

STUDIES IN HEBREWS No. 18
Hebrews 10:1-18
October 6, 2002

Review

- v.1 There is no question about the text here as there was at 9:11. He speaks of the “good things that are coming.” The Levitical sacrifices only foreshadowed the future salvation which Christ has guaranteed by his death and resurrection and which will some day come in its completion. And the problem with those sacrifices is, again, that they cannot take away sin and make the worshipper perfect before God.
- v.2 This is the third of the three contrary-to-fact conditional statements around which the preacher forms the central argument of his sermon. The first was in 7:11 – “If perfection could have been obtained through the Levitical priesthood...what need was there for another priest to come?” – the second was in 8:7 – “If there had been nothing wrong with the first covenant, no place would have been sought for another.” The third one, here is obviously like the others. If the sacrifices could deal definitively with sin, why did they have to be offered over and over again.
- v.4 Here he lays down the rule. Obviously he is not saying that the sacrifices were supposed to take away sin but failed to do so. He is saying that they were never capable of doing so and that the faithful people in the ancient epoch never imagined that they could as the following citation from Psalm 40 indicates.
- v.7 Our preacher takes the citation from Psalm 40 from the LXX (the MT does not have “a body you have prepared for me) and understands it as prophetic of Christ. (Let me say, in short, having listened to Dr. Waltke on the Psalms this summer, I think it is more true to say than not that the Psalms of David are all in one way or another messianic. As Dr. Waltke puts it: “sacral kingship is fundamental to the Psalter.” When anointed to be king, he is the manifestation and representation of God, which explains a lot of the language that often confuses us in those psalms. He was the king, he speaks in his psalms as the king, and yet there is always a recognition that the merely human king of Israel is not adequate to fulfill the vision of kingship that has been given to the people of God. In any case, the New Testament and the early church were correct to see Christ everywhere in the Psalter.

The citation perfectly suits the preachers use of it here because it compares the Levitical sacrifices unfavorably with the work of Christ. It was a truism of the Old Testament revelation that the Levitical ritual served no good purpose without faith and obedience on the part of the worshipper. Several Lord’s Days back we looked at some of the texts in the prophets that make that point. This is the simple meaning of David’s words in Psalm 40:6-8. They knew that what was required was the offering of their trust and willing obedience to God.

The author here, however, as throughout this argument, is dealing with Levitical sacrifice, or, as the four terms – sacrifice, offering, burnt offering, sin offering – indicate, the entire sacrificial ritual of the Mosaic law, under the view of them entertained by his readers, viz. as means of dealing definitively with their sin before God. The person he is addressing in his sermon is not the person whose sacrificial worship gives expression to his trust in the Lord his Redeemer and to the glad consecration of his life to the service of God in gratitude for the salvation he has received as a free gift. The person he is addressing is the person who hopes that the act of sacrifice itself will cleanse him from guilt.

- v.8 The Lord was often pleased with his people's sacrifices. Remember how often the OT speaks of the pleasing aroma that the sacrifices send up to God. But here he is not pleased. David is speaking categorically when he says "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire," but he means that what comes first and is most important is the offering of the heart and the faith one puts in God. As we saw, the prophets put the point in the same categorical way, to the point that some have wondered if they were against the sacrifices altogether. They were not but they made their point about faith coming first in the same dramatic way.
- v.10 Christ's sacrifice of himself, has just the saving power that the Levitical sacrifices lack. The "will of God" that Jesus came into the world to fulfill, was, of course, the offering of himself for sinners. And what need would there have been for him to do that if the Levitical sacrifices were adequate to take away sin and guilt?
- v.11 The point made earlier in vv. 1-4 and earlier still several times in the argument (cf. e.g. 8:1-2) is recapitulated and summed up. The ineffectuality of the Levitical sacrifices is demonstrated by the fact that they had to be performed over and over again. They fare poorly in that regard in comparison with the once for all sacrifice of Jesus, the effectuality of which is attested by the singular place of honor that he was granted when he returned to heaven from his mission in the world. The priests must continue to stand; Christ has sat down and where? At the Right Hand of God! It is to Christ, therefore, and not to priests and rituals that sinners must come to obtain forgiveness and entrance into eternal life.
- v.18 The author returns to his citation of Jer. 31:31-34 (in chapter 8) to provide a dramatic climax to his long argument that began as far back as 4:14. The true salvation that God promises and Christ has guaranteed results in a permanent and full absolution, forgiveness of sins.

Of course, Protestants cannot understand how Roman Catholics can read this verse and still believe that Christ's sacrifice is repeated, that it happens over again, every time the Mass is said.

No one who had true and living faith in the ancient epoch believed that the sacrifices, in themselves, had the power to remove sin and guilt. They knew very well that God had rejected generations of his people for their want of faith *even though the sacrificial ritual continued*.

When they were expressing repentance, as David in Ps. 51, they understood that sacrifices were valuable only *after* and only *as an expression of* the true repentance of the heart. “You do not delight in sacrifice, else I would give it. You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” If that was the understanding of these Jewish Christians Hebrews would never have been written.

Believers in the former era enjoyed the full freedom from guilt that God’s grace provided. It is in the OT that we read how God has separated our sins from us as far as the east is from the west, that he remembers our sins no more, that he has hurled our iniquities into the depths of the sea, that he has cast them behind his back, that he has trampled them underfoot, that he does not impute our iniquity to us.

And, as we have pointed out a number of times so far, the error into which Israel often fell and into which these Jewish Christians were being tempted to fall is a sin that is as possible for Gentile Christians in the new epoch to commit as it was for Jews, and, is a fatal error vast multitudes of them have committed over the last 2,000 years. It is not for nothing that Hebrews takes such a prominent place in Protestant/Roman Catholic polemics. We see Roman Catholic theology as, for substance, very much the theology of ritualism that the author of this letter is condemning and warning against.

I think we need not say much more about this, as it has been our subject for weeks now: salvation rests on the perfect and eternal sacrifice of Jesus Christ and not on human sacrifices that, at best, were only types, or enacted prophecies of that true and eternal sacrifice. You need Christ and you get him by faith in him, you don’t need a ritual. Christian ritual is valuable *only* if it is the expression of a true and living faith in Jesus himself.

But I want to deal with another aspect of this that does sometimes confuse us. I’m speaking of the relationship between Christ’s once for all sacrifice, which we read here, as we read elsewhere in the Bible, “made perfect forever those who are being made holy” and the continuing seeking for forgiveness that was required in the ancient epoch and is no less required in the epoch that began at Pentecost.

If Christ’s sacrifice has made perfect forever those who are being made holy, then how can John the apostle write this?

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

It is not an easy question to answer, not least because the Bible never seems to address it directly. One would think it might have, that there needed to be explanation as to how it can be true that “there is therefore now no condemnation to the man who is in Christ Jesus” and, *at the same time*, that we must seek over and over again the forgiveness of our sins. But there is no place in the Bible where the tension between those facts is faced and resolved. I wish there were. But God is wiser than I am and clearly he wants us to face both facts. And the proof is that it isn’t that you find one fact in one writer and another in another. You find both facts in the same

writer and sometimes cheek to jowl with one another. Paul talks about the finality of Christ's work and of our justification over and over again, but he also talks about our need for continuing forgiveness.

We are here face to face with a major theological "problem." We believe because the Scripture teaches it that the pardon granted to us in our justification, when we believe in Jesus Christ, applies to all our sins: past, present and future. In the Bible justification is always once for all and never is repeated. And there are many texts like Hebrews 10:14 that seem to make a great emphasis of the complete, final, and eternal forgiveness that is ours, as believers, through Christ. Paul says not only that there is no condemnation for the person in Christ, but that no one can lay a charge against us because it is God who has justified us.

But, there is no doubt that believers continue to sin after they have been justified and are required to pray for the forgiveness of their sins. In the Lord's prayer Jesus taught his disciples always to pray "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." We include in our worship every Sunday morning a confession of our sins, as we are taught to do in Holy Scripture. This sermon we are studying, that we know as Hebrews, is a summons to these Jewish Christians to repent of their sins, to seek forgiveness from the Lord, and to put on new obedience.

Some of our own theologians, facing these facts, spoke themselves of a repeated or even daily justification. Roman Catholics, of course, use these same biblical facts to argue that believers must in some way atone for the sins they commit after baptism and that justification can wax and wane according to the sins a believer commits and whether forgiveness for them is sought and obtained.

As so often, the solution comes by asserting, by confessing, and by believing *everything* the Bible teaches us about the forgiveness of our sins. Not one thing at the expense of the other; not one thing to the diminishment of the other; but both things together, fully and at one time.

There is no doubt that the Bible teaches the absolute annihilation of guilt in the justification of sinners. It does it here in Hebrews 10:10 and 14 as it had in 9:12 and 15 and it does it in many other passages as well. We must confess that as gospel truth. When a person believes in Jesus Christ there is, therefore, no more condemnation for that person. No one can lay a charge against the man or woman, boy or girl, that God has justified. No system of theology can justify itself in the face of those statements and that emphatic teaching if it does not teach a once-for-all justification of sinners. Christ's righteousness, which is imputed to us, reckoned as our own, is a perfect and infinite righteousness, and that is the righteousness that is ours when we believe in Jesus Christ. By his death he took away all our guilt and by his righteous life he gave us a perfect and infinite righteousness in which we stand before God. That is Paul's doctrine, that is the doctrine of Isaiah and of Peter and of John and it is most definitely the doctrine of Hebrews. The reason Protestants have generally not been tempted by the Roman Catholic arguments is that Roman Catholic theology does not reproduce in its system a faithful form of this emphatic and repeated emphasis on the perfection of our justification that we find in the Bible.

But, there is no doubt that sins continue to be committed and must be forgiven. The Bible not only teaches this a thousand times, but you and I know it from painful, bitter experience. The

Lord Jesus by his terrible sacrifice and perfect obedience may have made us perfect forever, but he certainly did not take sin out of our lives or make it unnecessary for us to confess our sins or to seek forgiveness.

Different approaches have been taken to explain this. Some, as I said, speak of our justification being “pieced out” day by day. We have the eternal forgiveness in Christ when we believe, but we actually get the forgiveness sin by sin, day by day, as we live our Christian lives. Even the great Wilhelmus a Brakel, the famous Dutch Reformed theologian of the 18th century, took this view. He saw justification as a continuous act, a repeated act. The problem with that is that it does not seem to be possible to reconcile that view of justification with what the Bible is always saying about justification, that it is perfect, complete, entire, and once-for-all. The Bible never says that justification – our pardon or forgiveness and God’s declaration of our righteous standing before him – is repeated or continuous.

The better solution, the one that is most faithful to *everything* the Bible says on this subject of the forgiveness of our sins, is to confess, with the Bible, that God, in his grace and mercy, removes the guilt of our sins entirely and once-for-all when he first applies to us the life, the death, the record, the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus, or, in the beautiful words of the Heidelberg Catechism, when:

“God credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me.”

But, at the same time we must admit that we continue to be sinful, and that, while the *guilt* of our sin may have been entirely removed, that is, our liability to be punished for that sin that Christ was punished for in our place; the *culpability* of that sin, the ugliness of it, the unworthiness of it is not removed. The inherent evil of our sin remains, we know it does, and we feel the evil of it and the offense of it. And that offense produces in us, and properly so, a sense that we have offended our heavenly Father. We do not fear the wrath of God, we are now in his family and are his precious children, but we rightly feel separation from him, we rightly grieve that we have offended him by our disobedience, we are conscious that having failed to do right and having done wrong we need to acknowledge that to our Father and ask his forgiveness. We may even fear our heavenly Father’s paternal displeasure and his discipline. Father’s can punish their children, and rightly, very severely for their sins without any suggestion that the child’s place in the family is in jeopardy. Justification gives us a place in the family. But in a family, sins must be confessed and forgiven, because sin disturbs family relationships and because fathers want their children to grow up in holiness and goodness.

Justification is an objective declaration by God that we are righteous before him in the righteousness of his Son. But that divine acquittal creates in us the consciousness that our sins have been forgiven, it creates in us the joy of our salvation, and a sense of peace with God. So, when that joy and peace is disturbed and our sense of filial or childlike relationship with God our Father is troubled by our sins and obscured, we are right to look up to him in humility, honestly acknowledge our fault so that our relationship with our Father will be renewed and restored. It is

our Father who extends us that forgiveness, that kind of pardon. It is not God as Judge, but God as Father who cleanses us from our daily, already pardoned sins.

Our Confession of Faith puts it this way:

“God doth continue to forgive the sins of those that are justified; and, although they can never fall from the state of justification, yet they may, by their sins, fall under God’s fatherly displeasure, and not have the light of his countenance restored unto them, until they humble themselves, confess their sins, beg pardon, and renew their faith and repentance.”

Of course, they get that forgiveness day after day, still and only on the basis of Christ’s perfect and finished work, that once for all made them perfect before God. When John, for example, says that if we confess our sins God will forgive them, he goes on to say that

“...if anyone does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”

The only basis for our forgiveness, whether we are thinking of it as that once-for-all forgiveness that is granted us when we become Christians or that day by day forgiveness our heavenly Father extends to us when we ask him for it, it is still made possible only because Christ gave up his life on our behalf and suffered the punishment our sins deserved in our place and for our sakes. We get the daily pardon only because we already have the once-for-all pardon.

This is the point Alexander Whyte was making when he wrote,

“...we are always returning home from the far country, and we are always saying, “Father, I have again sinned.” And our Father is always saying over us, “Bring forth the best robe and put it on him.” Every morning you rise put on again the best robe and every returning night lie down again in it. Go out to your day’s work always wearing it. Make it your morning coat and your evening dress. Be married in it, if you would be married in the Lord; and make it your winding sheet, if you would die in the Lord. Die in it and awake in it and go up to Judgement in it. Stand at the Right Hand of the Great White Throne in it, and enter heaven shining like the sun in it.” [*Thomas Shepard*, 161-162]

Which is to say, never doubt your full and free forgiveness in Jesus Christ. There is nothing incomplete, nothing imperfect in the sacrifice he offered for you and which was applied to you when you first became his follower, either by faith when you were older or by the seed of faith when you were an infant in your believing parents’ home. But, never take that full and free forgiveness for granted either. Count on it, and, sure that you have it, grieve over your sins and confess them to God and to one another, and ask your heavenly Father to forgive you and to restore your full and free fellowship with him that you disturbed, as sinful children will, by disobeying him.

Think of God's once-for-all pardon of all your sins as your justification, the act of your Judge; think of your continuing pardon as the act of your heavenly Father and the means of your sanctification. Forgiveness is not something we receive and then forget about. It is the stuff of our life and the fact that we are sure we have it, already, is the greatest motive for seeking it day after day from our Father's hand and heart. And there is nothing like a sense of that great forgiveness kept on our soul by constant confession and absolution to keep us hungering and thirsting after a life that is a credit to our Savior and our Heavenly Father.

I tell you this, if you are always remembering the forgiveness you have in Jesus Christ and what he did to obtain that forgiveness for you, if you are constantly asking for a fresh application of it from your heavenly father, asking that the same grace that took all your condemnation away to be given to you again and anew to remove the offense of your sins that has troubled your relationship with him or with others, you will not live the same life as those Christians who think about forgiveness and seek it and obtain it only from time to time. Yours will be a deeper, holier, and, yes, a far happier life, in the strong, true meaning of that word.

I know of women in this congregation, I think of them in particular, able, well-read, effective women, attractive women in every way. Yet these same women are often beside themselves. I know it so because they have told me from time to time. They have written me a letter or come to see me because they are so distracted by their sin and their constant and repeated failure to get past their sin. You might share a meal with such a woman and have no idea how heavy her heart is over her own sin and how often she has cried out to God about it. She is so polished and so polite and, also, she is so ashamed that she does not speak about this to you. Sometimes, only sometimes, she will speak about it to me, but usually only to God.

And what can I say to such a woman. I can only say that she must do what I must do and what I want to do every day of my life. I want to say the morning and at midday and again at night, "Lamb of God, I come." And I know I can come, time after time after time, because I have already received for now and forever the full and free pardon of all my sins. And when I come to my heavenly Father now, it is only that I might obtain that forgiveness he extends as my Father because he has already extended it to me forever as my Judge.

A friend of his met "Rabbi" Duncan on an Edinburgh street at a time of great and controversial political agitation. "Is there any news today?" he asked. "Oh, yes," Duncan replied, "this is always news, the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin."

[*Just a Talker*, xxxiii]