

Shadow and Reality

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[0 : 01] Well, most people have two ears, and God has given you two ears to listen to sermons. With one ear you should be listening to the sermon for yourself, and with the other ear for someone else.

For I find that often a week after or ten days after I've heard a sermon, someone asks me a question, and I think, oh, I heard a sermon on that just recently. Now what did the preacher say? So the reason we're studying Hebrews is not just that you need to know this message, but that others need to know it as well. It might be a fellow believer who asks you a question, it may be somebody who doesn't know much about Christianity.

But these sermons are meant to be helping you for yourself, and also helping you help others. So let's pray for those two things to happen this morning.

Father, we thank you so much for the letter to the Hebrews. Please use it to teach us, and please train us to use it to teach others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

[1 : 12] Well, there's a young boy in church in the 19th century who was sitting through a long series on the letter to the Hebrews, and he wrote afterwards that he spent most of his time during the sermons wishing those Hebrews had kept their letter to themselves, and not inflicted on a poor little Gentile boy.

Well, that little boy grew up to be Charles Spurgeon, one of the great Baptist preachers in London, whose printed sermons used to be welcomed here in Australia in the 19th century.

So I think he later grew to realize that the letter to the Hebrews was actually quite a good letter to read. Well, the theme of our sermon is taken from the first verse of chapter 10.

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming, not the realities themselves. So the writer puts before us the difference between a shadow and the reality to which the shadow points. It's not the way in which we might usually use the word shadow, but it's a very interesting way of thinking. What it means is that the law in the Old Testament gives us an outline of reality, which is later filled in detail in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[2 : 36] A bit like a portrait that you might, if you're painting a portrait, do an outline of the person and then fill in the detail. Paul uses similar kind of language in Colossians 1, where he talks about the Old Testament rituals being a shadow, but the substance belongs to Christ.

And in this use of language, the shadow is always imperfect, and the reality is always perfect. Now, I read recently that one of the big changes in childhood education at the time of the Renaissance and Reformation was the idea that you should have different classes in school for different levels of children.

Until that time, apparently, all the children had been in the same classroom, trying to cope as best they could with the message from the teacher. But when Calvin began his academy, his school in Geneva, he picked up this idea of graded lessons for children, graded lessons for people to understand.

And God is a patient teacher, a patient educator, who adapts his educational plan to the level of the understanding of the people who hear it. And God knew that it would be all too much at once if he sent his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, without explaining beforehand, without giving a picture beforehand, without giving hints beforehand, promises beforehand of what his son would be like.

And people sometimes ask me, why God waited so many generations to send his son? Why didn't he send his son, you know, a hundred years after Adam and Eve were out of the garden?

[4 : 25] And my, I don't know the reply, because the answer to that, because the answer isn't given in the Bible. But I suspect that one reason would be that people needed to learn so much before they could understand the Christ who was to come.

And our writer says the law is only a shadow of the good things. He doesn't just mean the giving of the law, that is, the giving of the first five books of the Bible.

He means the reality spoken about in those first five books. And he also means here, of course, the sacrifices and the building of the tabernacle.

So these sacrifices, this tabernacle, is a shadow of the good things that are coming. I mentioned last time, I think last Sunday, the idea that the temple was a visible sign of the Christ to come, a visible reminder that God would one day dwell among his people in reality.

And so the sacrifices were visible signs of the Christ to come, promising forgiveness, though not delivering the forgiveness that Christ would give with his sacrifice.

[5 : 35] They were visible signs, those sacrifices, visible signs of the sacrifice to come, but only signs and weak signs. Just a shadow.

The reality was to come in Christ. And the writer gives us two paragraphs, if you like, two examples of this idea of shadow and reality, of an earthly shadow of a heavenly reality.

He says back there in verse one, 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.

Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, who would no longer have felt guilty about these sins.

But those sacrifices are annual reminder, an annual reminder of sins. For it's impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

[6 : 41] Yes, these sacrifices in the Old Testament were repeated endlessly. There were, of course, the daily morning and evening sacrifice. There were sacrifices for special occasions.

And then, of course, massive sacrifices of massive numbers of animals at the annual festivals. And these were, as the writer points out, an annual reminder of sins.

They pointed to a future truth, but did not deliver that to which they pointed. For it was impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. How could the blood of dumb animals, unwilling animals, take away the sins of human beings finally and forever?

But these sacrifices were visible signs, promises of the sacrifice to come. They kept the people aware of the fact that they were sinners, that they needed a sacrifice, that God had provided the sacrifice, and that God would accept the sacrifice he provided.

But now, of course, in New Testament times, as the writer says, we've been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

[8 : 00] For, as we read in verse 5, the quotation from Psalm 40, when Christ came into the world, he said, sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me.

That is, a body who would be a willing sacrifice. With burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased? Then I said, here I am, it is written about me in the scroll, I come to do your will, my God. He was not the unwilling sacrifice of an animal, but the willing sacrifice of the Son of God, who was made a human being, that he might represent us to God.

Conclusion, verse 10, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

The same move from shadow to reality is found in verses 11 to 14. Day after day, every priest stands and performs his religious duties.

[9 : 08] Again and again, he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. Now, we're not actually sure when the letter to the Hebrews was written, but it was possibly written while the temple was still standing in Jerusalem.

And if you went to Jerusalem, when this letter was written, it may be that you could go into the temple and see the priest offering their sacrifice, day after day, offering sacrifices, which cannot take away sins.

The contrast is, verse 12, but when this priest, that is Christ, when this priest had offered for all time, one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.

You stand to offer a sacrifice, because you're acting as a butcher, basically, and a barbecue merchant, as you offer the sacrifice. But Christ had completed his sacrifice, a finished work, so he sat down at the right hand of God.

And since that time, he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For, verse 14, by one sacrifice, he is made perfect forever, those who are being made holy.

[10:19] The shadow is imperfect, inexact. The reality is perfect, and powerful.

And this reality of the sacrifice of Christ, is a promised reality, not only promised in signs, invisible signs of the Christ to come, but also in words.

As we find in verses 15 to 18. God promised the coming of Christ, not only by the temple and the sacrifices, but by his words of promise.

Verse 15, the Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First, he says, this is the covenant I will make with them. After that time, says the Lord, I'll put my laws in their hearts, and write them on their minds.

But the new covenant is not just about, God teaching us how to live. It is about God forgiving our past sins. Verse 17, then he adds, their sins and lawless acts, I will remember no more.

[11:33] And where there have been forgiveness, where there have been forgiveness, sacrifice for sins is no longer necessary. I love that word, their sins and their lawless acts, I will remember no more.

That is, God forgets our sins perfectly and completely. You might, you might be well aware of sins you've committed, and you still feel guilty about them, still feel embarrassed about them.

And indeed, one of the costs of sin is that we can still see the effects of the sin we've committed in our own lives, and the lives of others. But what we remember, and what others may remember, God forgets.

And what God has forgotten, we should not dig up, and try to remember again. Well, the message of Hebrews chapter 10, and these verses, is very clear.

By one sacrifice, he has made perfect forever those who are being sanctified. But I think there are some difficult words to understand.

[12:53] Not just difficult for ourselves, but also difficult for others to understand. So if somebody asked you tomorrow, what was the sermon about yesterday in church, and you said sin, I imagine the response would be, oh no, not sin again.

For what the world thinks, I think, what people who aren't Christians think, is that sin is a ridiculous obsession for Christian believers to have. Let me tell you why the world thinks that sin is a ridiculous obsession.

It's because the world holds three ideas closely together. The first one is that we're autonomous, independent human beings accountable to no one. That's very deep in our society.

The second is that human beings have a duty to create themselves, their own moral values, their own world of reality. What a pressure to put on a young teenager to say, create your own world of moral values, your own reality.

no wonder they're such conformists. And thirdly, it's dangerous if you don't have all your needs met. You'd be psychologically damaged if you have a need and don't get it met.

[14:08] Well, we need to explain to people why those ideas are wrong. Because we are accountable to someone and that's to God. We're not just separate islands, individuals, who create our own reality.

No, God is the creator and God is the judge. And it's not dangerous if you don't get your needs met. It may be dangerous not to admit your personal needs, but there's no danger in not getting your needs met.

Just look at Jesus Christ. No, sin does matter. I have two dogs.

The younger of the two dogs called Bertie. Every morning he wakes up to planning to overthrow lawful authority. First of all, to defeat Bella, who's the older dog and thus the head of the pack.

And the second plan of Bertie is to overthrow my authority as well so he can eat his meals whenever he wants to. No, the sins of dogs don't matter though they do cause a mess occasionally.

[15:16] But the sins of humans do matter, you see. And here's another problem that when we talk about sin people think or even hear that the preacher is saying, the Bible is saying, God is saying you're worthless because you're a sinner.

Nothing could be further from the case because the Bible tells us so clearly in Genesis chapter 1 how much God values human beings. Human beings are the peak of creation because God only made human beings in his own image.

My dog Bertie is not an image of God. I am. I am and you are. What is it to be an image of God? It's to be a visible reminder of God.

The images of God in the Old Testament were a visible reminder of the God but God will allow no images of himself, no pictures of himself, no statues of himself because all pictures and statues would misrepresent him because they don't move, they can't speak, they can't think, they can't do things.

But there are some images of God and they are human beings. you know, when I look at young people nowadays, I occasionally think I know, I think I know who your parents are, I always pretend I don't because they don't often like you knowing who their parents are, so I just pretend I have no idea, that was perfectly obvious to me.

[16 : 44] And occasionally dear things they say, I think you know my parents, I say, yes I do as a matter of fact. But you see, I'm meant to see a family resemblance in you because you're meant to remind me of God.

You're an image of God meant to remind me of God. You're meant to be doing God's works, showing God's character of forgiveness and love and generosity, working for the welfare of others. On my worst mornings, when I get out of bed feeling like yesterday's breakfast heated up, I look in the mirror and I say to myself, you are an image of God.

Then I say to myself, I am an image of God. Then I think, oh, good, I can face the day now. That's good. And that's why human sin matters, because we are so precious, made so valuable to God. We have such great dignity given us by God, such a great destiny given us by God. That's why when we stuff things up, it really matters to God. Because the image is once again marred and misshapen by our sin.

[17 : 58] It's not that we're worthless, it is that we are worth so much that our sin matters. well, you think it would be the case that because sin matters so much, it matters more than our problems, it matters more than our unhappiness, it matters more than our lack of gifts or lack of resources or lack of energy.

The thing which actually hinders our relationship with God is not our problems, but our sins, sins. Not our pains, but our sins.

It's amazing how often people come to talk to me and how infrequently they raise the subject of sin. Most people come and say, well, I've got a problem I want to talk to you about, and I'm very happy to talk to people about their problems.

Well, I'm not sure what I should do, I'm happy to talk about that as well. Just occasionally somebody says, well, I've got this sin in my life, I want you to pray for me and help me get rid of it. I'm so glad when somebody says that, because there's one prayer God is sure to answer immediately, please forgive my sin.

God will not only forgive the sin, but forget it immediately through the blood of Christ. Why don't people talk about sins and think about sins today?

[19 : 29] I think because most people are running the happiness race, not the holiness race. The question is, am I happy today, not, am I holy today?

But holiness matters more than happiness, as you'll know if you've been listening to the letter to the Hebrews with attentive ears. God's love.

When I was converted in my last year in school, the man who converted me trained me to confess my sins every night before I went to sleep.

But I discover that very few Christians today are doing that. Do you confess your sins each day? I hope you do.

You do if you say the Lord's prayer, forgive us our sins. I hope you know what your sins are. I hope you know your sins, and I hope that you know your Saviour.

[20 : 30] I hope that you confess your sins each day, and are assured each day of God's forgiveness. For this great work of Christ, this great high priest, this single sacrifice for sins, matters for you today as much as it matters for anybody else in the world.

The coming of the Saviour is not just good news for unbelievers, it is good news for believers as well, even seasoned believers. So let me ask you if you do confess your sins every day.

If not, I assume you think you're perfect. You're one of very few people in the world who is perfect, if that's the case.

There's only one actually, and that's Jesus. And do you know what your habitual sins are? If you don't ask somebody who lives with you, they'll tell you quickly enough.

Or ask a good friend, they'll tell you. If you ask God to show you your sins which were invisible to you but obvious to everybody else, I remember thinking a few years ago, well, thinking of friends of mine, and I could see obvious sins in their lives, they were completely oblivious to them.

[21 : 44] Then I thought, well, perhaps there are things in my life, sins which are invisible to me, that is the repetition of them has made them invisible, blinded me to them, but I ask God to show them to me, and he's been doing that, including my driving.

I confess publicly that my method of driving was aggressive, would be, well, no, not quite aggressive, I didn't try and cut people off, but if somebody cut me off, I made sure they were sorry for it, and if they tried to get in, I'd speed up and get so they couldn't get in, and then it suddenly struck me a couple of years ago that actually I was meant to love my neighbour, love the big trucks and the motorbikes and the pedestrians, people who cut in, well, the first day it lasted two minutes, and then I was back.

I can now, by God's kindness, last for an hour and a half, isn't that amazing? And of course the funny thing is I actually arrived far more relaxed than I did when I was doing my aggressive driving. So I praise God that God showed me, and you might think it's a trivial example, it's actually not a trivial example, is it? Because you can kill people, can't you, when you drive aggressively? And you bless people when you drive lovingly and gently and kindly. So I now try to pray for every other driver on the world, on the road, God bless you, as your little red car comes in and zips in front of me, God bless you today.

[23 : 26] Now, you might think that's a silly example, what I'm saying is I know I need forgiveness for my driving, you see. And I know I need God's forgiveness every day in many aspects of my life.

And I know because the Bible tells me that you do as well. The biggest problem for churches is sin. The biggest problem for individuals is their sin.

The biggest problem in marriages is sin. The biggest problem for our nation is its sin. The biggest problem for our world is its sin.

But God has provided his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, as our great High Priest. And by one sacrifice, he has made perfect forever those who are being sanctified.

He made one sacrifice for all time. one sacrifice for sin and sat down at the right hand of his heavenly Father.

[24 : 48] I hope you know you are a sinner. I hope you know your sins. But if you do, I hope you know your Saviour, your great High Priest, Christ and his one sacrifice for all time to take away your sin.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the privilege of living in your creation as your images. And we thank you that you plan for the human race and for us as human beings such a glorious destiny as to reflect your character and do your works.

But we see with great sadness around us in the world today and in our nation and in our church and in our own lives how far we have fallen from that great destiny, that great glory, that we have indeed fallen short of your glory.

glory. But we thank you so much that you sent your Son to be our Saviour. Please draw us, drive us to your Son each day as we need to confess our sins and help us to find in him your provision for our greatest need, a single sacrifice for sin for all times and blood which makes us clean.

please convict us of our sin and please assure us of your salvation. We ask this in Christ's name.

[26 : 34] Amen.