

Appointed unto Men Once to Die

Hebrews 9:27 – An Abused Verse



Clyde L. Pilkington, Jr.

*And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but
after this the judgment (Hebrews 9:27).*

This is one of the more abused verses in Scripture. This verse was written to “the Hebrews,” and the context is a comparing and contrasting between the Old Testament high priest and Christ. The “*man*” who has an appointment with death is the high priest. This verse is misinterpreted because of the ignoring of the immediate and original context of Israel’s high priest. Context is KEY here because the verse starts with the simile of “*as*” and the next verse begins “*so*.”

The *Holman Bible Dictionary* reminds us that,

The death of the high priest marked the end of an epoch. One guilty of involuntary manslaughter was required to remain in a city of refuge until the death of the high priest (Numbers 35:25; Numbers 35:28; Numbers 35:32; Joshua 20:6). The expiatory death of the high priest removed blood guilt that would pollute the land (*cf.* Numbers 35:33).

A.E. Knoch also reminds us of the bearing of the high priest upon the context.

In Hebrews 9:27 ... it was the death of the high priest in Israel which led to the “*judgment*” of the man slayer (Numbers 35:22-29). The statement has no reference to men in general. The “*judgment*” here is *restoration*. It cannot be applied to suffering for sin on the part of the unbeliever at the Great White Throne. How often have great saints wrested this passage from its context so as to bolster up their theology! Where this is necessary, does it not indicate a defect in their teaching?

What Does the Bible Really Teach About Hell?
Unsearchable Riches, Volume 22

Ivan Burgener agrees,

... The death in focus here is not the “death” of men in general, but a very specific death, that of Israel’s “high priest”! ...

As we think about our old understanding of this verse, did it not seem strange that people needed to be told they would die but *once*? Did people think they were kin to a cat with multiple lives? Of course not! ...

What about “*after this the judgment*”? Well, upon the death of the High Priest the court would convene to declare the release and freedom (the judgment) of all manslayers in all of the cities of refuge throughout the land of Israel.

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Charles Welch, associate of E.W. Bullinger, expounds on this wonderful truth.

[Hebrews] Chapter 7 is dealing with the failure of Israel’s priesthood, the law concerning priesthood “*perfected nothing*.” Only in the virtue of a “*better hope*” can any draw nigh unto God. Chapter 9:26-28 is dealing with the failure of Israel’s sacrifices; the law concerning sacrifices was a shadow and could not “*perfect*” those who drew nigh. Only in the virtue of a “*better sacrifice*” can any draw nigh to God. The parallel is complete.

Moreover both sections deal with the removal and failure of the old covenant:

- A 7:18. The setting aside (athetesis) of the commandment concerning the priests.
- B 8:8. Finding fault with the first covenant.
- A 9:26. The setting aside (athetesis) of the sin offering.
- B | 10:9. Taking away the first covenant.

It may be objected that where we have inserted “*sin-offering*” the *A.V.* says “*sin*,” but it is recognized by all students of Scripture that the word “*sin*” often stands for the “*offering of sin*,” and consequently may be so understood here. Hebrews 9:26 is not dealing with the forgiveness or the putting away of sin, it deals with the abrogation of the sin-offering, a fact absolutely necessary if Israel were to believe on the Son of God, and leave the shadows of the old covenant. “*He appeared to set aside the sin-offering by the sacrifice of Himself.*” The reader has only to read Hebrews 10:4-9 to find abundant confirmation of this interpretation.

The idea that has been read into this verse that the offering of Christ was “for the repudiation of sin at the conclusion of the eons” does violence to the order of the words in the original and fails to give the true meaning of *athetesis*. There is not one single instance in either the New Testament or the *LXX* where the word is used in connection with “putting away sin,” whereas the consistent usage compels us to see that here, in Hebrews 9 as in Hebrews 7, the disannulling of a weak and profitless symbol is entirely in harmony with the context and aim of the epistle. Verses 27 and 28 must be read together, as they are two members of one simile indicated by the

words “as” and “so.” Some intended likeness must be discovered, for if a contrast were intended we should get the expression used in Romans 5:15.

Now what is the intention of the writer when he says, “*as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment*”? The majority of commentators take it to refer to mankind in general, and that the offering of Christ “*once*” is set over against the dying “*once*” of verse 27. While this contains truth, we are not persuaded that it is the true meaning of the passage. For one thing there is hardly a deviation from the one great theme discernible in the whole of chapters 7, 8 and 9. Every effort and argument is brought to bear upon the one absorbing theme, the superiority of the priesthood and offering of Christ, and the typical teaching of the types and shadows of the law.

Who are “*the men*”?¹

“*It is appointed to the men once to die.*” The priests of the order of Aaron are definitely called “*dying men*” (Hebrews 7:8), and “*men having weakness*” (Hebrews 7:28).

So that, to say the least, we may admit the probability that in the context that speaks of the typical tabernacle priesthood and offerings, “*the men*” may refer to these same dying priests.

It occurred to us at this point to consult the *LXX* for the usage of “*judgment*,” knowing that in many cases the word judgment is synonymous with salvation in the Old Testament. Turning up the word *krisis* we found the list too formidable for the time at our disposal, but believing that the key to Hebrews 9:27-28 lies in the law concerning the cities of refuge, and knowing that Numbers 35 contains a full statement concerning these cities, we looked to see whether *krisis* occurs in that chapter. It does:

And they shall be unto you cities for refuge from the avenger; that the man-slayer die not, until he stand before the congregation in judgment [krisis] (Numbers 35:12).

This statement is followed by a law making a distinction between a willful murder and a man-slayer, and when these distinctions have been made the Scripture continues:

Then the congregation shall judge between the slayer and the revenger of blood according to these judgments [krimata]. And the congregation shall deliver the slayer out of the hand of the revenger of blood, and the congregation shall restore him to the city of refuge, whither he was fled [katapheugo], and he shall abide in it unto the DEATH of the high priest, which was anointed with the holy oil ... after the death of the high priest the slayer shall return into the land of his possession (Numbers 35:24-28).

This is the “*judgment*” EQUIVALENT TO SALVATION that was to be pronounced by the congregation, and hinged upon the death of the anointed high priest. It will be seen that such an interpretation harmonizes with the simile here intended:

1. “*The men*” is the translation of both the *Emphatic Diaglot* and the *Concordant Literal New Testament*.

- A | :27-. And as.
B | :-27-. The men die once.
C | :-27. Judgment.
A | :28-. So also.
B | :-28-. Christ was offered once.
C | :-28. Salvation.

Judgment and Salvation

In Judges 2:16-19 we have the close connection established between the judge and deliverance:

And when the Lord raised them up judges, then the Lord was with the judge, and saved them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge ... when the judge was dead, they turned back.

The judges of Israel were first of all saviors. This is seen in the judgeship of Othniel and Ehud.

The Lord raised up a savior to the children of Israel (Judges 3:9-15).

The reader will doubtless call to mind the many passages where the poor, the needy and the righteous call upon God to “judge” them, and such passages as Psalm 1:5 where the ungodly are excluded from “judgment.” It is this Old Testament concept of judgment and the particular exercise of it seen in Numbers 35 that must be kept to the fore as we read Hebrews 9:27.

Charles H. Welch

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