

“Finally Free”
Hebrews 10:1-10

July 3, 2022

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Haven't We Heard This Already?

If you've been joining us for worship the past few weeks or if you have been reading through the book of Hebrews, our scripture reading this morning might have felt a little repetitive. Didn't we already cover all this stuff about sacrifices and high priests and blood already? The answer is a resounding “yes,” with just a hint of “no.”

The verses we're looking at today from Hebrews 10 are the conclusion of an argument that started back in chapter 8. The author of Hebrews is doing exactly what I learned to do when writing an argument – he's reviewing his main points, and tying up his loose ends. That means that some of it sounds very familiar; but we can't “check out” completely. This isn't all review. He's going to add something new and really important. The new thing we will see in this passage is the idea of freedom. But before we get there, let's do a quick recap of the argument he's making.

Shortcomings of the Old System (1-4)

In the beginning of Hebrews 9, we find an extended metaphor about how the earthly tabernacle that Moses built was a “shadow” or an “image” of the heavenly tabernacle. He returns to this language in verse 1, to say that law is a “shadow” of the coming realities. In both cases, he's drawing on the ancient philosopher Plato and his well-known allegory of the cave.

In its simplest form, Plato's allegory of the cave asks us to imagine prisoners who spend their entire lives deep in a cave. They are chained in place and can only look at a blank wall in front of them. Somewhere behind them in the cave, there is a fire burning. People carrying different objects walk between the fire and the prisoners, casting shadows on the wall where the prisoners are staring. The prisoners know nothing of the fire or the people, all they can see are the shadows in front of them. For the prisoners, these shadows appear to be reality - they can't comprehend anything other than the “shadows” or “images.”

It's best not to push this allegory too hard or make Hebrews too much like Plato's *Republic*, but the main idea is the same. The author of Hebrews is saying that the tabernacle and the law are “shadows” and “images” of the good things to come. Our

perception is limited, and we can't yet see or understand the true realities that those things are modeled upon.

The biggest clue that these systems are "shadows" is how ineffective they are. The sacrifices prescribed in the law are "repeated endlessly year after year" (1). The fact that they keep getting repeated year after year proves that they don't have the power to cleanse people from sins. "Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered?" the author asks. Indeed, there is no provision anywhere in the Old Testament for the sacrificial system to stop. There are plenty of instructions about offering sacrifices, but nowhere to my knowledge that describes how the system finally ends. It was designed to be a system that goes on and on and on, without end.

It reminds me a bit of a diabetic. I grew up particularly close to one of my cousins. He was very young when he learned he was a diabetic. I have really early memories of my grandparents and my aunt coaching me through how to give him insulin shots. In hindsight, I'm not sure how he felt about being stabbed by his little cousin! In any case, he would need shots regularly to keep his insulin levels in check. Years later, he would switch to an insulin pump - but it was the same approach to his disease. There was this quick shot of a corrective that would get his body back into balance, but it wouldn't last forever. The shot would help for a while, and then it would be time for a new shot. There was never a chance that if he timed the shot right, or injected himself in just the right spot, or said the right words while doing the injection that it would cure diabetes.

Insulin shots were made to treat the symptoms, not cure the disease. The author of Hebrews is making a similar case here - the sacrifices of the old system can't cure the underlying disease of sin; all they can do is address some of the symptoms. And so, just like a diabetic doesn't get to stop checking or regulating his insulin, the people of God couldn't stop offering sacrifices over and over and over again. Year after year, generation after generation.

Sometimes Christians can get a little harsh when talking about the ancient Jews and the sacrifices they offered. I think those criticisms can be unfair. When we think about the Jews who were bringing their offering before God, we ought to remember two important things - these folks are described as "worshipers," and they were worshiping God by doing the things God had told their ancestors to do.

The sacrifices weren't the ultimate cure for the problem of sin, but we might do well to think of them like an insulin shot. They were designed to bring the people back into right relationship with God for a time. Last week, Kevin talked about the Day of Atonement. That day was an annual reminder of sin and guilt. One commentary I read this week says that "the whole Day of Atonement ritual, repeated annually, is like a sledgehammer to the human spirit, pounding away year after year after year with its constant battering away on the theme of sin. In other words, it does not work to heal; it works only to drub it into us that we are sinful, sinful, sinful -- guilty, and unacceptable to God." (101)

The very fact that the sacrifices happened over and over, with no “exit plan” is proof that they weren’t the final solution. So what is the final solution? If you were here last week or if you read Hebrews 9, you know that the answer is Jesus.

Jesus is the Final Solution (5-10)

The 20 or so verses that come immediately before today’s passage talk extensively about how Jesus’ self-sacrifice is far superior to the ritual sacrifice of animals. To review and revisit that point, the author of Hebrews quotes from Psalm 40: “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, my God.’”

Bible scholars have done a lot of work on these verses. I’ve read a lot of that this week, and it’s sort of interesting. But what’s helpful here are just a few notes. First - and the one I find most interesting! - is that this is only the second time in Hebrews that Jesus “speaks.” The way the author uses Psalm 40, Jesus is the one saying these words. And in doing so, the author is letting Jesus set up the contrast between the old sacrificial system and his own self-sacrifice.

If you’re the sort of person who likes a good word study in the Bible, it might interest you to know that “sacrifice” and “offering” and “burnt offerings” and “sin offerings” are all different terms that indicate different types of sacrifice that were to be offered on different occasions for different reasons. Those details are more than we have time for today. The cumulative effect is Jesus saying, “the system of sacrifices isn’t making God happy; but God has given me a body and I am prepared to use it to glorify him!”

Verses 8 and 9 restate verses 5 through 7, and clarify that Jesus has set aside the old system to establish a new system. And finally, at long last, we get to the heart of the passage, to the new angle that is full of new hope.

Finally Free

“And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” (10) There is so much good stuff packed into this one sentence!

At its core, the new information we get in this verse is that we are finally free! Instead of sacrifices that happen year after year without end, we see that Jesus’ sacrifice has made us holy “once for all.” We are no longer a people who need to return over and over again to our sin, and we do not need rituals to remind us to feel guilt and shame for all we have done. Through Christ, we are people who are free from guilt, free from the endless cycle of trying to make up for what we have done wrong. We are people who are free to embrace God’s gift of holiness, and free to live as the holy, cleansed and purified people of God.