

always highly significant, “and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb. 9.22b).

This is a principle of the new covenant, as of the old – except that the blood has been shed “once for all.” The blood of bulls and goats could never take away sins (10.4,11).

“But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God [because his sacrificial work is complete]. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (vv. 12-14). “And where [sins and lawless acts] have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin” (v. 18).

The perfect once-for-all sacrifice has been made and offered in the heavenly sanctuary. Our sins are forgiven. God regards us now “in Christ” as Paul wrote again and again. He is still working on us – we are “being made holy” – but we are in fact “perfect forever” with no need for another sacrificial offering to be made.

- This is all rather mind-blowing, so we had better think about it step by step. The sacrifice of Christ doesn't need to be repeated – do we agree with that? Our sins are forgiven on the basis of that complete and sufficient offering, the blood of Christ – do we agree with that? We are therefore “made perfect forever”! That is the part we find hardest to grasp, but it is all part of the once-for-all-ness of what Christ has done. Yet... God is still working on us to transform us into what he means us to be! Reflect on what God has done – and on what he is doing.
- What does the Lord mean us to do while we await his second coming?



Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews

by Peter J Blackburn

6. Once-for-all Sacrifice

Reading: Hebrews 9.1-10.18

Every household has lots of little “chores” that have to be repeated again and again. Meals have to be prepared. Washing up has to be done. Clothes need washing. Grass keeps growing in the lawn – and weeds in the garden! We accept that this is life – though sometimes grudgingly!

A mother's work is never done, so the old saying goes. We can be envious of those whose job has elements of finality about it. The builder completes his house. The editor “puts the newspaper to bed.” The harvest will be over. The mill will be silent – relatively!

Yet even in such jobs there may be the end of a cycle and a brief spell – the work may be over for the moment but we know there is more work calling to be done. Our most permanent work soon exhibits signs of decay. It may become photographic, but no longer functional!



We call things “chores” when their constant, time-consuming repetition seems to rob us of needed time to do what we regard as more important – the real “stuff” of life.

And for the Lord's people, there had to be the constantly repeated sacrifices to mend a relationship that was constantly being broken. We noted in the previous study that it was “as if the characteristic of the old covenant was that it was continually being broken.”

- How do we react to jobs that don't “stay done”? The stone house pictured above is in Girraween National Park near Stanthorpe. When visited in October 1997, grass was growing off the roof and guttering and it showed signs of sinking further into dereliction. To what extent can any of our human works be “permanent”?
- The Old Testament sacrificial system required constant and regular repetition to maintain and repair their relationship to God. But it wasn't a final solution. Reflect again on the promise of a new covenant given in Jeremiah 31.31-34 and quoted in Hebrews 8.8-12.

Sacrifice and Tabernacle

Read: Hebrews 9.6-10

Hebrews 9 begins with a brief description of the furnishing of the tabernacle. (The writer refers to the tabernacle rather than the Temple. This may suggest that the Temple has already been destroyed, or simply that these non-Palestinian Jews only know these things from the Scriptural record anyway.) Most significant in the tabernacle is the fact of the two rooms – the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place.

“When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year [on the Day of Atonement, Lev. 16], and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance” (vv. 6-7).

The significance of this is that “the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed” (v. 8). In other words, it wasn’t possible for any human being to enter the presence of God – except for the high priest on the Day of Atonement, and then only on the grounds that he was carrying with him the blood of the atonement. This instilled in the worshippers an awesome sense of their separation from God.

“Atonement” is the word made up by the KJV translators from “at-one-ment.” In Hebrew they call the day of atonement *Yom Kippur*. The verb implies the covering-over of human sin to protect sinners from divine wrath.

The writer says that the sacrificial blood is unable in fact to “clear the conscience of the worshiper” (v. 9) – literally, “make the worshiper perfect in conscience”.

In other words, the various prescribed sacrifices and offerings were “external regulations applying until the time of the new order” (v. 10).

- The old order seemed to tell them that, although they were God’s chosen people, they couldn’t approach him. Even the high priest had severe limitations on his ability to approach God. Compare and contrast this with our approach to God. Are we inclined to have too little a sense of the holiness and majesty of God?
- Why was the whole sacrificial system and especially the blood of the atonement so important for them?

The Blood of Christ

Read: Hebrews 9.11-22

“When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption” (vv. 11-12).

Here is the final offering, the perfect sacrifice, offered by Christ in heaven itself – the Most Holy Place not being any human sanctuary, but the very presence of God (note v. 24).

The earthly sacrifices made people “outwardly clean” (v. 13). “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” (v. 14)

This was a once-for-all sacrifice. The same Greek word (*ephapax*) occurs in v. 12 as we met in 7.27. It is used again in 10.10, and a variant (*hapax*) in 9.26,27,28, and 10.2. These related words represent a very important concept in Hebrews. Christ’s sacrificial work is complete – compare his shout of triumph, “It is finished!” (Jn 19.30).

“But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Heb. 9.26b-28).

- Reflect on the finished work of Christ. Do we regard it as important that it happened at all? How important is it that it happened “once for all”?
- What does it mean that he will “bring salvation” at his second coming? What is the significance of “waiting for him”?

The Perfect Sacrifice

Read: 9.22; 10.1-18

Sin is serious – in fact, it is deadly! This was symbolised in the old order by the extensive use of blood in purification rituals. Remember, the slaughter of animals for food had to be done very carefully. The law said, “And wherever you live, you must not eat the blood of any bird or animal. If anyone eats blood, that person must be cut off from his people” (Lev. 7.26,27). The shedding of blood was