving unusually, and the experienced seamen followed them. The orcas led them to a baby orca caught in a submerged net. The men dove down, cut the calf loose, and the response of the surrounding pod was visibly grateful. And these are creatures we have named “killer whales.” The same kind of thing happens with a dog on an ice ledge: a man rowing out, working the dog into the boat, getting bitten in the process because the dog was operating in fight-or-flight from its own pain, and only later seeing that the rescue had cost some of the rescuer’s own blood.

That is the picture of the surrounding world. Internal wounds producing fight or flight or freeze in every direction. And the rescuer, to do the work of rescue, has to absorb some of the wounded creature’s misdirected aggression. The cost of helping a fight-or-flight-frozen creature is bleeding from the bites and scratches the creature directs at its rescuer. That is the gospel-shape of how Jesus enters into our wounded interior. He absorbs the aggression we direct at him

because we cannot tell, from the inside of our wounding, whether his hands are reaching toward us to harm us or to free us.

The Massey Default

And every family has its inherited default reaction to the interior wounding. Some families default to fight. Some default to flight. Some default to freeze. And the inherited patterns get transmitted across generations until somebody breaks the pattern by deliberate spiritual work.

I grew up around the disparaging vocabulary my father used for people he wanted to dismiss. His favorite term for someone he did not respect was “sheeper”: a contraction of “sheep-herder,” delivered with enough scorn that any time I heard it I knew exactly who and what he was dismissing. “That old sheeper.” I heard that contempt-word a thousand times growing up.

And the Bible’s reaction to the same category is precisely the opposite of my father’s. Sheep-herders are God’s preferred audience for the gospel announcement. When Samuel arrived at Jesse’s house to anoint the next king of Israel, Jesse paraded his sons in front of Samuel, the oldest first, the strongest first, the most impressive first. None of them was the chosen one. “Are these all the sons you have?” Samuel asked. And Jesse, almost dismissively, mentioned the youngest: “There remains yet the youngest, and there he is, keeping the sheep” (1 Samuel 16:11). Jesse had not even brought the sheep-herder in. The sheep-herder was not even worth showing to the prophet.

And David is the chosen king. The sheep-herder who would have been disparaged with the same scorn-word my father used is the one God selected to be the king of Israel and the ancestor of the Messiah. And a thousand years later, when the angels announced the birth of Jesus, they did not announce it to the temple authorities or to the political-economic elites. They

announced it to a group of shepherds working the night shift outside Bethlehem (Luke 2:8-14). Twice. Two of the most consequential divine announcements in the entire biblical narrative, both delivered to sheep-herders rather than to the surrounding culture's recognized elites.

This is the kingdom-pattern. God gives names above all names to people the surrounding culture has refused to name. And every one of us who has come into the kingdom has received that family name, the name above every name, even when the surrounding world had previously refused to name us at all. Whatever "sheeper" you were treated as by whoever did the surrounding naming, the name God has given you is the actual one.

David's Courage Was Not Courage Without Fear

And the kind of courage David eventually exhibited before Goliath was not the absence of fear. David knew what bears and lions could do, because he had fought both while protecting his sheep (1 Samuel 17:34-37). He knew the cost of standing up to predators. His courage before Goliath was not innocence about danger. It was confidence in the God who had already delivered him from the bear and the lion.

The Goliaths we face are different from David's, but the structural diagnostic is the same. We may not fight a literal nine-foot warrior with a brass helmet, but we are fighting something. There is a darkness, an oppression, a set of voices in this world that is so compelling that the Greeks named them the sirens, the singing voices on the shore that drew sailors off course and onto the rocks. Odysseus had his sailors stop their ears with wax and tie him to the mast so he could hear the sirens without being able to act on what he heard. Every culture across history has had to deal with the same operating reality. Humanity has not changed.

But Jesus changed everything. He genuinely did.

The Priest After the Order of Melchizedek

And Hebrews 8 picks up the central change by returning to a figure who appears very briefly in Genesis 14 and then disappears from the Old Testament narrative for a thousand years. Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of God Most High (Genesis 14:18). Abraham (the great patriarch, the prototype of biblical faith) met this priest after returning from rescuing Lot, and gave him a tithe of the spoils. And the writer of Hebrews builds substantial theology on the tithe-transaction:

> For if Joshua had given them rest, then He would not afterward have spoken of another day. There remains therefore a rest for the people of God . . . Now consider how great this man was, to whom even the patriarch Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils. (Hebrews 4:8–9; 7:4)

The greater always blesses the lesser. Melchizedek blessed Abraham. By the structural logic of biblical blessing, Melchizedek was greater than Abraham. And Moses was descended from Levi, who descended from Abraham, who paid tithes to Melchizedek. Which means that the entire Aaronic priesthood, Moses's brother's lineage, was already, by the time it was instituted, structurally subordinate to the priesthood of Melchizedek. That is the underlying logic of Hebrews 7-8.

And then, a thousand years after Melchizedek disappeared from the narrative, David wrote in Psalm 110:

"The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.' The Lord has sworn and will not relent, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek'" (Psalm 110:1, 4).

A priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. The writer of Hebrews seizes on this Psalm 110 reference and asks the obvious question, if the Aaronic priesthood was the all-sufficient priesthood, why would David, a thousand years after Aaron, be predicting a different priesthood? The very fact that a new priesthood is being predicted is the structural evidence that the old priesthood was insufficient. And the new priest is going to be Jesus, the one who, at a young age, began encountering the priests in the Jerusalem temple and debating Torah with them, who grew in wisdom and stature, who became faithful in every temptation, who lived as a lamb among wolves without abandoning the lamb-pattern at any point. That is the new priest after the order of Melchizedek.

Leviticus 16 and the Day of Atonement

And Hebrews 9 unfolds the inadequacy of the old priesthood by walking through Leviticus 16, the day-of-atonement ritual that was the central annual transaction of the Aaronic priesthood. Let me describe what was actually happening on that one day each year, because the contemporary church does not always understand the underlying structure.

The high priest had to be ceremonially cleansed on the outside. He offered a bull for himself, atoning for his own sins first, because no priest could enter the holy of holies while himself bearing unaddressed sin. Then he offered a ram for the people. Then he took a basin of blood, the blood of the sacrifices, and carried it past two layers of separation into the innermost chamber of the tabernacle.

Look carefully at the architecture. The tabernacle had a fence around it. Only consecrated Israelites could enter the outer court to offer sacrifices. Only priests could enter the holy place, where they trimmed the wicks on the seven-branched lampstand, replaced the bread on the table of showbread, and tended the altar of incense. And only the high priest, only once a year, could

pass through the veil into the holy of holies, where the ark of the covenant sat with the cherubim of glory over the mercy seat.

Multiple guardrails. Multiple layers of separation. Multiple categories of who could go how far in. And the architectural message of the entire structure was clear: God is holy, and approach to God is dangerous, and the surrounding population has to be protected from the holiness by these concentric zones of restricted access.

And the Indiana Jones films have, in their odd way, popularized the ark of the covenant in the contemporary cultural imagination. Most people in the surrounding culture know the ark from Indiana Jones rather than from Moses. The cinematic version captures, in its visual register, the same sense of dangerous holiness that the Leviticus 16 architecture was designed to communicate. The ark cannot be casually approached. The holiness it represents cannot be casually engaged with.

And the high priest, once a year, with a basin of bull's blood and ram's blood, had to make the inward journey past all the guardrails to sprinkle the blood on the mercy seat. The waiting population sat outside the tabernacle in trepidation. "Will the sacrifice be accepted? Was the priest holy enough? Was the bull adequately prepared? Did the ram meet the specifications?" The whole population's relationship with God for the coming year depended on whether one human being's annual visit had been done correctly.

And the writer of Hebrews names the structural inadequacy of the entire system:

> For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purified, would have had no more consciousness of sins. But in

> those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins. (Hebrews 10:1–4)

The annual repetition is itself the evidence of inadequacy. If the sacrifice had actually done what it claimed, it would not have needed to be repeated. The fact that it had to be repeated every single year for centuries is the evidence that it was not actually getting to the conscience underneath the outward act. The blood of bulls and goats could clean the outside. It could not get to the inside.

A High Priest Carrying His Own Blood

And then Hebrews 9 names the structural shift:

> 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. (Hebrews 9:11–12)

Jesus did not carry someone else's blood through the guardrails. He carried his own. And the cleansing he applied was not merely external; it was the cleansing of the conscience itself:

"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?" (Hebrews 9:14).

Cleansing the conscience from dead works. That is the structural payoff Hebrews 9 is announcing. The old sacrifices could not reach the conscience. The new sacrifice reaches the conscience and cleanses it from the dead works that have lodged there. And the cleansing is not annual. It is once-for-all. The repetition is over.

And let me name something about the resurrection that the contemporary church sometimes blurs. If Jesus did not actually come out of the grave, then everything we are doing is foolhardy. We should go home. There is no point in the whole project. But if Jesus did come out of the grave, if the resurrection is a historical event rather than a spiritual symbol, then absolutely everything has changed. The blood that was sprinkled on the heavenly mercy seat has been accepted by God once-for-all. The veil between the surrounding population and the throne has been torn from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51). The guardrails that the Levitical architecture maintained for centuries are gone.

No More Guardrails

Hold what this means. There is no more vetting of your role as you proceed toward the throne. No more checkpoint of whether you are clean enough to approach. No more inquiry about whether your sacrifice has been adequately prepared.

God is standing there on the throne saying: “Come, sons and daughters. Be part of what I have asked you to be part of.” The architecture of restricted access that Leviticus 16 had organized for centuries has been dismantled. The veil is torn. The basin of blood has already been sprinkled. The annual transaction has been replaced by the once-for-all transaction. And the population that had previously been kept on the far side of the guardrails is now invited directly to the throne.

This is what we have been missing. We have been operating, in the contemporary American religious imagination, as if there are still guardrails, as if certain people qualify and certain people do not. As if the priestly class still mediates the access. As if our own conscience-burden still has to be addressed by some annual transaction that the religious authorities will

perform on our behalf. None of it is true any longer. The guardrails are down. The veil is torn. The access is direct.

And in our contemporary religious imagination, we have invented new priestly classes to replace the old. Politicians. Economic advisors. Sports heroes. Cultural icons. Every election cycle we sacrifice to a new pantheon, "Maybe this one is the one. Maybe this presidential candidate. Maybe this executive will turn the company around. Maybe this celebrity figure will provide the cultural anchor we have been looking for." And every time, the human priest disappoints. Eventually some scandal emerges, some moral failure surfaces, some history of wrongdoing comes to light, some attempt to pay hush money comes out. The political priesthood is structurally as inadequate as the Aaronic priesthood was, and for the same reason. No human priest, however gifted, can deliver what only the priest after the order of Melchizedek can deliver. Only the faithful one, who remained a lamb in the midst of the surrounding turmoil, could carry the conscience-cleansing blood through the heavenly veil. And he did it once-for-all.

The Covenant Written on the Heart

And the writer of Hebrews quotes, at length, the longest single Old Testament citation in the entire epistle, from Jeremiah 31:

> Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. None of them shall teach his neighbor, and

> none his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more. (Hebrews 8:8–12, citing Jeremiah 31:31–34)

The new covenant is written on the heart. Not on tablets of stone. Not on rolls of parchment. Not on temple walls. On the heart. The deep interior place that no human hand can reach. The place where the wounds from your father and your grandfather have lodged. The place where the abuse from your mother and your grandmother and your great-grandmother has lodged. The place where the things little children mocked you for in junior high school have lodged.

Junior high school was hell for me. I cannot go back and undo it. And yet little Robbie still freezes up, sometimes, when I think about specific things that were said about me in middle school. That is the depth of the interior wounding. And no surface-level religious practice can reach where the wounding has lodged. Only the One who can inscribe new words on the deep heart can address what is lodged there.

And the inscription work he does is the reimagining of who we are. He takes the primordial soup of our wounded interior and begins to form something new, the way Genesis 1 narrates the divine ordering of the original creation. Light from darkness. Land from sea. Living creatures from sterile ground. The same divine ordering that produced the original creation is now ordering the new creation within the heart of each believer.

Walking Through the Pieces Again

But the new covenant requires a new covenant-maker. And the old covenant-making ritual, the cutting of animals into pieces and walking between the bloody halves, turned out, after

centuries of Israel's repeated covenant-breaking, to require something the original covenant-maker had not been able to deliver.

Jeremiah 34 names the diagnostic directly. Just three chapters after the new-covenant promise in Jeremiah 31, the same prophet describes the disaster underneath the failed old covenant:

> And I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not performed the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between the parts of it . . . I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. (Jeremiah 34:18, 20)

They cut the calf in two and passed between the parts. They had walked through the pieces. They had signed up for the covenant's consequences. And they had failed to keep what they had committed to.

After a thousand years of sacrifice and offering and priestly mediation, the covenant had not done what it claimed. The conscience had not been reached. The interior had not been transformed. The people had continued to break covenant. And the old covenant-walking-through-the-pieces ritual had become, in retrospect, a thousand-year demonstration that human beings cannot be trusted to keep what they promise when they walked between the bloody halves.

And the new covenant-maker does not put the demand on us to walk through the pieces. He walks through them himself. Just as God himself, in Genesis 15, walked between the pieces of Abraham's covenant sacrifice while Abraham was in a deep sleep, taking on himself the consequences of any future covenant-breaking, Jesus walks through the pieces on our behalf in the new covenant. He becomes the guarantee of what we cannot deliver.

And when he comes through the pieces, he carries his blood not into a stone tabernacle but into the heavenly sanctuary itself. And the blood he sprinkles is not on a wooden mercy seat: It is on you and me, the people he has covenanted to receive into the family. Every veil between us and the throne is torn. Every guardrail of the old architecture is dismantled. Every diminishing word that the surrounding world has used to make us feel smaller, less adequate, less valuable, has been turned around in the new-covenant inscription on our actual heart.

Looking for a Lion, Seeing a Lamb

Now hold the imagery against Revelation 5 and Revelation 14. John, in Revelation 5, is told that the Lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed to open the scroll. He turns to see the conquering lion, and sees, instead, a lamb as though it had been slain (Revelation 5:5-6). Same figure. Two different angles of vision. The expected lion of military conquest turns out to be the actual lamb of sacrificial love.

And then in Revelation 14, John sees the same Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 followers:

“Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father’s name written on their foreheads” (Revelation 14:1).

A whole army of lambs standing with the Lamb. Not lions. Lambs. The same kind of creature whose interior had been reconstructed by the new-covenant inscription. The followers have come to look like the One they have been following. And the entire eschatological vision of Revelation is, in this register, the gradual reproduction of the Lamb-shape across the entire community of the redeemed.

That is the new humanity Hebrews 8-9 is announcing. Not the old fight-or-flight-or-freeze humanity that the surrounding world is still operating in. The new lamb-shaped humanity that the new covenant has inscribed across the actual heart.

Stand and Wait With Tiptoes

And the closing diagnostic of Hebrews 9 names what we are supposed to be doing now:

> And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation. (Hebrews 9:27–28)

To those who eagerly wait for Him. That is the operative phrase. Standing on tiptoe, looking over the rim of human history, waiting for the second coming of the One who has already accomplished the first.

Many generations have stood on tiptoe before us, looking for the return of the King. And we will likely not be the generation that sees it directly. But we are part of the line of generations that have been keeping the watch. And the drilling-in we do now, with our words and our commitment to Christ, is what we deposit into the continuing line of generations that will outlast us.

My Grandmother on Tiptoes

And as I was telling my wife about my horrendous dream this morning, she said to me, "You know what your grandmother did? She showed her passion for wanting to serve God without making you feel guilty for being who you were."

My grandmother did exactly that. She would sing the song: "Shouting, come on! You can make it if you try!," and you could feel it from her tiptoes to the top of her head. She believed

Jesus was coming. Every fiber of her being communicated that conviction without weaponizing it against anyone in her proximity.

She has been long dead in the grave. And someday I will be. And someday my children will be. And a hundred generations from now, there will be people who are still standing on tiptoes waiting for the salvation of God because somewhere in the line of generations that came before them, an old woman sang a song that has been passed forward, person to person, across the centuries.

The full story is not told in this life. That is the structural point of why faith is required at all. If Jesus were physically standing here right now, if we could touch him and see him and ask him to clarify whatever we are uncertain about, faith would be unnecessary. The very deferral of his visible return is what makes the present moment a moment of faith rather than a moment of sight. And the faithful work we do in the deferral is what gets deposited into the continuing line of generations that will outlast us.

Confess and Be Cleansed

And let me name the concrete promise that should not be left implicit. First John 1:9, the verse my collaborator confirmed for me from the front row, names it directly:

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

If we confess. He is faithful and just. To forgive. And to cleanse. That is the new-covenant transaction in its most condensed form. We do not have to perform the annual ritual. We do not have to wait for a priestly class to mediate the cleansing on our behalf. We confess what we know to be wrong, and the One who is faithful and just to forgive does the forgiving and the cleansing in the same movement.

Do not leave this chapter without believing this directly. God has given you deliverance from your past, both the past you have inflicted on others and the past that has been inflicted on you. The cleansing is for both directions. Every day is a brand-new day. There is, as the old song says, “a land of beginning again, in the kingdom where Christ is the head.”

Not a Metronome but a Conductor

And the life Christ has given us is not a metronome-life that demands rigid synchronization with a single external standard. I played in a middle-school band, and I remember the metronome the band teacher used, that mechanical tick-tick-tick that everyone had to synchronize against. The metronome had one register. One pace. One unforgiving demand. Whatever your personal musical instinct might have been, the metronome was indifferent to it.

The Mosaic law had something of that metronome-quality. “This is how you do it. This is the cadence. This is the unbending standard. Approach God in exactly this way.” And the metronome could not accommodate the actual variation among the human beings who were trying to march to its beat.

But Jesus is not a metronome. He is a conductor. And the symphony he is conducting includes every individual instrument in the surrounding orchestra, each playing its particular part, with the conductor drawing from each what the symphony as a whole requires at each particular moment. You do not have to talk like me. You do not have to think like me. You do not have to express the new-covenant inscription the same way I express it. He has written something on your heart that he has not written on mine. And the symphony of the kingdom requires you to play your particular note, conducted by the great High Priest, in coordination with everyone else’s particular note.

Bring out from the treasure-trove of your particular heart what he has written there. That is the new creation. That is what the surrounding community needs from you. That is the way the symphony goes. Praise God.

The Anchor

Hebrews names one more image I want to close with, the image of an anchor:

"This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil" (Hebrews 6:19).

An anchor of the soul, sure and steadfast, that enters the Presence behind the veil. That is the anchor we have been given. And in a storm, and the contemporary storm is real, pulling down on the anchor of hope is what keeps the ship in place.

Pull down on the anchor. Jesus Christ. Sure and steadfast. The anchor that has already entered the Presence behind the veil and is holding us from the inside of the heavenly sanctuary. That is the confidence we have to live this life for him.

And whatever scam-artist barkers are calling our families up onto mountains that are about to collapse, whatever compelling and convincing voices are pulling the people we love toward destruction we cannot prevent, let us be the ones who are clear about what God has actually told us. Let us be the ones whose voices carry the kind of clarity the surrounding storm requires. And let us drop the anchor of hope so deeply into the heavenly sanctuary that no storm in the surrounding world can pull our ship loose. Amen.