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Hebrews #26

When God Chooses Not To Remember

Hebrews 10:1-18

I'm going to begin by asking you a series of questions, to each of which, in my opinion, there is one simple answer.

- What is the single greatest and most imposing obstacle to your enjoyment of God?
- What, more than anything else, keeps you at arms' length from your heavenly Father?
- What is it that makes you hesitant to draw near to God and to seek his help?
- What is the primary reason why you don't pray more than you do?
- What is the primary reason that when you do pray you live in fear and anxiety that God either won't hear it or if he does hear it he won't answer it in the way you want him to?
- Why are you restrained in your worship of God?
- Why are you reluctant to share your faith with non-Christians that you know? What is it that causes you to think of yourself as unqualified to step up and serve in the local church?
- What is the primary cause of your fear, worry, doubt, and self-contempt?
- Why do you struggle to find energy and motivation to read your Bible on a regular basis?
- Why are joy and peace so infrequent in your spiritual experience?

Now that, dear friend, is quite a list of questions! It virtually spans the spectrum of issues in the Christian life. And I strongly believe that there is one answer to them all.

The single overriding and most debilitating factor that threatens to undermine everything in our Christian lives and in our relationship with God is the failure to understand, embrace, and enjoy the full and final forgiveness of our sins.

The reason you and I struggle to enjoy God is because we live in constant fear that he doesn't enjoy us. And how could he when our guilt and shame remain? And why do we experience this fear? ***Because we don't understand, embrace, and enjoy the fact that God has forgiven us all our sins!***

The reason we are so hesitant to draw near to God and bring our prayerful requests to him is that we live in fear that he's angry with us. And why shouldn't he be when our guilt and shame remain? And why do we experience this hesitation? ***Because we don't understand, embrace, and enjoy the fact that God has forgiven us all our sins!***

The reason we feel uncomfortable in being entirely free and joyful and heartfelt in our worship is that we wonder if perhaps God might still be disgusted with us. We worry that his wrath still abides on us and that we are still subject to eternal condemnation. The lingering memory of sins committed leads us to think that God looks at our worship and our service in the church as hypocritical. And why do we live in bondage to those crippling thoughts? ***Because we don't understand, embrace, and enjoy the fact that God has forgiven us all our sins!***

Now, am I exaggerating things a bit? Maybe. I suppose there are other reasons why we don't live our Christian lives in the way that we know we should and with the joy and energy and zeal that we would prefer. But I'm still convinced that ***deep down inside many Christian souls is the lingering fear, the ever-present doubt, the crippling uncertainty that God has all of our sins in the forefront of his mind and stands ready to use them against us.***

Feelings of guilt, shame, and self-contempt pose the greatest threat to a robust and joyful Christian experience. Nothing serves to undermine the intimacy of our relationship with God quite like the piercing pain of guilt, the lingering memory of multiple moral failures in our past, and the darkness of shame that so often accompanies it.

In other words, our fundamental problem is that we either haven't heard or don't recall or simply refuse to believe what God said in **Jeremiah 31:34**, words that are quoted here in **Hebrews 10:17** – ***"I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more."*** What haunts us and

brings torment and unrest to our hearts is that we live as if those final two words weren't in the text. If I could provide a more literal translation, God is saying: "I will never again, by no means ever, remember their sins or lawless deeds."

What we feel deep inside is that God is constantly examining us and indicting us and declaring to us: "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds," when in fact that is precisely what he declares he will do "no more"! ***No more! By which he means, "Never again! Never again!"***

Even those who profess no faith at all in Jesus and operate on the basis of secular principles and a humanistic framework for understanding human nature will tell you that one of the most severely debilitating problems that anyone can face is guilt. Feelings of guilt can paralyze and intimidate and suffocate the human soul. Feelings of guilt destroy marriages and drive people to a multitude of sinful alternatives. Psychologists who largely reject the biblical gospel still agree with us that guilt and self-condemnation and contempt for one's own soul is perhaps the most problematic issue people face.

But the great difference is that we who believe the Word of God do not tell such people that they need to recognize that they *aren't* guilty. The answer *isn't* to say: "Look, your problem is that you are in bondage to false guilt. You shouldn't feel that way about yourself. You've done nothing to warrant this sort of mental and emotional agony."

Christians, on the other hand, say: "Your problem isn't that you *feel* guilty but that you *are* guilty. But the gospel of Jesus Christ has a permanent solution to your pain: the blood of Jesus Christ brings complete and eternal forgiveness! Your conscience can be cleansed *forever*. Your heart can be set free from condemnation, *forever*. Your emotions need not be damaged by self-contempt but can be redeemed and renewed and enjoyed, *forever*."

I say this to you today because of what the author of Hebrews says that God says. There it is for us to see and read and hear and behold: God promises never ever to remember our sins or lawless deeds! Hebrews 10:17 is one of the most glorious declarations in all of Scripture, and I want you to hear it today with a force and energy you've never experienced before. ***I want you to hear it in a way that actually changes your life and your relationship with God.***

Our focus, therefore, is this one verse. But as you well know, no text like this hangs isolated in the Bible. It does not exist in a vacuum. It is always nestled in, as it were, among other

statements that supply us with a context or framework for understanding it. That context is the first eighteen verses of Hebrews 10.

So let me take a minute or so to *summarize* what is being said in Hebrews 10:1-18. That isn't as difficult as you may think, for the simple reason that these verses are something of a summation of everything that our author has been saying in the first nine chapters of Hebrews. You've probably noticed this as we've been making our way through this letter, but *Hebrews is highly repetitive*. Unlike the letters of Paul, for example, *Hebrews is a constant re-telling of a single theme with only slight variations along the way*.

That theme, of course, is that *Jesus is better!* Jesus, who he is and what has done and what he is even now doing at the right hand of the Father in heaven, is infinitely superior to and greater and more glorious than everything that preceded him in the Old Testament. In fact, everything that preceded him in the OT pointed forward to his coming. Through various symbols and shadows and the sacrifices of the Levitical code, the OT was designed to point forward to the coming of Jesus Christ.

We saw in chapter one that Jesus is better than the *prophets* of the OT. He is superior to the *angels* who fulfill God's bidding and do his will. We saw in chapter two that the *salvation* he secures for us is superior to anything that the OT Law of Moses could provide. In chapter three we were told how Jesus is better than *Moses*. In chapter four we were told that the "*rest*" provided by Jesus is greater than the "rest" that came through *Joshua* and the promised land of Canaan. In chapters five, six, and seven our author explained in considerable detail how Jesus as High Priest is better than *Aaron* and all the other High Priests in the history of Israel. In chapter eight he explained how the *new covenant* inaugurated by Jesus is superior in every way to the old covenant that came through Moses. And in chapter nine we saw that the sacrifice that Jesus offered of himself to deal with sin once and for all time is incomparably superior to the *sacrifices* of bulls and goats and lambs that were offered during the time of the OT.

There is a sense, then, in which chapter ten, verses one through eighteen, summarize this central theme. So instead of walking through it verse by verse, let me provide a simple summation so that we can focus our attention on v. 17.

Hebrews 10:1-18 / A Summation of the First Nine Chapters

As I said, there is little in this paragraph that has not been dealt with at considerable length in the first nine chapters. It falls into four parts:

- **10:1-4** – in which the inadequacies of the Old Testament sacrificial system are explained.
- **10:5-10** – in which our author uses Psalm 40 to explain how Jesus has effectively achieved what the Old Testament system could not.
- **10:11-13** – in which we see once again the superiority of the single sacrifice of Jesus when compared with the multiple and repeated sacrifices of the Old Covenant.
- **10:14-18** – in which the superior spiritual blessings of the New Covenant, as set forth in Jeremiah 31, are explained and applied to us today.

(1) Hebrews 10:1-4 – Here the point is unmistakable. If a sacrifice for sin was perfect and could finally and forever cleanse the human heart of guilt and condemnation, it would not need to be repeated. The inadequacy of the OT sacrifices, which is to say, their failure to cleanse the human conscience of guilt and shame, is demonstrated in that they were continually offered year after year. The only thing these sacrifices did well was to remind the people that their sins had not yet been forgiven. Simply put: *repetition is inconsistent with finality*.

The Day of Atonement that came every year, year after year, was not only a reminder to the people that their sins had not yet been fully and finally removed; it was also a constant reminder that **God still remembered their sins**. This is what will make the declaration of v. 17 so beautiful!

Let me make two brief comments before I move on. *First*, there are people today in Christian churches who believe that we should embrace the Law of Moses and live under its regulations. But the Law of Moses, as good and wonderful as it was, and as instructive and encouraging as it is, “has but a *shadow* of the good things to come” (v. 1). The “good things” to come refers, of course, to Jesus and all that he has accomplished for us in the establishment of the New Covenant. Nothing in the OT Law can provide us with the “true form” of those spiritual realities that God wants to give us. ***Why would you want to place yourself under the authority of a shadow when God invites you into the experience of the substance?***

Second, you may be wondering: If the blood of bulls and goats could never “take away” (v. 4) the sins of the people of Israel, ***how were people in the time of the Old Testament saved?*** It wasn’t by works. It wasn’t through obedience to the Law of Moses. ***It was by faith in that to***

which the sacrifices pointed. An OT believer said, in effect: “I know the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away my sin. If it could, it wouldn’t be shed in sacrifice year after year. The only thing that can take away my sin is that perfect sacrifice that God has promised he will provide in due course. I don’t know fully what that will entail or look like. But ***my only hope for eternal life is to trust that what these animal sacrifices symbolize and typify and prophesy will one day be offered up on my behalf to atone finally and forever for my sins.***” That is how a person living during the time of the OT was saved.

(2) Hebrews 10:5-10 – Psalm 40 is a declaration by David that what God ultimately wants isn’t the blood of bulls and goats and lambs but obedience from a willing heart. This sort of obedience was perfectly embodied and expressed in the life of Jesus, especially when he willingly offered up himself as a sacrifice for sin, a sacrifice that was perfectly suited and adequate to make a final atonement for sin.

Look at v. 9. When Jesus came in fulfillment of God’s will, he did away with the “first” system in which sacrifices were offered repeatedly, and in its place established a “second” and superior way to atone for sin: namely, the blood that Jesus himself shed on the cross. The “***first***” is thus a reference to the Old Covenant of Moses and the “***second***” is a reference to the New Covenant of Jesus Christ.

(3) Hebrews 10:11-13 – Here the focus is on the proof that the sacrifice Jesus made is perfect. And what is that proof or evidence? It is found in the fact that after Jesus offered up himself as a sacrifice for sin, ***he sat down!*** No OT high priest ever sat down, for his work of offering up a blood sacrifice never ended. But to prove the perfection of Christ’s death as a sacrifice for sin, he sat down! Praise God!

(4) Hebrews 10:14-18 – Here our author quotes for us once again the prophecy of Jeremiah 31 concerning the establishment of a New Covenant in the blood of Christ. Since I devoted an entire sermon to the New Covenant when we were in Hebrews 8, I will here only consider v. 14 and v. 17.

First, Hebrews 10:14 is a remarkable and extremely important passage. I want to draw your attention to something that most people ignore or fail to see. This is you, Christian. He’s talking about you. And he says that Christ “has perfected (you) for all time.” Don’t overlook the past tense. Something has happened to you through faith in Jesus that is foundational to your

Christian identity and life. You “have been perfected”! It is accomplished, finished, and complete, and nothing can add to it or detract from it.

This doesn’t mean you will never again sin or make mistakes or forget where you left your car keys. It doesn’t mean you will never lose your temper when someone cuts you off on Broadway Extension or that you will never look upon someone with lust or envy those who have something you lack. Rather, *the “perfection” that he has in view is the forgiveness of sins.* You are “perfect” in the sense that God has forgiven all your sins and declared you righteous in his sight, and thus qualified you for acceptance in his presence. And that will never change. We’ll see that more clearly when we look at v. 17.

So, how do we know that the “perfection” here in v. 14a is not sinless perfection, as if to suggest that when we believe in Jesus we cease forever to sin? We know it because of v. 14b. There we read that *those who are “perfected” “are being sanctified.”* Notice the change in tense. We *have been* perfected in the past. It is accomplished and complete. But we *are being* sanctified in the present. If we are still in need of daily sanctification we obviously are not yet free from sin.

This is more than a little shocking when you stop to think about it. Martin Luther, the great 16th century Protestant Reformer, would often describe Christians with the Latin phrase, *simul iustus et peccator*: “simultaneously righteous/just and a sinner.” We are those who have been “perfected” in that our sins are finally and forever forgiven at the same time that we battle with sin and are gradually and progressively being made more and more like Jesus in personal experience.

Second, we now return to the one text that concerns us most: “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more” (Heb. 10:17).

It’s important for us to remember that God does in fact “remember” many things and we should be grateful for it. Frequently in the OT we are assured that God remembers his people, the promises he has given them, and especially the covenant that he has made with them (see Pss. 74:2; 105:8, 42; 106:45; 111:5). But when it comes to our sins, well, that’s another matter!

You and I certainly remember our sins and evil deeds, all too often! We can’t shake free from them. They nag at our hearts and haunt us and torment us and oppress our souls. There is a

constant piercing of the conscience. And the only way to break free from that remembrance is to remind ourselves that God does **not** remember!

God doesn't gain knowledge. God doesn't lose knowledge. He neither learns nor forgets. He knows all things instantly and eternally, now and forever. So, when he says he won't remember our sins he means: ***"I'll never bring it up and use it against you. I'll never take your sins into consideration when it comes to determining who is granted entrance into my eternal kingdom. I'll never appeal to your sins as grounds for condemning you."***

There is obviously a difference between "forgetting" and "choosing not to remember." Forgetting is unavoidable. It happens by nature, not by choice. You can't choose to forget. It just happens. It doesn't require any effort to "forget" something. You get busy, distracted, tired, and things slip from your mind.

This is not what happens to God. God cannot forget in the literal sense of the term and certainly not in the same way you and I do. God doesn't suffer from mental lapses. His mind is infinitely perfect and powerful. Rather, God willingly chooses "not to remember." Thus, it isn't so much that the knowledge of our sins and lawless deeds has been erased from God's mind. Rather, God promises to us that he will "not remember" our shortcomings and sin. He will not remind *himself* of our failures. And he will not remind *us* of them. They play no part in determining or shaping our relationship with him. He will never throw them in our face or subtly drop hints about the ways we've failed.

"But wait a minute! Doesn't the Holy Spirit still convict us of sin and call us to confession and repentance?"

Yes, he certainly does. Although that may seem to conflict with v. 17, it makes perfectly good sense when you keep in mind the vitally important distinction between our ***eternal union*** with Christ and our ***experiential communion*** with Christ.

Our ***eternal union*** has to do with our salvation and our status in the sight of God. We are united by faith to Christ and nothing can change or undermine that reality. This is what our author had in mind when he said in v. 14 that we "have been *perfected for all time*." And God's promise to us is that our eternal union with Christ will never be threatened or altered simply because we

have a bad day which in turn causes God to have a bad day such that he decides to “remember” our sins. That will never, ever happen.

But our *experiential communion* with Christ is something that can change from day to day. Our *enjoyment* of that eternal union and the *peace* in our hearts that flows from it can fluctuate dependent on our obedience. I am always and forever united to Christ by faith but I don’t always feel it or enjoy it or experience it from one day to the next. ***Disobedience and sin can greatly affect my communion with Christ but never my union with him.***

Our fear is that when we fail and sin God will say: “Ah hah! Gotcha! I remember now when you did this before. I gave you a free pass. I gave you a second chance. And there you go again. You’re such a disappointment!” No! Never!

Conclusion

So I ask you today: What would your Christian life look like if you woke up each day, went about your tasks and responsibilities, and fell asleep each night with the unassailable confidence in your heart that God will never remember your sins and lawless deeds? Think again about the questions I asked at the beginning of this message.

To know without hesitation or qualification or the slightest doubt that when God looks at you and thinks about you and hears your prayers that he refuses to remember your sins or lawless deeds, not because there aren’t any, not because you’ve been especially good this week, but solely because Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice in your place once and for all time, . . . to know this and to experience the joy and power and peace it brings, is simply too marvelous for words.

Now let me close with an appeal and an offer to you who do not yet know Christ as Lord and Savior. Do you agonize over your sin and lawless deeds? Do you live daily in distress and fear that God will reject and judge you, now and forever? Do you desire that God would never again remember your sins? That can happen today, right now, and it will last forever.

I offer you Jesus Christ, or better still, Jesus offers himself to you, he who gave himself as a sacrifice for sinful men and women like us. Through that sacrifice he has atoned for sin; he has satisfied the wrath and justice of God. And now all that is required is that you acknowledge your need of a savior and that you repent of those sins and lawless deeds and put your trust and hope and confidence in Jesus alone. The moment that happens, God says to you: “I will remember your sins and your lawless deeds ***no more***.” And that means forever!