

## “By a Single Offering”

### The Fourteenth in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

*Texts: Hebrews 10:1-18; Psalm 40:1-17*

---

There is a very good reason why we talk a lot about the distinction between the law and the gospel, and the fact Christ’s death upon the cross can save even the guiltiest of sinners, and that Christ’s righteousness (his obedience) is the ground of our justification before God. The reason why we talk about these things so often is that these things are taught throughout the pages of Scripture, and they are repeatedly emphasized in the Book of Hebrews. In this epistle we read that it is because of Jesus’ obedience to the will of God in offering himself as the once and for all, final and perfect sacrifice for sin, that we have the forgiveness of our sins, a clean conscience before God, that we are being sanctified, and that we already have an eternal redemption. And it is because Jesus has done all of this for us as our great high priest, that we live in the new covenant era where there are no more sacrifices for sin, no priests to make them, and no holy places in which God dwells in the midst of his people, protecting us from his wrath and from his glory.

As we continue with our series on the Book of Hebrews, we now take up the author’s discussion of Christ’s sacrifice for sin in chapter 10—concentrating (as we did last time) on the “once for all” and the “how much more” descriptions of our Lord’s redemptive work on behalf of sinners. In this section of Hebrews we find some of the most important teaching in the entire New Testament about the purpose and the meaning of the death of Jesus Christ. This is why it is wise that we take our time as we work through this section of Hebrews, and why we should digest this material carefully and prayerfully.

In order to understand why the unknown author of Hebrews emphasizes the particular theological points that he does, we need to keep in mind that he is writing to an unnamed church (likely a house church in Rome or Alexandria) which is made up of recent converts from Judaism to Christianity. Apparently, a number of the people who originally founded this church had renounced Jesus Christ and returned to that religion in which they had been raised. The author of Hebrews composes this epistle to demonstrate the absolute superiority of Jesus Christ to all things, effectively removing any reason or justification to return to Judaism. The result is this letter in which we learn a great deal about the eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ, the nature of his sacrifice upon the cross, as well as how our Lord’s priesthood gives us a clean conscience before God, confidence to approach God in prayer, and a solid hope that our eternal priest will return to deliver his people at the end of the age.

As we have seen throughout our study of Hebrews so far, the author has been relentless in building his case from the Greek text of the Old Testament (the LXX) that Jesus is the great high priest whose redemptive work fulfills every Old Testament expectation that God would send a Messiah who would save his people from their sins. We all know someone who if one nail is required uses three, if a dab of glue is needed they use half the tube. They just want to make sure . . .

We see this tendency “to make sure” in the way in which the author of Hebrews builds his case for the superiority of Jesus Christ to Moses, to the priests of Israel, and even to angels. We have observed that the author has used one line of biblical argumentation after another to prove that Jesus is superior to the inferior (the types and shadows of the Old Testament), that Jesus ushered in the new covenant superceding the old covenant, and that in Jesus—through the power of the Holy Spirit—God’s redemptive work is not merely external to us (the sacrificial blood of animals and the law being given on stone

tablets), but is now internal, removing from us the guilt of sin in such a definitive way that our consciences are now clean before the Holy God.

The particular section of Hebrews which we are covering in this sermon (chapter 10:1-18) is part of a larger running argument which runs throughout chapters nine and ten in which the author makes four important theological points all the while building upon those points he made earlier in chapters 7-8 (that Jesus is an eternal priest in the order of Melchizedek, and that Jesus is the one who ushers in the new and better covenant as foretold by the prophet Jeremiah). In the first 10 verses of chapter 9, the author discussed the role of the earthly tabernacle, the mode of worship conducted there, and the role these types and shadows play in redemptive history. In effect, he is showing us how to read and understand the Old Testament—everything written there points ahead to the coming of Jesus.

In the balance of chapter nine (vv. 11-28), the author discussed the nature and meaning of the death of Jesus (in light of the old covenant types and shadows) and set forth the fact our Lord's shed blood does what the sacrificial system associated with the old covenant could never do, remove the guilt of our sin and secure for us an eternal redemption. The old covenant sacrifices temporarily and provisionally turned aside God's anger, but these could do nothing to assuage the consciences of guilty sinners. In this section we see some of the clearest and most important teaching about the nature of Christ's priestly work on our behalf, especially the meaning of Christ's death for sin and how that death does more than merely make people savable, it actually and effectually saves them—it is a perfect and eternal redemption.

As we will see, when we look closer at our passage (chapter 10:1-18), the author sets out his case that the death of Jesus put an end to the validity of all old covenant sacrifices. We are not going to butcher any critter this morning and barbeque its remains. Nor I am a priest standing between you and God. Jesus is our high priest and mediator of the covenant of grace who has already secured for us every good thing which God has promised to give to his people. Then, in the balance of chapter 10 (which Lord willing, we'll address next week), the author addresses the wonderful assurance which is ours by virtue of trusting in what Jesus has done to save us from our sins. It is because of Jesus Christ's finished work (on the cross and in the heavenly temple) that we have confidence to enter into the Lord's presence to worship him, now free to offer our sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to our gracious redeemer.

So with that bit of introduction in mind we turn to our text, the first eighteen verses of chapter 10.

The issue which the author addresses at this point in his argument is the redemptive historical purpose of those perpetual animal sacrifices prescribed under the old covenant. As we saw earlier in this section of Hebrews, these sacrifices (i.e., the sacrifices made by the priests on behalf of the people) did indeed turn aside the wrath of God in a provisional sense, because they anticipate the future once for all sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The various sacrifices prescribed under the old covenant required a priesthood, a tabernacle, and the shedding of the blood of sacrificial animals—and these are all identified by the author as types and shadows. Because these sacrifices are provisional, they were only temporary in their effect. Because people are sinful, these types and shadows did little to remove the guilt and break the power of sin, and they had to be repeated over and over again until the coming of Jesus Christ, who made the final, once for all sacrifice for sin.

At this point in his case for the superiority of Jesus Christ, the author addresses the inability of the law to provide what is necessary for God's people, *if* we are to be saved from the guilt and power of sin. Here the author uses the term law (*nomos*) in a broad sense as a reference to the priesthood and the system of

sacrifices established by the old covenant.<sup>1</sup> In verse 1, he reiterates a point he has already made—*“for since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.”* The law (the old covenant) was but a shadow of what (or better “who”) was to come.

Yet, according to the author, the law (the old covenant) did anticipate “the good things yet to come.” As we saw in Hebrews 9:11, these “good things” are a specific reference to Jesus Christ in his priestly office and work on behalf of his people. Jesus is not only the perfect high priest—he does not suffer from human limitations or sin, although Jesus is able to empathize us in our weaknesses because he was truly human—Jesus offers the perfect sacrifice, himself. And this is precisely what the old covenant was intended to teach us—good things were yet to come in the person of a great high priest after the order of Melchizedek who offers the perfect sacrifice for sin.

Because the law (the old covenant) was but a shadow of these good things, the old covenant could never (by itself) bring to an end the tyranny of human sin. At the heart of the old covenant is the law—the ten commandments. But the ten commandments were given, in part, to show us how sinful we truly are. The law reveals to us the will of God. The law judges us. The law stands over us. The law crushes us. And the law gives us no ability to obey its commands. The temple, priesthood, and sacrifices were given precisely to show us that our sin is a very serious matter, that it separates us from God, and that full satisfaction must be made to God’s holy justice *if* any of Adam’s fallen children are to be saved from God’s wrath on the day of judgment.

The very nature of the old covenant economy should have made this point clear to the people of Israel. This should also be clear to anyone in the church receiving this letter as well. Like Abraham, the Jews should have understood that temporal blessings from God (material prosperity) pointed ahead to eternal blessings (including a clear conscience based upon an eternal redemption). This is why it is such an egregious sin to make a profession of faith in Christ (as many in this church had done), and then renounce that profession under the threat of persecution and return to Judaism (or any other religion of works righteousness). In Hebrews 6:6, the author warned that this amounts to *“crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.”* To commit apostasy is to deny that Christ’s priestly work (the good things promised under the old covenant) is the reality which alone can deliver sinners from the guilt and power of their sin. To do this is to invoke the covenant curses.

Although the priests of Israel repeatedly offered the sacrificial blood of bulls and goats, these sacrifices could never make sinners perfect, nor could these sacrifices truly cleanse their consciences so that we might draw near to God without fear. Indeed as the author states in verse 2, *“otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins?”* The good things are grounded in Christ’s once for all sacrifice for sin, which alone can remove the guilt of our sins and cleanse our consciences from that which would otherwise haunt us. This was the point at the end of chapter 9 when the author wrote in terms of the huge contrast between the old covenant and the new—“how much more” does the shed blood of Jesus Christ deal with the guilt and power of sin in comparison with the sacrificial death of an animal.

In fact, the author makes this very point again in verse 3. *“But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year.”* When the animal dies and its blood is shed, when the priest makes the sacrifice, applies

---

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, Hebrews, 235-235.

the blood, and then offers up the burnt offering, we see that our sin is truly offensive to God, and that it must be dealt with. But in these sacrifices we also see that the blood of an animal cannot actually or effectually deal with the wickedness of the human heart. God may turn aside his wrath from his people for a time, but it is clear that something much more is needed, a sacrifice which can indeed turn aside God's wrath so that we may actually receive what is promised, and so that we may not live in continual fear of God's judgment.

In verse 4, the author spells out the theological reason as to why this is the case. "*For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*" While these sacrifices could not remove the guilt of our sin in and of themselves, the sacrifices did point ahead to that one sacrifice which could remove the guilt and stain of sin, once and for all. Our catechism captures the heart of this quite well in Q & A 14-16:

**Q 14. Can any mere creature make satisfaction for us?**

*A No; for first, God will not punish any other creature for the sin which man committed; and further, no mere creature can sustain the burden of God's eternal wrath against sin and redeem others from it,*

**Q 15. What kind of mediator and redeemer, then, must we seek?**

*A One who is a true and righteous man, and yet more powerful than all creatures, that is, one who is also true God.*

**Q 16. Why must He be a true and righteous man?**

*A Because the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should make satisfaction for sin; but one who is himself a sinner cannot satisfy for others.*

An animal cannot die for my sins. But Jesus (who is fully God and man) can and did die for my sins. The sacrifices of the old covenant were provisional in nature (they anticipated the coming of Jesus Christ) and they were temporary (they must be repeated) so as to be a lesson to God's people about the gravity of human sin. And these sacrifices must be offered by the priests, because the people of Israel were separated from the presence of God and remained outside the tabernacle, watching and wondering about what was going on within the Holy Place and Most Holy Place, outside of their sight.

Given the provisional, temporary, and hidden nature of the old covenant sacrifices, this is why it is so important to grasp the fact that with our Lord's once for all sacrifice for sin upon a Roman cross (a very public event), there are no more sacrifices to turn aside God's wrath from us. Any attempt at such sacrifices is an offense to the holy God! This is because God's wrath has *already* been turned away at the cross. For God's people, judgment day was Good Friday. That promised perfect and eternal redemption is already ours.

The "how much more" nature of Christ's priesthood is spelled out in some detail in verses 5-10. Citing from a messianic Psalm (Psalm 40:6-8—a portion of our Old Testament lesson) composed by David but which must refer to the coming Messiah, the author applies this passage to Jesus who actually made that sacrifice which can and does deal with human sin. Not only must the sacrifice be sufficient to take away sin, but the one making the sacrifice must himself be without sin. As we read in verses 5-6, "*consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.'*"

It is important to notice that the author mentions four terms (also used by the psalmist) which reflect the four types of sacrifices in the old covenant. “Sacrifices” refer to any form of animal sacrifices, “offerings” refers to the grain offering (as specified in Leviticus 2), “burnt offerings” and “sin offerings” are also mentioned in Leviticus.<sup>2</sup> The point is that the animals involved in the sacrifice do so without knowing what they are doing—there is no willingness on their part to give up their lives for us. But that one of whom David is speaking willingly gives himself up for us, and God even prepared for him a body in which to do so (the incarnation).

In fact, in verse 7 the author goes on to cite from Psalm 40 in regard to this very point. “*Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’*” Jesus willingly went to the cross because it was the will of God that he do so. And in doing so, Jesus fulfilled the words of Scripture written about him hundreds of years in advance of his coming. There can be no question here that our very salvation depends upon the willingness and obedience of Jesus Christ to suffer and die for us and in our place. In order to secure our redemption, there must be perfect obedience. Since we cannot render such obedience, Jesus Christ does it for us and in our place.

Given the shift in redemptive history which occurred with the coming of Jesus Christ to do God’s will (and to provide the obedience required of us under the law), the old order of things was already rendered obsolete and the sacrifices being made in the Jerusalem temple at the time this epistle was written (before 70 A.D.) are no longer effectual, even in a provisional or temporary sense as they had been. This is spelled out in verses 8-9 where we read, “*when he [the Psalmist] said above, ‘You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings’ (these are offered according to the law), then he added, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will.’ He does away with the first in order to establish the second.*” In one sense, God did not “will them” nor did he take pleasure in old covenant sacrifices, because they served as only a provisional purpose in light of Christ’s work upon the cross yet to come. To put it another way, Jesus’ death was the sacrifice which God desired and in which he delights. Furthermore, now that the new covenant has been established in the blood of Christ and through our Lord’s obedience, the first (the former, the Sinaitic covenant) is ended, and the second (the latter, the new covenant) is now established.

As the author has made plain in chapter 8, the second (or latter), i.e., the new covenant, is the fulfillment of God’s covenant promise to Abraham which remained in place from the time God gave it to Abraham (Genesis 12, 15, 18, 22 etc.), up to the time of the covenant God made with David (2 Samuel 7) and even until the prophecy of a new covenant in Jeremiah 31 is fulfilled (which the author will cite yet again in the next few verses). This means that the covenant of grace was in force the whole time the Sinaitic covenant was also in force, and although the old covenant (the first, which God established at Sinai) was rendered obsolete because of the redemptive and priestly work of Jesus Christ. This means that the second (the new covenant) is the Abrahamic covenant, now fulfilled in Christ. And it is this covenant which remains in force even now. This is a very strong argument against going back to the old order of things established at Sinai. Priests, bloody sacrifices, and holy places are not part of the new covenant. Christ’s work on the cross and in the heavenly temple has done away with them once and for all.

That Christ’s obedience is at the heart of our salvation is made clear in verse 10. “*And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*” Our sanctification (our holiness—being set apart by God through our purification from sin) is accomplished for us by the

---

<sup>2</sup> Bruce, Hebrews, 241.

death of Christ, who obeyed God's will and offered himself (his body) as the final once for all sacrifice for sin. In this sense, our sanctification too has already occurred, having been accomplished for us by Jesus Christ. And because our sanctification is on-going, our consciences can rightly be described as "pure" before God.

Having established the perfect nature of Christ's death for sins, the author once again returns to summarize the eternal nature of Christ's priesthood and his work in the heavenly temple. In verse 11, the author reminds us of the limits of the old covenant priesthood, when he writes "*every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.*" This is a point already hammered home, but raised again so that we might see yet again the contrast between the old covenant and the new. In verses 12-13, this contrast is set out. "*But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet.*" Once again, the author emphasizes that unlike Israel's priests who repeatedly made sacrifices which could not ultimately deal with our sin, Jesus Christ's final and once for all sacrifice for sin has already been made. And having made that final, once for all, perfect sacrifice for sin, Jesus sat down at God's right hand (a position of power and authority). Jesus remains at God's right hand until he returns to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new.

As the author puts it in verse 14, "*For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*" Nothing remains to be done. Christ's work of redemption is complete, finished, accomplished. His death on the cross applied to us in the heavenly temple "perfects" sinners. The cross removes from us the guilt of our sin. The cross breaks the power of sin over us. The cross secures for us an eternal redemption, and the cross purifies our consciences before God. The cross even ensures that we are presently being sanctified—meaning that our sinful nature is progressively weakened and the new nature is progressively strengthened. All of this is our because Jesus did God's will and suffered unto death, for us, and in our place, through a single offering of himself.

As he wraps up this section of his argument, the author once again reminds us the fact that Jesus Christ has fulfilled the promise of a new covenant given by the Holy Spirit through the prophet Jeremiah. Citing from Jeremiah 31, the author concludes in verses 15-17, "*and the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, 'This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds,' then he adds, 'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.'*" It is the death of Jesus—by a single offering—which secures for us all the benefits of the new covenant. And because of this, the author concludes in verse 18, "*where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.*" The old covenant is gone. It is null and void. Obsolete. It has been fulfilled once and for all by a single offering—the death of Jesus Christ.

What, then, do we take with us from this passage?

**W**hat, then, do we take with us from this passage? The most important thing to take away from this text is to realize how emphatic the author is that Jesus Christ has *already* done everything necessary to save us from our sins. We are delivered from God's wrath by Jesus' obedience to God's will (his active obedience), and by Jesus' death for our sins (his passive obedience). The knowledge of this "once for all" and "how much more" nature of the death of Christ is vital to keep before our eyes, lest we say to ourselves, "I am too sinful, I cannot be saved." "I can't keep the commandments, so why bother trying." Understanding the cross is the remedy for despair and doubt. The cross is enough. It is perfect. And it renders you "perfect" before God.

But understanding that we are saved by a single offering is also vital to keep before our eyes whenever

we think to ourselves that God requires us to add something to the finished work of Jesus Christ. We may say “merely believing in Jesus is too easy, surely I must contribute *something*.” But what can you add to what Jesus Christ has already done? Remember the wise counsel of Martin Luther—God doesn’t need your good works, but your neighbor surely does! Trust Christ and then love your neighbor. That we must do. But we can add nothing to the finished work of Jesus Christ. It is foolish and dangerous to even try.

And finally there are those who think that they are nice people who love God, and who believe that being a Christian is obeying the teaching and following the example of Jesus. But if that is true, why then did Jesus suffer such agony on the cross, and why do the biblical writers use this “once for all” and “how much more” kind of language? The fact is that you are not a good person—something all too evident should you measure yourself by the law of God. To be blunt, you cannot follow the example of Jesus or live a life which God accepts as “righteousness.” To seek this path as a way to enter heaven is a fool’s gambit.

No, we are saved because Jesus is a perfect savior and great high priest, who obeyed the will of God, and who by a single offering (himself) won for us an eternal redemption and a clean conscience before God! *By a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*”