

Sermon for December 22, 2024 – Advent 4

Hebrews 10:1-10 EHV

Theme: **The Merry Christmas that ushered in a Happy New Year**

1. Jesus fulfilled the Old...
2. ...To bless us with the New.

In fact, the law is only a shadow of the good things to come, not the actual realization of those things. It will never be able to make perfect those who continually offer the same sacrifices year after year. ²If it could do this, would they not have stopped bringing sacrifices, because the worshippers, once they were cleansed, would no longer have a bad conscience about sins? ³Instead, these sacrifices reminded them of their sins year after year. ⁴The fact is that the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sins. ⁵Therefore when he entered the world, Christ said: Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but you prepared a body for me. ⁶You were not pleased with burnt offerings and sin offerings. ⁷Then I said, "Here I am. I have come to do your will, God. In the scroll of the book it is written about me." ⁸First he said: Sacrifices and offerings that were offered according to the law, both burnt offerings and sin offerings, you did not desire, and you were not pleased with them. ⁹Then he said: Here I am. I have come to do your will. He does away with the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰By this will, we have been sanctified once and for all, through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ.

It might seem a bit early to bring up the New Year when we haven't even celebrated Christmas yet, but please bear with me. Many people use the time leading up to New Year's Day to reflect on the past and consider what changes they would like to make for the better. They resolve to implement these changes on New Year's Day, believing that the "fresh start" of the new year will psychologically help them make lasting changes. But does this approach work? Not really. Why not? Because New Year's Day is just like any other day, it possesses no special power to bring about lasting change.

What if I told you the reverse could be true? Instead of looking to the New Year to bring about change, there is a change that ushers in an everlasting New Year—a truly new and everlasting era of peace, love, joy, and all things good. Even better, this change is not something we must resolve to do for God; it is something God resolved to do for us. I am talking about the change that Jesus was born to bring at Christmas when our Holy God took on human flesh and blood to save us from our sins. With the author of Hebrews as our guide, let us contemplate **the Merry Christmas that ushered in a Happy New Year**. 1) Jesus fulfilled the Old 2) to bless us with the New.

Part One: Jesus fulfilled the Old

Our text from Hebrews invites us to compare Israel's life under the Old Testament's laws to our life now under Jesus. God chose the Israelites to be His special people—a light to the rest of the world concerning humanity's broken relationship with Him because of sin and what He would do

to save us. After giving the Israelites the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, the LORD instituted many other laws to govern their civil and religious affairs. Many of these laws are recorded in Leviticus, a book that many Christians find hard to read. Why is that? Because it lists law after law with few breaks and many of the laws can seem somewhat oppressive. For instance, if you were sick, you were considered unclean. If you touched a sick person, you were also deemed unclean. If your house had persistent mildew, it was considered unclean and faced possible demolition. The cleanliness laws God gave to Israel were so strict that it was nearly impossible for a person not to be declared unclean at least once a month! Additionally, numerous sacrifices needed to be made to regain a state of cleanliness. Why did God command all these things for His Old Testament people?

Our sermon text from Hebrews explains it this way: *The law is only a shadow of the good things to come, not the actual realization of those things. It will never be able to make perfect those who continually offer the same sacrifices year after year. ²If it could do this, would they not have stopped bringing sacrifices, because the worshippers, once they were cleansed, would no longer have a bad conscience about sins? ³Instead, these sacrifices reminded them of their sins year after year. ⁴The fact is that the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sins.*

So, let me ask you: what was God illustrating with all these laws that declared His people unclean and unfit to come to the temple for much of their lives? It was to show that our sins disgust and separate us from Him. Worse yet, there is nothing we can do to wash them away. We need help. We need a Saviour.

Now, consider all the animals that had to die each day due to the Israelites' uncleanness. Imagine the smell of burning hair and flesh that filled the air around the temple and the sight of so much blood. Did God command such sacrifices because they were beautiful to the senses? No. He commanded them to drive home a point: the wages of sin is death.ⁱ

However, the sacrifices also served another important purpose. They reminded God's people of the promise to provide a Saviour. This Saviour would offer Himself as their substitute, suffering and dying for their sins in their place.

All the animal sacrifices the Israelites offered in obedience to God's command didn't forgive their sins. If they had, there would have been no need for them to be repeated year after year. They were merely a picture of the once-and-for-all sacrifice their future Saviour would make for them. Faith in His future sacrifice brought the ancient Israelites the blessings of forgiveness, peace, and righteousness before God, just as faith in Christ's past sacrifice brings us these blessings today.

Yes, Jesus was coming into the world to fulfill the demanding old covenant that God instituted as a guardian and chaperone for His Old Testament people.ⁱⁱ He was born to usher in the New Year: that is to say, a new covenant era of forgiveness, peace, and direct access to God because of His once-and-for-all sacrifice for sin.

Part Two: ...To bless us with the New.

⁵Therefore when he entered the world, Christ said: *Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but you prepared a body for me.* ⁶You were not pleased with burnt offerings and sin offerings.

God never desired sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice. Instead, He was only pleased when a person brought an offering in faith: trusting in Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice for sin. Consider the story of Cain and Abel. Scripture tells us that: *The LORD looked favourably on Abel and his offering, but he did not look favorably on Cain and his offering.*ⁱⁱⁱ Why was Abel's sacrifice pleasing to God while Cain's was not? The difference lay in intention. Cain offered his sacrifice without faith to earn God's favour. Abel, on the other hand, offered his sacrifice out of genuine faith in God's promise of a Saviour – understanding no one can merit God's forgiving favour. It can only be received as a gift.^{iv}

Therefore, it is not our act of sacrificing that pleases God, but our faith in His promised Saviour who would offer himself up in payment for our sins. Jesus, the Son of God, came in the "body" prepared for Him to fulfill the Lord's will of saving humanity, as our sermon text quotes Jesus saying: ⁷*Then I said, "Here I am. I have come to do your will, God. In the scroll of the book it is written about me."* What was written in the scroll about Jesus? Isaiah said that He would be born of a virgin. David called him his LORD. Micah said He would be born in Bethlehem. Indeed, the scroll, the Old Testament Scriptures, all point to Jesus as being our Saviour.

What was the Father's will that Jesus came to accomplish? To save us. God intended for Jesus to lead the perfect, sinless life that everyone else was unable to live. Furthermore, Jesus came to offer himself up on the cross in payment for the sins of the entire world, satisfying God's perfect justice.

The author of Hebrews writes, ¹⁰*By this will, we have been sanctified once and for all, through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ.* In other words, Jesus once-and-for-all sacrifice of himself on the cross has forgiven all our past sins, all our present sins, and even all our future sins. Through faith in Him, He credits us with His perfect righteousness so that we can stand perfectly clean before God. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament's laws and sacrifices. He so perfectly saved us that nothing is remaining for us to do to earn God's favour. Yes, Jesus' birth is the Merry Christmas that has ushered in a Happy New Year: a new era of peace with God. That is what makes its celebration so important and joyful!

"But what about all the sin that remains in my life?" a Christian might ask. *"The desire to do good is present with me, but I am not able to carry it out. So I fail to do the good I want to do. Instead, the evil I do not want to do, that is what I keep doing."*^v How, then, can I consider myself clean before God?" If you struggle with such guilt, remember that Christmas celebrates the one who came to free you from this burden. You are clean, not because you can keep yourself from sinning, but because Jesus paid for all your sins in full. Through His work, God the Father gave you a new spiritual birth at your baptism, declaring you to be His child and sealing you with His Spirit. Confess your sins to Jesus and trust that He forgives you for His mercy's sake. Then, look to the Holy Spirit to instruct, strengthen, and guide you in way that pleases God as He keeps you connected to Jesus through His Word and Sacraments.

Yes, the joy of Christmas (the celebration of Christ's coming as our Saviour) is not confined to just one day of the year—every day is Christmas for you! Why? Because Christ comes to forgive you every day you confess your sins and recall His Gospel. Each time you partake of the Lord's Supper, He comes to reassure you of His love and dwell within you. Yes, every time you put your hope in Christ, you celebrate a Merry Christmas that brings a Happy New Year—a new desire, motivation, and strength to live according to the Holy Spirit's guidance through His Word.

Additionally, because Jesus accomplished His Father's will by being born into this world on that first Christmas Day, you can be confident that He will keep His promise to come again and deliver you to the perfect paradise He is preparing for all believers. A genuine new era will begin on that day and never end for those who look to Jesus in faith—a happy, everlasting era filled with life, peace, blessings, love, hope, joy, and all that is good.

So, dear Christian, now that you've been reminded of these truths, I sincerely wish you a Merry Christmas as you remember and worship Jesus, who was born to take away all your sins. May you also have a Happy New Year filled with peace of conscience and peace with God as you look forward to Christ's second coming in eager hope. Amen.

ⁱ Romans 6:23

ⁱⁱ Cf. Galatians 3:19-25

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 4:4-5 EHV

^{iv} Cf. Hebrews 11:4

^v Romans 8:18-19 EHV