

Hebrews 10:1-18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Hebrews chapter 10 verses 1 to 18 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.

Otherwise would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshippers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins. But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year, for it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

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.

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. 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, then he added, Behold, I have come to do your will.

He does away with the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.

[1 : 2 1] 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.

For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. 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. Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin. Chapter 9 ended with Christ once for all dealing with sins in the heavenly places themselves, opening the way to God that was once closed off, in a manner symbolised by the lack of access to the most holy place in the earthly tabernacle.

In the opening verses of chapter 10 he drives the point home. The law of Moses and its ceremonies had only an anticipatory shadow of the realities that had been brought in by Christ. The most holy place of the tabernacle was not the heavenly reality of God's throne, but an earthly symbolic representation.

All of the sacrifices performed in the old sanctuary could not ultimately perfect the worshippers, bringing them to the clearly intended goal of the system. The old covenant was Sisyphean.

[2 : 4 1] It had to repeat the same cycle again and again and again, year by year, while never actually attaining to its goal of decisively dealing with sin and bringing the worshipper into the presence of God.

Had it done so, the sacrifices wouldn't have continually been offered. The worshippers would no longer have needed repeated reminders of their sin. The sacrificial system constantly brought sin and the division that it caused to the forefront of the worshipper's consciousness.

However, with the offering of Christ, the burden of sins upon the worshipper's consciousness can be removed. The obstacle of our sins needs no longer be a constant preoccupation when a true way into God's presence has been secured.

This contrasts markedly with the old covenant, in which year after year there were repeated reminders of that obstacle of sin, a constant nagging recollection of the barrier between God and humanity that had not been lifted.

And while the blood of bulls and goats offered a symbolic cleansing of the body, they could never truly take away sins and deal with the deeper reality of sin that obstructed people's access to God's heavenly presence.

[3 : 46] Christianity talks a lot about the blood of Christ and other such things. Some people can think of this as if the physical blood of Jesus has quasi-magical properties. However, blood was always a symbolic manifestation or representation of something more fundamental.

One's blood is one's life, especially one's life laid down or offered or transmitted in some manner. The use of the physical substance of blood helps us to communicate or to understand the more fundamental reality of the transmission of the qualities of someone's life and death to others.

Likewise, the concept of animal sacrifice always related to the communication and offering of oneself and one's works to God. The author of Hebrews makes this point by quoting Psalm 40 verses 6-8 as if it were the statement of Christ just before taking human flesh.

Animal sacrifices were unable to deal with sins and to establish righteousness. They constantly recalled the presence of an obstacle and the need for something to deal with it. And while they might symbolize the solution, they were unable to affect that solution themselves.

They were not ultimately pleasing to God. God wanted something more, the true obedience and self-offering of human life. David's words to the Lord in the psalm are most fully realized in his greater Son, who accomplishes the true will of God by coming to render the true service and human offering that the sacrifices were unable to achieve.

[5 : 11] The author of Hebrews tweaks the verse to strengthen his harmonic point. The original text reads, In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear.

Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, Behold, I have come. In the scroll of the book it is written of me, I delight to do your will, O my God. Your law is within my heart.

Verse 6 more literally reads, Ears you have prepared for me, which Hebrews expresses as a body you have prepared for me. Perhaps the author of Hebrews is wanting his hearers to hear that divergence from the original text and to recognize that he is unpacking the point of the original.

The open ear or the prepared ears are bodily instruments given and prepared by God for obedience. Christ in his incarnation realizes and more gloriously fulfills what the psalmist is speaking of and the author of Hebrews tweaking of the verse makes this more apparent.

It reinforces his argument. The body of Christ's incarnation is a God-given means of his full obedience to the will of God. It's a means by which what God always most deeply desired from humanity can be realized.

[6 : 22] God the Son became man in order that the will of God might be fulfilled in true human obedience. The law of God is within his heart. This was written of in the scroll of the book, which now refers not merely to the law of kingship or even to the Pentateuch more generally, but to the entire Old Testament, which anticipates or speaks of its expected fulfillment in the obedience of one who is to come.

When such human obedience is offered and we are by the Spirit caught up in the slipstream of Christ, animal sacrifices and offerings are no longer needed and indeed they can be done away with.

The once for all decisive and final offering has now occurred. Animal sacrifices are nullified now that the true human obedience that the law always anticipated and awaited and desired has been established.

And now the author of Hebrews is at a point to return triumphantly to the point at which he began. But now we have the eyes to see its true wonder and glory. The Levitical priests are engaged in that Sisyphean task of repeatedly offering the same sacrifices, sacrifices that are ultimately futile in the task of taking away sins.

However, Christ offered a single, efficacious sacrifice for sins, achieving once for all what the old repeated sacrifices were unable to do, no matter how much they strive towards it.

[7 : 45] Having offered this once for all sacrifice, he can now sit down at the right hand of God in the position of intimacy. He enjoys all the prerogatives of sonship and rule.

He waits for all things to be subjected to him, to be placed beneath his feet. The great contrast here is one of posture between the Levitical priests who stand daily at their service and Christ who is seated.

Their work is never completely done. However, Christ's work is truly complete and as a result, he has entered into his rest at God's right hand in fulfillment of Psalm 110 verse 1, the verse concerning the ascension of the one who is eternally the priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

He now awaits the final judgment as all enemies and opponents are subdued under his feet. He constantly intercedes for us from his position of rule as through and in us his enemies are overcome.

Recognizing the efficacy of Christ's once for all sacrifice is imperative for our understanding of the Christian faith. The old sacrifices could never take away sins, but the offering of Christ has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

[8 : 55] The pollution and the guilt of sin have been decisively dealt with and we now have access to God. We have been made holy. However, Christ's work is also continuous and progressive as we are being conformed over time to the reality of who he is and what he has achieved for us.

We have been perfected, but we are also being sanctified. We must continue to participate in Christ, growing into full possession of him and of his life. All of the things the author of Hebrews has written of are witnessed to by the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah chapter 31.

There are two parts of this promise, speaking both of the dealing with the principle of sin within the people of God and dealing with the guilt and condemnation of sin. Christ, in his self-offering, deals with both of these things.

His self-offering deals with the condemnation of death that lies upon humanity as he takes up the destiny of humanity within himself and bears its sin. Christ is also the word or the law made flesh, the complete incarnation of the will of God.

By the communication of his life by the Spirit to us, this writing of the law upon the heart, the enfleshing of the will of God, becomes a reality for us too. The attentive reader of scripture will have noticed earlier that when the author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 40, he cuts off at the end of verse 7.

[10:15] But verse 8, which a biblically literate hero would have been familiar with, is the real powerful verse. I delight to do your will, O my God. Your law is within my heart.

The true obedience of David's greater son is the means by which the new covenant will be fulfilled. A question to consider.

What might we learn from the way that the author of Hebrews uses the Old Testament within this passage?