

“The Law a Shadow of Good Things to Come”

PSALM 40:6-8; HEBREWS 10:1-18

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Congregation of Christ: “God doesn’t just forgive, he forgets. He erases the board. He destroys the evidence. He burns the microfilm. He clears the computer. He doesn’t remember my mistakes.” What I just read is a quote from a popular evangelical author, Max Lucado. Do you agree or disagree with his statement? After all, in verse 17 of our text, God says, *“I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.”*

Here’s another thought that may arise out of verse 2 which says, *“For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins.”* So you Christian men: do you still feel guilty when your wife reprimands you for not taking take the garbage out, or not replacing the cap on the toothpaste?

A final quote: “The perfection I teach, is perfect love; loving God with all the heart, receiving Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King, to reign alone over all our thoughts, words and actions. That we are to expect it, not at death, but every moment.” This is from Charles Wesley, the great hymnwriter, who taught that a Christian can attain perfection in this life. Verse 14 of our text might be used to teach this, *“For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.”*

A forgetting God; guiltless over sins; sinlessness in this life: we will think about these three things this morning, in addition to Christ’s “single offering” of himself as the once-for-all sacrifice for all the sins of all his people.

At this point in our series on the letter to the Hebrews, it is good to review our previous studies. The purpose of the author in writing this letter is to encourage persecuted Jewish Christians to be firm and persevere in their faith in Christ. He does this by focusing on Jesus as superior over all things in the world. In Chapters 1-2, he is superior to the angels. But even though he is superior over all, he willingly made himself lower by assuming human flesh and blood to accomplish salvation for God’s people.

So in chapters 5-10, he presents to the Jews Christ’s superiority over the Old Testament ceremonial laws. He is the superior High Priest of a superior new covenant, mediating for a superior temple, the universal church. The law, he says, is *“but a shadow of the good things to come,”* not the reality.

Sacrifices Remind the People of Sins

In the opening verse, the writer summarizes his theme of the chapter, *“For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities.”* We previously learned that the law itself is not bad. The psalmist tells us in our call to worship that God’s Word, his law, *“is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path”* so he does not forget his law (Psa 119:105, 109). Elsewhere, the psalmist also praises God’s law as more desirable than gold and sweeter than honey (Psa 19:10).

Paul himself also says that the old covenant law is “*not contrary to the promises of God*” (Gal 3:21). He regards the commandments in the law as “*holy and righteous and good*” (Rom 7:12). The fault lies, not in God’s law, but in human sinfulness (Rom 8:3). So then, the result of trying to be righteous before God through obedience to the law is death. Why? Because God demands perfect holiness (1 Pet 1:15-16), and no human being can attain this. Only by faith and trust in Christ alone is anyone perfectly righteous before God, because Christ is perfectly obedient to God. So he says that the sacrifices under the old covenant can never make anyone perfect.

As in the previous chapter, he repeats that Jesus had brought “good things” with his sacrifice for sins. What are these good things? Among other things, forgiveness of sins, righteousness before God, assurance of salvation, a heavenly inheritance, and eternal life with Christ. All believers receive the glorious riches of Christ he gives now and forever.

In verse 3, the Preacher says that the old covenant sacrifices reminded the worshiper of their sins every year. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would sacrifice bulls and goats for the all the sins of the people, including his own sins. This was a reminder that they fell short of God’s required holiness year after year. And the curtain guarding the Most Holy Place reminded them that they could not actually draw near to God except through the high priest. The sacrifices were a constant reminder of their separation from God.

But the Preacher implies in verse 2 that once Christ cleanses us, we “*would no longer have **any consciousness of sins.***” The NIV translates this as “*would no longer **have felt guilty** for their sins.*” This translation can mislead Christians, even pastors, into thinking that we must not feel guilty when they commit sins. The word used means “awareness of information about something.”¹ God tells us that when Christ cleanses us from sin, we are aware or conscious that he has completely forgiven us of our sins.

So when you commit a sin, be mindful that Christ has cleansed you once and for all from all sins—past, present and future. Do not allow our enemy to accuse you of your sin and to put doubt in your mind that you are not God’s children. Sin does not determine our standing before God as forgiven sinners. Before God in his heavenly courtroom, you have been found “Not Guilty” and acquitted of your sins for the sake of Christ our righteousness.

On the other hand, you are to feel or be conscious of your guilt before God when you sin. How would you confess and repent of your sin before God and before men, if you don’t feel guilty of your sins? Sin does not prevent you from drawing near to God in confession and repentance. When David committed adultery and murder, he confessed his guilt before God in Psalm 51, “*For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me*” (51:3). But he was also conscious of God’s mercy, pleading to God, “*Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit*” (51:12). So husbands, feel guilty and ask forgiveness from your wives when you leave your

¹ Bauer, W. (with Arndt/Gingrich/Danker). *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition, revised and edited by Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 967.

socks and shoes all over the living room. And more importantly, repent before God when you don't love and cherish your wife as you promised.

Not only is the law lacking in completely clearing our conscience from guilt. Verse 4 also says, *"it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."* If this is so, why even have sacrifices? The bloody sacrifices were the means used by God as a foreshadow of the final and once-for-all bloody sacrifice—his Son Jesus Christ offering himself as our Substitute for sin. Through the animal sacrifices, God was declaring to them that blood was required for forgiveness of sins. They were a laser pointer to their coming Messiah.

But the blood of bulls and goats was inadequate to finally atone for their sins and to make them perfect in the sight of God.

Christ Came to Make the People Perfect

What was God's solution to the problem of demanding perfect obedience from his people? Is God so unjust that he would demand something that his people can never accomplish? Here is where the Preacher offers the solution to the Jewish Christians, and to us today. In verse 14, he writes, *"For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified."* By his offering, he has *"[made] perfect those who draw near"* to God (10:1). Do the people make themselves perfect? No, it is God who makes them so.

Therefore, in the new covenant, God fulfills his covenant promises *all by himself*—doing all things necessary to save his people from sin. He sends his Beloved Son Jesus the Christ from heaven to earth in the form of true human flesh and blood. His mission was to live and die as a blameless, spotless bloody sacrifice on the cross to fulfill what the old sacrifices can only foreshadow.

In verses 5-15, the Spirit shows us the stark contrast between the sacrifices under the law and the sacrifice of Christ for sin. The writer does this by quoting King David in Psalm 40:6-8, which has two main parts. First, God is not satisfied with animal sacrifices. God's dissatisfaction with mere rituals is a common Old Testament theme. In Psalm 51:16-17, for example, David knew that God *"will not delight in sacrifice... with a burnt offering."* What pleases God? *"a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart"* (Psa 51:16-17; cf 1 Sam 15:22).

Second, David was willingly obedient to God, saying, *"I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."* The author of Hebrews says that David was speaking the words of Christ when he willingly obeyed God's law in offering himself as the once-for-all sacrifice for sin. This will of God to offer Christ has made us perfect and holy before God, *"For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified"* (10:14).

Perfected Saints, Forgiven Sinners

In considering the perfection of God's people, his saints, the writer contrasts the old covenant with the new. In verse 1, the law is unable to make worshipers perfect. But in verse 14, he says that Christ has perfected his people forever. Why this seeming contradiction? Are we now perfect in this world? Or can we be perfect in this life?

We know that we are not perfect. We sin, we fail. We have many faults. In thought, word and deed. This is why the Holy Bible has warnings and exhortations from beginning to end about sin. Wesley and all who believe in perfection in this life are wrong. But in our text, the writer uses the term “to make perfect” in a different sense. It means “to complete, to bring to an end, to finish, to accomplish.”² His sacrifice was complete and sufficient to bring us to a right standing before God forever. Jesus has no need to do anything else. *“It is finished,”* he says on the cross.

Therefore, bear this in mind: You who believe in Christ and his finished work on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins are saints in two ways. First, the word “saint” means set apart. Out of all the people in the world, God chose you from eternity to be his children. Not only did he choose you to be a “saint,” but he also chose you to be holy and blameless (Eph 1:4). Even your good works have been prepared by God from eternity (Eph 2:10). And this is the second meaning of being a “saint.” It means that God, through the Holy Spirit, is molding you into the image of Christ by renewing your heart and mind daily. You have been *“predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son”* (Rom 8:29).

But do not be so arrogant as to say that you are not a sinner anymore because you had been chosen by God. You are sinners saved by grace alone, not of your own doing or will. You sin daily, but your sins have been completely wiped clean by God for the sake of Christ. Your conscience is cleared by confessing and repenting of your sins.

Does this mean that God forgets all your sins, since God says in verse 17 of our text, *“I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more”*? No, for God knows all things from the beginning to the end. He is not a forgetful God. Rather, he is a forgetting God. He doesn’t clear his computer or burns the microfilm of your sins. Rather, his “forgetting” actually means “forgiving.” God forgives us completely. If he had a registry of deeds, he would wipe your sinful slate clean if you’re a believer. On Judgment Day, when he looks at your slate, he will only see the righteous works of Christ. No sin, acquitted, free from guilt forever.

Dear Friends: This is our comfort from today’s lesson. All other religions require good works to be right with God. Not so with our religion. To be right with God requires only faith in Christ and his completed work on the cross for all our sins. He has made you perfect saints before him because of the perfect obedience of Christ in his life and death. But when you sin, he is also a forgiving and forgetting God.

Through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, you now have access to God’s heavenly throne of God. You can draw near to him alone in your room and in the congregation. Offer your sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to God for forgiveness of sin, to Christ for his once-for-all sacrifice, and to the Spirit for renewing our mind and heart daily for good works. Remember these words from 2 Peter 1:5-7: *“For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.”*

² Ibid., 996.