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TOTAL FORGIVENESS

Hebrews 10:1-18

By

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Hebrews Lesson 28

Total Forgiveness Hebrews 10:1-18

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of the Sherlock Holmes detective novels, was a practical joker. One time he sent a telegram to twelve famous people in London whom he knew. It read: "Flee at once. All is discovered." Although all twelve were upright citizens, they all quickly left the country.

That story may be fictitious, but it illustrates the fact that a guilty conscience is a common thing. Even in the church many are uncertain about their standing before God because of past sins. These ghosts from the past stay out of sight for a while, but then they come out of nowhere to haunt them. They wonder if anyone else knows what they have done. They're fearful that the truth may leak out. But even more seriously, they wonder if God has truly forgiven them. They're not sure how it will go when they stand before Him someday. Will God punish them in this life or in eternity for the terrible things that they have done? Such people need the assurance that our text hammers home:

Through Christ's obedience to God's will at the cross, new covenant believers receive what those under the Law could not receive: Total forgiveness.

As I said last week, the author of Hebrews uses repetition to drive his point home. He has already told us the bulk of what he tells us here again. This section concludes the main argument of the Book of Hebrews. It "expresses the very heart" of the book (Donald Hagner, *Encountering the Book of Hebrews* [Baker], p. 128).

If the original readers were to go back to Judaism, with its sacrificial system, they would forfeit the tremendous benefits that Jesus Christ secured for them. His death on the cross fulfilled all that the old system pointed toward. What it could not do completely, He did, namely, provide total forgiveness for those who draw near to God through Him. The old system, by its very design, barred the average worshiper from drawing near to God's presence. Only the high priest could go into the Holy of Holies, and that only once a

year. But in Christ, every believer has free access to God's presence because Christ's once-and-for-all sacrifice of Himself provides perfect standing with God.

The author piles up a number of synonymous phrases which show either negatively what the Law with its sacrifices could not do, or positively what Christ's sacrifice did accomplish. Note:

- 10:1: The sacrifices of the Law could never "make perfect those who draw near."
- 10:2: Those sacrifices could not completely cleanse the worshipers and take away their consciousness of sins.
- 10:3: Those sacrifices provided a yearly reminder of sins.
- 10:4: Those sacrifices could not take away sins.
- 10:10: By God's will through the cross, "we have been sanctified" once for all.
- 10:12: Christ "offered one sacrifice for sins for all time."
- 10:14: "By one offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified."
- 10:17: God promises to remember their sins and lawless deeds no more.
- 10:18: "Where there is forgiveness..." "there is no longer any offering for sin."

All of these phrases add up to news that sounds too good to be true, and yet is true: In Christ we receive a complete, final, once for all pardon for all of our sins, past, present, and future! We're prone to say, "What's the catch?" There's no such thing as an absolutely free lunch, but there is such a thing as God's absolutely free pardon from all of our sins. It is totally free to us, because Christ bore the awful penalty that we deserved to pay.

Before we work through the text, let me clarify that we are talking here about our standing or position before God in Christ. In our daily walk, when we sin we need to confess our sins in order to receive what we may call "God's family forgiveness." But even our worst sins do not eradicate our positional forgiveness as children of God.

For example, my children enter my family through natural birth, and nothing that they do changes their standing as family members. But if they sin against me, they need to confess that sin

and ask forgiveness so that our relationship is not hindered. Even so, like Peter we may fail the Lord badly, but our failures do not remove us from God's family. We possess our standing in the family through the new birth, which provides total forgiveness. We maintain daily fellowship as God's children by confessing our sins and asking forgiveness of the Father.

Our text falls into four sections. In 10:1-4, the author shows how the sacrifices of the Law could not completely remove the guilt of sin. In 10:5-10, he shows that Christ's obedience to God's will at the cross set aside the Old Testament sacrifices and provided for us perfect standing before God. As I understand it, 10:11-18 consists of an illustration and a quotation that both drive home the same point. In 10:11-14, the author illustrates the totality of our forgiveness by contrasting the unfinished, repetitive ministry of the Old Testament priests with the finished, all-sufficient sacrifice of Christ. Then in 10:15-18, he cites again the Old Testament prophecy of the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34) to show that the total forgiveness that it promises means that the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ is sufficient and final.

1. The sacrifices prescribed by the Law could not completely remove guilt and sin (10:1-4).

First (10:1, 2), the author argues that the Law was only the shadow of good things to come, and not the very form of things. For this reason, the repeated sacrifices could not make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, they would have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had a consciousness of sins. "To make perfect" refers to our standing in God's sight. It includes total cleansing from sin, so that we have a clean conscience. If our consciences are aware of sins that have not been confessed and forgiven, we will hesitate to draw near to God.

This was illustrated with Adam and Eve. As soon as they sinned, they tried to hide from God's presence. They didn't want to face Him because of what they had done. Every parent has had the same experience. You come home and your child avoids you. When you track him down, he won't look you in the eye. He doesn't want to draw near to you because he has a guilty con-

science. Even dogs have this sense of guilt, where they avoid you if they've done something that they know is wrong!

In 10:3 the author goes on to argue that the annual sacrifices (on the Day of Atonement) only provided a yearly reminder of sins. The fact that every year the people had to go through this ritual sacrifice again and again only showed that it had not completely removed their guilt. It put it off for another year, but just like our April 15th tax deadline, that day of reckoning kept coming around. Then (10:4) the author states plainly, "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." Animal blood has no permanent efficacy for human sins. God designed that system of animal sacrifice to point ahead to His provision of the sacrifice of His own Son. As eternal God, His sacrifice has infinite value. As man, His sacrifice atones for human sin in a way that the blood of animals never could.

It's interesting that the word "reminder" (10:3) is the same Greek word used in the institution of the Lord's Supper, where Jesus says, "Do this in remembrance of Me" (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24). While we are instructed to examine ourselves and confess our sins before partaking of the elements, the gospel transforms our remembrance from one of guilt to one of grace (Philip Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 394). The Lord's Supper reminds us that the penalty we deserve for our sins was put completely on Jesus Christ. His death accomplished what the blood of animal sacrifices never could accomplish, namely, it took away all of our sin and guilt!

2. Christ's obedience to God's will at the cross set aside the Old Testament sacrifices and provided perfect standing for us before God (10:5-10).

In 10:5-7, the author puts a quote from Psalm 40:6-8 (LXX) in the mouth of Jesus as He comes into this world. This assumes the preexistence of Jesus Christ as eternal God. There is a difficulty in that the Hebrew of this psalm reads, "My ears You have opened," whereas the LXX translated it, "A body You have prepared for Me." Apparently the Greek translators rendered an interpretive paraphrase of the Hebrew text, using a part and expanding it into the whole (F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 232). "To dig out an ear" (the literal Hebrew) is a

part of God's fashioning a whole body out of clay. It does not refer to the master boring the servant's ear with an awl (Exod. 21:6; Deut. 15:17). Rather, the picture is that of God's opening the ear of His servant so that He would be obedient to the cross (Isa. 50:5ff.). The LXX rendering puts the emphasis on God's preparing a body for Jesus that He would offer as the suitable sacrifice for our sins, thus supplanting the Old Testament sacrifices. These verses (10:5-10) make three points:

A. The cross was the direct will of God.

The cross was not an accident or an unforeseen tragedy that took Jesus by surprise. It was not a temporary setback that God figured out how to turn for good. Rather, the cross was God's pre-determined plan, before the beginning of time, to deal with our sin. The Son of God would come into this world as a man, would fulfill through His obedience the complete Law of God, and then would die as the sacrifice that the justice of God demands as the payment for sins.

There is a great mystery here that we must submit to: even though God ordained the cross, down to minute details (*e.g.* casting lots for Jesus' clothing), He is not in any way responsible for the sin of those who crucified Jesus. As Acts 4:27, 28 puts it: "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur."

By coming into this world specifically to go to the cross, Jesus not only provided the sacrifice for sins that we need. He also provided a supreme example of resolute obedience to the complete will of God. The author twice repeats Jesus' words from this psalm, "I have come to do Your will, O God." As Luke 9:51 puts it, "He set His face to go to Jerusalem" (NASB, margin). As Jesus prayed in the garden, "not My will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42). We cannot imagine how difficult it was for the sinless Son of God to be made sin for us. But His determined obedience to God's will, no matter how difficult, teaches us to commit ourselves to obey His will, whatever the cost. You don't decide to obey God at the moment of temptation. It has to be a rational commitment that you make *before* you find yourself facing temptation.

B. Christ's obedience to God's will at the cross set aside the Old Testament sacrifices once and for all.

"He takes away the first [O.T. sacrifices] to establish the second [the will of God at the cross]" (10:9). When the psalm states that God did not desire or take pleasure in sacrifices (10:5-6), it reflects a frequent theme in the Old Testament, that God did not desire sacrifices for their own sake. Rather, the sacrifices should reflect a repentant heart (1 Sam. 15:22; Ps. 51:16, 17; Isa. 1:11-13; 66:3-4; Jer. 7:21-23; Hos. 6:6; Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:6-8). God is displeased when people go through the outward motions of worship, but their hearts harbor sin that they are unwilling to forsake. In modern terms, you can go to church and partake of communion, but if you are living in disobedience to God or if you are covering some sin in your heart, God is not pleased with your worship.

But the author's main point to his original readers is that the sacrifice of Christ on the cross permanently replaced the Old Testament sacrificial system. For this reason, I cannot accept the view that animal sacrifices will again be offered in the millennium. It is explained that they are "memorials" of the cross, but I cannot reconcile that with Hebrews. The cross supremely fulfilled and replaced that old system. There is no reason to go back to it, even as a memorial, when we can gaze at the Lamb on the throne!

C. By Christ's obedience to God's will at the cross, we receive perfect standing before God once and for all.

That is the point of 10:10. The author of Hebrews uses "sanctified" to refer to "inward cleansing from sin" and "being made fit for the presence of God, so that ...[we] can offer Him acceptable worship" (Bruce, p. 236). "Have been sanctified" is the Greek perfect tense, signifying a past action that has ongoing results. By way of contrast with the often-repeated Old Testament sacrifices, the one offering of Christ on the cross conveys to believers perfect standing before God for all time. As I explained, this refers to our position before God, not to our daily relationship. As we will see (in 10:14), even though we are perfect in our standing, we are progressing in our growth in holiness.

The author has shown that the Old Testament sacrifices could not completely remove guilt and sin (10:1-4), and that Christ's sac-

rifice on the cross removed the sacrificial system and provides for our perfect standing before God (10:5-10). He goes on to illustrate his main point in 10:11-14.

3. The totality of our forgiveness is illustrated by the contrast between the unfinished, repetitive ministry of the Old Testament priests and the finished, sufficient sacrifice of Christ (10:11-14).

Verse 11 portrays the priest, who stood daily “offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.” You can feel a sense of futility in these words! But verse 12 contrasts the “one sacrifice for sins for all time” that Jesus offered, after which He “sat down at the right hand of God.” The standing of the priests indicates unfinished work that is never done (there were no chairs in the sanctuary). The sitting of Jesus indicates that His work of sacrifice is finished, and that He has been exalted to the place of supreme honor.

The author could have ended the quote (from Ps. 110:1) after the reference to Jesus’ sitting at God’s right hand, but he adds (10:13), “waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet.” He may have done this for two reasons. First, he didn’t want his readers to grow discouraged because of the cross, as if it represented a defeat for God. Perhaps their unbelieving Jewish friends were taunting them for their belief in a crucified Messiah. If Jesus is really Lord, then why do His people suffer persecution and martyrdom? The author says, “Just wait! The day is coming when Jesus’ enemies will all become His footstool, just as Psalm 110 predicts.”

Second, the author may be giving a subtle warning to his readers. If they abandoned the faith and went back to Judaism, they would be placing themselves on the losing side in history. They would be making themselves enemies of Jesus, and that’s not where you want to be, because Jesus’ enemies are headed for certain defeat and judgment.

In 10:14, the author again repeats the effect of Jesus’ one offering: “He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (literal translation). This verse brings together two vital truths. First, the *position* of believers before God is that they are perfect.

God has forgiven all of their sins through Christ's sacrifice, and He has imputed Christ's perfect righteousness to them. These great facts are the basis of our standing before God. Second, the *practice* of believers is that they are being sanctified. They are growing in holiness in thought, word, and deed. The *position* is granted instantly at the moment of saving faith. The *practice* is worked out over a lifetime of growth in obedience. If there is no growth in holiness, there is reason to question whether the person has been perfected in his position through faith in Christ.

The author wraps up this section with a supporting quote:

4. The Old Testament prophecy of the new covenant supports the totality of our forgiveness (10:15-18).

Note that the author attributes Jeremiah's prophecy to the Holy Spirit, who inspires all Scripture (10:15). He paraphrases (perhaps from memory) what he had earlier cited (8:11-12) from Jeremiah 31:33-34, because this quote gives God's own testimony to what the author has been arguing. God promises to put His laws upon His peoples' hearts and to write them on their minds (10:16). The author may have cited this part of the new covenant promise to preempt any criticism from a Jewish reader to the effect that the setting aside of the Law (10:9) would lead to lawless living. "Not so! God's people are marked by obedience from the heart."

Then he adds the part of the new covenant that is directly to his point, "And their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more." God's not remembering our sins does not mean that He is forgetful, but rather that He will not bring up our sins against us for judgment. They are totally forgiven because of God's covenant decree. And so the conclusion is, "Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin" (10:18). The Old Testament sacrifices are now rendered worthless and obsolete. What they pointed to, Jesus has completely fulfilled. Through the cross, believers under the new covenant receive God's total forgiveness! If you have total forgiveness in Christ, why go back to a system that could never provide that?

Conclusion

If the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches would accept the message of our text, they would do away with the

doctrine of purgatory, which is not in the Bible anyway. Purgatory is supposed to be a place where, after death, our remaining sins are purged away. Supposedly, the friends and loved ones of the deceased person can pay to have masses or prayers said on their behalf to shorten the time in purgatory. What a blatant denial of the gospel of God's grace in Christ! If His death places us in perfect standing with God, purgatory is a lie!

Our text also eliminates the practice of penance. Not to be confused with penitence (a synonym for repentance), penance is the Catholic teaching that certain good deeds prescribed by the church will make satisfaction for sins and thus lessen time in purgatory. Sometimes this is coupled with indulgences, which supposedly remove the guilt or punishment of temporal sins.

All of these unbiblical practices detract from the total merit of Christ's sacrificial death for us. His death obtained *total* forgiveness for believers. His death perfected us for all time. His death sanctified us once for all. His death completely takes away the guilt of our sins. To believe in purgatory and to practice penance and indulgences is like going back to the Jewish sacrificial system!

Imagine a young man who falls in love, but he and his lover are separated by distance. He has a beautiful photograph of her that he gazes at every day. Finally, the two get married. The photo is still there, but now he has her.

But then one day, he starts behaving rather strangely. He stands before his wife, clutching the photo to his chest. He tells her, "I've really missed your photo, so I'm going back to it. He passionately kisses the picture and goes out the door mumbling, "Oh, how I love you, dear photo! You're everything to me." (Adapted from Kent Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* [Crossway], 2:19). We would rightly conclude that this guy's dipstick reads a quart low!

But that guy's weird behavior illustrates what people do when they abandon Christ for the shadow. Christ and His sufficient sacrifice on the cross provide total forgiveness of all of our sins. Any religious system that devises human works to atone for sins is a mere shadow. Trust in Christ alone and God bestows on you by grace alone His total forgiveness!

Discussion Questions

1. If the Old Testament sacrifices could not provide total forgiveness, why did God institute that system for 1,500 years?
2. Why is it important to distinguish between our position in Christ and our daily practice with regard to God's forgiveness?
3. How do the Catholic teachings on purgatory and penance completely undermine the gospel of God's grace in Christ?
4. How would you answer the charge that total forgiveness by grace alone will lead to licentious living?

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