

9. Jesus, the Perfect Sacrifice (1Q 2022— In These Last Days: The Message of Hebrews)

Biblical Material: Heb. 9:15; Gen. 15:6–21; Jer. 34:8–22; Eph. 3:14–19; Heb.7:27; Heb. 10:10; Heb.9:22–28; Heb. 10:14.

Quotes

- A forgiven sinner is still a sinner, and while he may feel better about himself because of the forgiveness of his sins, forgiveness alone offers no hope for a future free from sin... Being in Christ is not an abstract legal standing in some heavenly court of law. Rather, it is the existential reality of being transformed into the image of Christ. *John Stamps*
- The Christians say that among the ancient Jews, if you committed a crime you had to kill a sheep. Now they say ‘Charge it. Put it on the slate. The Savior will pay it.’ In this way, rascality is sold on credit, and the credit system in morals, as in business, breeds extravagance. *Robert Ingersoll*
- Now that Old Testament system only helped if it was thought about, if it was understood as the prophets understood it, if it led people to repentance and faith and willingness to listen. I believe the same is true of the cross, and the heavenly sanctuary. If watching Jesus die, and if considering His ministry in the heavenly sanctuary, does not lead us to what Micah says in 6:8 and Hosea says in 6:6 and Amos says and Isaiah says and Jeremiah says, and David said in the fifty-first Psalm—if the whole system and the actual dying of Jesus, and what He’s doing now, does not lead to truth in the inner man, to repentance, conversion, and rebirth, and a willingness to listen and a constant trust, then it is of absolutely no avail to us at all. And Hebrews spells this out in such specific terms... *A. Graham Maxwell*

Questions

What is the meaning of Jesus’ sacrifice? What issues and questions does Jesus dying on the Cross answer? What is the link between sacrifice and salvation? Is there any inference that Jesus is executed by God? Why does Jesus die? How does Hebrews speak to us today—like the Jewish Christians who were having such a hard time reconciling the past with the present?

Bible summary

Jesus is the mediator of a new agreement (Heb. 9:15). Gen. 15:6–21 is the record of God’s agreement with Abraham. Jer. 34:8–22 records King Hezekiah’s agreement with the people to free their slaves, and God’s judgment when they went back on their word. Eph. 3:14–19 is Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians that they may be filled “with the fullness of God.” Jesus offered himself, once for all (Heb.7:27, also 10:10). “According to ceremonial law, almost everything is made clean with blood, and without shedding blood nothing is made ritually free from the stain of sin.” Heb. 9:22 FBV. Paul uses imagery of the sacrificial system, and then applies this to heaven, making it clear that what happened on earth was only a copy or a shadow of the heavenly. By his sacrifice of himself to us Jesus has set us right forever. (Heb. 10:14.).

Comment

Many “atonement theories” have been proposed that deal with Jesus’ sacrifice. Different ones may have some element of truth, but inevitably each one has problems, especially when pushed to extremes. For example, the “ransom theory” has Biblical support, but breaks down when you ask to whom the ransom was paid, what was the currency, who agreed the contract etc.

Similarly with ideas of “substitutionary atonement.” We can all affirm that “Jesus died for me.” But how this exactly is accomplished can lead to some major errors. For example, is it not a denial of justice, divine or otherwise, to assert the legal interpretation that Jesus substitutes for the death penalty imposed on others? What is *just* in killing one for the crimes of another? Instead of upholding law and justice, as many maintain, such an idea does the exact opposite. No human court would accept such a transfer, and God’s justice is surely higher than ours. The idea that God executed his Son to satisfy himself or some concept of justice is appalling.

Note that nowhere does Scripture say that Jesus was punished as our substitute. Jesus certainly experienced the consequences of “being made sin,” but that is a very different concept to judicial substitutionary execution. Hebrews 9:28 is typical of the Biblical statements that state that Christ bore our sins, demonstrating the consequences of sin—death and separation from God. But this is the consequence of the self-destructive nature of sin, not an imposed penalty.

What about the blood? Explaining the role of blood in the sanctuary ceremonies, Paul comments that this was ineffective in removing sin, “because it’s impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to remove sins” (Hebrews 10:4 FBV). Applying the image and symbol, he affirms that Jesus took his own blood and achieved salvation for us (9:12-14). Paul uses the blood interchangeably with the death of Jesus (see for example 10:19), and the blood symbolism is really a shorthand for Christ’s life and death, the whole mission of Christ. When it comes to the historical account of Jesus’ crucifixion there is little mention of blood. Salvation is not in the physical blood, but in Jesus’ giving of himself to and for us.

So how are we to read Hebrews in a less legalistic way. One useful practice is to use more than one version. For example, using J.B. Phillips’ translation of Hebrews 3 is a great help since he uses the concept of “not giving up trust” instead of the term “unbelief.” This points to the centrality of trusting God in the whole of Hebrews, and gives a greater insight—since we can perhaps more readily understand the importance of trust, while unbelief can be seen simply as a refusal to operate according to statements of belief or dogma.

Paul in Hebrews is trying to use the old imagery and make it relevant and applicable. What he is saying is that the old methods were not wrong, just misunderstood and now superseded. Even the sacrificial system did not achieve what God had intended, because it was so often seen as some routine ritual by which the problem of sin was taken care of. That is why God through the later prophets actually speaks against the system, because it had become meaningless. This is a vital aspect of Hebrews, and which is still applicable today: our worship systems must make an impact, must make us think. If there is no thought, then worship becomes just a form, a ceremony, with no real content. Paul is actually saying through Hebrews that the old ways really didn’t work, and only make sense in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus—and since Jesus is God then we have direct access to God himself—the priesthood as a system is also gone. The sanctuary is primarily designed to encourage our faith and confidence in God—in other words, to develop our trust.

Ellen White comments

The sacrifice of Christ as an atonement for sin is the great truth around which all other truths cluster. In order to be rightly understood and appreciated, every truth in the word of God, from Genesis to Revelation, must be studied in the light that streams from the cross of Calvary. {AA 315.2}

Centuries, ages, can never lessen the efficacy of His atoning sacrifice. Neither life nor death, height nor depth, can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. {AA 552.2}