

The Better Sacrifice

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Date: 22 March 2026

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[0:00] Hebrews chapter 10, beginning at verse 1. The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming, not the realities themselves.

For this reason, it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. Otherwise, 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. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said, 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. First he said, Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire.

[1:08] Nor were you pleased with them, though they were offered in accordance with the law. Then he said, Here I am. I have come to do your will. He sets aside the first to establish the second.

And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. 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. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.

And since that time, he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice, he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says, This is the covenant I will make with them. After that time, says the Lord, I will put my laws in their hearts and I will write them on their minds. Then he adds, Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.

[2:12] And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary. This is the word of the Lord. Amen. Let's pray as we sit.

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight. O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen. Well, we're going to have a chance going to come up in a moment.

And you can, we'll give us some sort of context for our reading. If you look at that chart, we're just about, almost got to the yellow line, or white line, just here.

It's funny, it's yellow on that screen. Most exciting. And so, the central section of Hebrews is all about Jesus, the perfect priest.

It runs from 4 verse 14 right through to 10, or the end of chapter 10. And that central section starts with a call to approach God boldly in 4 verses 14 to 16.

[3:30] And it's summed up with the same thought in 10, 19 to 23. And that long section in the middle about Jesus, our priest, is divided into two halves.

And the second half starts in chapter 8, and it covers the new covenant. And when we get on to this theme of the new covenant, we start with a quotation from Jeremiah, chapter 31.

And that quotation sort of wraps around this whole section. So, when we get to our passage tonight, that's the end of this section on the new covenant.

And we'll explore the way that the passage works. And Old Testament quotations are very important to our author.

And we'll see how they work in our passage. So, as it thinks about the new covenant, then perhaps the most important feature of the new covenant is the new sacrifice.

[4:39] And our passage divides into two parts. It seems like we're endlessly drilling down as we get to what we're looking at tonight. There are two parts, and there's verses 1 to 4.

This is all on page 1208, which is the sacrifices under the law. And then we have Christ's sacrifice in 5 to 18.

And as I think you will, if you've been with us for a very long time, when you go back to the very beginning, there's always that sense of better.

Christ is the better sacrifice. And that's what we're looking at. So, it's all about a contrast tonight. We have a contrast between the sacrifices under the law, in verses 1 to 4, relatively briefly. And then Christ's better sacrifice, which is 5 to 18. And each of these halves divides into three subsections.

[5:39] And you'll find them on your notice sheet. And I think I really would encourage you to use the notice sheet. If you take notes, that's fine.

But if you don't, I think it will help you to see the structure, which I think is very clear. And I think this will help to explain where we're going tonight.

The first half on the sacrifices under the law makes three points, which are that the sacrifices under the law are a shadow of what's to come.

They're incomplete and inadequate. Verse 1. The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming, not the realities themselves.

The Old Testament law shows us a picture of the true sacrifice that would come in Jesus. If you read the Old Testament as a whole, there's an enormous amount of information there devoted to explaining the sacrificial system.

[6:49] And I think all that is to ensure that when Christ came, we would understand his work. So, I'm not going to explore that tonight. But the point that our author is making tonight is that the sacrifices of the Old Testament, though they are God-given, they're God-appointed, they're but a shadow of the true sacrifice.

Paul Clark, the minister of St. Andrew's Free Church, and another one of our patrons, gives us a great illustration of this. He says, But when she comes back, you put the photo away.

You speak to her face to face. It would be really weird if you went on speaking to the photo. She'd be most upset. If you tried stroking the photo, not her, she wouldn't.

Perhaps we'd better not go too far down that one. But, you know, that would be a terrible mistake, wouldn't it? And the readers of our letter were tempted to go back to the law and to its sacrifices.

And our author says that that would be like preferring your wife's photo to her. You'd be missing out.

[8:35] You'd be going back from the real thing to the shadow. And for us, the whole point about Hebrews is it's all about Jesus.

You don't want to go back from Jesus to churchiness, to some sort of religiosity. Just go back to church going when you can have Jesus himself.

So the first point is that the sacrifices are a shadow. And the second point is that the sacrifices of the law are incomplete.

Verse 1b. What he's saying is that under the old covenant, there is endless repetition.

There's always more to do. But if the worshippers had been cleansed once for all, those sacrifices would have no longer been offered.

[9:57] C.S. Lewis argued that while most religions are based on doing, on human effort and ritual, Christianity is based on what God has done in Christ.

Our author says to us, why go back to doing when you've got done, when you've got what Jesus has done?

So the sacrifices under the law are a shadow. They're incomplete. And thirdly, they're inadequate. Verse 4. It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

What our author is saying is that the sacrifice of an animal is just not an adequate substitute for a human being.

It's just not enough. It's not equivalent in value to us. We'll come back to that from another route in a second.

[11:00] For three of the four paragraphs of our Bible reading tonight relate to the sacrifice of Jesus. And they come, as it were, in reverse order.

It went a shadow, incomplete, inadequate. And now it goes adequate, complete, and the reality. Jesus' sacrifice is adequate, complete, and real.

And in order to make his point, in each case, our author has an appropriate Old Testament quotation. He starts with Psalm 40.

It's in verse 5. Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said, well, this is the actual quotation, Sacrifice, an 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's written about me in the scroll. I have come to do your will, my God.

[12:05] This is surely the answer to the question of adequacy. The blood of bulls and goats was inadequate.

But a sinless human being offering himself is what the prayer book calls a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction.

Nothing less than that perfect human being would do. But equally, nothing can be added to that. It's absolutely adequate and sufficient and perfect.

Now we need to explore these psalm verses a little bit more because they're obviously, in the first case, words of David.

And he came to the throne after Saul had twice offered sacrifices. Saul was his predecessor. Had twice offered sacrifices disobediently.

[13:07] The details don't matter tonight. God had commanded the sacrifices. But what he took pleasure in was not the burnt offerings and the sin offerings, but the inward grace of which the sacrifice was the outward sign.

God wanted an obedient heart. In that famous verse in 1 Samuel 16, people look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.

Now, as we well know, even David only went so far in doing God's will. He had a terrible failure. So David never came fully to do God's will.

But only David's greater son, as the hymn puts it, could say completely, here I am. I've come to do your will, my God. Only Jesus could do that.

If we think about the question of a perfect life and sinlessness, the Gospels show his life. And I'm always perhaps particularly struck by the words of Peter.

[14:29] He lived with Jesus for three years, and yet he wrote in 1 Peter 2, Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps.

He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. No one would say that about us. Well, they certainly wouldn't say that about me.

But that's what Peter said after he'd lived with Jesus for those years. He went on. When they hold threats at him, he didn't retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats.

He entrusted himself to him who judges justly. So the passage, in the passage when Hebrews, the writer of Hebrews, takes these words to be words of Christ, because he's the only person for whom they're completely true.

And they're true in terms of what Christ did, but there's also two other gems in them we shouldn't miss. The first is in verse 5. A body you prepared for me.

[15:46] Now, I'm not going to go into the difficult question of why it's strangely different from the Hebrew at this point. The Hebrew says, my ears, you have opened. That's what you'll find if you look it up.

And the Hebrew clearly refers to a listening, and thus an obedient person. And the Greek, which is what our writer quotes, refers to the embodiment of that obedience.

You see, he's talking about someone who embodies obedience. Jesus is the incarnate son.

A body had been prepared for him. He comes to do God's will. And what's more, he says, here I am, it is written about me in the scroll.

He comes to do God's will, as it's written about him in the Old Testament. He's the one who comes as the fulfillment of all that we read about sacrifices in the past.

[16:49] He comes as the incarnate son of God. He is the perfect sacrifice, the adequate sacrifice.

And more than that, in our next point, he's a complete sacrifice. Verse 11, 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. But when this priest, that's Jesus, had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.

I think we can identify two contrasts here. Firstly, the priest offers the same sacrifices again and again. Whereas Jesus offers one sacrifice.

All those sacrifices, and then on the cross, we see the one sacrifice that is adequate and complete and replaces all those that went before.

[18:03] And secondly, he sat down the priest stands, Jesus sits.

Now, most first century jobs involve standing. Given the number of doctors in our church, in hospitals or other, their jobs probably involve quite a lot of standing too.

Many of us do have standing jobs, but a lot of us have sitting down jobs, which is perhaps slightly confusing. But I think probably in the past, basically, you stood up to work.

And then, when it was over, you sat down. You sat down and you said, job done. Work complete. And Jesus had done his work for us as priest. He died for us. And then it says, he sat down at the right hand of God.

[19:03] Job done. It's that same contrast again. Other religions are about doing. Christianity is about done.

There's a little Greek phrase that's used, I think, only four times in the New Testament. And they're all in Hebrews. And it's used thrice in our passage.

In chapter 7, it says of Melchizedek that he continues a priest forever. that in our passage, we have verse 1. It talks about the sacrifices repeated endlessly.

Same phrase. Forever, effectively. And verse 12, on the other hand, which I've just been talking about, says, the priest had offered for all time one sacrifice.

They're all the same phrase. When you go back, the sacrifices before go on forever. Now, there's one sacrifice, but its effect lasts forever.

[20:09] It's the one complete sacrifice. And so, the question is, do you want Old Testament sacrifices repeated forever?

Or do you want to enjoy Jesus' one forever sacrifice? And that new sacrifice is so much better, because, I told you it had been used thrice, and I only quoted twice.

There's one more to come in verse 14. For by one sacrifice, he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. same forever. Isn't that interesting?

In terms of verse 14, Christians are being made holy. We don't claim to have been made holy. We are being made holy. Sanctification is a process, but we have, according to that verse, by Christ's death, been made perfect forever.

So, we are being made holy, but we're already able to stand before God, ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, through the one forever sacrifice.

[21:31] It's a very wonderful and very exciting truth. But the astonishing thing in the passage is it's clear that not everyone wants this amazing gift.

I'll just read verse 12b and then 13. Christ sat down at the right hand of God and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool.

There's nothing that flags that as a quotation from the Bible, but it obviously is. For one thing, it sticks out slightly strangely, I think. But it may not stick out strangely to you because you've been following Hebrews so well and you know where it comes from.

But just in case you don't know where it comes from, it comes from what I think might even be our author's favourite Old Testament passage, Psalm 110. I'm going to read the key verses which have popped up before.

The Lord says to my Lord, this is verse 1 of Psalm 110, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet. And verse 4, the Lord has sworn and will not change his mind.

[22:43] You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek. That's my special phrase, forever. Now, that may seem quite a complicated

quotation.

There are words of David and he speaks about the Lord and my Lord and Jesus makes it clear that that's to be interpreted as that my Lord refers to Jesus Jesus.

So the Lord says to David's Lord, that is Jesus, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet. I'll come back to that thought about enemies in a moment.

Jesus' sacrifice is adequate, not a bull or a goat. it's complete for all time, not endlessly repeated, and finally, it's not a shadow, but the reality.

As I said in my introduction, the whole section from Hebrews 8 to the end of tonight's passage is wrapped around by Jeremiah 31 verses 31 to 34.

[24:00] Not the whole of it is quoted in our passage, but a significant part. I'll read out the bit that's in our passage. The Holy Spirit also testifies to us, verse 15, about this.

First he says, this is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts and I will write them on their minds.

Then he adds, their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more. So this is the key section about the new covenant.

What makes the new covenant so wonderful? It's that our law, God's laws are put in our hearts and written on our minds.

The Old Testament law is internalized. Religion isn't a royal book in the same sense. it's now come in.

[25:03] It's also about a new relationship with God. A new closeness to God. I will be their God and they will be my people.

They will all know me from the least of them to the greatest. Jesus has dealt with the past and also he's dealt with the heart.

That's the key. to this new covenant. Put my laws in their hearts and I'll write them on their mind.

We can come close to God in a new way.

The curtain. There was a curtain. The veil in the temple. We're hearing about the temple this morning. And this veil, which meant that ordinary people couldn't approach God directly, it was torn in two when Jesus died.

it was torn in two in fact from the top to the bottom. It wasn't torn as we would have done from the bottom, it was torn from the top as God ripped it in half.

[26:08] That was the work of God. And now we can draw close to God. And our sins and lawless acts, God will remember no more.

our sins are no longer remembered. They're utterly gone. We have the law within. We have a new closeness with God.

So says our author. How can we go back from the reality of this new covenant, this new relationship to the shadow?

how can we go back from the complete all done once to the incomplete doing again and again?

You see, faithfulness to Jesus is so important. None of us want to become the enemies that will end up as his footstool.

[27:17] people. So what difference does this amazing story make to us?

Well, the writer is going to show us next week that in detail.

And as it was, I was going to explain it to you. But don't worry, I'm going to say a little bit about it tonight. I'm not going to leave you with just the argument in its splendid form.

I'll say a little bit about it tonight. But you can come back next week and you'll get a more detailed answer. The glorious, perfect, once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus means that we should draw close to God.

as I said with that diagram at the beginning, drawing near to God tops and tails the central section of Hebrews. Chapter 4 verse 16 says, let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence. And then in our own chapter, verse 19, therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings.

[28:44] As I said, the temple curtain was, went asunder. We can come close, we can come in.

It means we can come in worship, as we are doing tonight, as we thought about this morning. It means we can exercise prayer, as we've already done, together. We all draw close to God and we pray to him. It's something we can do on our own as well. But, as you'll see next week, it's particularly something we do together. Our author says, not giving up meeting together, as some were in the habit of doing, they were tempted not to go. It was hard to be a Christian. It was easy to give up. It was easy to go back. It was more acceptable to move back into the Old Testament world. they were tempted to go. But he says, don't go back.

[29:51] Encourage one another. We encourage one another just by being together, but we can also encourage one another, as we did over coffee, by talking to one another.

Afterwards, we can encourage one another. We're going to keep going. He says, we need to spur one another on towards love and good deeds. You know, if you have the old illustration of the coal and the fire, if you take the, when we're all together, the fire's all together, we all keep warm. When we take the coal out, it cools down. Be together. Or verse 23, let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

this business of going on with Jesus comes up earlier as well. Just before the long central section, there was the same call when he expounds Psalm 95, what Anglicans call the vanity.

The question he's interested in is, would the wilderness wanderers make it through to God's rest, or would they long to go back to Egypt? Would the readers of his letter press on to God's eternal rest, or would they go back to the shadows?

[31:25] He says, let us hold fast to our confession and go on. As I said before, there's pressure on us today. Churchy religion could be a substitute for biblical truth.

we could lose our love for Jesus and our joy in his finished work. But our reading speaks of so much better things. Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.

He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. It's so wonderful. people. So if you've been on this route for a long time, can I encourage you tonight to keep going?

Keep Jesus at the centre. That's the challenge to me as it is to you. But if this is all new to you, and this has seemed quite complicated tonight, quite a difficult passage in some ways, full of pictures and looking back to the past, can I encourage you to keep on thinking about Jesus, thinking about the one sacrifice, exploring the story, and this is the best time, any time of year would do.

But passion tide as we call it, this is the next fortnight as we run up to Easter, as we think about Jesus, next Sunday he comes, he came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and then he's people responded enthusiastically, and then many turned away.

[33:06] But there were those who said truly this is the Son of God. This passion tide, keep exploring and thinking about Jesus, and think above all about the cross, and try to understand what he did for you, by reading the stories of the Gospels, by coming perhaps to our service on Good Friday, or Maundy Thursday, or speak to any of the staff, or to me afterwards, that would be lovely too.

I'm sure we'd love to talk to you about it. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we do thank you so much for your one sacrifice, your perfection you offered for us, the fact that it is full and sufficient, and Lord, we rejoice, and make us people who continue to rejoice as we go forward with you.

Help us not to turn back, but help us to draw close to you day by day. Help us to be people who pray.

Help us to be people who spur one another on. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.