

CHRIST'S ONCE-FOR-ALL SACRIFICE

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Hebrews 9:23–10:25

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. (Heb. 9:24)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Mar. 31	Ps. 96	Enter God's Courts with an Offering
T	Apr. 1	1 Pet. 3:18–22	Christ's Suffering and Exaltation
W	Apr. 2	Isa. 52:13–53:3	Suffering Servant
Th	Apr. 3	Isa. 53:4–12	Light out of Anguish
F	Apr. 4	Mark 10:41–45	A Ransom for Many
Sa	Apr. 5	Heb. 9:23–10:4	Christ in Heaven on Our Behalf

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

God gave ancient Israel ways to reconcile with God when they violated the covenant and harmed their relationship. The sacrifices described in Leviticus were means to show their contrition and their resolve to live as God's holy people.

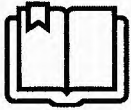
However, rituals have a way of becoming hollow. Friends may resolve to meet regularly for coffee to stay in touch and support one another. Couples can set aside times for intimacy to sustain their passion and commitment. Unless their hearts are in the right place, people can eventually find themselves merely going through the motions. Routines and practices are important to maintain relationships.

The Hebrew prophets continually reminded ancient Israel that what is important to God is a clear conscience and faithful hearts. With God, what is on the inside counts. The priests could make offerings of bulls and goats and birds, but in and of themselves these sacrifices could not change the hearts of people. The prophets told of a time when God "will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds" (Heb. 10:16).

God sent Jesus to fulfil this promise. He is our atoning sacrifice once and for all. There is no longer need for a priest to

enter the sanctuary year after year and offer sacrifices on behalf of the people. Through Jesus, we are able to offer our innermost selves. We don't have to be concerned if we've done enough to satisfy God. On the cross, Jesus accomplished everything that the priests of ancient Israel were required to do. It's not that we no longer have to tend to our relationship with God. It's that we try to live godly lives because it is in our nature to do so. It is our grateful response to God. In Jesus, we have been transformed. On our behalf, he has fulfilled the requirements of God's law (Matt. 5:17).

Lord Jesus, thank you for making us worthy to come before God. Help us live each day in hope, confident of your redeeming love. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Hebrews 9:23–10:4, 11–14, 19–25

9:23 Thus it was necessary for the sketches of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves need better sacrifices than these. ²⁴For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. ²⁵Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the holy place year after year with blood that is not his own, ²⁶for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself. ²⁷And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once and after that the judgment, ²⁸so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

10:1 Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect those who approach. ²Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered, since the worshipers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin? ³But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year. ⁴For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. . . .

¹¹And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins.

¹²But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, “he sat down at the right hand of God,” ¹³and since then has been waiting “until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.” ¹⁴For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. . . .

¹⁹Therefore, my brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. ²⁴And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

STRAIGHT TO THE HEART


Hebrews 10 points out how ancient Israel’s sacrificial system had to be repeated continually. Such repetitiveness could become rote. The prophet Jeremiah recognized this when he conveyed God’s promise to “put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts” (Jer. 31:33). Although awareness and confession of our sins is an important component of our relationship with God, the repetition of the sacrifices was a continual reminder to the people of their shortcomings. They could never feel freed from their sins if they were always thinking about the next sacrifice, making sure it was a worthy offering to God. Again, Hebrews calls on Jeremiah to show how God intended to remedy that dilemma: “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more” (Heb. 10:17).

Hebrews makes the case that Jesus is the fulfillment of the law that God gave to ancient Israel. “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb. 1:1–2). The letter contains numerous quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures to buttress this claim.

Hebrews makes the case for Jesus to people who were steeped in Jewish law and tradition, but the covenant community that received this letter was in a very different situation from their

ancestors. After the conquest of Israel by Babylon in 597 BCE and following the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, Jews were scattered far and wide. Without a central place to offer sacrifice by a priestly descendant of Aaron close at hand, the need for another way of reconciling with God was felt acutely. As a way of explaining the new sacrifice in Christ, Hebrews draws on a concept that would have been familiar to those living in a world shaped by Greek philosophy.

Plato described the world we see as a shadow of what is real. The writer of Hebrews adapts this concept, stating that “the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities” (Heb. 10:1). The Day of Atonement, the tabernacle, the animal sacrifices were mere shadows of the law’s fulfillment in Christ. His sacrifice on the cross dealt with the reality of our sin, not just its symptoms. “Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin” (Heb. 10:18).

 **What can we do to keep our spiritual practices such as prayer and worship from becoming stale?**

THE REAL DEAL

In order truly to live as God wants us to live, our actions have to grow out of a pure heart. Jesus made this point when he criticized the Pharisees and scribes for obeying the letter of the law but ignoring its spirit. He said that it is not what we put into our mouths that defiles us, “but whatever comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles” (Matt. 15:18).

The gospels tell us that at the moment of Jesus’ death on the cross “the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom” (Mark 15:38). Behind the curtain was the holy of holies, that place in the temple where sacrifices were made to God. Because God is so holy, only the high priest could enter there, and only at specified times after undergoing a ritual of purification. The ripping of the curtain symbolized that now, through the sacrifice of Jesus, access to God is not restricted. God has been revealed to humanity in human likeness, in the Son who fulfills the work that God began when Moses received the law at Sinai.

What Jesus did on the cross is not only the fulfillment of what had gone before. It is also a promise of what is to come. After offering his sacrifice on our behalf, “he sat down at the right hand of God,” and since then has been waiting “until his ene-

mies would be made a footstool for his feet” (Heb. 10:12–13). Jesus’ death and resurrection conquered the power of death and sin and all that separates us from God. He is the assurance that the project God gave to ancient Israel, to be a chosen nation through which God brought creation back to Godself, will be fulfilled. This hope is what gives all people of every nation courage and stamina to live holy and upright lives.

Hebrews 10:22 alludes to baptism. It reminds us that we approach Jesus, who is our great high priest, “with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” In this simple act, we receive for ourselves the sacrifice Jesus made on our behalf. Rather than having to bring bulls or goats or birds, all we need is water. Instead of going to the tabernacle, we can participate in Jesus’ sacrifice wherever we are. Our baptism is a sign and a seal of what Jesus has already done.

 How does your baptism give you confidence to face each day?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

During practice, a basketball coach will look for what is wrong with the team. He or she will point out every botched play and critique each poorly chosen shot. The coach doesn’t want the team to settle for anything less than the best it can be. However, right before a game the coach will gather the players in the locker room and remind them what they’re capable of. They may review their weak spots and what they need to do to overcome them, but the point of the pep talk is, “You can do this! Don’t sell yourselves short.”

Hebrews is reminding us who we are. We are not defined by our imperfections and failures. In Christ, we are a new creation. “Everything has become fresh and new” (2 Cor. 5:17). Because Jesus is our great high priest, we can do all things through him who strengthens us (Phil. 4:13). Like players on the court, those of us whom Christ has put in the game encourage one another to live into this reality. We cheer each other on and push each other to dig deep inside and do our best.

Being a Christian is a team effort. Hebrews 10:25 indicates that it was the habit of some in the faith community to neglect meeting together. It can be tempting to focus only on your own spiritual welfare and avoid the messiness of living in community.

Certainly, Jesus' disciples got irritated with each other. Certainly, they followed Jesus while living messy lives. Just as the priestly sacrifices described in Leviticus were offered not just for individuals but on behalf of the whole nation, so Jesus' sacrifice was not only for our personal salvation. He has redeemed the whole creation. His church is a body, with each part interdependent on the other.

Christians are called to be a light to the world, but it can be tempting for the church to focus on its own welfare and survival. The world's troubles can be overwhelming. In order to spur themselves on, a championship team focuses on the victory they're striving for. They imagine themselves on the podium receiving the trophy. We who belong to Christ do not imagine a world that depends on us for there to be no hunger, war, or injustice. Rather, we live into a reality that is already assured. Jesus is already sitting at the right hand of God, and we see the Day of his victory approaching. We don't encourage one another to love and do good deeds so we can earn a place in that glory. We already belong, so we live and give our all.



How do those in your church “provoke one another to love and good deeds”? (Heb. 10:24)

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. Christ's perfect self-offering in the heavenly realm shows him to be the intercessor for all humanity. His sacrifice is “once-for-all,” signaling “the end of the age.” Just as the high priest returned from the Holy Place, Christ will return to save those who eagerly await him.
2. The limitation of the sacrificial system is indicated by the need for the priests to continue sacrificing day after day, year after year. For the author of Hebrews, this repetition of sacrifice was not a source of liberation from sin but a reminder of sin.
3. The citation from Psalm 110 indicates the “already, not yet” nature of the cross's effects. Christ has already “sat down at the right hand of God,” but he still waits until his enemies are made his footstool. The citation from Jeremiah 31:33 indicates that Christ has initiated the new covenant written not on stone but in the heart and mind.