Guilt and Sacrifice

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Date: 03 April 2026

Preacher: Stephen Murray

[0:00] Hebrews chapter 10 verses 1 to 18. The author of Hebrews writes and he says, But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins.

It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said, Sacrifice an offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me.
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 have come to do your will, my God.
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. Then he said, Here I am.
I have come to do your will. He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.
[1:25] Day after day, every priest stands and performs his religious duties. Again and again, he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.

And since that time, he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice, he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. 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 will put my laws in their hearts and I will write them on their minds.
And then he adds, This is the word of the Lord.
Let's pray. Let's ask for God's help as we study. Gracious God, teach us your truth this morning. Help us to understand what it is that your word says.
[2:32] We want to meet Jesus in the pages of scripture. We want to meet him and then we want to be changed by that encounter. And that happens when your word is taught and when your spirit takes that word and impresses it upon us.

And so we pray that you would grant us that special mercy this morning. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. There are a lot of different ways we could talk about the cross this morning.
What it is that the cross does. What it achieves. What it is fulfilling. And one of the ways to speak about it is to use the category of sacrifice.
The author of the book of Hebrews describes it this way in the previous chapter to the one that we just read. In chapter 9 verse 26 he says, Jesus has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.
Just as people are destined to die once and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many. And he will appear a second time not to bear sin but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.
[3:45] So the cross is the sacrifice of Christ to bear sin. It's one way to think about it. Now that language of sacrifice in the sort of religious cultic sense might be a little bit foreign to us because we don't perform ritual sacrifices here every single Sunday but it would have made a whole lot of sense to a first century Jew who participated in the Old Testament religious system.

That system, if you go back into your Bibles, you'll read has all these very intricate and detailed sacrifices that all constituted a part of regular worship.
And so one of the things that the author of Hebrews is doing throughout his book is he's trying to say you don't need to go back there. That system has been replaced. It's a shadow.
It's been replaced by the once and for all sacrifice of Christ on the cross. And that's what we're going to think about together this morning. That once and for all sacrifice of Christ.

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There's two things I want you to see this morning. I want you to see the problem of guilt and the solution of sacrifice. The problem of guilt and the solution of sacrifice.
[4:57] So here's the first one. If you go back to the beginning of chapter 10 and you look at the first four verses. It says, So here's what we're getting told there.

We're getting told the sacrifices of the Old Covenant system that were stipulated in the Law of Moses. They didn't ultimately take away sin in and of themselves. The blood of bulls and goats, the animals used in those sacrifices, couldn't achieve that ultimate end.
Now if you think for a second, what were the people wanting exactly? As they go and they participate in that worship week in and week out, what are they wanting? What are they hoping that the sacrifices are going to do for them?
In one sense, they're hoping it's going to solve their one big problem. And it's really the one big problem that is across the Bible.
That the entire Bible is trying to solve. And they're hoping the sacrificial system is going to solve that one big problem. Which is the gap. The gap between a holy God.
[6:32] A holy perfect God. And a sinful broken humanity. How do you bridge that gap? How do you bring those two parties back together into a relationship? How do you make them friends again?

But then what Hebrews does, and particularly this section, chapter 9 and chapter 10, is it personalizes this a little bit. And it moves from that bigger question, that bigger problem, to the actual experience of the individual who's trying desperately to connect with God.
So if you've actually got a Bible, you can flip back to the previous chapter. Chapter 9 verse 9. There, talking about the tabernacle and all the sacrifices associated with the tabernacle.
The author says this. He says, The gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. Now what do you clear a conscience of?
Well, you clear a conscience of feelings of guilt, right? It's exactly what our passage says. Chapter 10 verse 2. He says, If the sacrifices of the old covenant system actually worked then, and I quote, The worshippers would have been cleansed once for all and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins.
[7:52] So what's the big problem of the Bible? Sinful, sinful humanity separated from a holy God. But what does that feel like? How is that experienced?

Well, you feel guilty. The big problem is I feel guilty. Now guilt is not a pleasant experience. Feeling guilty is not something any of us desire.
It can be quite debilitating actually. Nigel Byrne is a British author and pastor, writer in the UK. He says this, he says, In our society, guilt is increasingly being recognized as a real problem.
Not just because feeling guilty is unpleasant, but because it can be crippling. It can stop us being the person we really are. We can be unable to express ourselves or be ourselves when we're weighed down with the burden of guilt.
In particular, it can stop us relating to other people as we should. Guilt can lead to various defensive mechanisms. It leads to feelings of inferiority or insecurity, and all that affects our relationships.
[8:55] We can't relate with other people as we could or should. So what do we do with these feelings of guilt? It's a large sort of section of contemporary society that says, Well, what you've got to do to get rid of feelings of guilt is you've got to get rid of traditional notions of God.

Because if you do that, if you get rid of traditional notions of God, then you get rid of these crippling feelings that we all feel. You see, because if you think there's a big God out there, a big great God out there, who watches your every single move, including your inner thought life, so not just what you do externally, but even what's going on in your thoughts and your desires and your motives, and then he evaluates everything according to his incredibly strict moral code, well then of course you're going to be crippled by feelings of guilt all the time.
If that's what you believe. So you've got to get rid of the God that Sting sings about. I know some of you are too young to know who Sting is, but the God that Sting sings about.
Every breath you take, every move you make, every bond you break, every step you take, I'll be watching you. Every single day, every word you say, every game you play, every night you stay, I'll be watching you.
You get rid of that God, and then the problem of guilt, well it goes away, right? So the culture says, look, let's stop feeling shameful about ourselves, just because some ancient book with archaic

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morality tells us that there's a big guy in the sky who's watching our every single move.
[10:23] And that's one way that the culture has tried to get rid of feelings of guilt, or lessen feelings of human guilt. The problem is we've had some time to test this hypothesis out.

Basically, since the Enlightenment, the beginning of the Enlightenment, we've been testing this out, and the results aren't great. So there have been plenty of attempts to strip God from the equation over the last few hundred years, and yet, feelings of guilt have continued to linger.
I remember reading several years ago a blog, when Christian blogging was the thing to do, and everybody wrote a blog, even though none of us had anything to say, we wrote a blog because we thought the world needed to hear what we had to say.
There was a guy by the name of John Shaw, who was an author and a blogger, and he had a blog where he tried to engage with people who were in the faith, who were kind of like one step out of the faith, who were deconstructing their faith and walking away.
And he put a question on his blog, and he asked for all the atheists who read his blog, how do you deal with inner feelings of guilt? And he got over 130 responses to that question from atheists, from people who no longer believe in God.
[11:37] What was interesting to me, as I read through all the different responses there on the blog, is that none of the atheists really contested the fact that we all struggle with guilt. The only kind of debate came about what to do with these feelings.

But these streams and streams of comments gave this implicit acknowledgement that guilt is still a very real problem for you, whether you believe in God or not, which is somewhat odd, if you think about it.
American historian Wilfred MacLeod wrote a really important essay on this phenomenon not so long ago. He said, Those of us living in the developed countries of the West find ourselves in a tightening grip of a paradox, one whose shape and character have so far largely eluded our understanding.
It is the strange persistence of guilt as a psychological force in modern life. If anything, the word persistence understates the matter. Guilt is not merely lingered, it has grown, even metastasized, into an ever more powerful and pervasive element in the life of the contemporary West, even as the rich language formerly used to define it has withered and faded from discourse, and the means of containing its effects, let alone obtaining relief from it, have become ever more elusive.
So he says, Look, even though we've moved away from traditional notions of guilt, presumably in relation to God, the psychological experience of guilt has just continued to ramp up and get worse.
[13:12] It's still there. It doesn't go away. And so dismissing God from the culture, well, it hasn't lessened those feelings of guilt. If anything, it's created a bigger problem because now we have nothing to do with that guilt. We have no one to take that guilt to.

So if getting rid of God doesn't take away guilt, then what else do you do? Well, you make sacrifices. That's what you do. You offer up sacrifices.
If you've got a crushing feeling of guilt, you do something. You turn to some sort of performance to justify your life and your existence. You basically make penance.
And so we end up with a culture of people all performing, performing in all sorts of different ways in different areas of their lives in an attempt to cleanse their consciences, to make penance.
And that's sacrifice. That's what it is. You and I don't make sacrifices quite in the same way as in the Old Covenant.
[14:12] I mean, we do fry cow and chicken occasionally, but it's not quite the same thing as the Old Testament. We don't have a religious system where we are trying to day in and day out make ourselves acceptable to God in the way that the Israelites did.

But that doesn't mean that we're not making personal sacrifices in some form or another all of the time in an attempt to appease our consciences, to gain a sense of righteousness, a sense of belonging, a sense of acceptance, to even make up for past wrongs, failures in our lives.
See, because it's very simple. A sacrifice is giving up one thing to get another thing. In fact, it's giving up something of value, of significant value. That's what makes it a sacrifice to get something else of value.
You and I do not get the things that we really, really want in life without sacrificing. When you want something really badly, when your life is built on having that something, your life gets meaning from having that one thing, well, then you have to sacrifice it to get that thing.

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So if your life is built on your career, for example, if it is from growing and thriving and succeeding in your career that your deepest sense of justification comes, if you're saying to yourself subconsciously, it doesn't matter what things I've done in the past, it doesn't matter if I failed in other areas, if I succeed in this area, then I'll feel complete like I've made it.
[15:44] If that's how you feel, well, then you have to make sacrifices to feed that. You have to cull things around you, things of significant value to feed that.

Now, it might be the relationship that you have with your kids. It might be your marriage. It might be moral convictions that you set aside to get ahead, but you have to sacrifice. Maybe your life is built on finding happiness in relationship through getting married, through finding a spouse, where you're saying to yourself subconsciously, it doesn't matter what I've done wrong.
It doesn't matter my moral failings in the past. As long as I can find somebody who's gonna love and accept me, then I will feel complete. If that's how you feel, if that's your biggest thing in life, well, then you've gotta make sacrifices to get that.
It might be putting your career on hold. It might be surrendering your autonomy. It could be any number of valuable good things, but you have to sacrifice. And I could give you plenty of other examples, and the examples are not bad things in and of themselves.
It's not a bad thing to want to excel at your career. It's not a bad thing to want to find love. But when you're saying to yourself, if I do this right, it'll complete me, well, then you've got a very big problem.
[17:06] The problem is this. It's in our text. It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin. That's the problem.

That is, no matter how many sacrifices you make, you will never, ever, ever clear your conscience in an ultimate sense. Those feelings of guilt will still be there. There are people who are at the very top of their careers having sacrificed so much to get there and to find meaning and fulfillment in getting there, and they get there and they still feel guilty.
There are people in wonderful marriages having sacrificed to get that marriage, and they still feel guilty. And here's why.
You're placing the burden of perfection on something that cannot handle that burden. The ancient Israelites came year after year to offer their sacrifices, looking for what?
Longing for what? For perfection. For cleansing. That's what the passage says. They wanted to feel right. They wanted to have their conscience cleansed, to feel justified before God, to feel right within themselves.
[18:21] But the writer just so clearly points out that to attempt to do that through the sacrificial system is to place the burden of perfection on something that cannot handle, cannot bear the weight of that burden.

The sacrifices could never make them completely clean, could never clear their consciences. And yet we're doing the same thing in the culture. We pursue wholeness.
We pursue completeness, justification, perfection, whatever it is you want to call it, through our careers, through our relationships, through our ideas, through our value systems, through building all sorts of different identities.
And what happens is we leave this trail of damaging sacrifices behind us. only to find out at the end that your career can't bear that burden.
It can't bear that burden of cleansing your conscience. It can't bear the burden of making up for all of your past failures, your moral failures. Your career can't do that. Neither can your love relationship. Neither can your marriage.
[19:23] Neither can raising your children perfectly. Neither can chasing after noble ideas, pursuing causes of justice. Because the sacrifices that you make in pursuit of those ultimate things can't cleanse you.

You have a guilt problem. And you need a sacrifice that is bigger, that is more comprehensive than any other sacrifice in order to deal with that guilt problem. So that's the first thing, the problem of guilt.
Here's the second thing, the solution of sacrifice. Look down at verse 5. The writer says, Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said, Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me.
With burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. And then I said, Here I am. It is written about me in the scroll. I have come to do your will, my God. First, he said, Sacrifices and offerings,

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burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them, though they were offered in accordance with the law.
And then he said, Here I am. I have come to do your will. He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all.
[20:53] Might be a little bit of a confusing text as you read and think like, what's going on? Who's speaking? Where? But what's happening is the author's making his case by appealing to the Old Testament, as he does throughout the book of Hebrews.

He quotes sections of the Old Testament. And here he quotes from the Psalms, a messianic psalm. That is a psalm in the book of Psalms that really, very clearly, when you read it, is foreshadowing the coming Messiah.
He quotes a section of Psalm 40, a psalm of David. And then what he does is in verses 8 to 10, he gives a little bit of commentary. He says, I'm going to tell you what the psalm means in our context. And it seems what he's trying to say there, what he's trying to point out is that even from the very beginning, sacrifices wouldn't be enough for God. They wouldn't make you right from God. He's saying, look, it's in the Old Testament.
Instead, what we need is not more sacrifices. What we need, rather, is the one who would come and offer his life, his body, do the will of God perfectly.
[21:51] We need the Messiah, is what he's saying. By coming and perfectly fulfilling the will of God, Jesus, the Messiah, sets aside the sacrificial system.

He sets it aside with a sacrifice of his own. the sacrifice of his body. And it's this sacrifice then that perfects us. It's this sacrifice then that actually truly makes us holy.
It's this sacrifice then that bridges the gap between sinful humanity and a holy God. And it is this sacrifice then that cleanses a guilty conscience. This is not a sacrifice that gets repeated over and over like all the others.
You see that in the section we read earlier, 11 to 14. it's a once for all sacrifice. Cleanses us, makes us holy once and for all.
And it's then this once and for all sacrifice that is then the basis for living a forgiven life. The life of what he calls the new covenant there.
[22:53] If you look at verse 15, he says, 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 will put my laws in their hearts and I will write them on their minds. And then he adds, their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more. And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.
See if you live in light of this sacrifice which has been performed once and for all on your behalf by Jesus on the cross, well then all other sacrifices are no longer necessary.
You don't need them. That is, the sacrifice of Jesus provides a comprehensive solution to human guilt. It removes our need to keep sacrificing over and over again in different ways to cleanse our consciences.
Now friends, this is incredibly good news. This is why the gospel is called good news. It is the good news that if I trust in Jesus Christ, if I trust in his once and for all sacrifice for sins, I can stop sacrificing to try and cleanse my own conscience.
[24:08] I can stop, I can rest. Now there is a sense in which we all sacrifice all the time and we have to sacrifice all the time to achieve certain things in life.

You want to be in a relationship with somebody, for example, then you have to sacrifice to some level. You have to sacrifice some of your personal autonomy, otherwise you'll just be a really selfish idiot and just break those relationships all the time.
So there has to be a level of sacrifice. If you want to do well in your job, you probably will have to make some sacrifices. You can't just sit on the beach and surf all day long if you want to perform at your job.
But the thing that moves those sort of sacrifices from being ordinary, necessary sacrifices that we need to make to becoming dangerous, destructive sacrifices that destroy our lives and destroy our relationships is whether or not you in your heart of hearts are looking to clear your conscience through those sacrifices.

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But when you've got the sacrifice of Christ already securing forgiveness for you, then there is no need to look at those other sacrifices to cleanse you anymore.
[25:21] You don't need them. You don't need to pay some sort of penance to get a clear conscience. You don't need to religiously perform to get God's acceptance and forgiveness. In fact, the sacrificing that you engage in to clear your conscience, no matter what form it takes, is actually an insult to God.

It's an insult to God. It's an insult to the sacrificial love of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now, Christians don't always get this right. I think we get this muddled often. There are extreme versions of this, but we get this muddled often.
There have been eras of Christian history where the church has forgotten that Christ's sacrifice is sufficient, that it's all that we need. Long periods of Christian history where religious people engaged in all sorts of penance in an attempt to clear their conscience.
Monks and nuns would grovel on the floor, like bend down, and then literally lick the floor. This was the thing. Lick the floor in order to present themselves humble and contrite and presumably acceptable before God.
Some people would wear hair shirts, what's called a sillis. It's this coarse undergarment that you put on just to make yourself uncomfortable all day long, aimed at bringing discomfort.
[26:45] Others would whip themselves repeatedly, all in an attempt to clear a guilt-ridden conscience. Here's what the great preacher Charles Spurgeon said about these attempts as he kind of reflects on the same passage in Hebrews 10.

He said, whenever I think of another sacrifice for sin being offered by whoever it may be presented, I can only regard it as an infamous insult to the perfection of the Savior's work.
Then again, what becomes of penance? Is not penance in its essence an offering for sin? I do not care who it is who prescribes the penance, nor what it is, whether it is licking the pavement with your tongue, or wearing a hair shirt, or laying on the whip.
If it is supposed that by the mortification of the flesh, men can take away my sin, this text is like a two-edged sword to pierce the inmost heart of such teaching. Then he quotes that last line there, where remission of these is there is no more offering for sin.
Take off your hair shirt, poor fool. Wash the stones with a dishcloth and keep your tongue clean. There is no need for these fooleries. Christ has completed the atonement.
[28:00] You need not suffer thus. Christ has suffered. God exacts no more. Do not try to supplement his gold with your dross. Do not try to add to his matchless robes the rags of your poor penance.

There is no more sacrifice for sin. Some of you are using your careers, your relationships, your hard work, your parenting, your moralism, your religious performance on a Sunday, numerous things as a form of penance, hoping that if you succeed in that area, your conscience is going to get cleansed.
I want to tell you that you are licking the floor. You are licking the floor. When you do that, you insult the perfection of the Savior's work.
You are swapping the golden robe Christ has clothed you with for a filthy rag. sacrifice, your penance is worthless. It is worthless in clearing your conscience.
Christ and his sacrifice has done it already. Trust in him. Rest in him. When that once for all sacrifice of Jesus is the basis of your life, when you live your life resting in it, well then you interact much more healthily with guilt, with feelings of guilt, with ordinary everyday sacrifice, with achievement, with all the different areas in your life because those things no longer define you.
[29:43] Instead, you are defined by the once and for all sacrifice that makes you holy. Before God, your conscience is cleansed. Jesus has borne the punishment you deserve for your sin. He's taken that guilt upon himself.

He has done away with it at the cross. That's why we're sitting here this morning. And because you've now got that once and for all sacrifice, you have this endless well with enormous depth full of resources to draw on to navigate this difficult world that you live in.
And so when feelings of guilt arise in you, they don't send you into that debilitating spiral. Instead, they point you back to the cure. And they cause you to dive more deeply into the sacrificial love of Jesus.

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You might know that the great hymn writer John Newton who penned the famous hymn, Amazing Grace, was earlier in his life prior to becoming a Christian, was the captain of a slave trading ship. He, in an earlier part of his life, engaged in all sorts of horrors. Later on in his life, he wrote this down. He said, it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.
[31:11] Now, doing the things that he must have done, seeing the things that he must have seen, you would think that a man like that would have been debilitated by his guilt, flawed by his guilt for the rest of his life.

And yet he wrote hymns with words like this. Bowed down beneath a load of sin, by Satan sorely pressed, by war without and fears within, I come to thee for rest.
Be thou my shield and hiding place, that, sheltered near thy side, I may my fierce accuser face, and tell him thou hast died.
O wondrous love, to bleed and die, to bear the cross in shame, that guilty sinners, such as I, might plead thy gracious name. And that wasn't just sentiment, it wasn't that he was just good with words and writing poems and hymns, because in later years in his life, Newton, with a very firm sense that his guilt had been cleansed by the once and for all sacrifice of our Lord, became a key and influential figure in the abolitionist movement, inspiring the likes of William Wilberforce and the work that he did in parliament.
And so my question to you this morning is, as we stand and are confronted with the once and for all sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ, is do you sense it this morning? Do you sense the forgiveness of the gospel that you have there? The removal of guilt?
[32:42] Do you know that your guilt has been taken away? Or are you still sacrificing in all sorts of different ways to try and appease that conscience? Rest in Christ.

Those nails are there in those hands. Those thorns are in the brow to say your guilt is gone this morning and you can rest in that. Let's pray together.
Our Savior, why don't you teach us how to rest in the finished work of Jesus? because our consciences, they assault us sometimes.
They tell us that we're guilty. They make us feel inadequate and weak, unlovable, that no one would accept us.
And it is at those dark, low moments and throughout really that we need to continually preach the gospel to our own hearts and remind us that the once and for all sacrifice has been offered up.
[33:54] It was offered up on Golgotha. It was offered up on the cross. And because it was offered up and because it was accepted by you as a pleasing sacrifice, there is no more guilt for those who will trust in Jesus.

The guilt is washed away, it is taken away, and the conscience is cleansed, Lord. So please Lord, keep us as a people from turning back to the blood of bulls and goats to try and make feelings of guilt go away.
And let us rest in Jesus. We ask that this morning for Christ's sake. Amen.

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