

The Active Obedience of Christ Hebrews 10:1–10

J. Gresham Machen was an incredible defender of the faith.

- Raised in the South, schooled in Europe, he came of age in the Presbyterian Church when modernism was beginning to erode the faithful tradition of biblical theology.
- He eventually went to Princeton Seminary and became a leading New Testament scholar and a defender of orthodoxy.
- He would eventually write *Christianity and Liberalism*, a classic work on the difference of religions between these two conceptions of God, sin, Christ, salvation, and the church.
- In time, he founded a new seminary (Westminster) and a new denomination (OPC), and on a fund-raising, preaching mission in the NW states. And after preaching, he became sick and on January 1, 1937 he died.
- Yet before he died, he “dictated a final telegram to his friend and colleague, Professor John Murray. The words of the telegram were short and sweet: "I'm so thankful for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it."
- “That memorable message has been passed down through the generations and continues to inspire no small admiration for this great man. Yet how many of us can honestly say that we understand what Dr. Machen meant by his parting statement?” ([What Machen Meant?](#) Brian L. De Jong)

Put in its barest terms,

- The active obedience to Christ is what Jesus did in perfect fulfillment of the law.
- The passive obedience of Christ is his willing submission to death on the cross.
- In truth, his passive obedience is not passive at all. He laid down his life; no one took it from him.
- However, these are the classical distinctions between his life – his active obedience – and his death – his passive / passionate obedience.

In this study of Hebrews 10, I hope to show why the Active Obedience of Christ matters so much and why.

But first, let's see what's there¹

10:1–4	The Inadequacy of the Sacrifices
10:5–10	The Many Sacrifices Replaced by the One
10:11–14	The Many Priests Replaced by the One
10:15–18	The Adequacy of Christ's Sacrifice
10:19–25	The Application

¹ William Lane, *Hebrews*, 130.

Hebrews 10:1–4

¹ For **since** the law **has** but a shadow of the good things **to come** 8:5 (*typos*)
 instead of the true form [*eikon*] of these realities [things], 1:14; 2:5; 6:5; **9:11**
 11:1
 “image” (Col. 1:15)

it **can** never, . . . **make perfect** bring near / make sons / give life
 by the . . . sacrifices *those who draw near.* Cf. Heb 4:16; 10:19ff
 same that are continually offered every year,

[Logical Implication = one sacrifice ends the need for all sacrifice]

² Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, . . . would no longer have any consciousness of sins? having once been cleansed,

[Contrary Implication = many sacrifices means reminder of sin]

³ But in these sacrifices there is a reminder (cf. Philo *On the Life of Moses*, 2.107 = reminder) Lev. 23:26–32 = Yom Kippur = fasting
 of sins Lev. 16:20–22 = Confession
 every year.

[Conclusion = The Law cannot take away sin]

⁴ For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

How should we read 10:1–10?

- Picking Up and Summarizing Earlier Sections

8:1–5 Temple

8:6–13 Covenant

9:1–10 Priestly Effectiveness → 10:1–4 Sacrificial Effectiveness

9:11–28 Sacrifice in Heaven → 10:5–10 The Heart of the Sacrifice

Sacrifice as NC → 10:11–18 Once and For all

- Two Parts

- Blood of animals is insufficient (vv. 1–4)
- Will of Christ makes his sacrifice sufficient (vv. 5–10)

- Quotations

- Psalm 40
- Jeremiah 31

What does Hebrews teach us about “perfection”?

Christ

- a. Hebrews 2:10 – perfected through suffering
- b. Hebrews 5:9 – Being made perfect by suffering

Law

- c. Hebrews 7:11, 18, 28 – purification / resurrection / access . . . NOT by OC, but only by NC
- d. Hebrews 9:9 – OT sacrifices cannot perfect conscience
- e. Hebrews 9:11 – the greater and more perfect tent
- f. Hebrews 10:1 – blood of bulls and goats cannot make perfect those who draw near
- g. Hebrews 10:14 – for by a single offering he perfected for all time those who are being sanctified

His People

- h. Hebrews 11:40 – Not perfect without us
- i. Hebrews 12:2 – Perfector of Faith
- j. Hebrews 12:23 – Spirits of righteous made perfect

Perfection in Hebrews

- David Peterson, *Hebrews and Perfection*. Cf. Harold Attridge, *Review of Hebrews and Perfection* by David J. Peterson, *JBL*, 104.1 (Mar 1985): 153–155.
- David Moffitt, *Atonement and the Logic of the Resurrection in Hebrews*; cf. Jared Compton, *Review of Atonement and the Logic of the Resurrection in Hebrews*, *Trinity Journal*, 36.1(Spr 2015): 133–135.

Christ

Hebrews 2:10

For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.

- God made Christ perfect
- Suffering is the means by which perfection comes
- This does not mean he lacked moral perfection
- Perfection is conferred or recognized after his perfect earthly life resulting in death
- This perfection is synonymous with coronation / glorification / exaltation
- **Resurrection** is in view, as is sonship – he leads many sons to glory (v. 9)

Hebrews 5:8–10

Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. ⁹ And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, ¹⁰ being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

- Being made perfect comes after a life of obedience and suffering
- Sonship is related to suffering, and perfection
- Jesus's source of eternal life comes after being perfected and at the time he is designated by God as high priest
- Sonship and priesthood stand together (vv. 5–6) and now perfection is conferred in the resurrection
- Resurrection is the time of perfection, whereby Christ as resurrected son and priest is able to give life to others

The Law of the Levites

Hebrews 7:11

11 Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron?

Hebrews 7:18–19

18 For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness 19 (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.

Hebrews 7:28

28 For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

- Priesthood is related to perfection, but the Levitical priesthood couldn't provide perfection
- Perfection has to do with drawing near to God, but the Law could not perfect anyone and provide a way of access to God
- A son is high priest who has been made forever – he is a priest like Melchizedek who is able to enter into heavenly places
- **Perfection = Resurrection + Priesthood + Sonship + Access**

A Perfect Sacrifice and A Perfect Tent

Hebrews 9:8–12

*By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing 9 (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot **perfect** the conscience of the worshiper, 10 but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation. 11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more **perfect** tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.*

- The OC arrangement (gifts and sacrifices) cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper
- The OC system could only deal with the flesh
- The OC needed and anticipated a day of “Reformation”
- **The resurrection/exaltation of Christ** indicates the good things have come – a sign of the perfect tent.
- The perfect tent is not made by hands; indicating that perhaps anything made by hands cannot perfect (e.g., circumcision)
- A place can also be perfected (a tent) – does this indicate that one must be perfected to enter perfection?
- Perfection has to do with access and waits upon the arrival / appearance of Christ who has been perfected.

The Law and the Lord

Hebrews 10:1

*For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, **make perfect** those who draw near.*

Hebrews 10:14

14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

- The Law cannot make perfect; it cannot enable someone to draw near.
- The single offering of Christ perfects his people once and for all.
- Perfection is something conferred by means of a sacrifice – when a perfect Son offers up his life, he is able to perfect others in ways the Law never could.

His People

Hebrews 11:39–12:2

39 And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. 1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

- The saints of old did not receive what was promised yet
- Perfection is a group project that comes from the same source at the same time – this sounds like resurrection
- The Lord is the author and perfecter of faith – faith is the sign of resurrection life

Hebrews 12:22–24

22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly 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 that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

- The Spirits – not resurrection yet
- Righteous – those who have been made / declared righteous (by faith)
- These OT saints are the ones now present in heaven, because they have been made perfect
- This may not speak of resurrection, but it does speak of access

What does ‘perfected’ mean?

Options

- 1 – Technical term for priestly consecration (cf. Exod. 29:9)
- 2 – Mystical term coming from the likes of Philo
- 3 – Material / physical “perfection”
- 4 – Vocational status assigned to Christ and those in Christ

Conclusions

- 1 – Source of perfection is Christ: this stands against the Law and for the believer
- 2 – Perfection has elements of sonship, priesthood, and resurrection
 - Sonship (2:9; 5:8; 7:28)
 - Priesthood (5:8–10; 7:11, 28)
 - Resurrection (2:9–10; 5:8–10)
- 3 – Perfection gives access to God’s dwelling place
- 4 – Perfection is corporate; it happens to God’s people at once (11:40)
- 5 – Faith (12:2) and access to God (12:23) are evidences of the resurrection
- 6 – Ethical obedience is motivated and empowered by “perfection”

Hebrews 10:5–10

The Superior Sacrifice

(Christ 9:28)

⁵ Consequently, when [he] came into the world, he said,

Jesus speaks the Psalms

Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body [LXX; ear (MT)] have you prepared for me;

[Psalm 40:6–8]
Heb. 11:3; 13:21

⁶ in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.

⁷ Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to **do your will**,
O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’ ”

10:36; 13:21

⁸ When he said above,

“You have neither **desired**
nor taken pleasure
in sacrifices and
offerings and
burnt offerings and
sin offerings”²
(these are offered according to the law),

The Whole System (Lev. 1–7)
θυσία, peace offering
προσφορά, meal offering
όλοκαύτωμα, burnt offering
άμαρτία, sin offering

⁹ then he added,

“Behold, I have come to do your will.”

He **does** away³ with the **first**
\ in order to **establish** the **second**.

First = Levitical Sacrifices
Second = Obedience
Cf. Heb. 8:7, 13; 9:1, 2, 6, 8, 15, and 18

¹⁰ And
we

by that **will**
through the offering
of the body
of Jesus Christ
once for all.

² Four terms: θυσία (‘peace offering’), προσφορά (‘meal offering’), όλοκαύτωμα (‘burnt offering’), and άμαρτία (‘sin offering’).

³ This is the strongest negative statement Hebrews makes about the Old Testament cultus (though note 8:13; 10:4), and our author employs technical legal terms to assert it. The law prescribed sacrifices that could not ‘take away’ (*aphairein*) sins; so when Christ accomplished God’s purpose, the law was ‘abolished’ (*anairein*) O’Brien, P. T. (2010). *The Letter to the Hebrews* (p. 352). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Observations on Hebrews 10 Use of Psalm 40

- Psalm 40
 - Thanksgiving (vv. 1–11)
 - Lament (vv. 12–18)
- Thanksgiving
 - Salvation (vv. 1–3)
 - Blessing (vv. 4–6)
- Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord (v. 4)
- Trust is the defining feature of this man (vv. 4–6)
 - He does not turn to the proud (v. 4)
 - He does not trust those who go astray after a life (v. 4)
 - He tells the goodness of the Lord (v. 5, 9)
 - **He has an open ear (Isa 50:5) / prepared body (LXX)** (v. 6)⁴
 - He fulfills the promises of the Book (v. 7) – Deuteronomy 17:14–20; 30:6⁵
 - He delights to do the will of God (v. 8; cf. Ps. 119:16, 24, 35, 92)
 - He leads others towards to the Lord (vv. 9–10)
 - Altogether, this describes a son of David who has the Law written on his heart (cf. Deut 17:16–18). This also fits with Jeremiah 31 in Hebrews 8 and 10: “Both emphasize the internalization of the law, rivet attention with *idou* (“behold”), have something “written,” contain references to “sin” (*harmartia*), and refer to God (*theos*).”⁶
- The vision of a faithful king, one who has internalized the Law is what Hebrews 10 picks up. Jesus delights to do God’s will and now he shares his blessing with others (cf. Heb. 2:9–10)

⁴ The “digging of the ears” in 40:6 refers to a posture of obedient submission. Craigie (1983: 315) suggests that the backdrop for these verses is the “law of kings,” found in Deut. 17:14–20, and the reference to the scroll of the book in 40:7 points to the Deuteronomistic law, with its requirements for kings (so *Midr. Ps.* 40:8). In living out his responsibilities in light of this law, the king has internalized the Lord’s instruction (40:8b) and has been outspoken concerning God’s faithfulness and salvation in the assembly of the people (40:9–10). Guthrie, G. H. (2007). [Hebrews](#). In *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament* (p. 976). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos.

⁵ “This fulfillment, moreover, probably should be seen as a fulfillment of indirect typological prophecy, the experience of David the king being understood as a pointer to the experience of Christ. Some might find an element of double fulfillment here by seizing on the original author’s reference to his place in the scroll of the book, but, as we noted, the original context may simply be alluding to the role of kings as mentioned in the law.” *Ibid.*, 977.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 977.

What do we learn about Hebrews 10?

- Sacrifice once for all – many sacrifices is a reminder of sin
 - Roman Catholicism
 - When you feel guilty, what is your temptation?
 - Lords Supper – remember what
- Blood of animals vs. Blood of Christ – What is different?
 - The will . . .
- **What do we learn about the will?**
 - To obey is better than sacrifice
 - 1 Samuel 15:22–23 – Saul shows that sacrifice is not what pleases God
 - Jeremiah 7:21–23 – God delights in obedience
 - Isaiah 1:10–13 – Israel often sacrificed with unclean hearts
 - Hosea 6:6 – The priests are robbers (9:9); the people are under judgment
 - Matthew 9:13 – Pharisees were experts in sacrifice, but not righteousness
 - Matthew 12:7 – Sabbath
 - The OC could cleanse the flesh, but it couldn't cleanse the conscience
 - It could cover the stench, but it couldn't make people clean!
 - Faith is what purifies . . . and this is what the cleansed conscience is
 - Acts 15:9
 - Acts 26:15–19
 - 2 Thessalonians 2:13
 - 1 Peter 1:2, 22
 - The New Covenant gives this faith / resurrection / perfection
 - Ephesians 2:5
 - 1 Timothy 1:13
 - Hebrews 9:14; 10:14
 - Christ's will is given to his followers . . .
 - This is what the New Covenant does – it writes his law on our hearts
 - Notice how personal Christ's work is . . .
- **What about this idea of reminder?**
 - What are we reminded today . . .
 - What if we are only reminded of sin . . . (cf. 1 John 1:9–2:2)

Do you understand why the Active Obedience of Christ matters so much?

Here are a few closing thoughts from J. Gresham Machen, from a sermon entitled, the Active Obedience of Christ. (Quotations from [Brian DeJong](#))

Speaking of the original condition of Adam, Machen speaks of the covenant of works.

That covenant of works was a probation. If Adam kept the law of God for a certain period, he was to have eternal life. If he disobeyed he was to have death. Well, he disobeyed, and the penalty of death was inflicted upon him and his posterity. Then Christ by His death on the cross paid that penalty for those whom God had chosen.

Well and good. But if that were all that Christ did for us, do you not see that we should be back in just the situation in which Adam was before he sinned? The penalty of his sinning would have been removed from us because it had all been paid by Christ. But for the future the attainment of eternal life would have been dependent upon our perfect obedience to the law of God. We should simply have been back in the probation again.

While I prefer the language of covenant with Creation, or covenant with Adam, Machen's point stands. In the beginning, God created people in his image to keep his covenant, by which they would grow in knowledge and experience of covenantal blessing. Adam failed, therefore this original dispensation was lost.

And rightly, if Christ had only paid our penalty, we would be merely returned to this first condition—call it whatever you will. He goes on.

Moreover, we should have been back in that probation in a very much less hopeful way than that in which Adam was originally placed in it. Everything was in Adam's favour when he was placed in the probation. He had been created in knowledge, righteousness and holiness. He had been created positively good. Yet despite all that, he fell. How much more likely would we be to fall—nay, how certain to fall—if all that Christ had done for us were merely to remove from us the guilt of past sin, leaving it then to our own efforts to win the reward which God has pronounced upon perfect obedience!

If all we had was the atonement for sin, the removal of condemnation, the payment of penalty, we would not have the perfection needed to dwell forever in God's presence. But because the active obedience merited for us something greater, we now experience atonement for sin and resurrection power / perfection as true sons of God. Or as Machen puts it,

Those who have been saved by the Lord Jesus Christ are in a far more blessed condition than was Adam before he fell. Adam before he fell was righteous in the sight of God, but he was still under the possibility of becoming unrighteous. Those who have been saved by the Lord Jesus Christ not only are righteous in the sight of God but they are beyond the possibility of becoming unrighteous. In their case, the probation is over. It is not over because they have stood it successfully. It is not over because they have themselves earned the reward of assured blessedness which God promised on condition of perfect obedience. But it is over because Christ has stood it for them; it is over because Christ has merited for them the reward by His perfect obedience to God's law.