

Commentary on Hebrews

Overview of Hebrews

The Letter was written to people of Jewish background. These Hebrews had heard the gospel preached by the apostles and others during the early days of the church, and had seen the mighty miracles of the Holy Spirit which confirmed the message.

The Epistle to the Hebrews is really an answer to the question, "What do you have?" In a word the answer is **Christ**. In Him we have:

- One who is greater than the prophets.
- One who is greater than the angels.
- One who is greater than Moses.
- One who is greater than Joshua.
- One whose priesthood is superior to that of Aaron.
- One who serves in a better sanctuary.
- One who has introduced a better covenant.
- One who is the antitype of the typical furniture and veil.
- One whose once-for-all offering of Himself for sin is superior to the repeated sacrifices of bulls and goats.

Apostasy

After professing to receive Christ, the early Hebrew Christians might utterly renounce Him and return to ritualistic religion. This was tantamount to trampling on the Son of God, profaning His blood, and insulting the Holy Spirit. For this willful sin there was no repentance or forgiveness. Against this sin there are repeated warnings in the Letter to the Hebrews.

- I. In Heb 2:1 it is described as *drifting away from the message of Christ*.
- II. In Heb 3:7-19 it is *the sin of rebellion or of hardening the heart*.
- III. In Heb 6:6 it is *falling away or committing apostasy*.
- IV. In Heb 10:25 it is *the forsaking the assembling*.
- V. In Heb 10:26 it is *the willfulness or deliberate sin*.
- VI. In Heb 12:16 it is *spoken of as selling one's birthright for a single meal*.
- VII. Finally in Heb 12:25 it is called *a refusal to hear the One who is speaking from Heaven*.

All these warnings are directed against different aspects of the same sin—the sin of apostasy.

In order to convince the Jews Jesus of Nazareth is the True God, the writer uses three arguments:

1. Christ is superior to the angels.
2. He is superior to Moses.
3. He is superior to Aaron.

The message of Hebrews is as timely today as it was in the first century of the church. We need to be constantly reminded of the eternal privileges and blessings that are ours in Christ.

The theme of Hebrews is the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ as revealer and as mediator of God's grace. The prologue (1:1-4) presents Christ as God's full and final revelation, far surpassing the limited preliminary revelation given in the OT.

Hebrews could be called "the book of better things" since the two Greek words for "better" and "superior" occur 15 times in the letter.

The Nature of Shadows

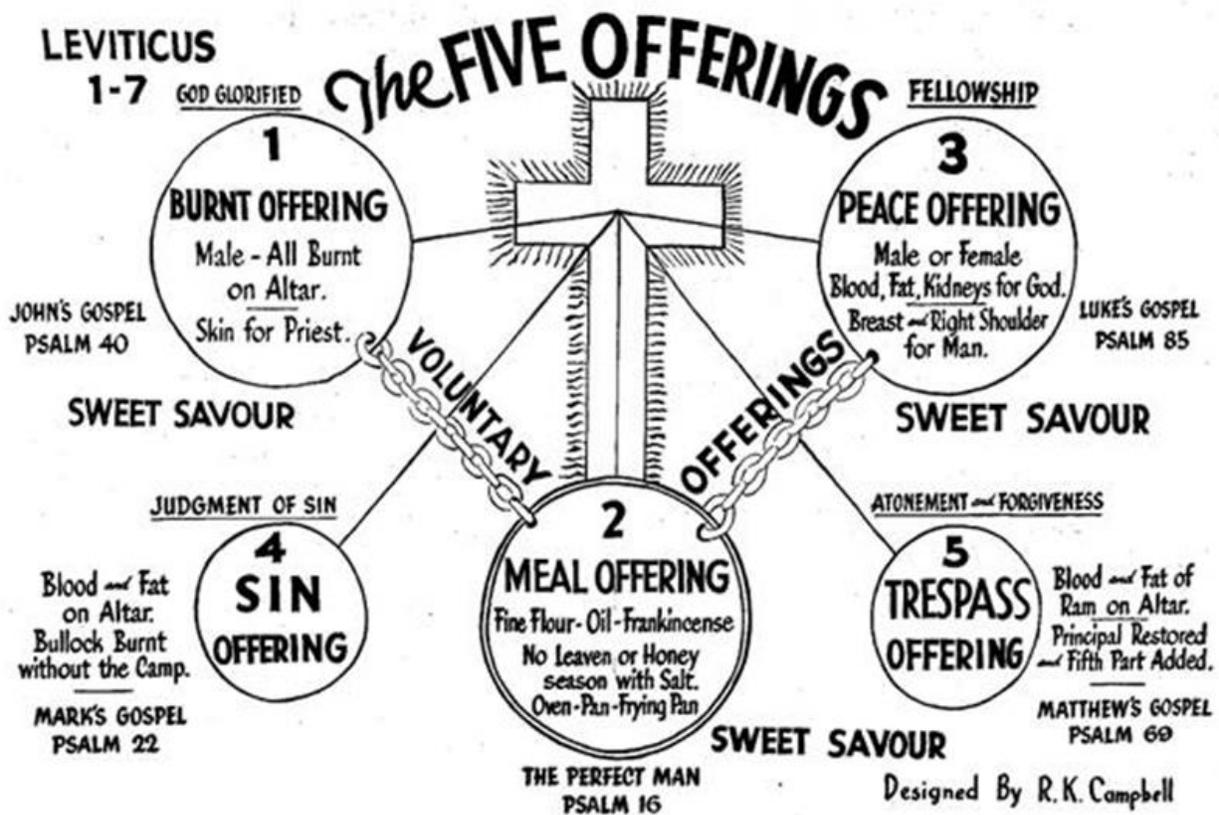
- I. Shadow – One of the favorite terms employed by the author in the book.
 - A. Shadows do not have independent existence.
 - B. Shadows do prophecy the substance that cast them. It is not possible to build a house out of the shadows of a tree. It takes a "reality" tree! This is the focus of the Hebrew writer. He takes his pen and boldly writes across the entire Old Testament system the word: "SHADOW" That includes the Law, the priests, the sacrifices, and the sanctuary. He calls the old tabernacle a "shadow" (Hebrews 8:5). He presents the old sacrifices as "shadows" (Hebrews 10:1). Evidently, the law and its priests were part of the "shadow."
 - C. Shadows serve as a kind of blueprint of the structure to be built in the future. As an example, notice late in the evening the shadow of an airplane pass along on the ground before you. You automatically know that the "reality" airplane passed between you and the sun. And in a short time, you expect to see the plane itself pass overhead. So a shadow may arrive before the substance arrives if the light source is in the right place.
- II. The shadow (the Law of Moses) came before the reality of the Christian system.
 - A. Once the reality has arrived, the shadow is no longer needed even though it still confirms in part the nature of the reality itself.
 - B. In effect, when we enter into the reality of the priesthood of Christ, enjoy the relationships of the new sanctuary He inaugurated, and receive the benefits of his eternal sacrifice, we will no longer need or be subject to the old shadow system.

An imperfect system

- I. The Levitical priesthood is imperfect (cf. Hebrews 7:11).
 - A. The former priests could have brought perfection to the Hebrew people, then there would have been no need for the new priesthood of Christ.
 - B. "The law made nothing perfect" (Hebrews 7:19).
- II. The old Hebrew tabernacle could not make the worshipers perfect (cf. Hebrews 9:9).
 - A. The sacrifices of the Law could not bring perfection (cf. Hebrews 10:1-2).
- III. Having inscribed the word "shadow" over the Old Testament, the Hebrew author then writes the word "imperfect" over it also. The first term implies that the "reality" which the "shadow" predicted is now present and that the "perfection" which the "imperfect" could not give is now a living part of the new system.

Therefore, in order to understand the message of Hebrews we need to think like a Jew from the first century. In order to facilitate that we are going to do an overview of the sacrificial system described in Leviticus before we actually begin discussing the letter to the Hebrews.

The Sacrificial System of Leviticus



- I. The Levitical Sacrifices (Offerings) were prophetic of Christ and in some ways prophetic of Christians themselves.
- II. Jewish sacrifices (sacrificial system) prefigures Jesus Christ
- III. Each Jewish sacrifice prefigures some specific aspect of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.
- IV. Hebrews 9:23 speaks of Christ's sacrifices being plural in number. Hebrews 10:1 speaks of the plural Jewish sacrifices that were shadows of Christ in His many faceted offering.
 - A. In the Burnt Offering – His Consecration to God
 - B. In the Meal Offering – Presenting His People to God
 - C. In the Peace Offering – His Reconciliatory Gift to Man in the Restoration of Fellowship with God
 - D. In the Sin Offering – His Atonement
 - E. In the Trespass Offering – His Defending the Justice of God
- V. The word "sacrifice" has assumed a secondary meaning not originally contained in its import.
 - A. Sacrifice has also come to mean: privation, renunciation, self-denial, giving up something.
 - B. It seems that it was David who first added the concept of personal cost to sacrifices to God.
- VI. 2 Samuel 24:24 – "I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing."

The Burnt Offering

The first and most important sacrifice offered by the Hebrew people – the Burnt Offering. This sacrifice stands apart in its importance from all other offerings of the Law of Moses.

- I. Purest, most comprehensive form of worship to God.
- II. Category: “sweet savor,” “pleasing aroma.”
- III. Most God-addressed sacrifice—it was wholly consumed for His exclusive pleasure.
 - A. No part of the Burnt Offering was given to others, as was characteristic of all other sacrifices.
 - B. Leviticus 1: 9 “the whole shall be turned to smoke” not destroyed
- IV. The sacrifice is not conceived as destroyed, or even burned—simply transferred, sent (fumed) up to God. “It is a burnt offering, an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD” (Leviticus 1:9 NIV).
 - A. As an incense ascends, or is fumed to God.
 - B. The word “OLAH” literally means: that which ascends.
- V. It symbolizes the total consecration of the worshiper to God.
 - A. The spiritual Jew says to God with this sacrifice: “As this animal is totally given to you and is consumed for your pleasure, so I want my life to be given to you for your pleasure.
 - B. All sacrifices involve vicarious substitution and representations on behalf of the offerer.
 - C. What physically happens to the animal is seen as the expression of the worshiper’s desire. “I want my life to be totally consumed for God’s pleasure.”
 - D. Genesis 22:2 the episode of Abraham and Isaac
 1. Verse 5 “we will go yonder and worship.”
 2. Verse 5 “we will return again” faith!
 3. Hebrews 11:19 “received him back from death.”
 - E. First view this from Abraham’s perspective. What is Abraham expected to learn from this event? Simply that he must surrender Isaac to God with no strings attached.
 - F. Second view it from Isaac’s perspective. Isaac belongs totally to God – But as a “living sacrifice” rather than a pile of ashes.
 - G. *Jehovah Jireh* = Jehovah provides. The ram becomes the vicarious, substitutionary sacrifice in the place of Isaac.
- VI. Most common of Hebrew sacrifices—centrality. It was central in all their worship activities.
 - A. Individual – any time that he wanted.
 - B. Continual Burnt Offering for nation. Offered every day – morning and evening. Required that the fires be “kept burning,” “never go out” (Lev 6:9, 12).
 - C. Central act of worship on all feast days and Sabbaths
- VII. Most God-centered and spiritually deep sacrifice.
 - A. Recognizing God’s right to man’s highest devotions.
 - B. Deserving unreserved love and consecration
- VIII. Consecration more important than atonement. Atonement means there is estrangement between the worshiper and God.
- IX. The worshiper presents himself and his sacrificial stand-in to God.

- A. The individual is seen as presenting himself and his animal as presents to God.
 - B. From that moment it is God's animal -- God dictates its use.
- X. Consecration is more important than atonement – the more the consecration the less the need for atonement.
 - A. The sin, trespass and Yom Kippur sacrifices were of a lower or lesser position – for they speak of disobedience not devotion.