



# ***Bible Study Guide***

## ***No. 32***

(February 2006)

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# ***25,000 Blessings and Counting***

*By Arn Shein*

**I**'m a blessing counter. I don't mean I go around counting other people's blessings; *I mean I count my own!*

My unusual hobby began during the summer of 1936. It was a time when two men—one athletic and black, the other crippled and white—were very much in the headlines.

Jesse Owens was stealing the spotlight at the Olympic Games in Berlin while Franklin Delano Roosevelt was campaigning for the second of his four presidential terms. And thanks to a multisyllable sickness, I was running an improbable fever of 108 degrees. Three doctors told my parents not to expect their 7-year-old son to make it through the night. But what those doctors didn't take into account was that Mom and Pop would spend that night talking to God.

More than 25,000 days and nights have gone by since Jesse Owens, FDR and I thumbed our collective noses at Adolph Hitler, Alf Landon and three red-faced doctors. The way I figure it, that's 25,000 blessings. Take it from a guy who collects them, I cherish each and every one.

## **My Blessing Book**

But those thousands of blessings aren't the only ones in my collection—not by a long shot!

When you consider yourself one of the luckiest and happiest men alive, your Blessing Book seems to grow bigger and better every day.

Thanks largely to loving, caring parents. I had a happy, fun-filled childhood. I was 21 when I met Mary Lou Rush on New Year's Eve, 1949. She was my best friend's blind date. Two weeks later, I lost my best friend...but it was a good trade: His blind date soon became the greatest wife and friend a man could hope for.

I was a struggling young sports writer when we met and, next to her, sports and writing were my big loves. She encouraged me to continue my career, and I went on to spend the next 56 years getting paid for doing what I love so much.

I have so many fond memories of my writing career; they alone make my Blessing Book bulge at the seams. Perhaps my proudest moment came one September evening in 1959 when I was sports editor of *The Daily Item* in Port Chester, New York, and was honored by hundreds of readers and fellow sports writers. The very title of the testimonial dinner was enough to make a man's head spin: "Arn Shein Honour Night—A Champion in the Cause of Sports and Sportsmanship."

Sitting at the head table were my proud parents. Ida and Lou Shein were to pass away within the next few years, but on that evening, my father was popping his buttons and my mother's already ample chest was more ample than ever. Five years after our marriage, Mary Lou and I were told by doctors we would never have children of our own. It was my turn to talk to the Lord, and nine months later Lindy was born. Stacey joined the family in 1962, and Kelli came on the scene 16 months later. Three daughters, three blessings.

We had a big scare on Lindy's sixth birthday when we took her to New York Hospital where we hoped doctors could discover what was making our oldest daughter so sick the past few months. After weeks of testing, we learned that Lindy had severe juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. As bad as her case was, though, even that was a blessing. Of all the boys and girls on that infamous children's floor of New York Hospital (most of them suffering from leukemia), our daughter was one of only two who would leave there alive.

She still has rheumatoid arthritis, but today Lindy is a vibrant mother of two handsome young men. As for Stacey and Kelli, they are beautiful young ladies who have blessed us with five more grandsons and, finally, a granddaughter. Eight grandchildren, eight more blessings.

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### **My Adventures With Doctors and Hospitals**

A funny thing happened on the way to my 39th birthday party in 1967. My world seemed to go haywire and, during the next 38 years, I was hospitalized 37 times and underwent 26 operations. I've been jabbed by so many needles since then, my understanding wife has disposed of every pincushion in our house. And I have long been on a first-name basis with some of the nicest ambulance drivers, doctors and nurses in New York and San Diego.

Thanks to two lens implants and the amputation of two toes, I have literally been operated on from head to toe. In between, I've had four total hip replacements, surgery on five fingers and a meniscus bone removed from my left knee. A coronary angiogram in 1982 proved to be a lifesaver since it revealed a fistful of severe blockages and led to a tricky little six-bypass heart operation.

A good chunk of my health problems stems from a severe case of psoriatic arthritis throughout my system. But I've also had phlebitis, two detached retina, glaucoma, reflux oesophagitis, legionnaires pneumonia, bronchitis, two cataracts, cellulitis, bursitis, angina, a heart attack, a hiatus hernia, root canal, tennis elbow, hemorrhoids and a partridge in a pear tree. And what decent red-blooded American would possibly exclude "the heartbreak of psoriasis?" Certainly not I!

My adventures also include 10 hip dislocations, which just might help explain why a person with the customary quota of two hips would require four total hip replacements.

Admittedly there were times during those adventure-filled 37 years when I was tempted to feel sorry for myself. But whenever I did, I simply looked at other patients in doctors' waiting rooms or peeked through the doors of hospital rooms and realized how fortunate I was. Wherever I looked, there were a great many people far worse off than I.

Besides, I consider each of my 26 operations successful. As for those 37 hospitalizations, I always left feeling a whole lot better than when I had entered. And don't believe everything you hear about hospital food.

I love it!

You discover also how important good friends are, particularly in a life-threatening situation.

When I had my six-bypass surgery, I was supposed to be hospitalized two weeks. They sent me home after less than a week, partially because I made a speedy recovery, partially because I was a disruptive influence.

When I left Scripps Hospital in La Jolla, California, the nursing staff estimated that I had more than 300 visitors, phone calls, get-well cards and gifts. It reached the point where my confused roommate thought he was lying in the middle of New York's Madison Square Garden during a rock concert.

### **Giving Thanks**

How do you adequately express appreciation to so many wonderful people for their kindness and warmth? There's really no way you can. You simply thank God, sit down, open your ever-growing Blessing Book—and make another entry.

Fifteen months after the heart surgery, I lost four close friends in as many months and, for the first time in my life, suffered through a stage of depression. Each day for weeks my wife tried to talk me into attending a local creative writing class in San Diego. And each day I resisted her pleas. After all, it had been 10 full years since my sickness forced me into early retirement as sports editor and columnist. But when she finally twisted my arm and I walked in to the writing class, the old juices began to flow. So did the words!

It wasn't long before I began sending my nonfiction writing to upper echelon magazines. As always, I felt my manuscripts were Pulitzer Prize material. The editors didn't necessarily agree with my assessment: Over the next four years my writing was rejected 96 straight times. I didn't give up! After all, what else did I have to do? And besides, what's 96 rejections to a guy who survived 26 major surgeries?

My slump was broken in February 1988 when *Guideposts* published one of my inspirational articles. Then came sales to the world's two largest circulation magazines, *Modern Maturity* and *Readers' Digest*. My byline has since appeared 400 times in more than 50 national magazines, more than half of them to the religious/inspirational market. In addition, I now teach creative writing classes and am a regular on the lecture tour.

I was seven when I almost died in 1936. Although I turned 77 in September 2005, I'm busier and happier than I've ever been. After all, counting all those blessings takes a great deal of time!

*Arn and Mary Lou Shein make their home in San Diego, California. Arn, a former award-*

*winning sports editor/ columnist for a Gannet Newspaper Group daily in New York, has been writing professionally since 1949. Forced to retire in 1974 because of poor health, he turned to freelancing in 1988 and has since been published in more than 50 national magazines (including Plain Truth).*

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## CREATION CARE

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### Saving the earth... without worshiping it

By  
Madison Trammel

*As environmentalism becomes more and more mainstream, Christians are joining the cause. Their ecological manifesto comes from the pages of Scripture, and they're seeking to save the earth without worshiping it.*

**T**he hippie journalist and co-founder of Greenpeace, Bob Hunter, died last May in his native Canada. A godfather of the environmental movement, Hunter had been driven all his life with a determination not just to write headlines, but to make them. Indeed, he was known to take on impossible odds and place himself in harm's way in defense of the earth and its resources.

Hunter first caught the world's attention in 1971, when he and a group of 11 activists sailed a boat called "The Greenpeace" into a United States nuclear testing site. Following the wake of their voyage, the U.S.-Canadian border closed for the first time since the War of 1812, public protest grew to the point where the U.S. government could not ignore it, and, eventually, the testing program was shuttered.

In the years that followed, Hunter presided over the growing organization named after his ship, wrote numerous articles and editorials about environmental issues, and became what his obituary called "one of the heroes of the environmental movement."

Yet evangelical Christians were never among his admirers. At least, not until recently. Perhaps because of Hunter's New-Age spirituality—he often recounted a Cree Indian

story about "Warriors of the Rainbow," spirits who would rescue nature when she became sick—Christians at large and evangelicals in particular tended to keep their distance. While the work of Greenpeace and other environmental groups began swaying public sentiment toward conservation, many Christians remained unconvinced. If you could find a Christian to speak publicly about the environment at all, he or she was more likely to quote Genesis 1:28, "Fill the earth and subdue it," than to show any real concern about global warming, deforestation or pollution. As James G. Watt, President Ronald Reagan's interior secretary, said, "We don't have to protect the environment—the Second Coming is at hand."

While it is true that many Christians have historically been supportive of environmental issues, evangelical Christians were generally suspicious of what they saw as an environmental agenda.

Since the early 1990s, however, evangelical attitudes have undergone a slow, steady shift. Last October, the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) released a "call to civic responsibility" that included a "responsibility to care for God's earth." In addition, more than

500 evangelical leaders, from Richard Mouw of Fuller Theological Seminary to Robert Seiple, former president of World Vision, also signed the first ever “Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation.”

### **The Seven Degradations of the Earth**

A little more than a decade ago, Ray Bohlin, the president of Probe Ministries International, an apologetics think-tank in Richardson, Texas, released a forward-looking statement on Christian environmentalism. Contrasting the Christian’s motivation sharply against that of an evolutionary naturalist, Bohlin argued that creation care was, for followers of Christ, an unavoidable issue of stewardship.

“...Man’s rule and dominion over the earth is that of a steward or a caretaker, not a reckless exploiter,” he wrote. “Ownership is in the hands of the Lord.”

Bohlin referred to the parable of the talents in Matthew 25, in which a master goes away on a long trip, holding his servants responsible for how they manage his resources while he’s gone. “When Christ returns,” Bohlin wrote, “His earth may well be handed back to him rusted, corroded, polluted and ugly. To what degree will you or I be held responsible?”

The NAE’s recent statement uses similar language: “God gave the care of his earth and its species to our first parents. That responsibility has passed into our hands.”

However, the specter of Bob Hunter and his New-Age environmentalism never strays too far from evangelicals’ minds. The NAE carefully distinguishes between worship of the Creator and worship of creation. We honor creation because we worship God, it warns, never the other way around.

Borrowing from a book written by Calvin DeWitt, president of Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies, Bohlin lists seven outstanding environmental crises, what DeWitt calls “seven degradations of the earth.”

Each one can be seen as an affront to God’s creation and a threat to humanity’s health and safety.

**1 First, urban development continues to** overrun wilderness and agricultural land, often without careful forethought about the

long-term consequences. Covered by sidewalks, streets and high-rises, this land may never be fully reclaimed. As Joni Mitchell put it in her 1970s hit, Big Yellow Taxi, “They paved paradise and put up a parking lot.”

**2 Second, extinction continues to claim** animal and plant species at a rate of three species per day. Most Americans, no doubt, can live without the spotted owl. But when three species a day disappear, it leaves unfulfilled the role that each one played in the ecosystem. To borrow the analogy of a previous generation, God has created the universe like a finely tuned watch. As parts break down and disappear, the watch cannot function properly.

**3 Third, pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers** take a toll on farming land.

**4 Fourth, even more seriously, foolproof treatment of hazardous chemicals** and wastes continues to confound scientists. The disposal of nuclear waste into geological repositories, for instance, leads to undetermined long-term consequences.

**5 Fifth, human pollution** continues to poison water sources and land, sometimes in unexpected ways. As Bohlin notes, human garbage has been found on the beaches of uninhabited Pacific islands, far from any shipping lane.

**6 Sixth, the earth’s atmosphere** appears to be changing, perhaps due to the thinning ozone layer. Although the Bush administration has made environmental concerns a low priority—as seen in its push for oil drilling in Alaska, among other decisions—it recently changed its tune about global warming, admitting that the burning of fossil fuels seems to be heating up the planet. Warmer winters may not bother residents of Chicago and New York. However, widespread climate change can affect the earth’s entire weather pattern, bringing about cataclysmic storms, unending droughts and other unintended consequences.

**7 Seventh, indigenous cultures** that have thrived in remote parts of the earth, such as

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the Amazon rainforests, are being pushed out by loggers and ranchers who make far greater demands on the environment. In addition to the human toll, this expansion of civilization eats away at some of the world's last wilderness areas.

As Bohlin concludes, "Never before have human beings wielded so much power over God's creation. Do we know what we are doing?"

### What Would Jesus Drive?

In 1994, social-justice advocate Ron Sider, the founder of Evangelicals for Social Action, aided in the genesis of the Evangelical Environmental Network (EEN). Perhaps best known for its "What Would Jesus Drive?" campaign, which addressed the national debate about fuel economy from a distinctly Christian perspective, the EEN takes every opportunity to tie creation care to family values.

Its Healthy Families, Healthy Environment initiative, for instance, provides families with tips on how to protect themselves from environmental health concerns. Similarly, the EEN has produced church study materials on environmentalism, started a program to protect the unborn from mercury poisoning, sponsored a recycling program at Creation Festival, the largest Christian rock festival in the U.S., organized

numerous Christian environmentalism conferences and launched a magazine entitled "Creation Care".

When combined with growing evangelical interest in addressing issues of poverty and social justice, environmentalism is threatening

to undermine the Christian right's full allegiance to the Republican Party. The lead lobbyist for the NAE, Richard Cizik, recently went public with his willingness to disagree with President Bush on this issue.

Both in their personal lives and in the public square, American Christians are slowly but surely adopting a creation-care mindset. Who can argue that an increased emphasis on reaching out to the poor and defending the environment is anything but Christ-like? We can thank God that the body of Christ is becoming more green.

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### ***Evangelical Church Calls for Environmental Stewardship***

*"Environmental stewardship" and "evangelical church" don't often appear in the same sentence, unless it's a story about conflict. But don't tell that to Tri Robinson, pastor of the 2,500 member Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Boise, Idaho, where an environmental program is thriving. The pastor is on a mission to get his church to "tend the garden" in their homes, community and state, and his message has been welcomed.*

*"The story of mankind in the Bible begins in a garden and ends in a restored garden," Robinson told Ministries Today magazine. "The first commission to God's people is to be caretakers of the gift of creation," he added. "We pridefully and selfishly assume that creation exists for our own consumption. It is the responsibility of every true Christian to take stewardship seriously, and that includes environmental stewardship." Robinson, age 57, said VCFB began airing a TV commercial locally to spotlight his four-week message on environmental stewardship and that the topic drew some 200 new people to the church.*

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# Stop... the Christian Hate Parade!

By  
Bill Dahl

I love a parade. I remember several million Red Sox fans lined the parade route in Boston, celebrating their first world championship in 86 years. As I watched the parade on T.V., my heart swelled with joy and empathy for these loyal fans in New England. Joy is contagious. I walked away from my television feeling good. I began wondering when the last time the Christian community in the U.S. had an event to celebrate something so joyfully that it infected others who were watching with the same, infectious sense of joy? Isn't that what the love of Christ is all about? I wonder how Christ looks upon the self-described "Christians" who fill the media with hateful, hurtful outbursts that remind me of the song, "I Wouldn't Want To Be Like You!" For me, it's been a heart-breaking Gong Show. As J. Lee Grady, writes:

*"The core of the gospel message is not about church-growth strategies, faith formulas, spiritual-warfare techniques, religious dress codes or the latest revelations about the end times. Why do we complicate what is so simple? Lately I've watched respected church leaders fight each other, break fellowship over nonessential theological points, take each other to court, flippantly divorce their wives, assassinate each other's character and engage in cutthroat competition for money and influence. Then they go on stage and teach people how to hear God's voice and experience miracles. Loveless Christianity is a counterfeit. When we spread the gospel without the love of God, we stage our own Gong Show."*<sup>1</sup> Thanks be to God that his love, grace and mercy do not contain the hateful, self-righteous judgments that many Christians proliferate—particularly during ongoing debates over socio-political issues.

I have become very sensitive to condescending, ridicule-laden brochures and emails that are sent by well-intentioned Christians in an attempt to

garner support for a certain cultural or political viewpoint. The vast majority of it is the mongering of ill will. This is an area where we Christians simply must become vastly more aware, sensitive, exercise restraint and change our behavior. Honestly, the character of behavior like this is the definition of "self righteousness." It's time to wise up.

## Culture War?

Christians in American society have fallen prey to an ongoing effort to divide and deceive us that I have no desire to participate in. It is essential to point out that the subtle, emotionally charged socio-political issues the evil one has overwhelmed our culture with are designed to divert our focus from Christ. By dividing and distracting us with a myriad of cultural/political issues, this worldly "agenda" gets elevated to the place of his throne.

Henri Nouwen cautions:

*"Dealing with burning issues without being rooted in a deep personal relationship with God easily leads to divisiveness because, before we know it, our sense of self is caught up in our opinion about a given subject."*

Unfortunately, the Christian in American society has assumed the role of judge, expounding rulings about "what we're against," and condemning those who are still lost.

As Henri Nouwen wrote,

*"The long painful history of the church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led."*

Perhaps the words of Francis Schaeffer provide us with the essential insights we need to be reminded of:

*"Christian apologetics is not like living in a castle with the drawbridge up and occasionally tossing a stone over the walls. It is not to be based on a citadel mentality—sitting inside and saying, 'You cannot reach me here.' ... The*

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*purpose of apologetics is not just to win an argument or a discussion, but that the people with whom we are in contact may become Christians and then live under the lordship of Christ in the whole spectrum of life."*

Jerramy Barrs adds: *"We face the same problem today, for the more secularized and 'post-Christian' our society becomes, the great temptation there is to love only our fellow believers who are fighting by our side in the 'culture wars.' We retreat from the command to love all people as we consider those outside the church as too worldly, as too dangerous to our spiritual well being. Rather than loving them, we feel constrained to keep ourselves separate from them, to strive for a purity of being uncontaminated by having no contact with the sinners out there. But, as Schaeffer points out, this is not the kind of purity that God's Word has in mind for us."*

I regularly advise people who send my wife and I correspondence to leave us off their list in the future. For us, it is a trap that serves to divide, inflame and obscure the Christian disciple's priorities and loving witness to the world, and our focus on Christ. It is very easy to get caught up in the flow of what everybody else is doing. That flow can take us to places Christ never intended us to go.

### What We Stand For

Rather than succumb to the temptation to criticize and judge in matters of politics and cultural issues today, the Christian witness must be the infectious loving service concerning what we are for, rather than what we are against. Our "witness" to the unsaved world is "under observation." As Yancey says: *"Rightly or wrongly, they see Christians rather as restrained, uptight, repressed—people less likely to celebrate vitality than to wag our fingers in disapproval!"*

My prayer is that Christians will not be drawn into the shouting match, condemnation, character assassination and finger wagging that our society (Christian and secular) has developed an accepted preference for. All the empirical evidence is in...we're (Christianity in the U.S.) losing the war we are enlisted to fight on his behalf. The words of A.W. Tozer are as pertinent today, as the date they were written

some twenty years ago: *"There are today many millions of people who hold 'right opinions,' probably more than ever before in the history of the Church. Yet I wonder if there was ever a time when true spiritual worship was at a lower ebb."*

Imagine what the Christian witness in this culture would be like if Christians spent half the time we spend espousing our positions on this and that socio-political issue, seated with a Bible in quiet contemplation seeking the face of Jesus Christ? Perhaps it's time we pause and listen to the tirade coming from the mouths of Christ's mainstream Christian community in the U.S. It's difficult to hear a conversation when one is in the midst of a loud parade.

I believe it is time to re-examine the methods we have come to unwittingly accept and return to the truth of biblical principles of counterintuitive love expounded by Jesus Christ... oftentimes principles that are completely opposite of the intellectual and glandular impulses many Christians have come to adopt as acceptable Christian witness in our culture. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said: *"Their real goal, was not to defeat the white man but 'to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor and challenge his false sense of superiority'"* (emphasis mine).

I truly, deeply believe that our "false sense of superiority" is something we Christians are being called on the carpet about today by Christ. Attacks on the moral character of people create collateral damage for Christ, Christianity and the Christian. Although we think we are shooting at the enemy, we are actually killing our cause. We are *all* sinners and indeed, "we are all in peril if the flawed messenger invalidates the message."

At my own admission, it is much easier for me to criticize rather than love. I have done the same thing as many of you on too many occasions. I fully expect that I will fall victim to the same, within 72 hours of writing this piece (God has a way of getting in my grill when I share things like this). God has dealt with my heart on this issue over the last twenty-four months. Frankly, he has broken my heart over it.

### It's Time to Go Home

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Once again, as his sheep, we have gone astray. It's time to return to The Shepherd. I am not suggesting that the Christian should be a doormat, uninvolved or apathetic to political and cultural issues of our time. I am suggesting that the *why* and *way* we do what we do matters. I am also recommending that it is time to re-examine how we spend our time and energy in these pursuits. For many of us, the time we sit with God and his Word pales in comparison to the amount of time and energy we exert in recoiling against the events, people and issues of our time. For many of us, it's time to go home—to seat ourselves reverently before his throne and stay there for a year, a few years, a lifetime.

Please accept what I am sharing here with you, as only part of what God has shared with me. C.S. Lewis summarizes how God has spoken to me about this issue over the past two years: *“Fine feelings, new insights, greater interest in ‘religion’ mean nothing unless they make our actual behaviour better; just as in illness, ‘feeling better’ is not much good if the thermometer shows that your temperature is still going up. In that sense the outer world is quite right to judge Christianity by its results. Christ told us to judge by results...Our careless lives set the outer world talking; and we give them grounds for talking in a way that throws doubt on the truth of Christianity.”*

Let's put down the stones, drop to our knees and ask for his forgiveness. If I spent one minute in prayer for every well-intentioned, self-righteous communication I have received from a Christian, I would be vastly more transformed by his grace than I am at present. Please pray for me. I pray that he continues to hammer my heart

about this issue, and that you will join me in repentance.

May we hear and heed the words of Oswald Chambers: *“Narrow all your interests until the attitude of mind and heart and body is concentration on Jesus Christ.”*

I want him to have his way with me. I know you do, too. Please be in prayer about this issue, as you contemplate the following from God's Word:

*“Whom have you so dreaded and feared that you have been false to me, and have neither remembered me nor pondered this in your hearts? Is it not because I have long been silent that you do not fear me? I will expose your righteousness and your works, and they will not benefit you. When you cry out for help, let your collection of idols save you! The wind will carry all of them off, a mere breath will blow them away. But the man who makes me his refuge will inherit the land and possess my holy mountain” (Isaiah 57:11-13).*

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*Bill and Jacki Dahl live in Southern California. They have four children and three grandchildren. They have three adopted Greyhounds—Dollar, Folsom and Boonie (who would be terribly disappointed if they weren't mentioned here). Jacki is an interior designer. Bill works in international finance. He has taught at the community college and university level. Jacki is composed, gentle, caring, creative, fun loving and contemplative. Bill can be a bull in a china closet and rarely shuts up. Prior to making their home in Southern California, Bill and Jacki lived in the Pacific Northwest.*

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# A Perfect Sacrifice

## A Study of Hebrews 9

**T**he book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus Christ is the mediator of a better covenant. He has a better priesthood and a better ministry than the Levitical priests (8:6). Chapter 9 then describes in more detail the better priestly ministry of our Saviour.

### **The tabernacle**

First, the old covenant ritual is described: "The first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary" (9:1). The author does not write about the covenants made with Noah or Abraham, even though they came first. Rather, by "first" he means the covenant made at Sinai, because it is the covenant replaced by Jesus' new covenant. The Sinai covenant had laws about how people could approach God. "A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lamp stand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place" (9:2, see Ex. 25:23-40). The author describes the tabernacle rather than the temple, perhaps because the tabernacle and its furnishings and rituals were familiar to all who read the Torah. "Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered Ark of the Covenant" (9:2-4, see Ex. 25:10-22; 30:1-6). "This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now" (9:4-5; for details see Ex. 16:33-34; 25:18; Num. 17:10; Deut. 10:1-5).

### **What the rituals could not do**

"When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance" (9:6-7). The high priest entered the Most Holy Place only on the Day of Atonement. Before he entered, he sacrificed a bull for his own sins, and later, a

goat for the people (Lev. 16:1-17). What is the spiritual significance of this symbolism? "The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed" (9:8). In the tabernacle symbolism, God was near but not accessible. The symbolism hinted that there was a way to approach God, but that way was not yet revealed.

"This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper" (9:9). Despite the sacrifices, the people were unable to go to God's throne, unable to enter his presence. The rituals could not complete the work that they symbolized. "They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings--external regulations applying until the time of the new order" (9:10). Rituals are external actions, and they cannot change the heart. They do not cleanse the conscience. They were valid only until Christ came.

Our author does not list all the obsolete regulations. It was enough to mention the Levitical rituals. But we can follow the logic to see much more. External rituals like circumcision are no longer required. Worship details no longer apply. The entire covenant is obsolete.

### **Christ's work in heaven**

Now, in contrast to the ritual works of the old covenant, we are told about the superior ministry of Christ: "When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation" (9:11). The better blessings have already begun, the author reminds us. We already have forgiveness and direct access to God, because Christ went through the heavenly holy place.

Jesus Christ entered the reality, not the imitation, and he did it by a better sacrifice: "He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once

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for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption" (9:12).

By dying for us, the Son of God was able to redeem us once for all. It was a perfect, sinless sacrifice, presented in the heavenly holy place, fully effective, never needing to be done again.

This was a sharp contrast with the Levitical rituals, which were repeated continually yet never bringing the people any closer to God.

"The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean" (9:13; see Num. 19:1-22). Here the author refers to the ashes of a heifer. Like the other rituals, it had obscure details that had nothing to do with a person's conscience.

Of course, Christ is much better than a heifer, and we should expect that his sacrifice achieves a much better kind of cleansing. "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!" (9:14).

He offered a perfect sacrifice, willingly, and through faith in him, this cleanses us on the inside and enables us to worship God. We can do what the high priest could only symbolize: we can approach God with total confidence. We have been washed and purified by the blood of Christ--all sins are removed. If a burned-up heifer could ritually cleanse an Israelite, we can be sure that the sacrifice of Jesus is more than enough for us.

Since Christ brings us complete forgiveness, he "is the mediator of a new covenant" (9:15). He gives us a relationship with God on a completely new basis--not the old covenant, but the new. And the result is "that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance."

This was achieved, the author reminds us, because "he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant." Under the first covenant, many external regulations defined sin. Christ set us free from that. He forgives any kind of sin, but he sets us free from the rituals that were so important under the old covenant.

### **Covenant enacted by blood**

But this new covenant could come about only through a better sacrifice--something far superior to animals. The author begins by using an illustration from the legal customs of the day. He uses the example of a will, because the Greek word for covenant could also mean will. It was a contract that became valid only when someone died (9:16-17).

The Sinai covenant also involved death--the death of animals (9:18-20; Ex. 24:5-8). The Law of Moses required blood in its rituals of cleansing (9:21-22). Obviously, drops of blood do not make anything physically clean. What the Israelites needed was a spiritual cleansing--an elimination of spiritual defilement, imperfection, sin, guilt and anything that separated them from God. They needed forgiveness.

Physical blood cannot change spiritual realities, and animal sacrifices cannot eliminate sin (10:4), but the old covenant nevertheless prescribed animal sacrifices for forgiveness (9:22). Just as the tabernacle itself pictured a heavenly reality, these animal sacrifices pictured a death that would be effective in removing sin.

The earthly tabernacle had to be ritually purified by animal sacrifices, but the heavenly holy place required a far better sacrifice (9:23). The spiritual barrier between God and humans required a spiritual sacrifice--someone with a perfect conscience, totally without sin. Jesus was not dealing with a physical, symbolic copy (9:24). He was not working with external rituals. Rather, he was dealing with the real spiritual problem, and he did his work in heaven. It was a better place, and a better sacrifice.

Humans are both matter and spirit; Christ's work was both physical and spiritual. He became fully human, mortal and physical, in order to redeem humans. But his redemption had to be on the spiritual level as well: a conscience untainted by sin, a life willingly offered on behalf of others, a being worthy of entering heaven itself to intercede for humans. He offered himself, both body and spirit.

Jesus Christ now appears for us in heaven to help us (9:24). He is the God-man who bridges the gap between God and humans. His work is

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fully effective--for all time. Once was enough, unlike the work of the Levitical priests, who had to repeat the same rituals over and over again (9:25). By this the Holy Spirit was showing that their work was not effective. True cleansing was possible only through a better sacrifice, a better priest, and a better covenant.

### **The decisive sacrifice**

Jesus did not go to heaven to perform endless rituals. He is not copying the old covenant, because the old covenant had only temporary substitutes (9:25). Jesus does not have to suffer forever to rescue us from sin (9:26). He gave himself once, and that was enough.

"He has appeared once for all." When? "At the end of the ages." Why? "To do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself" (9:26). Even 1,950 years ago, believers were living in the "end of the ages"--"in these last days" (1:2). The old era was fading away; a new age had begun with Jesus Christ. The spiritual world was radically

different. The sacrifice of all time had been given.

But the story is not yet done. Just as ordinary humans appear once, and then will appear again in the judgment, so also with Christ. "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" (9:27-28).

Each person dies for his or her own sins, but Jesus died for others. Each person will face the judgment for his or her sins, but Jesus will be the judge. His death took away the sins of all who believe in him, and when he appears again, he will not be bringing their sins against them. Rather, he will be bringing eternal salvation for all who trust in him.

Michael Morrison;  
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### Lessons from Mark

#### Lesson 24 - Mark 4:21-25 A lesson about measurement

*He said to them, "Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear."*

*"Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him."*

On the list of frustrating things, heavy traffic ranks pretty high. And drivers who don't signal, don't look, won't move over, cut people off, speed, tailgate, go too slow, or drive incredibly noisy or incredibly large vehicles rank among the world's most frustrating people.

I find it surprisingly easy to condemn drivers—other drivers, that is. I find it just as surprising how easy it is to *forgive* my own driving mistakes. I wish I could say this phenomenon only pertained to driving. But the truth is, I find it far easier to forgive myself for just about anything than to forgive the same mistakes in others.

Jesus casts the spotlight on this all too human tendency when he says, "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more." At first glance, this might seem to be a simple matter of cause and effect: you forgive and then your act of forgiveness will merit forgiveness for you. But to understand Jesus' statement on those legalistic terms would be a mistake.

Jesus makes a similar point in Matthew 18:35, when he says, "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." It might be easy to assume from this statement that God forgives us on the basis of our forgiveness of others. But that would be a false assumption. God forgives us on the basis of Jesus' perfect sacrifice on our behalf and in our place.

In these statements, Jesus is not prescribing a new form of legalism; he is describing the nature of hearts that trust in him. For example,

when we trust in Christ, we no longer have anything to hide. The day will come, of course, when nothing remains hidden (verses 21-23), and that is true whether we trust in Christ or not. But for those who do trust him, that day is in effect already here—they have nothing to hide from him.

But the reason they have nothing to hide from Jesus is not that they are suddenly sinless. It is that they trust him to love them unconditionally and to forgive their sins, sins that they are no longer afraid to show him.

In the same way, those who trust Christ are free from the craving to measure others with the stern rod of selfishness. Because they trust Christ, they can commit their fears and anxieties to him, which frees them from the need to get even or get back at others. In other words, they know they are measured by Christ's rod of grace, which takes the starch out of their natural tendency to condemn others.

Whether it's in traffic, at the courthouse or around the dinner table, we're no longer slaves to our raw impulses—we are free to forgive others as God, for Christ's sake, forgave us, and as Christ lives in us, we do.

What Jesus says in verse 25 is a condemnation only to those who don't trust him—their selfish measuring rod is the only standard they know and the only one they understand. But for those who trust the Redeemer, there is only one measure—the ever-unfolding heights and depths of the love of Christ.

I'm learning not to listen to my knee-jerk reactions to miserable drivers. I'm learning to

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mutter, "God bless him" instead of ... something else. It's not only a good reminder of who I am in Christ; it's a hazy reflection of the

heart of Christ, which, by his grace, dwells in me.

Mike Fezell

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