

## FROM SHADOW TO REALITY



Hebrews 10:1-10  
26th Message  
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SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

Two weeks ago Governor Greg Abbott of Texas signed into law legislation requiring that the Ten Commandments be posted in every public school classroom in the state. This may sound familiar. It's déjà-vu all over again! Exactly a year ago I started a sermon a similar way, only then it was Louisiana that had just passed such legislation. A judge has recently ruled that Louisiana law unconstitutional. Nevertheless, legislatures in a dozen other states are eager to follow suit.

Why the eagerness to post the Ten Commandments in schools? Do the legislators and governors post them in their own offices? Since most of the legislators supporting such moves are avowed Christians, why don't they also, or instead, post above their desks the words of Jesus about the Ten Commandments? In the Sermon on the Mount he drills down to issues of the heart. For example,

**"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment..."**

**"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matt 5:21-22, 27-28)**

Or why not post Jesus's summary of the law as the two greatest commandments:

**" 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' ... 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' " (Matt 22:37, 39; quoting Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18)**

That would save a lot of space. Furthermore, it puts the word *love* front and center, a word that is not prominent in the Ten Commandments, nor in the mindset of those who want to post the Ten Commandments.

Or we could make it simpler still: *Love God and Love Others*. This seems unambiguous, unless you quibble about *ordo armoris*, how far down the order of Others our love should extend.

What is the effect of posting these words on the wall? In one sense these words are aspirational. God had aspirations for his people Israel, whether expressed in the Ten Commandments or distilled into *Love God and love neighbor*. Even Jesus's intensification of the commandments was aspirational: that our interior world be rightly-ordered. But the commandments cannot compel compliance. None of us perfectly keeps the commandments or the real intent behind them as taught by Jesus. The commandments remind us of our failures. They reawaken our consciousness of sin. They confront us with our inability to measure up to these standards. The law does not make us perfect human beings—be it the Ten Commandments, Jesus's intensification of the law, or any current laws.

Even that most noble pairing, *Love God and Love Others*, does not compel us to love vertically and horizontally. The written commandment cannot perfect our love. It cannot write that love onto our

hearts and into our minds; it cannot compel our wills. It might indeed inspire us when we look at the poster on the wall...but then we go out and actually meet our neighbor. Our selfish self takes over and we fall far short of perfect love.

A year ago I started my summer block of Hebrews preaching with the sentence, "If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood..." (7:11). It could not. A better priesthood was needed, and "when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also" (7:12). Ultimately what was needed was a new covenant between God and his people.

Today as I commence my summer block we start with a similar verse (10:1): "The law...can never...make perfect those who draw near to worship." Many Christians think that law is fundamental to the structure of the universe, that a moral law is somehow coded into creation, sometimes called natural law. Is this how God has really designed his creation? Is this how we picture God: standing there with his rule book open, ready to catch infractions? Is this what he really wants: a people who meticulously keep his laws? Does the keeping of law ever lead us to perfection?

With these questions hanging in the air, perhaps like a dark cloud, we return to the Book of Hebrews. Over the next five weeks we will work our way through chapter 10.

The heart of Hebrews is a long exposition of Jesus as High Priest (5:1-10:18). First, in chapters 5-7, we are shown how Jesus is qualified to serve as a priest, since he is from a different tribe: Judah not Levi. He is high priest after the more ancient order of Melchizedek. Every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices on behalf of the people to God (5:1; 8:3). So, second, we are shown in 8:1-10:18 what Jesus offers. In both cases Jesus is superior: he is a superior high priest and he offers a superior offering in comparison to the priesthood of the old covenant. In these next two sermons the author brings this exposition to a climax.

We begin with a reminder of the system of sacrifices and offerings under the old covenant:

**<sup>1</sup>The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. <sup>2</sup>Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. <sup>3</sup>But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. <sup>4</sup>It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. (Heb 10:1-4 NIV)**

The law here is the Torah, the body of legislation that God gave Moses at Mt Sinai for the Israelites. More specifically it is all the instruction about the priests and the sacrifices in the tabernacle, where God dwelt in the midst of his people. This Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system was a gracious provision on God's part. It enabled a holy God to dwell on earth in the midst of a people who were not

perfectly holy or pure. God invited his people to draw near—but not too near. How near they could come depended on their status. And they could not draw near empty-handed. The ordinary people would draw near to the entrance of the tabernacle courtyard with their sacrifices and offerings. There they would hand them over to the priests who would draw nearer, to the altar. Once a year the high priest would draw nearer still, into the inner sanctum, the Most Holy Place.

It was a great privilege to be invited and able to draw near to God. But this system of approach—this law—could never make perfect those who drew near to worship. The preacher gives two reasons. First, the law, this whole system of priesthood and sacrifices, was only a *shadow*; it was not the real thing. A shadow is not real; it does not have any substance. You can see it, but you can't pick it up. But a shadow is evidence of something that is real, which casts the shadow. The preacher has already stated that the tabernacle sanctuary was “a copy and shadow of what is in heaven” (8:5). So the shadow is cast in two directions. It is cast from a heavenly reality down onto earth. And it is cast from a future reality back in time to the era of the old covenant. Here it is “the good things that are coming” which have cast the shadow. They were yet future at the time of the Levitical priesthood and tabernacle. But for us reading Hebrews today, the good things have arrived in Christ. He is the reality to which the shadow bore witness.

The second reason that the law could not perfect worshipers was that it was *repetitious*. The system had to be repeated over and over again. Notice how many terms the preacher piles up (v. 1b): the *same* sacrifices, repeated *endlessly, year after year*. This latter phrase suggests that he is thinking of the annual Day of Atonement, the most solemn, sacred day in Israel's calendar; the only day when the high priest went into the inner sanctuary, into God's presence. But then he came out and had to go back in the next year, every year. It was never complete. So, the law of priesthood and sacrifices was never able to make perfect those who drew near to worship.

If it had made perfect, would not the sacrifices have stopped (v. 2)? The offerings would have been effective to cleanse once and for all, with no need for repetition. And once such permanent cleansing had happened, there would be no more consciousness of sin. But that wasn't the case. The offerings and sacrifices never ceased. The consciousness of sin remained.

Instead, the annual repetition served to remind all those who drew near that they were a people beset by impurity and sin (v. 3). Every year the people gathered on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It was a day of fasting, the most solemn day in the calendar. They watched the purification ceremonies. They watched the high priest enter into the Holy of Holies with the blood of a bull for his sin, and the blood of a goat for their sin. They watched the scapegoat being led away into the wilderness, carrying all their sins, iniquities, and transgressions that the high priest had confessed on its head.

Every single day they watched the morning and evening burnt offerings go up in smoke. And in between those daily reminders and the annual reminder there was a steady parade of offerings and sacrifices brought to the tabernacle for presentation to the Lord. So many reminders! Again and again and again. They were never allowed to forget that they were an imperfect, sinful people living in the presence of a holy God.

The fundamental problem was that “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (v. 4). The lifeblood of these sacrificial animals could purge the impurities, after which for-

giveness was given as a gift. That forgiveness was retroactive, covering past sins. But the sins would accumulate again. The blood of animals, even unblemished ones, could never take away sins once and for all. There was power in the blood, but it was limited.

Eventually the impurities built up so much and the Lord's sanctuary became so defiled that he abandoned it. He removed his presence and went into exile (Ezek 10), and he sent his people into exile (2 Kgs 25). The sanctuary was destroyed; sacrifices and offerings ceased. Not because they had done their job. Quite the opposite. They had failed to maintain a holy place where God could dwell among his people. The shadow had faded away. There was no longer a place on earth to which the people were invited to draw near to God. The Old Covenant was too weak.

Next the preacher turns to Christ, but does so using an OT text which he reads Christologically, that is, he reads it with reference to Christ:

**<sup>5</sup> Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said:**

**“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,  
but a body you prepared for me;**

**<sup>6</sup> with burnt offerings and sin offerings  
you were not pleased.**

**<sup>7</sup> Then I said, ‘Here I am—it is written about me in the  
scroll—**

**I have come to do your will, my God.’ ” (10:5-7)**

The first line is literally, “Therefore, coming into the world, he says:” followed by a quotation from Psalm 40:6-8. The psalm was written by David, so “he says” ought to refer to David. But it is clear that the preacher is putting this psalm into the mouth of Jesus, great David's greater son. NIV has made this explicit by adding “Christ,” who was mentioned in 9:28.

Sacrifices, offerings, burnt offerings, and sin offerings were all prescribed in the law, the Torah. They were required under the Old Covenant. But later writers such as David and the prophets realized that these were not ultimately what God desired. He was more interested in the heart and mind with which those offerings were brought. If the heart of the person offering were not oriented onto God, then the sacrifices were meaningless and ineffective; they were a stench in God's nostrils rather than a fragrant aroma that put him at rest.

David knew this better than most. He had broken two of the Ten Commandments in a most high-handed manner, committing adultery with Bathsheba and ordering the death of her husband Uriah. In Psalm 51 he acknowledged to God:

**You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;  
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.**

**My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart  
you, God, will not despise. (Ps 51:16-17)**

So he cast himself on God's mercy:

**Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion  
blot out my transgressions.**

**Wash away all my iniquity  
and cleanse me from my sin. (Ps 51:1-2)**

David, for all of his flaws, had a heart after God. In Psalm 40 he wrote, “I desire to do your will, my God” (Ps 40:8a). But how could

he do God's will? God had prepared him. David wrote, "my ears you have opened" (Ps 40:6), literally "ears you have dug for me." This is a vivid metaphor for God opening the ear channel so that David could hear God's word and obey.

The Greek translation of the OT (the Septuagint) expands "ears you have dug for me" to "a body you prepared for me," which Hebrews follows. This is a case of synecdoche where a *part* represents the *whole* and vice versa: *ear* for whole *body*. The purpose is the same: preparation to do God's will. God had prepared David's ear to hear and obey.

Reading Christologically it is now Jesus who says, "I have come." Hence the preacher introduces the quotation:

**Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said,**

**"...a body you have prepared for me; ...**

**I have come to do your will, my God." (Heb 5:5-7)**

Here we have a clear reference to the incarnation of the eternal Son. God prepared a human body into which his Son was incarnated so that this human might do his will. In chapter 2 the preacher has shown that the Son took on flesh and blood to become human like us in every way. As we say in the Nicene Creed, "who for us men and our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man."

Jesus came as prophet, priest, and king. But as priest he did not come to offer the same old sacrifices. His was a different priesthood with a different offering. So the preacher summarizes David's words as now said by Jesus:

**<sup>8</sup>First he said, "Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them"—though they were offered in accordance with the law. <sup>9</sup>Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." (10:8-9a)**

Jesus, the eternal Son incarnate as a human being, sharing our flesh and blood, fully human in every way, lived his entire life within God's will. Theologians talk of his *active obedience* and his *passive obedience*. He actively obeyed God in all that he did. And in his intense suffering he passively accepted everything that the forces of evil did against him. In neither case did he turn away.

But *obedience* is perhaps the wrong word to use here. David the psalmist used the word *delight*: I desire/delight to do your will. Jesus didn't simply grit his teeth and obey God because the law said to do so. He *delighted* to do God's will. He delighted in this because it was his Father's will. His relationship with his Father was not that of master and slave, or law-maker and law-keeper. He was in a Father-Son relationship. The Son delights to do the will of his Father. And the Father delights to say, "You are my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well-pleased." The Father spoke these words from heaven at the baptism of Jesus, and again at his Transfiguration. I am sure this is what the Father was thinking as Jesus hung on the cross. I do not think the Father turned his face away. Instead, he continued to gaze with pleasure on his beloved Son in whom he continued to be well-pleased, because his beloved Son continued to delight in doing his Father's will despite all the efforts of the forces of evil to turn him against his Father. They could not turn him against God in the garden nor on the cross. Jesus did not delight in the suffering itself, but he knew that his loving Father saw him.

Yes, Jesus cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46), quoting Psalm 22:1. We often refer to this as the cry of dereliction and Jesus as "the derelict on the

cross." But I am confident that Jesus had the entire psalm in mind. The psalm turns:

**For he has not despised or scorned  
the suffering of the afflicted one;  
he has not hidden his face from him  
but has listened to his cry for help. (Ps 22:24)**

He was not derelict. He may have been forsaken by his disciples and many others. But his Father had not turned away; he did not hide his face from the intense suffering of his beloved Son.

On the cross Jesus offered up a perfect, or rather, perfected, human life, a life lived continually within the Father's will, a life in which he delighted to do his Father's will until he said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46), cried out, "It is finished!" and handed over his spirit (John 19:30). God accepted that self-offering.

God made "the pioneer of [our] salvation perfect through what he suffered" (2:10). And "once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (5:9). For all who hear his voice, turn, and follow him.

Finally the preacher describes the result of this self-offering:

**He sets aside the first to establish the second. <sup>10</sup>And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (10:9b-10)**

In his self-offering of a faithful life lived entirely within God's will, delighting in that will, Jesus has set aside the first covenant with all of its laws and practices, its priesthood and sacrifices, its tabernacle and altar. He terminated it so that he could establish a second covenant, the new covenant promised by the Lord through the prophet Jeremiah.

We become the beneficiaries. By that same divine will which Christ has faithfully fulfilled, we are made holy unto God through the self-offering by Jesus of his own obedient body. NIV has *sacrifice*, which can evoke the wrong idea in our minds. The word is better translated *offering* (as in NASB, ESV, etc.); it is something that is brought forward and presented. What Jesus presented on the cross was not himself as a bleeding and slain sacrifice, but the self-offering of a human life lived entirely within God's will and pleasure. It was a human life that had attained its *telos*, perfection. This was how God always intended human beings to live.

By God's will, which Jesus delighted in, we are incorporated also. We have been made holy, sanctified, set aside unto God, not by birth into the Levites or priesthood. But through the self-offering of his body by Jesus Christ. He offered it once. It need never be offered again. It can't be offered again, because God raised his beloved Son into a new creation body that is full of indestructible life. It is this body that he takes into the very presence of God in the heavenly sanctuary. There his blood, which is so full of indestructible life, effects the most powerful purification and cleansing. "After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (1:3).

Jesus offered himself once and for all on the cross. He was obedient even unto death, even unto death on the cross. God vindicated, rewarded, and glorified him in resurrection. The risen and ascended Jesus presented himself once and for all in God's presence in glory. There God has vindicated, rewarded, and glorified him by seating him at his right hand. But that is for next week!

This is the good news. Jesus has lived the perfect human life, in

his Father's will, all the way to death. God has raised him into the new creation, in a resurrection body that has entered God's very presence. God bids us come and be united with Christ in death and resurrection. He invites us to enter into the new creation also.

Here on earth we are invited to come and give our allegiance to this Jesus. To say with Thomas, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). When we do so the Spirit who was poured out ten days after Christ's Ascension comes on us to unite us with Christ. We participate in Christ, in his death and resurrection. We become the beneficiaries of his perfectly-lived life. The Spirit sets to work in us. First he sets us apart as holy, belonging to God in Christ through the Spirit. We enter into the communion of the Son with the Father through the Spirit, for we become beloved sons and daughters. And the Spirit continues to work in us, for it is the Father's will and pleasure that we become like his beloved Son. Our Father wants us to delight in doing his will, not because of commandments written on stone or hung on the wall. But because sons and daughters delight to do their Father's will, and our Father delights to say, "You are my beloved sons and daughters in whom I am well-pleased."

Jesus's path to perfection lay through suffering. He shared our humanity, flesh and blood like us in every way. He was tempted and tested like us in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. He is therefore able to empathize with our weaknesses. He knows what it is to suffer. It is clear that those to whom this letter is written are suffering. They may be tempted to give up, to turn back, to apostatize. They may be tempted to take their eyes off Jesus and slowly drift away. Hebrews is written to encourage them and us to remain faithful, persevering through our hardships and suffering. The preacher encourages us to do two things.

First, keep looking to Jesus, Christ before us. Christ before us as the one who has faithfully finished the course, despite intense suffering; he is our forerunner, our pioneer. And Christ before us as the one we look to, the object of our gaze, our inspiration. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus. And we have other examples: chapter 11 lists many OT saints who lived by faith. It initially seems like a list of those who lived the victorious life. But there also those in the list who suffered greatly yet remained faithful.

Secondly, keep meeting together. We are a family, brothers and sisters together, with Christ Jesus as our older brother. We meet together to encourage one another, to listen to one another, to share one another's burdens. This calls for honesty and vulnerability, not bearing our burdens alone. There is much trauma, including religious trauma. There is much suffering. We should not carry this alone, for we are family.

In Christ we are God's beloved sons and daughters. He did not send his beloved Son into our human world to be a law-keeper, keeping the commandments because they were written on tablets of stone. The Son entered our world to do his Father's will. Through his Spirit God adopts us into his family as sons and daughters. Through his Spirit he purposes to make us more and more like his Son, doing his will from our hearts' desire.

The sacrifices, offerings, burnt offerings, and sin offerings of the Old Covenant were a continual reminder of sins. Their repetition indicated that they could not dispel the consciousness of sin. Instead, they were a reminder of sins. The word reminder (*anámnesis* v. 3) is a rare word, used only four times in the NT. The other three times are all on the lips of Jesus: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24,25). We have a new reminder, a new remembrance. No longer do we have a daily and annual reminder of sins. Jesus lived the human life unto perfection, entirely within his Father's will, free from sin that so entangles us. He bids us come and partake of him, to participate in him and his resurrection, new creation life. We die to our old self and rise to our new self which is being renewed in his image. Jesus bids us come to the table regularly, frequently, to remember him, through whom our sins are forgiven and remembered no more.

*May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. (1 Thess 5:23-24)*

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