

HEBREWS VERSE BY VERSE - The New and Living Way - Part thirty-six

Sunday, December 3rd, 2017 - 10:00 a.m. - Teaching #2011

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CONFESSING SINS UNDER THE OLD AND NEW COVENANT

Hebrews 10:1-4 - "For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. [2] Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? [3] But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. [4] For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."

This is a text that raises fascinating questions. And I think it is right and good to ask questions of involved texts. Asking the right questions is very much like what Paul must have meant when he wrote to young Timothy - **2 Timothy 2:7** - "Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything."

Paul obviously knew Timothy would **read** his letter. But he's not asking Timothy to **read** his letter. He's asking him to **think** about his letter because **God works as readers think**. And there's no better way to pull the author's intended meaning from a text than to ask **questions** of that text.

Actually, we have **proof** of this - **Spirit inspired** proof - right in these opening verses of Hebrews chapter ten. Look at our writer's method of deepening understanding in **verse 2** - "**Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins?**"

Note the question mark at the end of that verse. This is our writer's way of making his readers do **more** than just read. This is our writer's way of **forcing application** and **pulling out implications** from what these readers are reading. In Paul's words to Timothy, he's making them **"think over what he is saying."**

Here are some of the questions I want to ask of this text. They will form the **outline** of this morning's teaching:

If the old covenant legal system is just a "shadow" of the "good things to come" in Christ(1), does that mean it had no goodness in itself? And if it didn't, then why bother with it at all?

When our writer says the old covenant system made nothing "perfect"(1) does that mean we have reached perfection under the new covenant?

What does our writer mean by that phrase, "consciousness of sins"(2)? Do we still have a consciousness of sins in the new covenant? And if we do, what's the difference?

These are not light, breezy questions. I hope they draw all of us in. I hope they help us all to **probe our treasure in Christ more deeply**. So my plan this morning is to work through the verses of this text, but to do it framing the verses around these three questions.

1) **IF THE LAW IS JUST A "SHADOW OF THE GOOD THINGS TO COME" DOES THAT MEAN IT HAS NO GOODNESS OF ITS OWN?**

Hebrews 10:1 - "For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near."

That word **"shadow"** was very carefully chosen by our writer. True enough, the shadow is not the **object creating the shadow**. The shadow isn't the **form** itself. It's just the shadow the form creates. And for most of this letter our writer has been pointing out the **dissimilarities** between the shadow of the old covenant sacrificial system and the true substance of the coming sacrifice of Christ.

But there is also another side to this shadow illustration. It's also important to remember there is at least some positive **similarity** between the **object** and the **shadow**. Given normal lighting conditions you won't get a **circular** shadow from a **square** object. There is obviously some **connection** between the shadow and the object casting that shadow and our writer

chose this illustration to draw us into making these connections.

First of all, take careful note that our writer calls the **whole old covenant** "**law**" a shadow, not just the **sacrifices**. And there's a reason for that. God gave the moral law on mount Sinai. This was to **define** sin and make it **knowable and official**.

Given our fallen condition that law immediately brought about a deep sense of **guilt** before God. That **moral law** is what awakened the need for the **sacrificial law**. The two **combine** under the old covenant. What were people to do when they realized they had broken God's law? How would they avoid just punishment from a holy God when the **wages** of sin was **death**?

The answer? There **would** be a death for sin all right, but it wouldn't be the sinner's own immediate death. They would be commanded to bring a bull or a lamb or a goat. The animal's blood would be shed and the actual sinning human would be **treated** as pardoned.

Now to the point. There was some temporary good in that old covenant shadow. Here's the good that God was working through the old covenant legal system. He was laying the very rudimentary foundation for understanding His grace and mercy would be bestowed on sinners **through the sacrifice of Another**.

This is what's missed by those who only see ugliness in the blood and violence of the old covenant sacrificial system. They miss the point. This is the deepest and clearest revelation of God's offer of pardoning grace to sinners who could never **merit forgiveness in themselves**.

But there's more. This old covenant shadow was also good in the way it re-trained our all-too-human way of understanding the **nature** of God's forgiveness. God was training people to never picture His grace and forgiveness as **cheap** grace and forgiveness. Divine grace couldn't just fall down from the sky like snow. Divine grace could never be taken for **indifference** to sin.

You'll see this question raised in **dozens** of contemporary writers and theologians from **Rob Bell** to **Brian MacLaren** to **Brian Zahnd** when they use and quote words like "**cosmic child-abuse**" when referring to Christ's sacrifice for sins - "**Why would God need to sacrifice His Son for my sin? Forgiveness shouldn't require payment. When I forgive someone I don't feel the need to exact payment for the wrong they've done to me. I just forgive. Why can't God?**"

I'm amazed at the lack of understanding of these writers. I'm amazed I see so few written responses to such obvious weak thinking and heresy. Here's the point. When someone sins against **you** you can and should just forgive them with no thought of **payment to you** for their sin. You just **forgive** them. Period. That's what we're **commanded** to do.

But there's reason for this wonderful simplicity. **First**, when someone wrongs you they aren't sinning against **you**. You're just in the **path** of their wickedness. They're sinning against **God**. This is exactly what David was teaching all Israel in his very public worship/confession in **Psalm 51:4a** - "**Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight....**"

This is David's studied confession after committing **adultery with Bathsheba** and **murdering Uriah**. It's all sin against God.

So the reason you can and must forgive freely is because the **work** and the **cost** of pardon have been paid through Christ, God the Son. The exacting of payment isn't yours to demand. In fact, quite the opposite, you and I are to freely forgive on the **basis** of the atoning work of Christ that **we ourselves have received** - **Ephesians 4:31-32** - "**Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. [32] Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.**"

So the basis of the **freeness** of my offer of forgiveness is **the fruit growing out of the costliness of the grace I have so graciously received through the sacrifice of Christ**. Take away the sacrifice of Christ and the freeness of my offer of grace to others falls flat on its face. Without God the Son's love-filled sacrifice satisfying justice before the moral throne of the universe all **other** offers of forgiveness become empty and immoral.

This is **assumed** in the Scriptures even where it isn't explicitly **stated**. There's a reason Jesus can simply **tell** the woman caught in adultery to "**Go and sin no more.**" The reason it all looks so natural and simple isn't to be found in Jesus' **niceness or politeness**. **Jesus knows He's about to die for that woman's adultery**. There is nothing cheap or natural about **any** expression of forgiveness in a sin-filled world - divine or human. It's all **cross-centered**.

Back to where we were. I said there were **two good things** pictured in the shadow of the old covenant law. **First**, it pointed to the truth that divine grace only comes through the **substitution of another**. In all those old covenant sacrifices God was providing the picture of pardon for those who couldn't achieve it for themselves.

And, **second**, God was revealing in very rudimentary shadows that His absolute **justice** made it impossible for Him just to forgive sins with no establishing punishment for wrongs committed. So God's love is revealed as infinitely **holy** as well as infinitely **gracious**.

This is the profound truth tightened up by the Apostle Paul in those great words in **Romans 3:26** - "It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be **just** and **the justifier** of the one who has faith in Jesus."

2) **WHEN OUR WRITER SAYS THE OLD COVENANT SYSTEM MADE NOTHING "PERFECT" (1) DOES THAT MEAN WE HAVE REACHED PERFECTION UNDER THE NEW COVENANT?**

Hebrews 10:1, 3-4 - "For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, **it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near....**[3] But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. [4] For **it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.**"

I'm not sure how many of us in this room would feel comfortable standing in front of this church family and boldly stating, "**Friends, I'm happy to announce today that I have finally reached a state of absolute spiritual perfection!**"

And we would have good Scriptural reason for denying such a claim. The beloved Apostle John **tells us when** we will finally reach a state of absolute Christlikeness - **1 John 3:2** - "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that **when he appears we shall be like him**, because we shall see him as he is."

Blessed hope, this. For all who are growing sick of their remaining sin - for all who constantly feel the downward pull of this empty world - for all who can relate to the great words of the hymn-writer, "**Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it! Prone to leave the God I love!**" - there is a wonderful day coming when our deepest love for our Lord will finally be the **only** manifestation of our **true selves**.

But while this truth is wonderful, it does make our present text in Hebrews much more confusing and difficult. Look at it again, keeping John's wonderful future promise in mind - **Hebrews 10:1, 3-4** - "For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it **can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near....**[3] But in these sacrifices there is a **reminder of sins every year.** [4] For it is **impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.**"

The question I want to ask this text is what is the **point** of reminding our text's Jewish readers their **old covenant** system couldn't make them **perfect** when all these Christians knew **they still weren't perfect**, even under the **new covenant**?

Christians need to know how to answer this question. There is a different **kind** of perfection being described in this Hebrews text. And when you think it all the way through you will immediately see the difference between these two covenants.

Here's the point. Our writer is describing the atonement of Christ in **deeper terms than mere forgiveness**. My sins aren't just things I **do**, though certainly that's included. My sinful self is who I **am**. I don't just need **forgiveness** for my past sins. I need actual **righteousness** before a holy God. I am a covenant **breaker** who needs an actual covenant **faithfulness**.

There is no bull or goat or lamb who died in any of those sacrifices as a **perfectly obedient covenant keeper before Father God**. Not one of those animals ever bled to death knowing there was such a thing as either an old or new covenant. They couldn't care a hoot about those things. The point of our text is these animals are helpless to provide any display of **covenant righteousness**.

But there was one sacrifice still coming. There had been divine promises. There was One who would be - in highly **covenant significant words** from the Apostle Paul described as - "...born of woman, **born under the law**, [5] to redeem those who

were under the law....”

Paul - and the writer of our Hebrews text - specifically relates the life and death of Christ, not just to *forgiveness*, but the *law*. This final sacrifice is offered through the blood of One who kept the law of God *perfectly*. This is the sacrifice we now stand in. This is what the hymn-writer meant in those blessed words, “...clothed in His righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne.”

There is no bull or goat standing in perfect righteousness at the right hand of Father God. But there is one like a slain Lamb - there is *the man, Christ Jesus* - in whose covenant faithfulness I am hidden.

All of this ties in with our third and final question:

3) **WHAT DOES OUR WRITER MEAN BY THAT PHRASE, “CONSCIOUSNESS OF SINS”(2)? DO WE STILL HAVE A CONSCIOUSNESS OF SINS IN THE NEW COVENANT? AND IF WE DO, WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE?**

We’re going to look specifically at **verse 2** but we need to read **verse 1** as well to pick up the thread of thought:

Hebrews 10:1-2 - “For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. [2] Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins?”

Here’s what makes these verses tricky. It is the clear teaching of the New Testament that I, as a follower of Jesus, am still *fully and painfully aware when I commit sin* - **1 John 1:6-10** - “If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. [7] But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. [8] If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. [9] If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. [10] If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”

Clearly, we *know* when we have sinned. We are *conscious* sinners most of the time. In fact, the *real* curse of sin is the way we become liars and *pretend* we haven’t sinned when we know we have - “if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us”(8).

So in this sense we are exactly like David in Psalm 51. Saints in all ages find the closer they get to God the *more* aware they become of the wickedness and pervasiveness of sin.

What, then, can our writer mean when he says there is a *difference* in consciousness of sin under the old covenant and the new? And the key point of understanding is our Hebrews text isn’t meaning *awareness* of sins when it speaks of *“consciousness of sins”(2)*. It means *consciousness of sins as a fear of divine judgment*.

Because those sins were repeated over and over again - and because the only sacrifice offered was the blood of animals - those sinners were made painfully aware of the *weakness* of their offerings. They had no ability to look clearly at One who *fulfilled every detail of the law with complete perfection*. They had no ability to grasp the incredible beauty of *God the Son - God Himself* - dying in their place.

Think about it. When we have the blessed opportunity to study the gospels and see the absolute *sinless perfection* of our Lord - and then when we see Him dying on the cross, that symbol of being *cursed and sinful* - we are forced to ask, *“if not His own, then for whose sin is this spotless Redeemer dying? Whose punishment is He bearing? And whose justice is He satisfying?”*

This is the root of New Testament confidence. This is the deepest source of our hope and joy. We still need to be painfully aware of our sins. But we confess them in deep repentance and *full confidence in the spotless High Priest clothing us in perfect righteousness*.

There’s enough to think about in this hard text to keep you singing for the rest of your life.