

FOR WHAT THE LAW COULD NOT DO

Hebrews 10:1–10 — *"For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? because that the worshippers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins. But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.*

"Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldst not, but a body hast thou prepared me: In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin thou hast had no pleasure. Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God. Above when he said, Sacrifice and offering and burnt offerings and offering for sin thou wouldst not, neither hadst pleasure therein; which are offered by the law; Then said he, Lo, I come to do thy will, O God. He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second. By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

The epistle continues making more and more of a point to recognize "what the law could not do". In Romans chapter 8, we see this phrase, and the point in Romans is what the law could not do in regards to righteousness.

In the beginning of the epistle, in laying down "the gospel of Christ", we read of the law: *"Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them that are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and that all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin."* (Romans 3:19-20)

There we see what the law could do. The law could condemn. The law did condemn. The whole world, by the law, is under sin, and condemned by it. It is useless to think that you may be the one person that can keep it and therefore be not condemned by it. God already said otherwise. The Jew, the one people group that God chose out for Himself and to whom the law was given showed himself by the Law condemned by the Law. Read just plainly what Paul the Apostle says in Romans 2:17 through 3:20, all of it. The Law did not affect anyone and does not affect anyone to a right standing with God. It declares Jew and Gentile alike, all under sin (Romans 3:9)³³.

In Romans 7 we see the working of the law in the life of a believer. Just as in Hebrews, we see the fault of the old covenant (the law) not lying in the law itself, but in the one that is under it.

Romans 7:7–14 — *"What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead.*

³³ It is true that there Israelites that were considered "righteous before God, walking in all of the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless", Luke 1:6 speaking of Zacharias and Elisabeth, the parents of John the Baptist. We must understand that in light of the law, that when one failed to live up to the law, there was provision for restoration, and an entire yearly national restoration, which is the very subject of Hebrews chapter 10. The fact that restoration had to be done yearly showed that it never took away sin. We see that sins were "pushed forward" so to speak — forbearance — until the true propitiation (Romans 3:25) could be made.

For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me. Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful. For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin."

In Hebrews 8:7 & 8, we have the quotation of the New Covenant declaration saying there was a fault in the first covenant, and it was finding fault with them, i.e., the people under the covenant. Verse 9 says they "continued not in my covenant". In Jeremiah 31:32, from where this is quoted, says "my covenant they brake". This is speaking of the same thing as we saw in Romans. Under the Old Covenant, all are at fault.

So we come to Romans 8 — in our study of Hebrews!

Why? Because of this phrase in verse 3, "For what the law could not do³⁴."

In Romans, the issue is righteousness, in a judicial and moral sense. One is declared righteous without the law by faith of Jesus Christ, 3:22. The conclusion is that man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law, 3:28.

The law is then shown as powerless to affect the Christian's walk, and actually brings him right back to self-condemnation, as seen in Romans 7. The cry for deliverance in 7:24 is a cry we all have I'm sure felt:

"O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"

Praise God that we are not left without an answer. "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord" is the answer in verse 25. The next verse is the beginning of the great mountaintop chapter of what I, and many others have called "the gospel according to Paul³⁵".

Romans 8:1-4 — *"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."*

The Christian life is, as we see going through Romans 8, lived by the power of the spirit and not by the deeds of the law.

The Epistle to the Hebrews in chapter 10 addresses another subject, but of the same sort: "What the Law could not do". This is in the sense of worship, or religion. This is specific to this epistle, because it is

³⁴ F.F. Bruce in his book *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* has this phrase as the title of chapter 18 midway through the book. Likewise, Douglas J. Moo in his *A Theology of Paul and His Letters* has "What the Law Was Powerless to Do" as a subheading in discussing what he called "the old realm". This should be understood as obvious from the Pauline epistles, and one need not be of a particular theological perspective to see it.

³⁵ Again, a chapter in F.F. Bruce's above mentioned work. Also, William R. Newell in his commentaries on Romans speaks of the epistle in this way, to name just two.

the epistle to the Hebrews, who were the old covenant people. These were the people who were actually subject to that God-specified and authorized³⁶ religious system.

Hebrews 10 begins saying that the law had a shadow of the good things to come, but did not have the substance. We now have the substance. The subject is still the once-for-all work of Jesus Christ, the Great High Priest of the better order who brought in His own blood testifying with His death the end of the old covenant and the bringing in of the new and better “New Covenant”. There is a comparison with the fact that the Day of Atonement offering was made year after year, every year. In Leviticus 16, the day is directed and described. The chapter ends with “*And this shall be an everlasting statute unto you, to make an atonement for the children of Israel for all their sins once a year*” (Leviticus 16:34).

We have then the God-inspired logical conclusion to this: these sacrifices never solved the sin problem. If they did, they would not have had to continue. Then in verse 4 we have the why it would never solve the sin problem. The blood that was shed was not good enough. Several times it is reduced to being called the blood of animals, not completely in a derogatory sense, but sort of getting there. It was God prescribed so there was a sense of holiness to that blood, but it was “fiat” holiness. The blood of the new Covenant is intrinsically Holy because it belongs to Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Here now we see a major declaration of the purpose of what is called “The Incarnation”, the Word made Flesh. The apostle is quoting from David in Psalm 40, although there is some different wording in Hebrews than in the Psalm. This purpose of the incarnation declared in these verses is to take away the first, and establish the second. From the overall context of this is to take away the first Covenant and to establish the new and living way, the New Covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ. It is very plain that the first is done by the second, not just modified and amended.

The first covenant never made a lasting “perfection”, verse 1, or a lasting sanctification, verse 10. Verse 10 brings us to an everlasting sanctification, otherwise could be said to be an everlasting state of holiness before God, and it is effected as “once for all”, in contrasted to the everlastingly unfinished atonements that were made year after year.

That it says in Leviticus that it is everlasting should be understood such: Unless God had made a way for it to be finished it would need to continue *ad infinitum*. This is a breakthrough of God into human history, and a showing of His sovereignty.

The Epistle to the Ephesians throughout, but especially in the first 3 chapters, declares how what God has done in Christ is entirely His idea from start to finish. It is correct to say that it is all His sovereign prerogative. The gathering together of all things in Christ (Ephesians 1:10) is His eternal purpose (3:11), and is all brought about by God. Our confidence in what God will complete is owed in a large part of the fact that it is His idea to do it. It is not an acquiescence to sinners but is from Him. It is what He wants and desires to accomplish.

Even the Law-based worship is shown to be only a temporary thing, because it is said that God did not even desire it. That the law entered was in a way an acquiescence to sinners. The Law and the religion attached to it was a stop-gap measure until Christ would come and take it out of the way by the sacrifice of Himself.

³⁶ The only religious system that God ever authorized.

The unbelieving Hebrew people needed to know that this system was temporary and had come to an end. It would be worthless to try and maintain it and to establish righteousness (Romans 9:31-32) apart from faith (see also Romans 10:4 as a continuation of this thought), or holiness through the Law. The God who established it has brought it to an end.

The believing Hebrew people needed to know also that this entire system is brought to an end in Christ. We are seeing this theme over and over in this epistle and in the last chapter, if we may move there before the due time, urges the believing to go forth with Christ without the camp and to bear His reproach. While the camp wants to operate under what is no longer the will of God, the believer will rest in the finished and all-sufficient work of Christ for judicial and moral righteousness, and holiness.

Romans 10:4 — *"For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth."*

1 Corinthians 1:30 — *"But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption..."*