

“Once For All”

In the latest edition of the Lutheran Study Bible the introduction to the book of Hebrews begins with this paragraph: “Frost glistens in the light as it melts from the backs of the woolly lambs, gleaming and shimmering and dripping as the animals doze. The lambs rise to stretch. They shiver, steam wafting from their warm legs and bellies. They look up expectantly toward a man standing near the gate. He leans on the edge of the pen and looks the herd over carefully, wondering which lambs to feed and which to choose for the morning sacrifice. It is a great and festive day—most holy. And yet, tomorrow he will have to choose again, and so the next day, and the next.”<sup>1</sup>

The forgiveness of sins demanded blood, so something had to die. This was the complex sacrificial system set up after God rescued his chosen people from Egypt. Regularly, the burnt offering of a lamb or a sheep or a goat was offered to Him for forgiveness and admission into his presence. As strange as it might sound to you and me, this was not something the Israelites just made up. This was divinely appointed. The Lord explains it to Moses in Leviticus, which we briefly heard about in our OT reading. In fact, throughout the OT, animal sacrifice was the means through which the chosen people were to maintain their unique status. And it was how they thought they would eventually arrive at redemption.

So, let me ask you all a question. How many of you here today have experience with sacrificing animals in an attempt to satisfy God? Good—no one! The concept of picking out just the right animal only to be skinned, cut into pieces, and then burned on the altar so that we can have access to God sounds absurd to us. We are New Testament people. Any animal burned and cut into pieces for us is usually along the lines of a juicy steak cooked on the grill, right? We have faith in Jesus who came to fulfill the Old Testament’s sacrificial system. No more sheep; no more bulls; no more goats plucked from the herd. We side with the writer of Hebrews who says, “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” We know this; we get it.

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<sup>1</sup> Lutheran Study Bible (St. Louis: CPH, 2009), Page 2102.

But what about a first-century Jewish reader of this text in Hebrews? After all, they were the people for which it was written. They didn't know this and they didn't get this because it was new information! It was new information and it was sudden information. Jesus, as we hear in verse 9 "does away with the first in order to establish the second." He didn't phase out the sacrificial system over time. He didn't say, "Try this new way and see if you like it. You can always go back to the old way." He does away with the old way: it was gone. And the new way was Him! Jesus, "the way, the truth, and the life." No more animal blood; no more animal sacrifices. Faith in what was finished on the cross was now the only way to the Father.

For a first century Jew, this had to have been mind-boggling. Think about this. Many of them undoubtedly had distinct memories of the smell of smoldering animal sacrifices outside the temple or memories of the sounds these animals made as they were being led to their final destination. I'm sure they were questioning how something so vividly implanted in their memories could change so radically and so quickly.

But that's just what the writer of Hebrews was communicating to them and ultimately what the writer was communicating to you and me. All sins have been taken away, not by a bunch of animals, but by Jesus. Here again these words from Hebrews 10:10: "We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." God's gift of grace made possible by the giving of himself on the cross to the point of death was the final shedding of blood. And because of that blood, that final sacrifice, we have been made holy. And it was once and for all.

I'm sure it took a while for a first century Jew to get this if they got it at all. And I imagine those who actually believed these words still wanted to make that animal sacrifice anyway, just in case this whole Jesus thing was not exactly accurate.

In a way, we kind of do the same thing. One example is in our confession of sins. Have you ever found yourself confessing the same sin over and over again? Maybe you stole something when you were a teenager and it seems to come up in your prayer life on a regular basis, even though you are now in your 30's or 40's. Maybe, as a married person, you did something extremely foolish a couple of weeks ago and you regret it horribly. You have admitted your guilt and confessed that foolish thing to God begging for his forgiveness but today, you will confess it once again. In addition, you might put a little more money in the offering plate just in case God really requires a little more from you apart from just your repentant faith in Jesus.

But the essence of our Christian faith is the one final sacrifice of God himself in the flesh! On the cross, Christ not only saved us in a general sense but he bore those sins that haunt our past. In his suffering, he bore those foolish sins that many of us regret so much. He bore every sin, including our sins of doubt and suffered and died for every one, once and for all. He did that and then he rose victorious over death proving that this final sacrifice was truly the last one. What I'm trying to get at is just like the first-century Hebrews, we must embrace that this new way is the only way. There's nothing we can do, nor is there anything else God requires us to do to gain His forgiveness apart from actually believing that Jesus was the final sacrifice once for all.

That's why this passage from Hebrews is such a great reminder of hope. Through all of the pain and suffering; through all of the broken promises, pettiness, sickness, and death, the complete and perfect sacrifice has been made for every single one of us. So now, the question is not about what else we need to do in order to be saved. It's not about wondering if the confession of our sins with contrite and repentant hearts is really enough for God to love us. The question, in essence, is, "Now what?"

Now, I know some of you still need to get to the point of trusting that faith in Christ and Christ alone is sufficient for a restored relationship with God. We all need to strengthen our faith more and more, don't we? That's an important reason we come to worship. This is where we receive his gifts of grace through Word and Sacrament and those gifts strengthen us so that we can navigate life's ups and downs with confidence in who we are as children of God.

And while we all need to continue to strengthen our faith, at the same time, we also need to contemplate what a life based on faith in Jesus Christ actually looks like out in the world. What does Christ's suffering and death once and for all mean for our daily living? What does it mean in our prayer lives and in our relationships with other people? Well, we're going to dig into these questions and more like them over the next few weeks.

At our weekend and Wednesday services during Lent we are going to look at the rest of this wonderful chapter in Hebrews, chapter 10, and reflect on how these beautiful exhortations relate to our lives each and every day.

We titled the series, "therefore" because after the introductory verses, which we are looking at today and into Wednesday night, verse 19, begins with the word, "therefore." The writer of Hebrews proclaims the work of Jesus who was offered as the final sacrifice

and then, in the rest of the chapter, encourages all people with faith in Him to live like this stuff matters in our relationship with both God and other people.

“We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all,” writes the author of Hebrews. This is the new way. Do you believe this? One of my favorite writers, Martin Luther, seemed to believe this. He wrote that, “If you really want to find a place where the sins of the world are placed for forgiveness; if you really want to find a place where the sins of the world are exterminated and deleted, then cast your gaze upon the cross.”<sup>2</sup>

This is the way. And this is God’s way. Stay tuned this Lenten season as we keep this most important truth at the forefront while contemplating what it really means in our daily lives. The series is called, “Therefore.” See you Wednesday night. In the name of Christ Jesus our Lord and our Savior. **Amen.**

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<sup>2</sup> Treasury of Daily Prayer (St. Louis: CPH), page 1185