

The Theme of Fire, Sacrifice, and Cleansing in Hebrews

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Last modified: November 14, 2019

Main Theme:

Jesus Alone Purified and Perfected Human Nature

Jesus perfected his humanity through his faithful life and death and resurrection, not just his death. He purified and perfected his humanity through his lifelong faithfulness, as shown in these passages:

^{1:3} When He had made **purification of sins**, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high...

^{2:10} For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, **to perfect** the author of their salvation through sufferings.

^{4:15} For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.

^{5:8} Although He was a Son, He **learned obedience** from the things which He suffered. ⁹ And **having been made perfect**, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation

^{7:11} Now if **perfection** was through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the Law), what further need was there for another priest to arise... ¹⁸ For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness ¹⁹ (for the Law made nothing **perfect**), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God... ²⁸ For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son, **made perfect** forever... ^{9:9} Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper **perfect** in conscience... ^{10:1} For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, **make perfect** those who draw near...

^{9:14} Christ... **offered Himself without blemish to God**... ^{9:26} ...He has been manifested to **put away sin** by the sacrifice of Himself... ^{10:1} For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, **make perfect** those who draw near... ⁵ Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, 'Sacrifice and offering You have not desired, but **a body** you have prepared for me... ¹⁰ By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of **the body** of Jesus Christ once for all... ¹⁴ For by one offering He has **perfected** for all time those who are sanctified. ¹⁵ And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us; for after saying, ¹⁶ 'This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws upon their heart, and on their mind I will write them... [Jer.31:31 – 34]' ¹⁹ Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, **His flesh**.

^{11:39} And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not be **made perfect**. ^{12:1} Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and **perfecter** of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Fire as a Literary Theme: The Symbolism and the Reality

^{1:1} God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, ² in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. ³ And He is the **radiance of His glory** and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made **purification** of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they.

^{12:29} for our God is a **consuming fire**.

<i>Fire Purified the Person Who Offered the Sacrifice: Jesus Purifies and Perfects His Own Humanity, Then Ours</i>	<i>Fire Destroyed the Offering: Jesus Sent Sin Away Once for All</i>
<p>^{9:13} For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, ¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit [<i>represented by divine fire</i>] offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?</p> <p>^{12:18} For you have not come to a mountain that can be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, ¹⁹ and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not bear the command, ‘If even a beast touches the mountain, it will be stoned.’ ²¹ And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, ‘I am full of fear and trembling.’ ²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, ²³ to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel... ²⁸ Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire.</p>	<p>^{9:14} Christ... offered Himself without blemish to God... ^{9:26} ...He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself...</p> <p>^{10:26} For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a terrifying expectation of judgment and ‘the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.’</p> <p>^{12:29} for our God is a consuming fire.</p>

Historical and Cultural Background

- *The Letter to the Hebrews*: The author is unknown, but some in the early church believed it to be the apostle Paul. Written from Italy (Heb.13:24) to Jewish-heritage Christians in Judea (13:13 – 14) who were faced with the pressure to go back to the sacrificial system of pre-Jesus Judaism. They were probably culturally sandwiched between the powerful and oppressive Roman Empire and the minority but established Jewish community.
- *The Jewish Laws*: God’s point in giving commandments to Israel was to call them into a partnership with Him to undo the corruption of sin in their bodies. God was like a doctor prescribing a health regimen for their total recovery. If they were faithful, they would be able to ‘circumcise their hearts’ of sinfulness (Dt.10:16; Jer.4:4), and write God’s commands on their hearts instead (Pr.3:3; 7:3). Notice Jeremiah (who is quoted in Heb.10:16) saw they couldn’t do it, but promised that God would still write His commands into human hearts (Jer.31:31 – 34). Jesus did that perfectly and faithfully.
- *Sacrificial Animals, Priest, Tabernacle*: Hebrews tells the origin story of *the tabernacle* from the Pentateuch.
 - God was on top of Mount Sinai, and called Israel to come up to meet with Him, but they didn’t go up (Ex.19:13; Dt.5:5). Instead, they sent Moses, who walked through the fire into the presence of

God (Ex.19:20 – 25; 24:9 – 18). God purified Moses as he came up the mountain, so that eventually his face shone (Ex.34:29 – 35), and Moses received the covenant.

- Each year, on the 'Day of Atonement,' God renewed the covenant with the high priest, who reenacted Moses' climb, symbolically. Each year, God drew Israel's sinfulness towards Himself through the priests, who symbolically 'ate' Israel's impurities (Lev.10:16 – 20). The high priest, representing everyone, passed the fire in the bronze altar which made things holy (Ex.29:37: 'The altar shall be most holy, and whatever touches the altar shall be holy'), entered into the holiest part of the sanctuary (the 'holy of holies'), so that Israel could be symbolically purified (Lev.16:1 – 34); the sin was 'sent away.'
- Symbolically, God acted like a dialysis machine, calling for people's impurity and giving back purity. Hebrews reminds us that *real purification* – the *actual* cleansing of human nature from sinfulness – didn't happen this way. It happened with Jesus, who was both the person offering the sacrifice, and the sacrifice itself.

Leader's Notes

1. In the view of Hebrews, why couldn't anyone become perfect before?
 - a. Everyone else failed and gave into temptation at some point.
 - b. Every king of Israel was flawed. In fact, the more power people have, the worse we seem to get. Temptation is stronger when you have power, or exert a claim on power. Think of King David raping Bathsheba (2 Sam.12), or modern politicians, or people with celebrity status.
 - c. Every priest in Israel was weak. The priests represent a posture of carrying other people's burdens before God. Think of compassion fatigue. It's easy for us to indulge ourselves when we feel like other people aren't thanking us enough.
 - d. Why was Israel important, unique, and significant? Because God had called them to be a partial restoration of Adam and Eve in the garden land. But they were more like a focus group in a health program. People were avoiding treatment for the corruption of sin (fallenness). God is a good Doctor, and wanted a people who would volunteer to be His focus group. He gave them a challenging health regimen. They couldn't completely defeat the disease of sin, but they made good headway. They experienced enough health that they wanted complete health. And they documented the diagnosis and the coming cure the Doctor promised.
2. How did Jesus 'become perfect'?
 - a. He didn't sin actively (Heb.4:15), but his human nature seems to have been 'imperfect' in the sense that he felt temptation, he was mortal, etc.
 - b. Athanasius of Alexandria (c.298 – 373 AD) said that Jesus' human nature was *imperfect* prior to his resurrection:

‘the *perfect* Word of God puts around Him an *imperfect body*, [that] He might, by Himself, *perfect* what was wanting to man. Now *immortality* was wanting to him, and the way to paradise...’ (Athanasius of Alexandria, *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.67)

Athanasius was an architect of the Nicene Creed, the doctrine of the Trinity and the defender of the divinity of the Son, and the first Christian leader to define the New Testament as we understand it today.

- c. Jesus was faithful throughout his whole life. What glimpses do we have into Jesus' human life?
 - i. He suffered a lot, partly because of what he went through but also because he grieved for his people.
 - ii. He learned obedience.
 - iii. He endured temptation without sinning.
 - iv. Hebrews 1 – 3 starts by describing Jesus' role as king.
 - v. Hebrews 4 – 10 shifts by describing Jesus' role as priest and sacrifice, together
3. Why was Jesus' human body important?
 - a. If human evil has become part of our nature (even though God didn't create us that way), then the cure for human evil must be a new human nature, cleansed from the evil.
 - b. This relates to Jesus' role as sacrifice. Jesus had to sacrifice his human body as an offering because it had an imperfection (mortality, the corruption of sin) within it. It needed to be consumed.
 - c. Jesus needed to bring his human body into resurrection and new life. Because God is committed to the whole human being, without the corruption of sin and fallenness.
4. Why was Jesus' human agency important?
 - a. This relates to Jesus' role as priest. Jesus had to be faithful and continually carry the burden of a fallen human nature.
 - b. The God of the Bible absolutely wants human partnership. Whenever God wants to accomplish something on this earth, God enlists human beings. He is committed to honoring and loving us, because He made us His image-bearers on this earth (Gen.1:26 – 28).
5. How does God define 'identity' for human beings?

- a. God's definition of what human beings are meant to be is Jesus.
 - i. The argument of Hebrews is that we can participate in Christ, and in the perfection and purification that he has accomplished for us. In fact, we must participate in Christ, because otherwise we are identifying ourselves with something sinful that God wants to burn away, that no longer exists in Jesus because he burned it away from within himself.
 - ii. What are other theories people have about how we can be purified or perfected?
Evaluate this statement: 'Is this as good as it gets?'
 - b. What desire or addiction or weakness or selfishness do we try to hold onto? Which do you?
 - c. Sometimes people claim that those desires, addictions, weaknesses, and selfishness are actually normal, okay, understandable, and something to hold onto as part of our identity. Are they using fallen humanity as the norm and standard?
6. When 'fire' is used symbolically in Hebrews, what did it symbolize?
- a. At Mount Sinai, fire symbolized God. The phrase 'our God is a consuming fire' (Heb.12:29) is a straight lift from Moses describing God at Mount Sinai (Dt.4:24). As Moses entered into the divine fire, he was partly purified and his face shone (Ex.34:25 – 39)
 - b. In the tabernacle, which represented Mount Sinai, fire was in the bronze altar. Everything that touched that altar with the fire was made holy (Ex.29:37). That fire was used to burn different kinds of offerings and sacrifices.
 - c. In the life of Jesus, fire symbolized the Spirit of God, who helped to purify his human nature
 - d. Notice 'Christ, who through the eternal Spirit [represented by divine fire] offered Himself without blemish to God' (Heb.9:14)
7. Who else believed this about 'fire' in the early church, as the apostles passed on their beliefs? Everyone. But here are some good examples:
- a. Ambrose of Milan, who lived from 337 – 394 AD, and was a towering figure intellectually and politically because he excommunicated Emperor Theodosius until he repented of ordering a massacre, said

'And Isaiah shows that the Holy Spirit is not only Light but also Fire, saying: And the light of Israel shall be for a fire. [Isaiah 10:17] So the prophets called Him a burning Fire, because in those three points we see more intensely the majesty of the Godhead; since to sanctify is of the Godhead, to illuminate is the property of fire and light, and the Godhead is wont to be pointed out or seen in the appearance of fire: For our God is a consuming Fire, as Moses said. [Deuteronomy 4:24] For he himself saw the fire in the bush, and had heard God when the voice from the flame of fire came to him saying: I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. [Exodus 3:6] The voice came from the fire, and the voice was in the bush, and the fire did no harm. For the bush was burning but was not consumed, because in that mystery the Lord was showing that He would come to illuminate the thorns of our body, and not to consume those who were in misery, but to alleviate their misery; Who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire, that He might give grace and destroy sin. [Matthew 3:11] So in the symbol of fire God keeps His intention... What, then, is that fire? Not certainly one made up of common twigs, or roaring with the burning of the reeds of the woods, but that fire which improves good deeds like gold, and consumes sins like stubble. This is undoubtedly the Holy Spirit, Who is called both the fire and light of the countenance of God... And as there is a light of the divine countenance, so, too, does fire shine forth from the countenance of God, for it is written: "A fire shall burn in His sight." *For the grace of the day of judgment shines beforehand, that forgiveness may follow to reward the service of the saints.* (Ambrose of Milan, *On the Holy Spirit*, book 1, chapter 14, paragraphs 164 – 165, 169 – 170)

- b. Augustine of Hippo, in Roman North Africa during the 4th and 5th centuries, said,

'O God, *you are the consuming fire* that can burn away their love for these things and re-create the men in immortal life.' (*Confessions* book 5.3) 'I have been divided...until I

flow together unto You, *purged and molten in the fire of Your love.*' (*Confessions* book 11.29)

To explain that, he also said, 'Every inordinate affection is its own punishment.' (*Confessions*, book 1.19). You could say, 'Every inappropriate *love* is its own punishment.'

- c. T.S. Eliot said it eloquently in his poem *Four Quartets*:

'The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre-
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.'

8. Hebrews says that God *is* the Judge (Heb.12:23), that God *will* judge every person for what we do with our own human nature (Heb.9:27; 10:27, 30), and that His judgment will be eternal (Heb.6:2).
- Yet we sometimes live as if we are the ultimate judge! As if we decide what good and evil are. What are times that you have acted like you are the ultimate judge of things?
 - Making rules for others, but making exceptions for yourself
 - Writing off someone else
 - Giving up on someone or saying they are hopeless
 - Not accepting God's definition of good and evil
 - Not accepting God's definition of human nature and who we are meant to be
 - Pretending you are the judge can be an addicting feeling. What words would you use to describe that feeling?
 - According to Hebrews, how did God already judge human sinfulness?
 - Jesus judged the corruption of sin out of himself.
 - A 'god' who does nothing about human evil, and is passive in the face of human evil, is evil, and has no right to judge! That's a major problem whenever you think about a 'god' who does nothing about human evil, but says that that 'god' will judge humans at the end of time. Wouldn't that 'god' be a hypocrite? Would that 'god' have moral standing?
 - Only this God, who goes all the way to the root problem in us, is morally qualified to be the true Judge, because God is 100% good.
 - Hebrews 4:12 says, 'For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.' Why would we want to come under the authority of the word of God *right now* rather than tomorrow, or later?
 - God is judging the sin out from us, which is why we have commands like this:

^{13:1} Let love of the brethren continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³ Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body. ⁴ Marriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge. ⁵ Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have.. ⁷ Remember those

who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith. ⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

What do you think of these commands?

- f. If you are familiar with stories from the four Gospels about Jesus, how do we see Jesus demonstrate hospitality to strangers (welcoming, inviting love)? Care for those who are 'ill-treated' and even in prison? Care for marriage, especially since marriage was the place women were the most physically vulnerable, and people in general are the most emotionally vulnerable? Financial generosity?
- g. If Jesus cleansed his own human nature of sin, what will happen to us if we try to hold onto it? What is it like to try to hold onto something that is burning away?
- h. Leader: Illustrate from your personal life how Jesus has purified you, and/or is purifying you, of one of these things, above.
- i. Read the quote from T.S. Eliot's poem, above, which concludes with:

'We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.'