

September 30, 2001 by Steve Brandon



Never Making Perfect

Hebrews 10:1-4

- 1. The sacrifices were shadows (10:1a)**
- 2. The sacrifices weren't the real thing (10:1b)**
- 3. The sacrifices never ceased (10:2-3)**
- 4. The sacrifices couldn't take away sins (10:4)**

When we participate in the Lord's Supper, we are "proclaiming the Lord's death until He comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). This evening, I simply would like to remind us again of the wonders of our Lord's sacrificial death on the cross. I invite you to take your Bibles and turn with me to Hebrews 10, which gives us insight into how marvelous this sacrifice was.

The Greek word, *kreisson* (kreisson), is often learned by Greek students when they translate the epistle to the Hebrews. Though this word is found only 19 times in the New Testament, in Hebrews alone, it is used 13 times. The epistle to the Hebrews explains how much better Christianity is than Judaism.

For instance,

Jesus has become much better than the angels (Heb. 1:4).

Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant (Heb. 7:22).

Jesus is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises (Heb. 8:6).

Jesus isn't better because of preference (like McDonalds is better than Burger King), but rather, Jesus is better because He is superior. This is the argument of Hebrews: the Superiority of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is better than Angels (1:1-14; 2:5-18).

Jesus is better than Moses (3:1-6).

Jesus is better than Aaron (5:1-10).

Jesus is better than Abraham (7:1-10).

Jesus is better than the Levitical Priesthood (7:11-28).

Jesus is better than the High Priest (8:1-9:28).

Jesus is better than the Law (10:1-18).

When we come to Hebrews 10, we are confronted with the great weakness of the Law.

Hebrews 10:1-4

For the Law, since it has [only] a shadow of the good things to come [and] not the very form of things, can never by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? But in those [sacrifices] there is a reminder of sins year by year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

The great weakness of the Law is that it could never make the worshiper perfect. This is the main sentence in verse 1, "The Law ... can never ... make perfect those who draw near." This was the problem with the Old Covenant. As often as worshipers would come to present their sacrifices before the priest and before the LORD, they would never be perfected by these sacrifices. As Hebrews 7:19 states parenthetically, "the Law made nothing perfect." Jesus said in the sermon on the mount, "You are to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). The demand of God is perfection, but the Law could never attain such perfection.

Even the sacrifices, were repeated and numerous, were never able to perfectly cleanse the worshiper. The writer to the Hebrews gives us four reasons given why the sacrifices could never take away sins (and thus, make the worshiper perfect).

1. The sacrifices were shadows (10:1a)

This is simply a restatement of verse 1, "The Law ... has only a shadow of the good things to come. In other words, the Law has some relationship with the real thing, but only in some vague and distorted way.

A shadow is unsubstantial, transitory, and temporary. This was illustrated for me this past week when I was painting my office using a solitary light on the floor in the middle of the room. My shadow was cast on the walls of my office all around. Sometimes it would be on one wall and

then would move to another. At times it was long and at other times it was short. Such is a picture of the Law.

You can also think of the Law as a preliminary sketch of an artist. It bears resemblance to the final product, but isn't a finished piece of work. It merely represents the reality of the masterpiece. You can think of the law as a toy Lego helicopter, like this in my hand. It merely represents what an Apache attack helicopter really is.

This isn't the only time in which this imagery of a shadow is used to describe the Old Covenant. In Heb. 8:5, the writer tells us that the high priest also was a shadow (and copy) of heavenly things. Furthermore, Paul describes festivals and Sabbaths as a mere shadow of what is to come, "but the substance belongs to Christ" (Col. 2:16,17). Jesus Christ is the substance casting the shadows.

This leads us to the second reason why the sacrifices could never take away sins....

2. The sacrifices weren't the real thing (10:1b)

The second half of verse 1 says that the Law is "not the very form of things." The Law wasn't the substance. In many ways, this merely repeats the first point.

Coca-Cola bottling company has this slogan: "It's the real thing." They are seeking to separate their product from all other products in the marketplace, by claiming that their product alone was the real thing. They want you to think that all other Cola products are merely imitations of the one true product -- Coca-Cola! It must be admitted that Cola products bear resemblance to the "real thing," but they are not the real thing. Similarly, the prescriptions of the law bore resemblance to the real thing.

The holy place is called a mere copy of the true holy place in heaven (Heb. 9:24). The multitudes of sacrifices of unblemished and spotless animals on the Jewish altars, were only an imitation to the work of the Messiah to come. They weren't the real thing. The role of the great high-priest was an imitation of the Ultimate High-Priest to come. But the high-priest wasn't the real thing. Neither were the sacrifices.

Only Jesus is the real thing!

3. The sacrifices never ceased (10:2-3)

Verse 2 reads, "Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered," The writer's argument here is that the continual practice of the sacrifices are merely a demonstration that the problem of sin hasn't been fully resolved. In other words, they never quite get rid of the problem.

In our old house in DeKalb, we had a problem with the water-line in our refrigerator. When Yvonne would move the refrigerator to clean under it, the copper cables would pull away from the refrigerator attachment and our refrigerator would begin to leak water. Each time she moved it, it would begin leaking. And each time she moved it, I needed to get out my wrenches and tighten the attachment to the refrigerator. Then, it would stop leaking.

Now, I ask you. Did I solve my leakage problem? In some sense, "Yes," because it didn't leak any more. But in reality, "No," because I merely provided a temporary fix to the problem. Perhaps some of you have similar house projects that you have simply fixed with a "Band-Aid," rather than ultimately solving the problem.

Similarly with the Jewish worshiper. In some sense, the sacrifices of the Old Testament provided for a temporary cleansing. For instance, Hebrews 9:13 says that OT sacrifices "sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh." But in a very real sense, it was only temporary and external, which is the point of Hebrews 10:2, "would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins?" That's the point. The mere fact that these sacrifices were continually prescribed demonstrates that they were only a temporary fix for the ultimate problem.

The sacrifices that were offered didn't do anything to rid the conscience of the continual need to be cleansed from their sins (verse 2). This is the identical language used earlier in Hebrews, "If the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" (Heb. 9:13-14).

One might say that the sacrifices of the Old Covenant were only "skin deep." They sanctified the flesh, but the sacrifice of Jesus Christ cleanses deep within. Christ's sacrifice cleansed so deeply that there was no need for another sacrifice. Let me try to illustrate this for you.

Suppose that I told you, that I recently visited the University of Wisconsin in Madison and was given a tour of their biology research laboratory. Suppose I told you, that their research biologists have been working on a new scientific discovery, which would eliminate our need for eating ever again? They are working on an organic substance which is able to produce all of the amino acids and sugars and fatty acids that we need to survive. Apparently, this organic substance could be surgically implanted into your stomach. Once there, it is able to harvest all of the nutrients that you would need to survive. Never again, would you have to eat or drink anything!

What would you think of such a substance? Wouldn't it be fantastic? Think of the implications of this.....

- We would no longer need our grocery stores, kitchens, or restaurants.
- We all would save much time. Rather than eating, we could be involved in other things.
- World hunger would be solved. We could travel to Ethiopia and the Sudan and set-up medical centers where the people there could receive this treatment. Never would they go hungry again.

But this is exactly like the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. When Jesus was sacrificed upon the cross, He eliminated the need for sacrifices ever again. He solved our hunger problem.

In the same way that hunger comes back to our bodies after we have feasted to contentment, demonstrates that you need more food, so were the sacrifices. The constant need of the sacrifices were a constant reminder that people always needed to have their sins removed from them. This is what is meant by verse 3, "In those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year." Every time a Jewish worshiper would come to present their sacrifice before the Lord, it would again, be yet another reminder that they continued in their sinful ways. It would remind them that they needed to have their sins taken away and removed from them.

4. The sacrifices couldn't take away sins (10:4)

This is what the writer says in verse 4, "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."

This past Thursday (3 days ago) was the Jewish Holiday called Yom Kippur. Yom means "day" and Kippur means "atonement." On Thursday, the Jewish people celebrated "the Day of Atonement." Yom Kippur, which occurs on the 7th month and 10th day of the month of the Jewish year, is the most solemn day of the year for the Jewish people. It would be equivalent to our Christmas or Easter. Many people attend church two times per year, on Christmas and Easter. Similarly, on the day of atonement, when many Jews haven't visited their synagogue all year long come for the religious ceremony.

Why is it important? Yom Kippur is the day the people were cleansed from all of their sins of the previous year. It is a day devoted to fasting and repentance for one's sin during the past year. It was the day, in which the High-priest would enter the holy of holies and offer a sacrifice for himself and for all of the people of the nation. It was the yearly reminder that their sins would be atoned for. Yet, in all of their yearly sacrifices, their sins were only "covered." They were never removed. Kippur means, "covering." God would cover their sins. But their sins would continue to be around, because "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4).

Last night, I was painting my office area, seeking to cover it with paint. When I got to one spot, there was a chunk of paint (about 6 inches in diameter) that came off of the ceiling and wrapped around my roller. Apparently, there was a blemish in the dry-wall, that was only covered over by a little bit of paint. When the roller came across it, the paint came off and the blemish was exposed. This morning, before church, I then chipped away at all of the bad ceiling. I actually made the hole a bit bigger. But then, I sanded it and repaired it with spackle. I won't have a problem there again, because I didn't "cover" the problem, I "fixed" the problem.

But the Jewish sacrifices were mere coverings to deal with their sins. They never could cleanse from within. They never could cleanse completely, because "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4).

On the notes I passed out this evening is a hymn that I would like to teach to you. Several of you know this, but some don't. It was written by Isaac Watts in 1702.

Not all the blood of beasts
Not all the blood of beasts on Jewish altars slain,
could give the guilty conscience peace, or wash away the stain.

But Christ, the heav'nly Lamb, takes all our sins away,
a sacrifice of nobler name and richer blood than they.

My faith would lay her hand on that dear head of thine,
while like penitent I stand, and there confess my sin.

My soul looks back to see the burdens thou didst bear,
when hanging on the cursed tree, and knows her guilt was there.

Believing, we rejoice to see the curse remove;
we bless the Lamb with cheerful voice, and sing his bleeding love.

This is exactly what the writer to the Hebrews is communicating.

1. The sacrifices were shadows ... but Jesus is the substance
2. The sacrifices weren't the real thing, ... but Jesus is the real thing.
3. The sacrifices never ceased, ... but Jesus was sacrificed once for all time.
4. The sacrifices couldn't take away sins, ... but Jesus took away our sins!

This evening, as we celebrate the Lord's Supper, may we truly rejoice because our sins have been removed. Never again do we need to sacrifice for our sins, because Jesus was the one sacrifice that forever solved our problem.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on September 30, 2001 by Steve Brandon.
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