

Hebrews 7-10: The Priesthood of Christ

In this lecture we will be studying Hebrews seven to ten. I would like to pray together before we begin our class session.

*Heavenly Father, we thank You for sending Jesus our great high priest, the author and perfecter of our faith, the one who did, indeed, offer the perfect sacrifice and who lived the perfect life. Lord, You sent our Lord to obey, completely and absolutely, all throughout His life and even to the point of death. Then, Lord, You passed through death and into the heavens and now sit at the right hand of God the Father to intercede for us, to plead for us and to offer us Your grace to bring us to perfect salvation. Lord, I pray that as we study Your Word we would gain an ever greater appreciation for who You are in Yourself just as much as we appreciate what You have done for us. Teach us, Lord, to meditate rightly on all that You are and all that You have said. We pray this in Christ's name, Amen.*

In this lecture we will be looking at Hebrews seven to ten. We are close to the end of the book. There are two units remaining, of which Hebrews seven to ten is one. Before we actually look at that section, I would like to remind you of where we have been. There is a problem afflicting the church. This church is most likely at Rome, primarily composed of Jewish converts. Many of these converts are being tempted to return to Judaism, perhaps because of the possibility it offers for release from the danger of persecution, or perhaps because they miss some parts of the ritual of atonement that was so beautiful in the temple. Also, persecution is causing them anxiety and trouble. And now that some of them are thinking of returning to Judaism, the church may be starting to split a little. There is a group that is thinking about forsaking the assembly. Therefore, the leaders of the church call on one man—the author of Hebrews—to address the church. He is perhaps their supreme leader who is not actually there. So they call upon him and he writes this letter.

Now, this church does not only have the problem of external persecution. Some of them are ignorant of the faith. Some of them have grown lazy in the faith. Some of them are even thinking about repudiating the faith entirely. In this lecture we will also see that the group appears to have a problem of being plagued by guilt. Again, perhaps they long for the Jewish rituals that seem to offer such a clear-cut release from sin, and maybe they are wondering about their continuance in sin. Maybe some members of their community have died before they had a chance to repent. But whatever is causing their anxiety, there seems to be a problem of guilt in this church. I say that because of 9:9 and 14. In 9:9 the author is in the middle of a discussion of the Tabernacle and the way things are arranged. He says, “This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper.” Thus we can garner from this verse that they are wondering about clearing their consciences. Then in verse 14 he says, “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God!” So in verse nine he reminds the readers that the sacrifices could not clear the conscience. And now in verse 14 he reminds them that Jesus does clear the conscience. Hebrews 10:1-2 says this: “The law ... can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshippers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins.” He keeps talking about the problem of guilt and a guilty conscience, which makes you think that they were having some questions or doubts as to whether the problem of guilt had indeed been solved.

We need to look at this in a couple of different ways. One way to look at it is to realize that the Jewish sacrificial system—the tabernacle and later the temple system—might have been at one level very

appealing. It seemed to offer a wonderful solution to the problem of guilt in a very attractive format. The format was very sensory. If you went to the temple or the tabernacle, you would have a feast for your senses. You would smell the aroma of fires burning, incense, perfume, and the perspiration of the priests who were working hard. Also it was a feast for the ears: the sounds of the priests and the Levites singing, the priests and perhaps also prophets teaching, the bleating of sheep, the flutter of doves' wings, the clatter of the hooves of bulls, sheep, and goats, and the sounds of animals being slain and moved around. It was a sensory experience. The sights would also have been incredible: the tongues of flame on the altar, the clouds of incense rising, and the beautiful raiment of the priests who had gold and jewels woven throughout their garments. It was feast to the eyes and also to the taste, the taste of sacrificial meals and of eating and drinking with your friends. It was a very impressive event, especially, maybe, for people like the Romans who did not get to be there every year. They may only have been able to go to Jerusalem for the feast of atonement once in a lifetime. They may have looked forward to it for 5, 10, or even 20 years, and then remembered it the rest of their lives.

Another thing that was attractive about that system was the rhythm of it. Once a year, you went to the Tabernacle or the temple to confess your sins. On the Day of Atonement, whether or not you could be in Jerusalem on that day, you could come to the Lord on that day and be forgiven of all your sins committed in an entire year. Would it not be great once a year to say, "Today is the day I will examine my life, think through all the sins I have committed, and then give them all to the Lord"? and then they are done. I know that some of you are thinking we can do that every day. We can do that every Sunday. But I am not asking you to be theological. I am asking you to be emotional. Would it not be great if once a year you could say, "That load of sin is off me for a whole year."? The truth is, we can do it any day, but the Day of Atonement sort of reminded you that there was a crisp, clean way of dealing with sin. So we can see how there would be some attraction to that.

Now, of course, there are some other things going on behind the scene. Some of those other things are this persecution, the subsequent temptation to go back to Judaism, and also the fact that the people are getting somewhat lazy and falling back into prior sins. What does Hebrews have to say to all this? The author speaks to this in chapters seven to ten. But before we look at those chapters, I have to tell you one more thing. What I am going to tell you from Hebrews ten does not work as well in our western culture as it did 20, 30, 50, or 100 years ago. The problem we have now is a very different problem. The problem now is the disappearance of guilt, not that guilt itself is actually disappearing, but the concept of guilt is disappearing. Thus when we talk about Christ and that His sacrifice is the remedy to guilt, sometimes people do not understand why they would need Christ. They say, "Why would Christ's death have anything to do with me? I do not have any guilt. I do not need that." This problem is even creeping into the church. People have observed that there is less and less teaching on hell in the western church and one reason is because people do not have any need for hell in their system. Hell is required for people who are guilty and need to be punished, but if nobody is guilty of anything then you do not need any punishment. Thus it is actually rather logical that the concept of hell is slowly disappearing, as many people observe, from western Christian theology. In our culture today, there are many people who think no one is really guilty of anything. There are people with guilty feelings, but we tell them that they need to get over their guilty feelings and realize that the problem is that they have an overactive conscience. We recognize that there are many victims in the world, but we do not seem to be able to recognize the victimizers. We wrongly believe that though there are very many people who have hurt others, they never did it on purpose. We might say that it was an act of ignorance, the result of poor communication, or because something happened to them as children—that they are expressing their inner rage or protesting. But we in the west are beginning to believe that nobody ever does anything wrong—that does not happen.

I would like to cite the case of Catherine Powers from a number of years ago. She turned herself in to the government after being on the run for about 25 years. She had been a member of the Black Panthers in the late 1960s. When she turned herself in, it was because of a very serious crime she committed. Her goal was to rob a bank with a group of others and to use the proceeds from the bank robbery to buy explosives to blow up a train track. This was the track on which a train would be running carrying a shipment of armaments from the Pentagon to one of the Army depot centers. They wanted to take those armaments to arm the revolutionaries and overthrow the American government. Things did not turn out quite that way. What did happen was that the robbery actually went sour very quickly and an alarm was sounded. A policeman responded and the group of which Powers was a member shot him dead. He left nine children behind. Powers took off. She was a criminal, an accomplice in murder. She possessed multiple weapons and thousands of rounds of ammunition, and had planned it all very carefully. But when she turned herself in, she wanted to make it very clear that she did not do this out of a sense of guilt, shame, or indebtedness. She came back because her life had become difficult. She had become sleepless, restless, depressed, and suicidal, and she realized she had to face her past in order to live with authenticity in the present. When she was interviewed, she said, "I was naïve and unthinking. The death of the policeman was shocking to me. I never meant to hurt anybody. I know that I must answer this accusation from the past in order to live with full authenticity in the present." And her husband explained, "She did not return out of guilt. She was tired of telling lies. She wanted her life back. She wanted her truth back. She wanted to be whole." She says she turned herself in for self-improvement and self-rescue. Now, whether she deep down knew she was guilty or not, we do not know. But she certainly repudiated the idea that she thought she needed to pay for her crime or anything like that. In our American culture her act actually makes a lot of sense to many people.

Because of our society's rejection of the concept of guilt, we have to approach people assuming that we will have to convince them that they need a Savior. We have to convince people that there is a just God. This absolute standard is fading away.

Hebrews is ready to address this here in chapters seven to ten. I just want to make sure we know where we are at the moment. In 1:1 through 2:18, we have an initial vision of the grandeur of Christ. We have a vision of His deity and His position as a prophet, king, and priest, and as the very Son of God. We see Him as the one who takes regard for us and is the author, the pioneer, and the perfecter of our faith. The author of Hebrews closes that opening section by saying, "He is a merciful and faithful high priest." Chapters three and four develop His faithfulness. Jesus was faithful in God's house, but how about you, will you respond faithfully? Then, in chapter five, he starts to talk about Jesus, the great high priest. Remember from the previous lecture that he kind of interrupts himself in chapter six and basically says, "I want to get into this priesthood issue, but I am not sure you are ready for it because you have not necessarily been faithful. Jesus has been merciful, but you have not been true to Him in His mercy."

Now, at last, in chapter seven he is ready to press on to the burden of his letter, the burden about the high priestly ministry of Christ. What we need to do now is take a look at Melchizedek in 7:1-10. Melchizedek will be the hero for a few verses. He is the king of Salem, which means peace. The name Melchizedek comes from *melek*, which means king, and *zedek*, which means righteousness. Thus Melchizedek means, "king of righteousness." In Genesis 14 he blessed Abraham and received 10% of Abraham's spoils from the battle he fought to rescue Lot. Abraham had gone up against a group of kings and after it was all over the king of Sodom came to greet him. He said, "Let me give you some plunder." Abraham said, "No thanks, I do not want any plunder." Then Melchizedek came and said, "I will give you some bread and wine," and Abraham said, "I will take that." That is an odd little scene and you might wonder what it means. But what happened is, Abraham liberated some of Sodom's people and Sodom's king essentially said, "You did me a favor and now I will do you a favor; let us have a

compact. You help me and I will help you.” And Abraham said, “I want no part of that,” because of the wickedness of Sodom. Instead he got into a relationship with Melchizedek who is King of Salem, or King of Righteousness. He came with blessing and provisions and Abraham gave him 10% back. That is, in skeletal form, what happened in the history of the Bible with Abraham and Melchizedek. Melchizedek is called not only a king, but also a priest. In fact, he is the first person who is called a priest in the Bible. Where does Melchizedek come from? What was his parents’ name? It certainly seems like Melchizedek was a believer by the way he is treated in Scripture. He seems to appear from out of nowhere, somehow having knowledge of the true and living God even though he does not come from Israel or from the line of Adam in any way that we can understand. He just appears, blesses, and then disappears. That is what the author of Hebrews wants to pick up about Jesus being a priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Hebrews 7:3-7 says that Jesus is like Melchizedek in that He appears sort of from nowhere without a human origin or succession to bless. A priest after the order of Melchizedek has been predicted already in Psalm 110:4 and Hebrews develops this. When we consider Jesus as a priest, there is a problem. This is the first time Jesus is called a priest in the entire New Testament. We are used to calling Jesus our High Priest and we do so often, but the truth is Hebrews is just about the only book that develops the priestly ministry of Christ. So what is the problem with calling Jesus a priest? He is not a Levite; He is not from the tribe of Levi, descended from Aaron and his sons. Thus He is unusual. He is from the tribe of Judah, which is why he is a Davidic king. Therefore, if we with the author of Hebrews want to have the insight that Jesus is both king and priest, then we have to go outside the normal spheres of the Old Testament. Within the normal spheres you were either a king or a priest. The two roles were sharply separated because they were supposed to check, control, and guide each other. But we have here at last someone who is a king and a priest, Melchizedek. He is also one who appears to be appointed out of nowhere by God. He comes from nowhere because God appointed him even as it is with Jesus.

The author of Hebrews even says that Melchizedek is a greater priest than the Aaronic priests and the author says it in kind of an unusual way. He says that the priests of Aaron died, but Jesus did not and, in a way, Melchizedek did not either. The priests of Aaron got their power through genealogy, but Melchizedek and Jesus did not. They were appointed directly by God, not by human descent. Another thing is that Melchizedek blessed Abraham and Abraham paid tithes to him. When Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek he was acting as the representative for all of Israel. Thus, in a sense, the descendants of Abraham also paid the tithes. Particularly, Aaron in Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek. This shows that Melchizedek was indeed the greater priest since Aaron must give a tithe to him. These are the main points so far: the paying of the tithes, appointment directly from God, and one who comes timelessly and does not die. Now, the point is not that Melchizedek did not die and that if you searched around the deserts of Saudi Arabia, you would find Melchizedek wandering around somewhere. The point is rather that we do not know anything about his death, so his life has certain timelessness. The best way I can illustrate this for you is by asking you to picture one of your friends whom you have not seen for many years. What age is his face? It is the same age he was the last time you saw him, even if in reality he is now 10 or 20 years older than that. In your memory your friends are timeless and their appearance is unchanged these 10, 20, or 30 years. Because you have not seen them age it is as though they did not age. That is what Hebrews is kind of working with.

Now what the author will do is tell us about the superiority of Jesus’ priesthood. He says in 7:11-16:

If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when there is a change of the priesthood,

there must also be a change of the law. He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry, but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. For it is declared:

“You are a priest forever,  
in the order of Melchizedek.”

Thus a new priesthood is needed because the old one could not attain perfection (7:11). By the old priesthood the law was given (7:11). And we know this about the law: it is not able to take us to perfection, but rather the law shows us our guilt and our need. What he is saying is that the law and old Levitical system are intertwined. The law sets up the standard and when we violate the standard, sacrifice must be made. The sacrifice is a sort of perpetual reminder that we are breaking the law. Every time a sacrifice is offered it is reminding us that things are not quite right. The very fact that the sacrifices have to be offered over and over again suggests that they never quite worked. Anything you have to do over and over again is not exactly done. Therefore, we need a new order. We need an order in which there is a definite final treatment of the problem of sin. Jesus, in the line of Melchizedek, offers this with the power of his indestructible life. Hebrews 7:18-19 says that the law is weak and useless in terms of bringing things to perfection for it makes nothing perfect. We need something new and better. We need a cure for wickedness and we need God not to remind us of our sin, but to write the law on our hearts. The law was only a shadow. We need something new, a new order of things. That new order, he says, is the order of Melchizedek. That is a quick overview of chapter seven, and now I want to go back and pick up some particular details from that.

In 7:21-22 the writer goes on to say this, “The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind: ‘You are a priest forever.’ This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.” What does a guarantor of a covenant or contract do? He guarantees or enforces if the provisions are not met. If you guarantee someone’s loan, then you have to pay if they do not. That is the point here. In Exodus 24:3, the people of Israel had just finished hearing the law of Moses and the rehearsal of God’s goodness in leading them out of Egypt and describing the way in which they should live. “When Moses went and told the people all the LORD’s words and laws, they responded with one voice, ‘Everything the LORD has said we will do.’” Now, some people have said that was Israel’s big mistake. They had one chance to say to Moses, “This is pretty tough. How about if we try to do only part of it?” Some theologians have actually taught that this was the central mistake of Israel: that they went with and accepted a covenant of law. These theologians say they should have held out for grace. I do not believe that. I think the law had been presented in a covenant-love context as, “The law is not some onerous thing you have to do, but because God has redeemed you, this is the way we should live.” This is the blessed life. This is living in the presence of God. The law is not a set of restrictions. Rather, the law is designed to show us what God is like.

The law reflects God’s nature. We should honor our father and mother because God honors people. We should not kill because God is a life giver. We should not steal because God gives. We should not be unfaithful because God is a faithful God. We should not lie because God is truthful. We should be kind to the widow, the poor, the orphan, and the alien because God is kind to the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the alien. The law is good and the Israelites did very well to say, “Yes, we will take the yoke of the law upon us.” Exodus 24:8 tells us that after they said this, “Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.’” There is a custom in antiquity of sealing covenants with blood. What happened

was that when you made a covenant you would take an animal and cut in half and the parties of the covenant would walk between the halves of the animal. This was symbolically saying, “May I be torn in half and killed as this animal is torn in half and killed if I am not faithful to this covenant.” Well, the Israelites were not faithful to the covenant and so what did they deserve? They deserved to be torn in half and killed. But Jesus is the guarantor of the covenant (Hebrews 7:22). What we deserve, He will bear. That is the first point about the excellencies of Jesus.

Now some other excellencies come rather rapidly in the text. The second one is found in 7:23-24: “Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, He has a permanent priesthood.” In the old covenant, every priest had this weakness: he died. No matter how good he was, he died. No matter how wonderful the priest was, his ministry came to an end. But Jesus’ ministry goes on forever. Verse 24 says, “He has a permanent priesthood.” It never ends. You can think about this with sports. Athletes have a way of fading. The best athlete that ever was has this weakness: he will get old. But Jesus, we might say, is the athlete whose skills never fade. He never gets old or dies. He never wears out. That is the thing about humans, no matter how great you are it will fade, but not so with Jesus. Verse 25 says, “Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them.” There are two ways of translating the little phrase, “He is able to save.” It is either, “He is able to save for all time,” or “He is able to save completely,” and there is no need to choose between these. He saves to the end, to the uttermost, to the end of the matter. Jesus saves. Verse 26 goes on to describe further the characteristics of Jesus the priest, “[He] is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.” There are two aspects of this verse. There is a denial section: “He is without evil [the literal translation of pure] and without blame.” Whatever we have, we are evil and deserve to be blamed; He does not have that. But there is also a positive section: “He is set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.” He is set apart. He is above it all. Furthermore, verse 27 says, “Unlike the other high priests, He does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when He offered Himself.” One of the things the priests had to do, especially on the Day of Atonement, was to offer a sacrifice for themselves so that they could even enter into God’s presence to make sacrifices for the people. Jesus does not have to make a sacrifice for Himself because He is sinless. He offers one sacrifice and sin is definitively treated. Then finally in verse 28 he says, “For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.” We could translate this last phrase as, “He is made strong forever.” Thus Jesus is the great and effective high priest. This is what the author has wanted to say ever since 2:17. He wanted to say it again in chapter five, and finally he has said it.

Chapter eight describes the superiority of the covenant that Jesus initiates and embodies. He says in 8:1-6 that the whole old covenant, or tabernacle system, is in a sense only a copy or a shadow of the real truth about the way the blessing and forgiveness of God are obtained. What Moses and Aaron presented was really a copy of what Moses saw. The real Tabernacle, the real presence of God, the real sacrifices, do not take place on earth. They take place in heaven. The earthly things are just shadows of the eternal things and they are put there to anticipate the real truth. The real truth is what Jesus does: He goes with the perfect sacrifice into the heavens. Then in 8:7-13 it says that Jesus comes to enact a superior covenant. 8:8-10 says this:

But God found fault with the people and said:  
“The time is coming,” declares the LORD,  
“when I will make a new covenant  
with the house of Israel

and with the house of Judah.  
It will not be like the covenant  
I made with your forefathers  
when I took them by the hand  
to lead them out of Egypt,  
because they did not remain faithful to my covenant,  
and I turned away from them,” declares the LORD.  
“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel  
after that time,” declares the LORD.  
“I will put my laws in their minds  
and write them on their hearts.  
I will be their God,  
and they will be My people.”

This is not saying that God found fault with the law. He found fault with the people. The problem is not with the law, per se. The problem is what people do with the law. A classic illustration of this is from Romans 7, where Paul says that when he heard the law, “You shall not covet,” then every covetous desire filled him. Let me give you an illustration of this.

I heard a sermon on the radio, from a good preacher, on Romans seven. The preacher lives in Southern California, in the orange district. One year there was a large crop of oranges. The problem with a large crop of oranges is that if you try to sell them all it depresses the price too much and you do not make any money. So what they do is they destroy hundreds of millions of oranges on those years. They do not sell them, give them to the poor, or ship them overseas. Rather, they put them in big piles and rot them. Someone was doing a report on the radio about this, saying how terrible it was and that they should give them to the poor. Then the report concluded with, “And if you are driving by and you come across one of these piles of rotting oranges—even if you are thirsty and hungry and there is no place to stop or anything to eat—it is illegal to stop and take one of the rotting oranges. You can be arrested and pay a big fine.” Having driven by those oranges for 20 years, it was only after hearing this report that he was seized by a desire for oranges. The minute he was told, “You cannot have it,” he said, “I want it.” That is the problem with the law. The law provokes sin because we have rebellion in our hearts. God did not find fault with the law but with the people, because their hearts were not able to make proper use of the law. The improvement in the new covenant is not that the Mosaic Law is eradicated, struck down, or simplified. The improvement is that it is now written on the heart. In fact, as you look at the teachings of Jesus and Paul, the law is deepened as it goes farther than ever before into the motives and thoughts of a man or woman.

Now the consequence of seeing the inadequacy of the tabernacle system (verses 1-10) is that things are now better. There is a trio of things that the priests are supposed to supply to the people. The first is, the priesthood is supposed to offer a true atonement, or sacrifice, for sin. The second is, the priesthood is supposed to offer unlimited access to God. And the reason why you have unlimited access to God is because of the third thing the priesthood is supposed to offer: a clean conscience. There is no more guilt or fear. Now, the tabernacle system did not really provide any of those. Everything about the system said limited access. The reason why there was limited access is because the conscience was not clear. And the reason why the conscience was not clear was because the final atonement had not yet been offered for sin.

Let me back up and explain this one to you. What does limited access have to do with feeling guilty or having an unclear conscience? If you know you belong somewhere, do you feel guilty being there? On

the other hand, if you know you do not belong, do you feel guilty when you go there? You are supposed to. You may look and smell like you do not belong, but if you actually do belong, you are okay. When I was a pastor I once had to go to the hospital to visit one of the members of my church. Before I went I did not have the opportunity to shower or change clothes, so I entered the hospital dirty from playing a game of volleyball. But even though I looked and smelled dirty and out of place, I knew I belonged. My parishioner was in pain and in need of his pastor, so I went with confidence. But if you are dressed up, everything seems right, and you have an appointment, but you do not belong somewhere, you will never be comfortable there. The whole Old Testament system basically said, "You cannot be at ease in the presence of God; do not go in there." The system said, "You have to be clean, you have to be a priest, you have to have a sacrifice, and it has to be the right day."

So the author of Hebrews is meditating on this fact and saying that, even though people maybe did not recognize it, the Old Testament system was always crying for something more. It was not crying for the blood of animals, which are only able to cleanse outwardly (9:12-14). There was a need for an interior cleansing, the cleansing that comes by Christ. Once that happens, He opens the heavenly sanctuary (9:11). It is now open to us. He opened the real thing of which the earthly tabernacle is a copy. He went through the heavens and now we can go follow Him there. Thus we see that Jesus fulfills the function of the priesthood in the way that the Aaronic priests could not. He offered atonement by His blood, not the blood of animals, which only cleanse outwardly; as a consequence we have access to God because our conscience is cleansed. Now we can serve the living God. By "serve" I do not mean helping the poor or teaching a class. I mean serving in worship, the service of bowing before God. We are now free to give the service of worship and humble praise to God since this sacrifice has been made. Our conscience is clean, the access to God is open, and now we can worship and serve God.

In chapter nine, because he is so enthusiastic about this, the author goes through the whole thing again, after a fashion, and points out the excellencies of Christ in 9:23. In 9:23 and following, I want you to follow along and notice how the traits of Christ and His perfect sacrifice are being enumerated in rapid fashion one by one yet again in this passage:

It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. 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, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, 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.

Do you see how he again runs through, in rapid fashion, the excellencies of Christ's sacrifice? Jesus offered His sacrifice in heaven, not only on earth, and so its place was excellent. The number was excellent because He offered one sacrifice. And His sacrifice was perfectly effective in that it annulled sin. If He comes again, is He going to come to offer another sacrifice? No, there is nothing more to be done when He returns. And so we see that Jesus' sacrifice does indeed finally take away sins. There is one more thing to be noted about Jesus' sacrifice. The priests come with the blood of an animal, but He comes with His own blood. The high priest comes yearly, but Jesus comes one time. The result then, Hebrews is saying to us, is that we need to rest in the completed work of Christ. Everything that needs to be offered has been offered. There is nothing more to say or do.

The responsibility of the believer at this stage is to rest in Christ and to train his or her feelings. That is what the writer was saying about the problem of guilt—our guilt has been taken care of, now we must train our feelings to come into accord with this truth. I tell you, there are many Christians who still struggle with the problem of guilt. They remember something they did last night, last week, or 10, 20, or 30 years ago and the shame of it burns as if it happened one minute ago. They remember what they did and think self-condemning thoughts. They think, “God is angry with me. How can I ever serve God? How could God use me in light of what I did a number of years ago. Only God knows what I did, what I am guilty of, and what I am capable of.” But God says, “No, a full, perfect, and final sacrifice has been offered. There is no more guilt.” Now, our culture says there is no such thing as guilt, only guilt feelings. This is not true for unbelievers, but it is true for the Christian who has been covered by Christ. For those who have been covered by Christ there is no guilt, only feelings of guilt. We need to learn to teach ourselves to stop feeling guilty and unworthy, even though we are unworthy in ourselves. We must stop feeling guilty and disqualified when Christ has qualified us. His work has definitively covered our sin.

Do you agree that what has happened in the past cannot be eradicated? Our salvation and our standing with God depend on what Jesus did objectively almost 2000 years ago, and subsequent acts cannot undo final acts in history. No matter how guilty you are this year, Jesus is your champion—Hebrews calls Him that—and He has taken care of that. It is objective and historical and history cannot be changed. That is the message of Hebrews.

Hebrews 10 revisits that and adds a point to it. First the author wants to recapitulate a little in 10:1-4 to make sure we get the point that these sacrifices no longer need to be offered. There is no more guilt and no more need of annual sin offerings and so on; that is 10:1-4. But he wants to add a new point in verses five through ten. In this passage he says that not only did Jesus offer this excellent sacrifice, but there is also something else: “Therefore, when Christ came into the world, He said: ‘Sacrifice and offering you did not desire.’” Now, you may be saying, “Wait a minute, all this time we have been talking about how necessary sacrifices were. What does this statement, ‘Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,’ mean? He goes on to say, “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, ‘Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, O God.’” What does that mean? It comes from Psalm 40. The sacrificial system was elaborated and stated and the law was set up mainly in Leviticus and Exodus. Do you know what the Bible says the prophets say and what some of the psalmists say about the sacrificial system? 1 Samuel 15 says, “To obey is better than sacrifice.” This is in the story of Saul who was charged by God to go and defeat the Amalekites. In fact, he was charged to exterminate and destroy them, to put them under a sort of sign of the eternal final judgment of God. After the war is over, Samuel comes up to greet him and Saul says, “The LORD bless you! I have carried out the LORD’s instructions” (15:13). And Samuel replies, “What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?” And Saul says, “The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites; they spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the LORD your God, but we totally destroyed the rest.” We do not know if he was being sincere here or not. Then Samuel tells Saul the word of the LORD in 15:22-23: “Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice.”

Now you understand that human nature is such that it will take advantage of almost anything. The sacrificial system, excellent as it was even though partial, was abused by some people. This story of Saul exemplifies one way in which they abused it. Think about it this way. If you are a corrupt person, but religious, and it was about a week before the Day of Atonement when you could offer a definitive sacrifice for all the sins of the prior year, what might occur to you? You might think, “This would be a

really good time to sin. Because in just a few days, it will all be washed away—will it not be great?” Furthermore, some people reasoned, “We have this sacrificial system and all we have to do if we commit a sin is offer a sacrifice to cover it. This is almost too good to be true! We can do whatever we want and then take an animal, kill it, give some to the priests—we even get to eat most of it—and everything is fine again. But what does God say about this? David, inspired by the Spirit, speaks about this very issue in Psalm 51 when he talks about sacrifices. Psalm 51:16-17 says, “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.” That is what He really wants, not abuses of the system. Jeremiah 7:21 also addresses this:

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Go ahead, add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat yourselves! For when I brought your forefathers out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, but I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in all the ways I command you, that it may go well with you. But they did not listen or pay attention; instead they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts. They went backward and not forward.

And when they did not obey and went backward, they said, “Oh, we have sacrifices.” On a variety of occasions the prophets and the psalmists say, “No, that is not the plan.” In Hebrews 10:8-9, Jesus says, “Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them. [...] Here I am, I have come to do your will.” He came to offer this perfect sacrifice. Simultaneously His obedience is His sacrifice, because He offered His body once by obedience but He also offered His body as atonement for sin, so He wrapped the two together in one. Again we see in this the excellency of Christ.

The author celebrates it all in 10:11-18 by saying one more time how excellent Jesus’ work is. He says, “Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.” If somebody stands offering the same sacrifice day by day, what does that imply? They are not finished. When the work is done and you have been standing all day, what do you do? You sit down. And if you have to do the same thing over and over and over every day, what does that imply? You are never really done, right? But Jesus made one sacrifice and then He sat down; it was done. This communicates the idea of finishing a job. Like the priests offering the same sacrifices day by day, we must wash the same dishes and clean the same floor day by day. Dishes get used and dirtied again. The floor gets walked on and dirtied again. It would be great if you could do the definitive washing of dishes! If you could say, “I am going to wash these dishes once and they will be clean for all time.” Or, “I am going to wash this floor and it will be clean for all eternity.” Would that not be great? That is what Jesus did. He gave the definitive cleansing and we will never get dirty again. That does not mean that we will never sin again. Of course we will sin, but in the sight of God we will never again be guilty before Him. We will never again be told by God that we have no access to Him. We will never be told we cannot get into heaven. He cleansed us once and for all and then sat down, as a woman or a man does the job and then sits down, because it is done—except, He sat down forever because it was done forever. Now what happens? Our conscience is clear at last. The covenant is now written on our hearts. From chapter eight, we know that the new covenant is better not because the law is different, but because it is written on our hearts. Struggles remain, but the struggle is now only the struggle of appropriating fully what God has already given us.

Verse 14 is a beautiful verse. The Greek says it so clearly: “By one sacrifice He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.” Now that word “He has made perfect” is in the perfect tense,

which is used in the Greek to describe something that is done once and the consequences stand. This is the verb tense they use to convey a past act that has ongoing consequences. So when he says, "He has made perfect forever," that is done and it stays done. We are perfectly consecrated, perfectly pure, taken to maturity in God's eyes, and perfectly cleansed, forever. He has done this to those who are being made holy because even though the gift is complete, the appropriation is a process. He has made us perfect forever, but we have to live into it and live out of it and let the process unfold. Now that is much easier because the law has been written on our hearts. We do live between the ages. We live in the time when glory has been announced but not yet seen. We are liberated from sin, but not perfectly free. We are being sanctified.

The central genius of Hebrews is to go back through the Old Testament and see the foreshadowing of Christ there. This actually started with Jesus Himself. If you look through the pages of the Gospels you will find that about a dozen times when He was asked why one thing or another was happening He applied prophecies of the Old Testament to Himself. For example, when He entered the city of Jerusalem, the children praised Him. The priests said, "You should not let the children say 'Hosanna' to you." He said, "No. For it is written, 'From the lips of children you have ordained praise.'" Jesus did that about a dozen times. Somebody would say to Him, "Why are You doing this?" And He would say, "Because it is written [...]" and it would be something from the Bible that was written about Him. Even on the cross He quoted Scripture, saying, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" By quoting this passage from Psalm 22 He was appropriating it to Himself. Even with His disciples in the last night He said, "You will all be scattered because Zechariah says, 'Strike the shepherd, scatter the sheep.'" Then at the end of his ministry, in Luke 24, after His resurrection and on the road to Emmaus with two of His disciples who did not understand, He says, "How foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter His glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself." The whole Old Testament testifies that this had to happen. In this way Jesus models the approach that the author of Hebrews takes. He modeled it and then His disciples followed it. For example, Matthew mentioned fulfilled prophecy in his Gospel on 10 occasions. Jesus says it Himself 12 times, but on 10 occasions Matthew says, "Jesus did this that the prophecy might be fulfilled [...]"

Jesus encouraged His disciples in this, and in Acts one they start doing it right away. After Judas committed suicide they were wondering what had happened and what they ought to do. If you were there you would also be wondering because Judas, as far as we know, performed the same miracles, cast out demons, and seemed to be a disciple of Jesus in every way. It was not as if everyone was healing people and Judas would lay his hands on someone and nothing would happen. He looked like a disciple in every way, and so they are saying, "How can this be?" In Acts one they quote Psalms 69 and 109, which were not very common psalms. They were psalms of lament, about being betrayed. But they were not psalms that were widely used. So evidently, they searched through the whole Old Testament to see if there might be something written there that would shed light on what happened with Judas. Jesus modeled it and He told the disciples to do it. They started to do it almost immediately and they put it in their books. And that is what is happening with Hebrews. We are told that Jesus fulfills all the Old Testament Scripture and the author of Hebrews, guided by the Holy Spirit, is looking for that. After a fashion, we should be eager to do the same. It is sometimes hard. The place to start is by simply learning what is in the Bible. But it is one of our responsibilities to look at the Old Testament in light of Christ, to see what it may say about Him, even as Hebrews models for us.