

The Three Appearances
Hebrews 9:24-28
Bellevue Baptist Church
Feb 8, 2026

If you have a Bible, I invite you to turn to Hebrews 9, the passage read a few moments ago.

Human beings come in all shapes and sizes. Even in this room, we are as different as night and day, and yet we all carry similar questions inside—questions that relate to the past, the present, and the future. We all ponder these three things:

Our Three Haunting Questions

What do I do with my past?

How do I live well in the present?

What do I hope for in the future?

Hebrews 9, where we turn today, speaks to each of them. When my past is settled and my future is secure, I can live at peace in the present. I can be present.

That's where I want to be because the present is the only point in time I can touch. We can only live today—we can't redo yesterday, and we can't skip ahead to tomorrow. Yet, we try, don't we? Fulton Oursler once said words that stuck with me:

Many of us crucify ourselves between two thieves—regret for the past and fear of the future. –Fulton Oursler

He's so right about that. When we stare at the rearview mirror, or plug one eye to look into a telescope, we can't see the people right in front of us. We miss out on the here-and-now.

Obsessing over the past causes depression. Obsessing about the future causes anxiety. So what's the answer? Hebrews 9 is about to tell us. The key to life is to trust Christ with both.

He appears

Look with me, at Hebrews chapter 9, and watch the way the word “appear” appears. Three times we are told that Christ appears for us. The first has to do with the present. What is Jesus Christ doing now? Look with me at 9:24:

For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with hands (only a model of the true one) but into heaven itself, so that he might now appear in the presence of God for us.

What does this mean that Jesus did not enter a man-made sanctuary? The author is once again doing his best to talk these Jewish people out of the Old Testament, with all of its rules and regulations. He is urging them: Would you please stop talking about temples?

There is no more need for temple construction. Today, we build buildings for the people of God to gather—we call them churches—but the word for church in the New Testament means assembly. You don't go to a church. You belong to a church. You belong to a family.

For this reason, the Bellevue sign facing Appling Road should be changed if we wanted to be clear. Take off Bellevue Baptist Church and let it say "The building where the people of Bellevue meet." That makes for a long sign, but it would be more in-line with Scripture.

This building we are in is not a temple. The temple in the Old Testament was a place for blood sacrifice, a place where animals were slain, a place where death was witnessed over and over. It was a place of grieving over sin, and dealing with human guilt. When Jesus died on the cross and declared "It is finished," the sacrificial system, the need for blood sacrifice was complete. And now he appears with the Father in heaven.

He is at the right hand of the throne of God, and when the trumpet sounds, the world as we know it ends, sin and death are no more, and the resurrection becomes reality.

"What's the big deal about that?" you might wonder. Why should it encourage me that Christ is in heaven right now, for me?

Imagine being charged with a crime you know you're guilty of. You did it. There's no spinning the story, no clever explanation that will make it go away. The evidence is overwhelming. The court date arrives, and you're standing there waiting for the judge to pound the gavel and issue the sentence.

Then someone leans over and says, "Don't worry. You have an unbelievable attorney. He will get you out of this." And you say, "That's good news... but where is he?"

The person says, “Well, this attorney has lived a brilliant life in the past. He went to the very best schools. He has won some of the toughest cases. His résumé is supreme.” And you say, “That’s wonderful... but where is he now?”

“Oh, don’t worry,” the person says. “One day, sometime in the future, he’s going to show up. He’ll step in and set everything right.” And again you say, “That’s comforting... but where is he now?”

When you are on the hook for your sins, you don’t care where your lawyer was, and you don’t care where your lawyer will be—what matters is whether he is in the courtroom now.

The Bible says that the wages of sin is death. And that none of us, no not one of us, is safe in the courtroom. But thanks be God, Hebrews 9, we have right now a Savior, a mediator, an advocate.

“He appears in the presence of God for us.” This is salvation present tense.

No matter how many times I fall short, the Lord Jesus said, “No one can snatch you out of my hand.” He’s got me, in the present.

He appeared

But what about my past? In V. 25 and 26 we see salvation in the past tense.

He did not do this to offer Himself many times, as the high priest enters the sanctuary yearly with the blood of another. Otherwise, He would have had to suffer many times since the foundation of the world. But now He has appeared one time, at the end of the ages, for the removal of sin by the sacrifice of Himself. Vv.25-26

Do you see how his appearance in the past has impacted the present? 2000 years ago, Jesus Christ appeared on this planet. He put on human skin and fulfilled the requirements of the sacrificial system.

If you **are new to the Bible**, let me give you a quick overview of the Old Testament, the story of God and man before Jesus showed up on the Earth. In the Bible we find the story of God’s relationship to us in four main parts: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration.

When we open the book, the first half takes us back in time, to the **building of a great temple**.

When sin entered the world and humans were cast from the Garden, the Lord chose to relate to His people through the temple they built with their hands. God wanted intimacy with His people, but sin caused separation. Holiness and filthiness cannot be companions. At the temple, the people could deal with their sins by providing an atoning sacrifice.

This is where the **priests came in**. On the left of this image, you see the priest replacing the shewbread. By placing the bread in His presence, Israel was confessing, week after week, “Our sustenance comes from You.” This wasn’t about God needing food; it was about people remembering who feeds them. Every loaf was a prayer without words.

At the top, you see the priest tending the lamps. There were no windows in the temple. If the lamps were not burning, the room was dark. The message was unmistakable: without God’s presence, there is no light. No hope.

On the right, you see the priest burning incense. When the priest burned incense morning and evening, fragrant smoke rose upward, filling the Holy Place. This represented the prayers of the people, rising to God. It was a sensory reminder that God hears the cries, confessions, and praises of His people.

And there front and center, you see the lamb being lifted to God. A priest helped the person get free of their sin by letting their past sins be placed on the animal, which gave its life as a substitute. It was an imperfect sacrifice but a shadow of the perfect one to come.

As you can see, in the first half of the Bible, man’s relationship with God might be described as high maintenance. It was a lot of work for a full staff of priests. The temple was a place of religious rituals, each one carrying a symbolic meaning.

It is difficult to overstate **how bloody** that way of life truly was. Innocent life taken hour by hour, day after day. The priests were told by God to sprinkle the blood on sacred things—on the altar, on the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant—as a constant, unavoidable reminder that unholy people could only draw near to a holy God through an atoning sacrifice.

The blood was not only sprinkled; it was managed. **Cleaned**. Dealt with day after day. The work of sacrifice required continual attention—shedding blood, handling blood, restoring the space so worship could continue. It never stopped. And the message was clear: God longed to be near His people, but sin was serious, costly, and ever-present.

As I mentioned, there were many priests participating—a large staff working year-round, but among those priests was **one high priest**. And when he entered the inner rooms of

the temple, he did so wearing a garment designed by God. His vest held twelve precious stones. Each stone was different, engraved with the name of a tribe of Israel.

As the High Priest stepped into God's presence, he carried the people with him—tribe by tribe, name by name—pressed over his heart. Thus, when God looked upon the High Priest, He saw the whole nation represented there.

Once a year—and only once a year—the High Priest was permitted to enter the most sacred space of all: **the Holy of Holies**. God had designed the temple with intentional layers of access. There was an outer court where the people gathered. Beyond that stood the temple itself, where the priests ministered daily. Inside that structure were two rooms: the Holy Place, the outer room of priestly service, and beyond it, separated by a veil, the inner room—the Holy of Holies—where God's presence was uniquely manifest.

Here, in the innermost room, rested the **mercy seat of God**. It was a golden covering atop the ark, fashioned with two cherubim facing one another, their wings stretched forward and overshadowing a sacred space between them. That space was understood to be the place of God's mercy, the point where heaven met earth.

There, before the mercy seat, the High Priest offered blood on behalf of the entire nation. He did not come for himself alone. He came carrying the sins of the people.

That day was called Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It was marked by fasting, silence, and deep sorrow over sin. And the High Priest did not enter that place casually or confidently. He came with reverent fear, fully aware that he was stepping into the holy presence of God, dependent entirely on mercy.

Jewish tradition tells us that a rope was sometimes tied around the High Priest's ankle when he entered the Holy of Holies. If he were to die in God's presence, no one else would dare go in after him. The holiness of God was understood to be overwhelming, even dangerous to sinful humanity.

This was the kind of reverence the people lived with. They loved the Lord, but they approached Him at a distance. Sin created a barrier that could not be ignored, and even the most sacred moments were marked by caution, humility, and fear.

That is the background Hebrews assumes.

But now, Jesus has appeared. He has made all things new. No longer do you need priests or generations of high priests. He has fulfilled the office. Jesus Christ is our great High Priest, but **He does not repeat those rituals**. God no longer dwells in a temple

inside Jerusalem, built by human hands. Our High priest no longer bakes bread, lights lamps, or burns incense. Sacrifices are not offered year after year. On the cross, Jesus screamed: It is finished!

And Hebrews says to us now, that in the past He appeared, and He was led like a lamb to the slaughter on a day we call Good Friday. On an old rugged cross, he died once for all.

John the Baptist saw him and said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!"

Hebrews 9:26...

He appeared one time... for the removal of sin by the sacrifice of Himself. Vv.25-26

Where is Jesus now? In the presence of God as our Savior and Advocate? Why does he sit in such a lofty seat? Because he was the one able to put sin and death away, forever.

Because of Christ, we can now approach the throne of grace with confidence. We no longer stand at a distance, because the debt has been paid.

Once. And forever.

"What's the big deal?" you ask. Let me put it this way.

Imagine being told you need a dangerous surgery. This isn't routine. This is the kind of surgery where, if the doctor's hand slips by half an inch, you don't make it. When they put you to sleep, you genuinely wonder if you'll wake up again. This isn't getting your tonsils out. This is life and death.

So, you go through all of it. The fear. The waiting room. The long hour sitting on the bed in a thin gown. The look on the doctor's face when he walks in, all business, no small talk. And by the grace of God, the surgery works. You wake up. You're in recovery. You're alive.

Then the doctor comes to your bedside and says, "Good news. The surgery was successful. But sadly, we're going to need to do this again next year. And the year after that."

That wouldn't feel like healing. That would feel like a life sentence. Hebrews tells us the cross was not a temporary fix. It was not a partial solution. It was not something that needs repeating. It was a definitive cure.

Because of the work of Jesus, our past no longer condemns us.

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 8:1) No condemnation.

If you belong to Jesus, there is no punishment that has been postponed or reduced. It is by grace you can be saved, and not by works. That’s the power of the cross, past-tense.

Now let’s turn to the future.

Verses 27 and 28 say this:

And just as it is appointed for people to die once—and after this, judgment—so also Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him. vv.27-28

He will appear. Future tense. Jesus Christ is coming again.

And why will He come? Not to deal with sin. That work is finished. He comes to gather the children of God, to bring them home to a world made new. A world free from bloodshed. Free from death. Free from sorrow. Scripture says heaven is a place where every tear is wiped away. No more funerals. No more final goodbyes.

Recently, I came across a poem by a woman named Joyce Sutphen titled *Living in the Body*. It’s too long to read in full, here’s the finish:

***Body is a thing you have to leave
eventually. You know that because you have
seen others do it, others that were once like you,
living inside their piles of bones and
flesh, smiling at you, loving you,
leaning in the doorway, talking to you,
for hours and then one day they
are gone. No forwarding address.***

Here we feel the blunt force of death. This is death through the eyes of the atheist. The poem ends like a door slammed in your face. This is what it feels like, this life in these bodies, for all who live outside the hope of Christ. In death, someone you loved is gone forever, and there’s no way to reach them. No place to find them. No forwarding address.

It's hopeless. But in Christ, we can sing words of hope, such as the song: *In Christ Alone*:

3 There in the ground His body lay;
 Light of the world by darkness slain.
 Then bursting forth in glorious day,
 up from the grave He rose again!
 And as He stands in victory,
 sin's curse has lost its grip on me;
 for I am His and He is mine,
 bought with the precious blood of Christ!

This is why what living in the body means for those of us who know Him. This is why we send missionaries to dark places in the world where the people live without hope. This is why we pack in here like sardines every Easter Sunday, because it is the real Super Bowl for the saved. The height of the Christian calendar. Why?

Because death is not goodbye but see you later. We can live fully in the present, because the future is secure. And even when we grieve, we do not grieve without hope.

Now, how about a few questions from around this room...Let me begin with may feel like an odd question about the human body, but it is one that I'm hearing more often from older people.

A Seasoned Christian Asks:

As I grow older, I've begun to wonder about something that feels morbid, but unavoidable. Should I be buried or cremated? Is cremation acceptable for a Christian?

I'm going to answer this quickly, but I want to answer it because it's become so common.

According to the National Funeral Directors Association, in 2025, the U.S. cremation rate was around 63%, while the burial rate dropped to around 32%. Last year $\frac{2}{3}$ of people were cremated, and by 2045, that rate is projected to be 82%.

This discussion is not going away. Every believer eventually has to wrestle with it.

The Bible tells us in Genesis that we are formed from the dust of the earth and that, in death, we return to it. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust" is not just poetic language. It reflects a biblical truth about our physical bodies. Whether a person is buried in the ground or cremated, the end result is the same. Burial simply takes longer but you can

be sure that Abraham, and David, and Esther and Ruth—came from dust and returned to dust.

Some Christians feels strongly that burial is best because it pictures hope that those we lay to rest will be reawakened at the resurrection.

The early church theologian Augustine felt this way. He said: *If the clothing of your father, or his ring, or anything he wore, was precious to you... then how much more should you care for his body.* —Augustine

Augustine was very black-and-white on this. But, in my view, this is one of those areas where Christians should be slow to judge others who form different convictions. Romans 14:5 says that in matters where the Bible is unclear, each person should be fully convinced in their own mind. We should form our own convictions and allow others to have theirs.

Because on this issue, here's the reality. The Bible records believers who died in many different circumstances. Some were buried. Others were lost at sea. Some were burned at the stake by Roman rulers. None of that limits God's power to raise the dead.

Do not forget that God spoke the world into existence and no matter what happens to my body, He can call my name and bring me suddenly back to life, in my glorified body.

In the end, what matters most is not where we were buried, but to whom we belong when we die. hat we belong to Jesus. Whether buried or cremated, the Christian's confidence is the same: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

That is where our peace rests.

A Good-hearted Skeptic Asks:

You mentioned that we all have a date with judgment. What would you say to someone like me who finds the idea of judgment more frightening than comforting?

I understand why judgment feels frightening. For many people, it sounds like a final exam that you know you're going to fail. We are all born with the Law buried within us. We know right from wrong and we also sense that one day—all of our wrongs must be accounted for.

If God is love, then why does judgment have to be in our future. Because love demands it. Let me explain.

Imagine a man who has committed murder standing in court. The day of sentencing arrives. The judge enters the room smiling, joking, clearly in a good mood. He says, “Today, out of kindness, I’m going to let this man go free.” That might sound merciful, but to the family who lost a loved one senselessly, it would feel like a second injustice. Mercy that ignores justice isn’t mercy at all. It’s cruelty dressed up as kindness.

So, the Bible does not minimize judgment. It insists on it. God is good, and goodness requires justice.

But here is where the gospel does something no other worldview dares to do.

The Bible says:

There is no fear in love. Instead, perfect love drives out fear, because fear involves punishment. 1 John 4:18

In other words, fear and punishment go together. But love changes the equation.

Christianity does not say, “You will face judgment, so try harder.” It says, “You will face judgment, but you will not face it alone.” When someone becomes a Christian, they are not claiming moral superiority. They are admitting moral bankruptcy. They are trusting that the righteousness of Jesus is credited to them, and that the record of their sins is marked *paid in full*.

Judgment still happens. Justice is still honored. But mercy triumphs because the debt has been covered.

That’s why Christians can speak honestly about judgment without despair. Because in the end, justice is real—and mercy is greater.

A Student Asks:

If Jesus really stands with me now, why do I still feel alone sometimes?

That’s a really good question.

Loneliness is one of the lingering effects of the fall. When sin entered the world, perfect fellowship was broken. Our relationship with God was damaged, and so was our connection with one another. Even after we come to faith in Christ, we still live in a world that is not yet fully healed. Through the death of Jesus and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, our connection with God has been restored and it is stronger than it has ever been. But it is still not what it will one day be.

That tension shows up in Scripture itself. The apostle Paul talks about it openly. In Philippians he says he feels torn between two desires. On one hand, he says that “*to depart this world is to be with Christ... which is far better.*” On the other hand, he understands that God still has work for him to do here. He knows that staying in this life is necessary, even though it comes with longing and ache (Philippians 1:23–24).

That’s why Paul can also say, “*to live is Christ, and to die is gain*” (Philippians 1:21). Life with Christ now is meaningful, but life with Christ then will be complete. And until that day, there will be moments when even believers feel lonely.

One of my heroes in the faith was a musician Rich Mullins. Rich never married. He was engaged once, and the relationship ended painfully. He spoke very honestly about loneliness in a radio interview. He said:

I was in a lengthy relationship with a girl and even though I had a girlfriend, I would still feel really lonely...

I finally realized that friendship is not a remedy for loneliness. Loneliness is a part of our experience and if we are looking for relief from loneliness in friendship, we are only going to frustrate the friendship. –Rich Mullins

I remember reading those words and they rang true. I appreciated his raw honesty: Loneliness is not a problem to be solved. It’s a reality to be lived. Even good gifts don’t erase loneliness. Marriage doesn’t cure it.

Lynley and I are best friends. We’ve been married more years than we’ve been apart, but even now, I have days when I experience loneliness, and it’s not her fault. She has days when she feels very alone, and it’s not due to my neglect.

Loneliness is a reminder that we are not home yet. That we are, as Scripture says, pilgrims passing through. So what do we do with loneliness?

We use it for good. We let it train our minds to remember that one day, He comes again. And we shall enter the Holy of Holies, without a rope around our ankle. For when we see Him, we shall be like Him. In heaven, we are complete. Until then, stay close to brothers and sisters in Christ, for we need each other. We need solid Christian friends.

Wrap up with the invitation:

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Why Come Forward Today

If you continually punish yourself for things in your past, come.

Come kneel at the altar and pray.

If you fret about the future, come

Come kneel at the altar and pray.

If you're a student who wrestles with loneliness, come.

Come kneel at the altar and pray.

If you hunger to find peace through Jesus Christ, come.

Come forward for baptism.