

FOCUS: Jesus is the only one who can deal with our sin decisively, completely and permanently and he has done it! Through his death we are forgiven and free!

FUNCTION: That hearers might know more deeply what Jesus has done for them and be reassured and joyful that they are completely forgiven. That those who don't know might seek that forgiveness.

## 1. Intro

How are you finding Hebrews?

Jesus as greater than the angels, greater than OT and Moses, as our High Priest and today, as the perfect sacrifice. I'm aware of a certain irony – that this morning my task is actually the opposite of the writer to the Hebrews! He is taking a system / history which is second nature to his hearers and showing how what Jesus has done has surpassed it. I am investigating a system / history we know little about, let alone have any experience of, and showing how this it gives greater depth and significance to what we know Jesus has done. But reassuringly, I think we both have the same message, the same goal, and the same prayer for our hearers. See if you can work out what that is : ).

Will need to concentrate today! Go home and read ch9 -10.

## 2. The sacrificial system

Helpfully laid out, remember from Owen last week – let's read first chunk of ch 9 –

*That first covenant between God and Israel had regulations for worship and a place of worship here on earth. There were two rooms in that Tabernacle. In the first room were a lampstand, a table, and sacred loaves of bread on the table. This room was called the Holy Place. Then there was a curtain, and behind the curtain was the second room called the Most Holy Place. In that room were a gold incense altar and a wooden chest called the Ark of the Covenant, which was covered with gold on all sides. Inside the Ark were a gold jar containing manna, Aaron's staff that sprouted leaves, and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the Ark were the cherubim of divine glory, whose wings stretched out over the Ark's cover, the place of atonement. But we cannot explain these things in detail now.*

*When these things were all in place, the priests regularly entered the first room as they performed their religious duties. But only the high priest ever entered the Most Holy Place, and only once a year. And he always offered blood for his own sins and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. By these regulations the Holy Spirit revealed that the entrance to the Most Holy Place was **not freely open** as long as the Tabernacle and the system it represented were still in use.*

*This is an illustration pointing to the present time. For the gifts and sacrifices that the priests offer are **not able to cleanse** the consciences of the people who bring them. For that old system deals only with food and drink and various cleansing ceremonies—physical regulations that **were in effect only until a better system** could be established.*

Three things to notice –

Restriction – only High Priest, and only with blood. Not freely open.

Partial – cleansing not able to clear the consciences.

Temporary – in effect only until a better system could be established.

These are truths that the writer returns to again and again.

Let's be clear -the sacrificial system is not bad or wrong, just no longer needed. Eg Spotify v CDs. God only ever meant it to be a temporary measure. We might say, then, why even return to it? What's the point in looking at something we don't need? Well, to be honest, you could be a follower of Jesus without knowing anything about the sacrificial system.

BUT – two good reasons –

1) simply that we are wiser and humbler for knowing our history. And ancient as this history is, when we become a follower of Jesus, the OT Jewish history becomes our history.

2) even more significantly, through his detailed instructions God had woven more deep meaning into his temporary system than even the Israelites imagined. He knew it would be what the writer calls a shadow of the good things to come. And even the insufficiencies and defects of this system serve to point to the great reality that God has planned for his world.

### 3. Zeroing in on sacrifice itself

Now let's zero in on sacrifice. We're not unfamiliar with the word or even the concept of sacrifice but we live in a society where sacrifice is completely metaphorical – to sacrifice something is simply to give it up or give it away for another purpose. We talk about making sacrifices – missing out on things we enjoy for a greater goal. Parents make sacrifices for children by restricting their own spending so they can spend that money on school fees or music lessons, or a holiday. The ultimate sacrifice still means giving up your life – we use this mainly to talk about soldiers who die fighting for their country.

This gives a surface understanding of what the sacrificial system represents. Let's dig in a bit more –

First, we need to remind ourselves that sacrifice was a very physical thing! Just imagine for a moment what it be like to bring a live bull to church, tie it up, get it onto an altar and kill it. The sounds, the smells, the things that could go wrong, the strength and grunt required would be quite something, especially if you're not the only one doing it!

It was also a very costly thing - now imagine that this bull, or sheep or goat is the very best one from your own flock, that you have raised it from birth, that it is worth a great deal to you in money, in status, in breeding, and you are going to be offering it to God with nothing tangible back in return. Would you be thinking of these things as you watched the priest cut its throat?

So why do it and what did it mean?

NTW – there are three elements of meaning to a sacrifice in the Hebrew system –

1) a human offering of something that is valuable and pure. This is an outward sign of the whole life offering made by God's people in gratitude for all he has done for them. Worshippers needed to buy their own offerings or bring them from their own flocks and herds. The HP enters the MHP annually as a representative of all the people.

2) life given in death – the blood of the animal represents this life being poured out, that in some way, life might be given by God in exchange for death. The animal dies in place of the worshipper who owes their own life to God, forfeited by sin and impurity.

3) these two signs together bring about cleansing. As a result, the worshippers were able to start again in freshness and newness, their uncleanness washed away. Think of David - *wash away all my*

*iniquity and cleanse me from my sin* Ps 51:2 This was the only way to be cleansed. And yet, it was not completely effective – remember – it was restrictive, partial and temporary.

It's important we recognise these elements so that we can see how they are completely answered and fulfilled in Jesus.

#### **4. Nothing but the blood**

Now we need to zero in even closer. What's with all the blood?

I confess I've always felt a bit uncomfortable with the focus we Christians have on blood. A lot of old hymns talk about blood. Nothing but the blood of Jesus, there is wonder-working power in the blood, there is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins, where all who plunge beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains (quite a mental picture) (see Zech 13:1!).

In the past, I've put this down to the rather melodramatic tendencies of the Victorian era these hymns come from with their gothic novels and gory artwork. But I've found there's a lot more to it than this...

*Now when someone leaves a will, it is necessary to prove that the person who made it is dead. The will goes into effect only after the person's death. While the person who made it is still alive, the will cannot be put into effect.*

*That is why even the first covenant was put into effect with the blood of an animal. For after Moses had read each of God's commandments to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, along with water, and sprinkled both the book of God's law and all the people, using hyssop branches and scarlet wool. Then he said, "This blood confirms the covenant God has made with you." And in the same way, he sprinkled blood on the Tabernacle and on everything used for worship. In fact, according to the law of Moses, nearly everything was purified with blood. For without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness.*

*That is why the Tabernacle and everything in it, which were copies of things in heaven, had to be purified by the blood of animals. But the real things in heaven had to be purified with far better sacrifices than the blood of animals. (9:14-22)*

At first, I found it hard to see what this section was there for – seemed like a tangent. But I discovered it's actually telling us about the purpose and meaning of the blood. It goes more deeply into that second meaning of sacrifice – the pouring out of life through death. The writer begins by explaining that a will only comes into effect when the person has died. The word for will and covenant are the same. It is the death of the sacrificial animal, the shedding of its blood, that confirms the old covenant. The writer is suggesting / building up to, is that the new covenant, too comes into place through the death of someone, the shedding of his blood.

So as blood represents the giving of life which make the covenant possible, the sacrifice giving of life through death is not only an offering from humans to God but more deeply, represents his own self giving love which will be demonstrated through the death of his Son. Therefore everything is sprinkled with blood, symbolising to his people that everything they do is possible only through God's self-giving love. No-one at the time of the sacrificial system would have dreamed that God himself would become human, offer his own life and shed his own blood, but this is the understanding reached very early on by the first Christians.

So this strange and rather violent sounding sentence – without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness – is not setting up a general principle (as some have thought) but is referring to the way God has chosen. Everything was sprinkled with blood in the tabernacle because there is no other way

to receive forgiveness but the self-giving love of God. How much more is this true for our Saviour's own self-giving love! This is what the old hymns are talking about – What can wash away my sin? Really truly absolutely nothing but the blood of Jesus!

#### 4. Jesus' death deals with everything!

So here it is! The message of the writer to the Hebrews, and thankfully mine to you this morning! Jesus completely and utterly deals with everything the sacrificial system could never deal with, for the Hebrews and for everyone else! What's more there is nothing and no-one else in heaven and earth who can do this! He is the only perfect sacrifice.

*For by the power of the eternal Spirit, Christ offered himself to God as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. (9:14)*

But how? Let's run through those elements of meaning for a sacrifice that we looked at earlier –  
1) a human offering of something that is valuable and pure.

Jesus is the only one qualified to truly do this – *one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens (8:26)*. Yet he's a true human being, who experiences life just as we do. Just think of those gospel accounts where Jesus willingly touches an unclean person only for them to become clean! This is not how it usually worked! *For Christ did not enter into a holy place made with human hands, which was only a copy of the true one in heaven. He entered into heaven itself to appear now before God on our behalf. (9:24)*

So Jesus is our representative, in a better truer way than the High Priest could ever be. He is able to enter freely not into a tent made by human hands but into God's real dwelling place, his very presence! And because he has, so can we!

2) life given in death – *With his own blood—not the blood of goats and calves—he entered the Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption forever.* Jesus' life and death embody the self-giving love of God that was symbolised by the blood of the sacrifice. This is what this strange sentence means - *But the real things in heaven had to be purified with far better sacrifices than the blood of animals.* Not that heaven needs purifying! but that heaven itself is marked for us with the self-giving love of God through Jesus.

3) the cleansing. - *The old system under the law of Moses was only a shadow, a dim preview of the good things to come, not the good things themselves. The sacrifices under that system were repeated again and again, year after year, but they were never able to provide perfect cleansing for those who came to worship. <sup>2</sup>If they could have provided perfect cleansing, the sacrifices would have stopped, for the worshipers would have been purified once for all time, and their feelings of guilt would have disappeared.*

*But instead, those sacrifices actually reminded them of their sins year after year. For it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*

*Under the old system, the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer could cleanse people's bodies from ceremonial impurity. Just think how much more the blood of Christ will purify our consciences from sinful deeds so that we can worship the living God.*

The old system was about outer purity, ceremonial cleansing. It was never able to cleanse the deep inner parts of a person. But that's never been what God cared about the most. Over and over again in

the OT, God shows that he is interested in the heart. Empty sacrifices are offensive to him. Last week - Jeremiah promises that God will put his laws in our minds and write them on our hearts. David prays 'create in me a clean heart' (Psalm 51:10). Jesus picks this up too when he rebukes the Pharisees about cleaning the inside of the cup, not just the outside (Matt 23:25-26).

NTW – *“Just as Jesus has gone into the very heart of the presence of God, not simply into a man-made building with an inner chamber but into the place where God lives in light and holiness, so the effects of his sacrifice are to be felt not only in the outer lives of his people, in terms of restoration to fellowship or being made ‘clean again’ in a bodily sense, but in the inward depths, the ‘holy of holies’ at the core of each individual person, the place where we really are who we are. ...there is a purification available which goes to the centre of things”* (Hebrews p 96-7)

And if we are this pure, as pure as Jesus, we too can enter into God's very presence without fear. The restricted access of the old system is replaced with open doors!

The final way Jesus deals with the old system is a consequence of the others - because the sacrifice is perfect, because the cleansing is complete – there is no longer any need to repeat anything – Jesus' sacrifice is once and for all –

*And he did not enter heaven to offer himself again and again, like the high priest here on earth who enters the Most Holy Place year after year with the blood of an animal. If that had been necessary, Christ would have had to die again and again, ever since the world began. But now, once for all time, he has appeared at the end of the age to remove sin by his own death as a sacrifice.*

*And just as each person is destined to die once and after that comes judgment, so also Christ was offered once for all time as a sacrifice to take away the sins of many people. He will come again, not to deal with our sins, but to bring salvation to all who are eagerly waiting for him. (9:25-28)*

*Under the old covenant, the priest stands and ministers before the altar day after day, offering the same sacrifices again and again, which can never take away sins. But our High Priest offered himself to God as a single sacrifice for sins, good for all time. Then he sat down in the place of honour at God's right hand. There he waits until his enemies are humbled and made a footstool under his feet. For by that one offering he forever made perfect those who are being made holy. (10:11-14)*

*And when sins have been forgiven, there is no need to offer any more sacrifices.(10:18)*

## **5. What about us?**

So what about us? Is this all theoretical? We don't live under a sacrificial system. How then does the rubber hit the road?

We may not sacrifice animals but as human beings, we have all the same problems as the ancient Hebrews. The same elements that needed sacrifices block us from God's presence.

1) We can't bring a perfect offering of ourselves, our lives to God on our own behalf. He is holy and we are spoiled by sin, we are curved in on ourselves, we are not able to stand in God's presence. But Jesus is the perfect offering.

2) Because there is no forgiveness outside God's grace, we cannot find it without the self-giving of blood. We have only our own blood, our own death, to offer and for the problem with this, see point 1. But Jesus bleeds and dies for us.

3) We cannot cleanse ourselves from sin, try as we might. If we try really hard, with enough effort and self-discipline, we might manage to make ourselves look fine on the outside. And sometimes that's how we live, even as Christians. But we cannot cleanse ourselves in the deep parts of our self that no-one else sees. We have no means of being truly clean on our own. But Jesus' death provides the forgiveness which washes us truly clean, inside and out. There's nothing he can't deal with!

So the message, once again, from the writer of Hebrews and from me –

Jesus completely and utterly deals with everything that stands between us and God. And he does this willingly and humbly, with great compassion and utter selflessness. On the cross, he cries out, 'It is finished'. The finish not just of his life on earth, but the finish, the defeat, of everything that has ever stood between God and human beings.

This applies to every single one of us! I don't need to know anyone's dark secrets to know that there is no-one here who has too much for Jesus to deal with. I want you to hear this morning that every single one of us, YOU are, I am, completely free if we choose to follow Jesus and accept his gift of complete cleansing and forgiveness. Completely free, completely clean.

*And when sins have been forgiven, there is no need to offer any more sacrifices.*(10:18)

How do you respond to this today?

- Is your heart bubbling over with joy and thankfulness?
- Are you feeling reassured about your forgiveness?
- Do you know Jesus' complete cleansing in your heart and life?
- Do you struggle to accept Jesus' complete cleansing?
- Have you never before really grasped what is offered to you or made the decision to accept it?
- Are you still unsure of what this all means for you?

Some silence and prayer.