

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

GOD'S REMEDY FOR GUILT

Hebrews 9:1-14

By

Steven J. Cole

June 20, 2004

© Steven J. Cole, 2004

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation

June 20, 2004
Hebrews Lesson 25

God's Remedy for Guilt Hebrews 9:1-14

Our society has thrown out guilt as a bad carryover from our Puritan past. Movie stars and celebrities not only cast off their guilt, but also go on TV to boast about their shameful deeds. Even Christians who have fallen into sin explain how they have come to feel good about themselves in spite of their failures. They complain about self-righteous, judgmental Christians who won't accept their "shortcomings."

And yet, in spite of our widespread efforts to suppress or deny guilt, we can't quite shake it. Years ago, psychologist Eric Fromm observed, "It is indeed amazing that in as fundamentally irreligious a culture as ours, the sense of guilt should be so widespread and deep-rooted as it is" (*The Sane Society*, [publisher unknown], p. 181). A cartoon hit the nail on the head. It showed a psychologist saying to his patient, "Mr. Figby, I think I can explain your feelings of guilt. You're guilty!"

The Bible declares that all of us are guilty before the bench of God's holy justice. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). The Bible teaches that guilt is more than just a bad feeling. It is true moral culpability that alienates us from God and brings us under His decreed penalty, eternal punishment in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:11-15). But, thankfully, the Bible also declares that God has provided a remedy for our guilt. It is vital that we understand and apply this remedy personally.

The Hebrew Christians were tempted to leave the Christian faith and return to Judaism. The author is showing them why that would be spiritually fatal. The old covenant under Moses was inferior to the new covenant that Jesus initiated. The Levitical priests under the old covenant were sinful, mortal men, as contrasted with Jesus, our sinless priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. In our text, he shows that the old covenant sacrificial system was temporary and imperfect. It could not provide a clean conscience for the worshipers. God designed that old system to point ahead to the superior, final sacrifice of our high priest, Christ,

who offered His own blood to obtain for us eternal redemption and a clean conscience. Thus his point is that...

God's remedy for guilt is the blood of Christ.

We will examine the text under three points: the imperfection of the old sacrificial system (9:1-10); what Christ's sacrifice of Himself accomplished (9:11-14); and, the practical result, that we now can serve the living God (9:14).

1. God designed the old sacrificial system as a temporary, imperfect way of pointing ahead to Christ (9:1-10).

These verses fall into two sections:

- A. God designed the earthly tabernacle as a picture of Christ (9:1-5).

John MacArthur (*The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, Hebrews* [Moody Press], p. 221) points out that the Bible only devotes two chapters to the story of creation, but it gives about 50 chapters to the tabernacle. It was the center of Jewish worship under the old covenant. The author mentions the tabernacle rather than the temple because the tabernacle was introduced immediately after the old covenant was instituted (Exod. 24-25). Also, the tabernacle was obviously more temporary than the temple, which fits the author's point here. As we saw in 8:5, the design of the tabernacle and its worship was not left up to human ideas, but God revealed everything in great detail to Moses on the mountain. The whole thing was an Old Testament portrait of Jesus Christ.

The author omits any reference to the courtyard, which contained the bronze altar for sacrifices and the bronze laver or basin. His purpose centers on the tabernacle itself, because he wants to compare and contrast it with the true tabernacle in heaven, where Jesus entered into the very presence of God.

The tabernacle was divided into two sections. The outer section, called the holy place, was about 30 long, 15 feet wide, and 15 feet high. The inner section, the Holy of Holies, was a 15-foot cube. On the left in the holy place, as the priest entered, was a solid gold lampstand with seven branches filled with pure olive oil. Since there were no windows, this provided the only source of light. On the right was the table that held the 12 loaves of sacred

bread. Farther in, and to the center just outside the veil that divided the holy place from the Holy of Holies, was the altar of incense.

Scholars debate why the author of Hebrews seems to place the altar of incense inside the Holy of Holies, rather than just outside in the holy place. Some say that he was mistaken, but this is absurd. Every Jew knew the arrangement of these basic pieces of furniture. Some say that the reference is not to the altar itself, but to the censers that the priests used to carry incense into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, which the author obviously has in mind. The Greek word is used in this sense in the LXX. But then the author would have omitted mentioning a major piece of furniture in the holy place.

Probably the best solution is that the author is connecting the liturgical function of the altar of incense with its close association with the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement (see Exod. 30:6; 40:5; 1 Kings 6:22). The same close connection is portrayed in Revelation 8:3, where the golden altar of incense, representing the prayers of the saints, is “before the throne.”

Inside the Holy of Holies was the ark of the covenant, measuring about 45 inches long, 27 inches wide and 27 inches high, which contained (in earliest times) a golden jar of manna, Aaron’s rod that budded, and the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. The covering of the ark was called the mercy seat, or (in Greek), the place of propitiation. It was overshadowed by two cherubim of glory, so called because it was there that the glory of God’s presence was manifested (Exod. 25:22). The high priest sprinkled the blood from the sacrifices on this mercy seat.

The author does not explain the symbolic meaning of any of these things, but hurries on to his point, that these things were temporary and looked ahead to Christ. But let me comment briefly. The lampstand pictures Christ, not here as the light of the world (because the world was not allowed into the holy place), but as the one who illumines the things of God through the Holy Spirit (the oil) to those who draw near. The table of sacred bread pictures Christ as the sustenance of His chosen people and their communion with Him. The altar of incense shows Christ interceding for His people in God’s presence.

The ark pictured the very presence of God. The golden jar of manna shows Christ as the daily bread of His people. Aaron's rod that budded shows Christ, the branch, chosen above others because He alone is life-giving. The tables of the covenant reveal God's holy standards. Neither the pot of manna nor Aaron's rod existed in Solomon's time, but the two stone tables were still there (1 Kings 8:9). The ark itself apparently disappeared when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple in 586 B.C. The later temple only contained a stone slab in the Holy of Holies.

The author moves on to describe the familiar tabernacle ritual:

- B. God designed the ministry of the priests in the tabernacle as a picture of the work of Christ (9:6-10).

He summarizes the common activities of the priests in 9:6. They went into the outer tabernacle to trim the lamps and to put fresh incense on the altar. Once a week they would replace the sacred loaves of bread.

But 9:7 focuses on the Holy of Holies. Only the high priest could go in there, once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). He would first offer a bull for his own sins. He would enter the Holy of Holies and sprinkle the blood of the bull on the mercy seat and in front of it. Then he would go back out and slaughter one of two goats as a sin offering for the people and take this blood into the mercy seat. He would go back out and lay his hands on the living goat, confessing over it the sins of the people. They would lead this goat out into the wilderness and let it go.

The author calls attention to the fact that old system provided a way for forgiveness for "the sins of the people committed in ignorance" (9:7). The Law stipulated that there was no sacrifice for sins of defiance (Num. 15:30-31). There is a sense, of course, in which virtually all of our sins stem from defiance toward God, but the reference in Numbers seems to refer to outrageous, blasphemous behavior that represented revolt or treason against God (Ronald Allen, *Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Zondervan], ed. by Frank Gaebelin, 2:830). In this sense, there is a parallel in Hebrews 10:26-31, where the author strongly warns his readers against apostasy, for which there is no sacrifice.

The annual Day of Atonement ritual would have underscored to Israel a number of vital spiritual truths. It portrayed the absolute holiness of God and how our sin separates us from entering His presence. It showed the sin and defilement of all of the people, including the high priest. It showed that no one dared to enter God's holy presence without the blood of an acceptable sacrifice. It showed that the people must approach God through the proper mediator, the high priest. It showed that if the proper sacrifice was offered, God would be propitiated or satisfied, so that He would not judge their sins. But, as glorious as all of this ritual was, it was inadequate, for two main reasons:

- 1) The old system provided limited access to God.

None of the people and not even all of the priests could enter the Holy of Holies. Only the high priest could go there, and that only once a year, with blood. It was not a cozy place where he put his feet up on the hearth and had a warm conversation with God! He had to make sure that he had the ritual down perfectly, or it would be his last trip into that sacred sanctuary!

The author attributes the Old Testament account to the Holy Spirit (9:8), who was signifying "that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed, while the first tabernacle is still standing." Some understand "first tabernacle" to refer to the entire tabernacle, but since the same phrase is used in 9:2 & 6 to refer to the holy place, others take it to refer to the outer or first room of the tabernacle. The meaning then would be that the holy place "was blocking the way into the sanctuary of God's presence for the mass of the people, for whom entry even into the holy place was prohibited.... So long, then, as the holy place continued standing they had no hope of immediate access to God" (Philip Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 322, 323).

- 2) The old system provided limited efficacy of the sacrifices.

The author's bottom line is that these gifts and sacrifices could not "make the worshiper perfect in conscience" (9:9). He does not explain exactly what that means, except that it was "a symbol" (parable) "for the present time." The "present time" (9:9) may mean "the time *then* present," that is, "in the Old Testament

days the way to God was not yet revealed." Or, it may mean "the time *now* present," indicating that "the real meaning of the tabernacle can only now be understood, in the light of the work of Christ" (Leon Morris, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Zondervan], ed. by Frank Gaebelein, 12:84).

The inability of the sacrifices to make the worshiper perfect in conscience "did not mean ... that no Old Testament saint ever had a clear conscience, but he did not obtain it by the sacrifices as such" (*ibid.*). The author offers two reasons for this statement (9:10). First, they were external regulations for the body, but (the implication is) they could not deal adequately with the conscience. Second, they were temporary, "imposed until a time of reformation," which refers to the time of Christ. The fact that the sacrifices had to be repeated annually showed the incomplete nature of the forgiveness. It put off guilt for each year, but it had to be done again and again.

Up to this point, the author is arguing that the Old Testament sacrificial system was not God's complete and final provision for the guilt of our sins. It all pointed ahead to Christ.

2. The blood of Christ obtained eternal redemption and a clean conscience for us (9:11-14).

Whereas the old system provided only limited access and limited efficacy, Christ provides complete access and efficacy:

A. Christ's blood provides complete access into the heavenly Holy of Holies (9:11-12).

There is a textual variant in 9:11. Probably the best reading is, "the good things that have come." The "greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands," refers to the "true tabernacle" in heaven (8:2), which is God's very presence. The point is, Christ didn't just go into an earthly Holy of Holies. He went into heaven itself, of which the earthly tabernacle was only a picture.

Furthermore, Christ didn't take the blood of goats and calves to sprinkle on the altar. Rather, He went there "through His own blood." Some have erroneously taught that Jesus had to carry His blood into heaven to secure our redemption. But He didn't go there *with* His blood, but *through* His blood. He secured our redemption on the cross. In contrast to going back every year, Christ

“entered the holy place *once for all*, having obtained *eternal* redemption.” The author is showing the complete supremacy and finality of the blood of Christ over the old system. Through His death, our guilt is atoned for once and for all, for all eternity! The penalty has been paid. There is nothing that we can add to what Christ did. Through Him we have direct access to God!

- B. Christ’s blood provides complete efficacy that cleanses our consciences (9:13-14).

The blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer “sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh.” In addition to the Day of Atonement ritual, the author adds the red heifer ritual (Num. 19:1-13). This was a ritual for purification, especially if someone had been defiled by touching a dead body. The author argues from the lesser to the greater. If these rituals could cleanse the flesh, “how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” Jesus Christ is the only one who could atone for man’s sin, because He alone was a man without blemish in all that He did. Thus His blood can act as the substitute for the penalty that we deserve.

Scholars debate whether “eternal Spirit” refers to the Holy Spirit or to Jesus’ eternal divine spirit (there were no capital letters in the original Greek). We cannot be dogmatic on this. If it refers to the Holy Spirit, then it means that Jesus relied on the Holy Spirit when He went to the cross, which is certainly true. If it refers to Jesus’ eternal divine nature, the emphasis would be on the fact that Jesus’ sacrifice was uniquely efficacious to redeem His people, because He is not only a man, but also is eternal God (7:3, 16). The point is, “the difference between the levitical offerings and Christ’s self-offering was infinite rather than relative” (P. Hughes, p. 360). This infinitely efficacious sacrifice satisfied God in a way that the blood of bulls and goats never could. Through Christ’s blood, we can have a clean conscience.

The Bible teaches that the conscience alone is not an infallible guide. Through repeated sin, the conscience can be defiled (Titus 1:15) and seared (1 Tim. 4:2). For example, I read that Cambodian dictator Pol Pot murdered between two and seven million of his fellow people. He ordered the murder of everyone who wore eye-

glasses, among many other senseless killings. Historians say that his evil deeds were even greater than those of Hitler and Stalin, if possible. Yet just before he died in 1998, he told a reporter that he had a clear conscience! It wasn't clear; it was seared!

So our consciences need to be informed and trained through Scripture. As we learn who God is and what His holy standards are, our consciences accuse us of how sinful we are. God's commandments, applied as Jesus did to the heart level, convict and condemn us all! None of us come close to loving God with our entire being, or to loving our fellow human beings as we love ourselves. Part of God's work in regeneration is to bring His holy Law to bear on our hearts, so that we despair of any way of trying to justify ourselves. We stand truly guilty

So how can our guilt be removed and our consciences be cleansed? Only through the sacrifice of an acceptable substitute. As 1 Peter 3: 18 puts it, "For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God...." Or, as Paul put it (Rom. 3:24-25), "being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith." Our guilt is not removed by doing penance or good works. Our guilt is totally removed by God's free gift through the blood of Christ. We receive this gift through faith.

"But," you may wonder, "if it is totally by God's grace apart from anything that we do, won't people take advantage of His grace by living in sin?" Paul deals extensively with this objection in Romans 6. But here our author counters it with a single phrase at the end of verse 14:

3. Christ redeems and cleanses us from dead works to serve the living God (9:14).

Some Christians serve God in an attempt to pacify a guilty conscience. They erroneously think, "If I do enough for Him, maybe He will forgive me." That is a wrong motive! Others mistakenly think that God forgives them so that they can feel good. Their focus is on themselves, not on God and others. Again, that is a wrong focus. The proper order is, "God has forgiven me by His

grace through the precious blood of His Son. Now I am free to serve Him!”

There are three senses in which the works of those who have not trusted in the blood of Christ are dead works (from P. Hughes, pp. 360-361): First, they are dead works because the one doing them is dead in his sins, separated from the life of God. Second, they are dead works because they “are essentially sterile and unproductive.” They cannot communicate spiritual life to others because they stem from a person who is spiritually dead. Third, they are dead works because they end in spiritual death. A person does them thinking that they will earn him eternal life. But if eternal life could come through our good works, then Christ died needlessly! No amount of good works can qualify a person for heaven.

But once we are born again by God's grace, we offer ourselves as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1-2), so that whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, we do it to God's glory (1 Cor. 10:31). Our daily lives become an act of worship and praise to the living God out of gratitude (Heb. 13:15-16).

Conclusion

Charles Simeon was a godly Anglican pastor at Holy Trinity Church in Cambridge. He described his own conversion in 1813 (F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 194, citing H. C. G. Moule, *Charles Simeon*):

As I was reading Bishop Wilson on the Lord's Supper, I met with an expression to this effect—“That the Jews knew what they did, when they transferred their sin to the head of their offering.” The thought came into my mind, “What, may I transfer all my guilt to another? Has God provided an Offering for me, that I may lay my sins on His head? Then, God willing, I will not bear them on my own soul one moment longer.” Accordingly I sought to lay my sins upon the sacred head of Jesus.

Have you done that? If you have not, you are truly guilty before God and stand in jeopardy of His judgment. If you have, you have applied God's remedy for your guilt, the blood of Christ. With a clean conscience, you now can serve the living God.

Discussion Questions

1. Are guilt feelings valid for a Christian who has sinned? How would you counsel such a person?
2. How can a believer distinguish between true and false guilt? How should each be dealt with?
3. How should we witness to a person who has no sense of guilt before God?
4. If we are totally forgiven through faith in Christ, why do we need to ask forgiveness when we sin?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2004, All Rights Reserved.