

The Result of the New Covenant is Greater than the Old

January 1, 2017

Hebrews 10:1-18

1 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. 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? 3 But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. 4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

5 Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,

"Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me;

6 in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.

7 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.'"

8 When he 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), 9 then he added, "Behold, I have come to do your will." He does away with the first in order to establish the second. 10 And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

11 And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, 13 waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. 14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

15 And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying,

16 "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,"

17 then he adds,

"I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more."

18 Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

Verses 1–4

1. **The law.** The apostle states two things about this **law**. Positively, and by way of concession, it was a **shadow of the good things that are coming**. Negatively, the law is not the reality itself.

2–3. In these verses the apostle’s argument is taken from the impotency and insufficiency of the law, which he had just asserted in verse 1. The words should be read as if they were a question. **Would they not have stopped being offered?** That is, they would have ceased, or else God would not have appointed that they should be repeated. The apostle observes that Christ’s sacrifice was offered once, once for all, because by one offering, and that offered once, the sacrifice was carried out perfectly.

4. Because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

It is impossible because it was divinely instituted that **the blood of bulls and goats** could not **take away sins**. The blood of bulls and goats, as offered in sacrifice and carried into the Most Holy Place, was designed by God to represent the way of taking away sin, but could not, by itself, achieve this. Therefore it was **impossible** that it should do so.

Verses 5–10

These verses declare God’s provision to make up for the defect in legal sacrifices as concerns the expiation of sin, peace of conscience with himself, and the sanctification of the souls of worshipers. For they have our Lord Jesus Christ’s undertaking that he will fulfill, perform, and suffer all things required by God’s will, wisdom, holiness, and righteousness.

The quotation in verses 5–7 is from Psalm 40:6–8. **“Sacrifice and offering you do not desire.”** No sacrifices of the law, not all of them together, were a means for the expiation of sin, suited to the glory of God or the needs of the souls of men. The constant use of sacrifices to signify those things that they could not effect in worshipers was a great part of the slavery that the church was held in under the old testament.

9. **“I have come to do your will.”** Christ came to do God’s will. The will of God is taken in two ways: first, for his eternal purpose and design, called “the purpose of his will” (Ephesians 1:11); and most often his will itself, that is, God’s will being done. Second, the will of God means the declaration of his will and pleasure about what he wants us to do in obeying him. It is the will of God in the former sense in this verse. This is evident from verse 10, which says, “by that will, we have been made holy”; that is, our sins were expiated according to God’s will. But the second sense is not totally excluded, for the Lord Christ came to fulfill God’s will, in that we may be enabled to fulfill his command. Yes, and Christ himself had a command from God to lay down his life for the accomplishment of this work.

10. Once for all. This is how Christ's offering of himself was made. It was **once for all**, or, as we say, "once only." It never happened before that time, nor will it ever happen in the future; "there is no longer any sacrifice for sin" (10:18). Through Christ's sacrifice the church was perfectly sanctified, so there is no need for the sacrifice to be repeated. It also paved the way for Christ's present state—that is, glory, absolute, and perfection—which is not consistent with the repetition of the same sacrifice of himself. For, as the apostle shows in, verses 12–13, after this sacrifice had been offered, he had nothing more to do but to enter into its glory. The apostle stresses this teaching, which is the foundation of the faith of the church. He often mentions it and from it argues for the superiority of Christ's sacrifice above that of the sacrifices of the law. This foundation is destroyed by those who fancy that a renewed offering of the body of Christ happens every day in the Mass. Nothing could be more directly opposed to what the apostle asserts here.

Verses 11–14

The apostle states four things here, by way of recapitulation, about what he had already declared. First comes the state of the legal priests and sacrifices and their repetition, which demonstrates their utter inability to take away sin, verse 11. Second is the complete contrast between the old covenant offerings and the one offering of Christ, and that once offered, verse 12. Third, this results in Christ showing the absolute perfection of his offering, verse 12, and his continuing state after this, verse 13. Fourth, the absolute effect of his sacrifice is stated, which was the sanctification of the church, verse 14.

12. He sat down. Note in verse 11 that "every priest stands and performs his religious duty." But the immediate result of Christ's offering was that **he sat down at the right hand of God**. This glorious exaltation of Christ is in great contrast with the high priest who stood throughout his service in the tabernacle. Also the high priest only went into the Most Holy Place for a short time, whereas Christ sits at God's throne, which lasts "forever and ever" (1:8). This is Christ's unalterable state and condition. Christ **sat down**, never to offer sacrifice anymore. And this is the best pledge of these two things, which are the two pillars and principal foundations of the faith of the church. First, that God was completely pleased, satisfied, and highly glorified in and through Christ's offering; for had this not been so, Christ's human nature would not have been immediately exalted to the highest glory possible (see Ephesians 5:1–2; Philippians 2:7–9). Second, that Christ had through his offering perfectly expiated the sin of the world, so that there is no need ever again to offer any sacrifice for this.

Verses 15–18

The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. The author of this testimony is **the Holy Spirit**. This is ascribed to him, as is all that is written in the Scripture, not only because holy men of old wrote as they were prompted by him, so that the Holy Spirit is the author of the whole Scripture, but also because of his presence and authority in it and with it continually. Hence,

whatever is spoken in the Scripture is, and should be for us, the immediate word of the Holy Spirit.

These verses bring to an end the doctrinal part of this letter, a part of Scripture filled with heavenly and glorious mysteries, the light of the church of the Gentiles, the glory of the people Israel, the foundation of evangelical faith.¹

10:1–18 The benefits of the new covenant

As the central doctrinal section of Hebrews draws to a close, the writer continues to explain the benefits of the new covenant. Once again he forcefully outlines the limitations of the law and its provisions for approaching God (1–4). Ps. 40:6–8 is then used to establish that the whole sacrificial system is replaced by the perfectly obedient self-offering of Christ (5–10). In contrast with the priests of the old covenant, who stand daily at the altar to offer repeatedly *the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins*, Jesus sits at God’s right hand, his sacrificial work completed (11–14). The result of this for believers is that *we have been made holy* and *he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy*. These terms are used to describe the sort of relationship with God predicted in Je. 31:33–34. The writer quotes these verses in abbreviated form (15–18), to signal that the argument begun in ch. 8 has come to an end. Since Christ’s sacrifice is so effective, there is no need for any other sacrifice for sin. The forgiveness promised by Jeremiah is available, making possible the renewal of heart and mind that is fundamental to the new covenant.

1–2 When the writer describes the law of Moses as *only a shadow of good things that are coming*, he means that it foreshadowed the blessings of the new covenant that Jesus would bring. The ritual of the law pointed to the need for the ultimate *realities* of Christ’s high-priestly ministry. There is a sense in which we still wait to enjoy the complete salvation that has been achieved for us (9:28; *cf.* 13:14). Nevertheless, many of its benefits can be experienced in advance (*e.g.* 9:14; 10:19–25). The inadequacy of the OT ritual is highlighted by the fact that the same sacrifices were *repeated endlessly year after year*. As noted in 7:11, 19 and 9:9, the law could never *make perfect those who draw near* to God in that way. The perfecting of believers has to do with the cleansing of their consciences from the guilt of sin, so that they might be wholeheartedly consecrated to God and his service (see notes on 10:10 and 10:14). If the sacrifices of the first covenant had achieved this end, *would they not have stopped being offered?* However, the worshippers continued to have (lit.) ‘a consciousness of sin’ (NIV, *they felt guilty for their sins; cf.* 9:9). They were not *cleansed once for all*, as one may be through trusting in the effectiveness of Jesus’ sacrifice (*cf.* 9:14; 10:17–18).

3–4 Although the Day of Atonement ritual assured Israel that the Lord could forgive sins, the

¹ Owen, J. (1998). *Hebrews* (pp. 207–210). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

ceremony had to be repeated year after year. The effect of this was to provide *an annual reminder of sins*—a reminder that sin is a hindrance to fellowship with God and brings his judgment. By contrast, God himself promises that under the new covenant, ‘their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more’ (Je. 31:34; *cf.* v 17). Sin was not dealt with decisively until Jesus died on the cross, *because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins*. God required animal sacrifices to teach Israel to look to him for cleansing and to show the need for a penalty to be paid for sin (*cf.* Lv. 17:11). But it was the destiny of the Messiah to pay that penalty by means of his death and so provide salvation, even for those who sinned in OT times (*cf.* 9:15).

5–10 The words of Ps. 40:6–8 are attributed to Christ when he *came into the world* because they find absolute fulfilment in his life. David the psalmist went further than many other OT writers in emphasizing the powerlessness of sacrifices in themselves to please God. The four technical terms that he uses—*sacrifice, offering, burnt offerings and sin offerings*—describe the different types of sacrifice commanded by the law. But the whole system was designed to encourage and make possible the willing self-offering of the people to God, as indicated by the words *I have come to do your will, O God*. In the *body* that was prepared for the Son of God, he lived a life of perfect obedience to the Father, culminating in his death as an unblemished sacrifice (*cf.* 9:14). He came to set aside the ancient sacrificial system and bring about the obedience to God which was always the intention behind the rituals. He found the Father’s will expressed in Scripture (*it is written about me in the scroll*), and *by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all*. His once-for-all sacrifice (10) brings the once-for-all cleansing from sin that the law could not provide (2). Such cleansing makes possible a definitive consecration or sanctification of believers to God, which is the meaning of the expression *we have been made holy* (Gk. *hēgiasmenoi esmen*; perfect tense). In this way the writer suggests the fulfilment of the promise that God would write his laws *in their hearts and on their minds* (16; Je. 31:33). Such dedication to God and his service is achieved for us by Jesus Christ, in whom heart-obedience was perfectly expressed.

11–14 Some of the ideas expressed in 9:25–28 and 10:1–4 are now restated. The priests of Judaism were involved in daily *religious duties*, involving the repeated offering of *the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins*. However, Jesus offered *one sacrifice for sins*, which is effective *for all time*. This contrast is reinforced by the picture of the Levitical priest who *stands* at the altar, offering repeated sacrifices, and Jesus who *sat down at the right hand of God*, because his sacrificial work was completed. As in Ps. 110, the Messiah’s kingly role is combined with his priestly function, and so his heavenly enthronement means that he also *waits for his enemies to be made his footstool* (*cf.* Ps. 110:1). This anticipates the teaching of vs 26–31, where it is revealed that the coming judgment will ‘consume the enemies of God’. But the positive implication of Christ’s enthronement is that *by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy* (14). As noted previously, the ‘perfecting’ of believers involves qualifying them to draw near to God or enabling them to enjoy the certainty of a new covenant relationship with God (*cf.* 7:11–12, 19; 9:9; 10:1; 11:40; 12:23). Fundamentally, this means the

forgiveness of sins and the cleansing of consciences, making possible the consecration to God's service of *those who are being made holy* (see note on v 10), and finally their participation in 'the promised eternal inheritance' (cf. 9:15).

15–18 *The Holy Spirit* who inspired the prophets in the first place, continues to speak through their writings to believers in every generation (cf. 3:7). Through the prophecy of Je. 31:33–34 (quoted here in an abbreviated form), the Holy Spirit specifically *testifies to us* about the things mentioned in the preceding verses. Jeremiah's promise of a decisive forgiveness of sins indicates that a time would come when there would be *no longer any sacrifice for sin*. But closely attached to this is the promise of renewed *hearts* and *minds*, helping to define the perfection and sanctification about which the writer has been speaking (10, 14).²

² Peterson, D. G. (1994). Hebrews. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., pp. 1342–1343). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.