

WHAT MORE CAN GOD SAY?

(Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews)

Study 9

"The Supreme Sacrifice"

(Hebrews 9:1-10:18)

VERSES (to ponder and/or memorize)

"For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; *he entered heaven itself*, now to appear *for us in God's presence*. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself *again and again* . . . But now he has appeared *once for all* at the end of the ages *to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself* . . . *by one sacrifice* he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy . . . *there is no longer any sacrifice for sin.*" (Hebrews 9:24-26; 10:14,18b).

WHAT?

The Passage At Hand

This week we are looking at a bigger portion of the letter than we have been accustomed to in past weeks. Don't be discouraged by that! The passage is actually held together by one simple and very encouraging theme: the superior sacrifice of Jesus and what it accomplished on our behalf. Seek to grapple with that.

The Context

We have come right to the heart of the letter. Remember the context? The Hebrews are under pressure to leave their Christian faith and go back to their Jewish roots. So our author has been busy building his case for the superiority of Jesus and the New Covenant over the Old Covenant out of a pastoral concern for his readers. He wants them to know just how harmful it would be to them if they were to abandon Christ, so he carefully demonstrates how their Jewish faith that came before Christ was pointing to Him and now finds its fulfillment in Him. This is meant to encourage the Hebrews to hold fast to Jesus through the sufferings they are facing. As we reflect on the teaching in the letter, we can't help but be encouraged to hold fast to Jesus as well, "fixing our eyes" on him (12:2).

The Argument Thus Far

To give a very simple summary, up to the end of chapter eight the author has shown how God has spoken supremely in His Son (1:1-4), how the Son is superior to the angels (1:5-2:18) and to Moses (3:1-19), and brings the rest to the people of God that Joshua could not bring (4:1-13). Then he begins to focus on aspects of Christ's priesthood (4:14-10:18). He is a Great High Priest in the Order of Melchizedek (4:14-7:28), a priesthood superior to that of Aaron, and thus He is the mediator of a new (superior) covenant (8:1-13).¹ Periodically he pauses to apply the implications of his argument to the Hebrews, exhorting them to perseverance in faith through encouragement and warning (2:1-4, 3:7-19, 4:11-13, 5:11-6:20).

A Superior Sacrifice

Now, as we enter into chapter nine and the first half of chapter ten, the focus is on the superior sacrifice of Jesus in relation to the Tabernacle and the sacrificial system under the Old Covenant law. As it turns out, the law with its ministry of the Tabernacle and its sacrifices for sin, was an "illustration" (9:9) and "shadow" (10:1) of what God purposed to do all along in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Here we can be greatly encouraged! We learn that the ministry of the Tabernacle *was not* able to cleanse the conscience of the worshipper, and thus failed to provide open access to God's intimate presence in the Most Holy Place. But Christ's superior sacrifice *is* able to cleanse our conscience *perfectly* from the guilt of sin and opens up the way for us to come directly to God through Him. Let's look closer at these vital things.

The Tabernacle and the Priestly Ministry Within It (9:1-10)

The chapter begins with the author's abbreviated description of the Tabernacle, which served as the center of Israel's worship until the Temple was built. In the law given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, God commanded that this tent be built, giving specific instructions for its construction. He said, "Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you" (Exodus 25:8-9). The word for Tabernacle, *miskan*, means "dwelling" (it is also called, "The Tent of Meeting," and the "sanctuary," and was referred to as "the house of the Lord" (Ex. 34:26)). It served as a sign of God's dwelling with Israel as He had promised to reveal Himself there in a special way. It spoke a dual message: God is with us and God is Holy, therefore our sin is an obstacle to our relation with Him that must be overcome by sacrifice.

¹ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), vi; Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews*. The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 58.
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The Tabernacle had an outer courtyard and then a single tent standing opposite the entrance to the courtyard. This tent was divided by a curtain, separating the initial Holy Place from the inner Most Holy Place. It was there in the Most Holy Place that God was said to dwell in a special way. In the Holy Place stood furniture used in the worship offered there: the lampstand, the table for the consecrated bread, and the golden altar of incense.² The inner room contained the Ark of the Covenant, the jar of manna, and Aaron's staff. The author relates that priests entered the outer room regularly, "but only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood" (9:7). This would happen on the Day of Atonement when he would enter to atone for his sins and that of the people.

What is the final significance of all this? We learn that in the Tabernacle and the ministry surrounding it the Holy Spirit was telling us something. It served as a living parable sending the message that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been opened to the people of God because the gifts and sacrifices being offered at the Tabernacle were "not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper" (9:8-9). They were only a matter of external ceremonies and washings, but couldn't cleanse the inside. They couldn't remove sin's defilement from the very core of our being and therefore failed to usher us into the intimate presence of the Most High God. The ministry of the Tabernacle was incomplete. What then can take away our sin?

The Superior High Priestly Ministry of Christ (9:11-14)

Having posed the problem the Tabernacle could not solve, the author now shifts to the superior high priestly ministry of Christ as the solution. He compares what Christ did to the ministry of the high priest in the earthly Tabernacle, showing how He did what the Tabernacle only pointed to. He has entered heaven as a high priest on our behalf, not on the basis of the blood of animals, but based on his own blood. As was mentioned in Study 8, the point here is not that Christ physically brought his blood into a heavenly sanctuary, sprinkling it on the prototypical furniture that the earthly sanctuary only had copies of. If we were to say this, we would diminish the value of the cross. It was there that the act of sacrifice was completed. The author is speaking figuratively here, his point being that Christ now appears for us in God's presence in heaven, having made atonement for our sin with his own blood. And the author argues, if the blood of animals was able to make the worshipper ceremonially clean in an outward sense, how much more is the sacrifice of Jesus

² Our author says that "the Most Holy Place . . . had the golden altar of incense." He would have been aware of Exodus 30:1-6 (Cf. Ex. 40:26.) and the practice of Israel, which placed it just outside the curtain in the Holy Place. His words here actually mean that the altar of incense "belonged to" the Most Holy Place even though it was placed just outside of it. The altar of incense played a key role on the Day of Atonement when the Most Holy Place was entered, so the author connects it to the Most Holy Place.
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able to "cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God" (9:13-14)! Here "from acts that lead to death" (Literally "from dead works"), points to the same thing this expression meant in 6:1, sinful deeds that require repentance. Christ's sacrifice is able to cleanse our conscience from the guilt of sin so that we are then free to serve God. He is able to cleanse the inside!

The Need for Death in Order to Secure Forgiveness (9:15-28)

Because Christ did what the Tabernacle could not do, take away the guilt of sin, He is the mediator of a New Covenant all together (9:15). It turns out that all those who were saved under the Old Covenant were saved not by animal sacrifices but by Christ. Christ "died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant" (9:15. Cf. Rom. 3:25-26). Donald Hagner puts it well, "Forgiveness experienced during the OT period depended finally - although this was hardly understood at the time - upon an event that was to take place in the future. The sacrifice of Christ is the answer to sin in every era, past and present, since it alone is the means of forgiveness."³

Beginning at 9:16 the author uses a play on words to make a point. It is the same word behind the NIV's translation of "covenant" and "will" in verses 15-20. The word *diatheke* could either mean a covenant in a formal sense, or a will, a testament. His point is this, just as a will is not put into action until the one who made it dies, so too both the Old and New covenants require death in order to be ratified. And just as the inheritance bound up in the will is not released until the death of the testator, so too the "eternal inheritance" of salvation (9:15) could not be released until the death that secured the New Covenant took place. This is why the law of Moses required everything to do with the Tabernacle to be cleansed with blood, for "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (9:22).

But Christ's offering of blood is far superior than anything the earthly Tabernacle ever saw. We see the superiority of His sacrifice in three ways here: 1) The earlier sacrifices were fit for earth, His is fit for heaven. He has now entered heaven itself, "Now to appear for us in God's presence" (9:24). 2) He offered *himself*, not blood that was not his own, but himself (9:25-26). And 3) He only need offer himself once, not again and again like the high priest did year after year (9:26-28). He came once to be sacrificed for sin, and He will come again to consummate His work of salvation in those who are waiting for him (9:28).⁴

³ Donald Hagner, *Hebrews*. The New International Biblical Commentary (Hendrickson, 1990), 141.

⁴ Notice that 9:28 makes an end to any Christian idea of reincarnation. Our hope is in the resurrection and Jesus consummation of all things (Cf. Romans 8:18-21).
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What the Law Could not do With Its Sacrifices, Christ Did With His (10:1-18)

In the first half of chapter 10 the author makes the point that the Law with its sacrifices was only a shadow of the good things that were to come and are now here in Christ (10:1). It could not make perfect those who continually drew near. If it could, the need for sacrifice would have stopped! They would not need to be "repeated endlessly year after year" (10:1), "Day after day" (10:11). The sacrifice of the Day of Atonement simply served "as an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (10:3-4).

The author sees Christ as the speaker of Psalm 40:6-8, and therein finds evidence under the Old Covenant itself that the animal sacrifices were incomplete (though the law required them to be made). Christ sets aside the sacrifices that the Old Covenant required and accomplished the will of God, making us holy by the sacrifice of His own body (10:10).

As a result, His sacrifice is complete! Finished! The priests do their work day after day, never taking away sins, but after Christ offered himself, He sat down at the right hand of God (10:12). "By one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (10:14). As Jeremiah 31:33-34 confirms, "There is no longer any sacrifice for sin" (10:18). Our forgiveness and acceptance before God is secured. Praise God!

Have I really been made perfect?

The idea of perfection in Hebrews is tied up with the idea of fulfillment. Jesus is said to be made perfect, not meaning that He was ever lacking morally, but instead meaning that He brought to fulfillment the purpose that was planned for Him (2:10; 7:28). In a similar sense, our salvation has been fulfilled, is being fulfilled, and will be finally fulfilled. Hebrews speaks of salvation as a past, present, and future reality. It has been secured, is being completed, and will be consummated!

In this passage, he speaks of our salvation as being secured: "And by that will *we have been made holy* through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (10:10), "by one sacrifice *he has made perfect forever*, those who are being made holy" (10:14). As is seen in the previous verse, he also speaks of our ongoing growth in grace in the present, "those *who are being made holy*." Finally, he speaks of our salvation awaiting its final consummation, "Just as man is destined to die once and after that face judgement, 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." Our salvation is already secured and has not yet reached its full goal!

So in saying that he has "already made perfect, those who are being made holy" he is not saying that we no longer struggle with sin. Of course we do. In this sense we are quite imperfect and longing for the final consummation of our salvation! Rather he is emphasizing the absolute adequacy of Christ's sacrifice to cleanse us completely from the guilt of sin. Our salvation has already reached its fulfillment (its perfection) in this sense: that our sin has been perfectly atoned for. There is no longer any sacrifice for our sin, and therefore no condemnation for our sin. Our guilt has been taken away. We no longer need feel guilty for the sins of our past (10:2) and we can come with confidence to the throne of grace (4:16). We have had our "hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience" (12:22). He will accept us and welcome us because of Christ. From this place of being completely forgiven and reckoned holy, we are then free to grow in the grace of living a Christlike life of love. Those who have been made perfect forever, are also "those who are being made holy," in the present, and those who are waiting for Jesus to bring our salvation to complete and final consummation when He comes again.

SO WHAT?

1. The conscience is mentioned directly three times in these two chapters (9:9, 14; 10:22. Cf. 13:18), and is indirectly referred to in 10:2: "For the worshippers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins." In what sense do you think our conscience should be put at rest by the blood of Christ? In what sense do you believe it should still guide us? Is it an infallible guide? (Rom. 2:14, Ac 24:16, 1 Pt 3:16, 1 Jn 3:19-21).
2. Through Christ's sacrifice, the way has been opened for us to enter the Most Holy Place (Hebrews 10:19-22). How do you think the Israelites would have viewed this privilege? How should we view it? What does it mean for us to "draw near" to Him (7:19, 10:1, 22).

NOW WHAT?

1. Do you carry around with you guilt from past sins that you just can't seem to shake? What is the message of this passage for you?
2. If you had to put it into your own words, what is the scope of the forgiveness the superior sacrifice of Jesus secures for us?

3. How does forgiveness move us into service and obedience (Hebrews 9:14)?