

“Once” (Hebrews 9:27-28)

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The Text: ***“And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, ²⁸so 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.”***

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Beware of anything that has to be repeated over and over again. It means that that thing – whatever it is – is imperfect and has significant flaws. One day when I was a kid, my mom asked me to get the pruning shears and to “trim” a particular bush in our front yard. I don’t know, I think I must have had a sudden delusion of grandeur in thinking myself a sculptor or something. I became mesmerized by this bush and every-time I thought I was finished “trimming” the bush, I convinced myself that it wasn’t good enough and so I went at it again. Before I was finished, my mom looked out the front door and almost had a coronary. ***“What had I done to her bush?!”*** It was like being enlisted in the military when getting a “hair cut” takes on a whole new meaning! I had given the bush a “buzz”!

And yet this repetition that bears imperfection and inherent flaws marks every day of our lives. In our sin, we never get anything right; we never get anything perfect. So as husbands we are always trying – at least we should be – trying to

become better communicators towards our wives. If you ever practice martial arts, you will be repeating forms, patterns and katas until you turn blue in the face. You know the old saying, “practice makes perfect.” But the actual reality is that practice only makes better...we never arrive to perfection. In fact, even if we are getting better, there is still undulation. It is not unusual to take two or three steps back even if we are making progress over the long haul. For myself, I have never preached a sermon, never taught a Bible Study, never conducted a visitation or a pastoral counseling session when – even if I was utterly convinced that the Holy Spirit blessed that service – that I didn’t think I could have done *something* to make it better. I am sure you can relate as this is true whether we are baking a cake, barbequing steaks, trying to get that “just right” mixture, developing your back-hand, learning to stay calm with that particular relationship, or whatever the case may be. I am not trying to encourage neurosis or an unhealthy form of perfectionism, but there is little doubt that our repetition reminds us of our imperfect lives.

But wait a minute! Don’t we as Christians constantly confess our sins to God? Aren’t we always repeating this sacred act? Does this mean that our confession is imperfect? More importantly, does this mean that our absolution is imperfect? But if our very forgiveness from the Lord were in *any* way imperfect, where would our faith stand?! This is most assuredly a critical question.

It is interesting that as we head towards the end of the Church Year, and as we head towards the high-anxiety seasons of the “holidays” -- as our culture likes to call them, ah, go ahead, be a rebel and call them the “holy days” and see what kind of a reaction you get – in the face of such times, we are led to Hebrews chapter 9. Everywhere we look in this world, we see repetition for lack of perfection, for sin that frustrates, and forever trying to get it right. And sometimes we wish we could try all over again. In watching a little bit of the news, how many analyses have been offered as to what the Republicans could have done better...all of it relates to repetition, frustration, and the evident truth that we struggle to ever get things right.

But again right in the middle of our frustration on account of our sin; right in the middle of our feverish repetitions, we are given Hebrews chapter 9.

There are some exceptions to the rule that we will experience getting right the first time and will never, ever have to repeat again.

One of those exceptions is when what we experience is not *our* work, but instead the work *of God!* Ephesians 4:5 teaches us that there is one baptism. There is no need – ever – to repeat baptism. Some might seek to do so because they doubt whether they were fully knowledgeable, or aware, or sincere enough, etc. But baptism is the work of God. Whether we remember or not, God’s work needs no revision or

improvement. You were baptized, and that baptism that put you into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was perfect then and it is perfect now! Thank God!

But there are other things that we will “get right” the first time. And in Hebrews 9, we are told that one of those things is death. When you die, you will most likely (unless the Lord has other plans) get it right the first time. There is no turning back even if we wanted to. It is a circumstance of which we have no control and it is one – even if we try not to think about – we cannot avoid. When we die, there will be no repeating of life (no reincarnation). Our life on this earth will end.

And according to Hebrews 9, there is more that we will “get right” the first time. With that “perfect” death – so to speak – will come a perfect, right, and just “judgment.” Please read with me what Hebrews 9:27 says:

“And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.”

We must understand this little word translated as “judgment”. The word (*krisis*) is simply the pronouncement of a verdict by God. So we will get right the first time without ever needing to repeat:

1. Physical death.
2. Receiving God’s judgment (whether it be an acquittal or a condemnation).

And let's face it when we let these words hang alone in mid-air, there is something fantastically unnerving about them. Are we ready? The anxiety that mounts is similar to some of those pietistic scenario's that ask you, "What will Jesus find you doing when He comes again?" The question is asked with the intentional motive to urge you to live in such a way so as to avoid all sin. In other words, you don't want to be sinning when Jesus comes again in glory! Now with that amazing counsel: how do you feel? Are you assured? Do you feel safe? Do you feel comforted? Let's be frank: "No way!" If you're being honest, you can never feel confident under such circumstances because by virtue of having a sinful nature, you and I sin every minute of every day of our lives. Rest assured, this much is certain: when you die or if you're alive when Jesus comes again in glory, sin will be right there with you!

So what is the writer to the Hebrews communicating? He is comparing one of those exceptional "get it right the first time" experiences we have (namely death and judgment) to another "get it right the first time" – never to be repeated – axiomatic truths of the universe, namely, that Christ – when He came the first time – bore all of your sins (the sins you've committed in your past, the sins you're committing now, and the sins you will commit in the future). Your sins therefore have been dealt with. "Repetition" is a non-category when it comes to the forgiveness of your sin. Forgiveness is completed. The ransom has been paid. The debt is cancelled for good. Reconciliation is complete: you are one with God (never to be separated

again). These truths can never be characterized or described with the words "repeated," but rather are marked by the word "once"... "once" as in "once and for all, and never again." Once! Christ bore your sin. Once! You have been justified! Once! You've died and are now alive! Once!

So in view of "once!" we can now sort out this thing about judgment:

1. First, you have already been judged, and in Christ Jesus, God has acquitted you!

John 5:24: "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life."

2. Second, the reason you continue to hear the absolution is NOT because God's forgiveness needs repeating in order to be effective and complete, but rather because in the Lord's mercy, He is serving you in your weakness -- as you still battle with your sinful nature which is daily drawn to the mud of repetition, your insistence in trying and trying again to "get it right," and your constant realization that you have failed -- for your sake, for your conscience, the Lord condescends, He serves, He gives His office of Christ in our midst to put upon us again and again -- not a different forgiveness, not a new forgiveness, not a better forgiveness, or updated one -- but the same

one, the only one, the ONCE-one that was accomplished when Jesus “offered [Himself] once to bear the sins of many (Hebrews 9:28).”

3. So when you die, when you experience that thing that needs no repetition, the judgment that follows – which also needs no repetition – will not be based on what you’re doing at the time, but it will be based on whether dear Christian you have a living faith created by God to trust in the ONCE given sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the judgment that accompanies your death will be consistent with your baptismal grace. The goal is to simply hold on to that grace and never let it go! And wouldn’t you know it? This too is the work of God through His gift of ONCE!
4. And finally, the judgment from your past – your crossing from death to life when you were born again by Water and the Spirit – is the same as the judgment you will know when you die, and it is the same as the glorious judgment you will experience on the day Jesus comes in glory and when everyone will rise from their graves. The judgment will be exactly the same, but this time for all to hear: that you have been declared “innocent!” because you trusted in the ONE who was ONCE declared “guilty!” for you while He hung on the cross with your sin nailed to Him!

This is why we are eagerly waiting for Him (Hebrews 9:28); this is why we are joyful about what we get to look forward to! So when your own sin, the world, and the devil try to fill you with the frustration of repetition and tiredness, fill your mind with the Word of Christ and rejoice on account of what Christ has already accomplished for you ONCE and then think of what you have to look forward to:

“Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is (1st John 3:2).”

This is true dear Christian not because of endless repetition which is never certain, but on account of what IS certain: Christ bore your sins ONCE so that even death must yield to your new status: ETERNAL LIFE; you have crossed over from death to life for what Jesus did for you ONCE and for all!