

“The Holy Place”

The Twelfth in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

Texts: Hebrews 9:1-14; Leviticus 16:2-19

As evangelical Christians (in the truest sense of the term) our religion is not tied to holy things, holy people, or holy places. Our religion is centered in very ordinary things including the “means of grace,” material things through which God’s Spirit works to establish and strengthen our relationship with our God who dwells in heaven. These ordinary things include: The ink and paper of the word; the bread, wine, and water of the sacraments; and a functional building in which we assemble for worship. As Christians, we have ministers and are no longer represented by high priests in priestly garments encrusted with jewels who make sacrifices on our behalf. Nor do we sacrifice animals on special altars using vessels of made of precious metals under a cloud of fragrant incense. We need not make pilgrimages to holy places where God is present, and we do not venerate holy people who have earned supposedly, a greater righteousness than the rest of us. All of this is because we live in the new covenant era, and all of those things associated with the old covenant have been rendered obsolete by the coming of Jesus Christ. But those elements associated with the old covenant served a very important purpose in redemptive history, and the author of Hebrews now points us to the heavenly reality which these things were designed to illuminate and illustrate—the eternal high priest and the heavenly temple, the true holy place.

As we continue our series on the book of Hebrews, we now come to chapter nine. If you’ve been with us for any portion of this series, by now it should be clear that the author of Hebrews is relentless in building his case for the superiority of Jesus Christ. Laying out argument upon argument, the author has shown us from the pages from the Old Testament that Jesus Christ is creator of all things and the promised redeemer of God’s people. The author has made a very convincing case that Jesus is superior to angels, to Moses, and to the priests of Israel. Jesus is not only an eternal priest after the order of Melchizedek, but Jesus is the mediator of a new and better covenant.

The reason why the Book of Hebrews is so relentless in building this case is because of the historical circumstances which led to the writing of this letter. The author is writing to a church (likely in Rome or Alexandria) made up of people who are recent converts to Christianity from Judaism. When the members of this church came under persecution from the civil authorities or from the synagogues from which they had departed, many caved in to the pressure and returned to Judaism. The purpose of this letter is show the Jewish converts from the pages of the Old Testament that Jesus is the one in whom the promise to Abraham is fulfilled. Jesus is the eternal high priest who offers a perfect sacrifice (himself) and who always sympathizes with his weak and sinful people. Jesus is that one in whom the types and shadows become reality and fulfillment. And since Jesus is all of these things and more, there is no reason why returning to Judaism is anything but an act of apostasy, a return to the inferior and sadly, serves to invoke the same covenant curses which brought judgment upon that people and nation.

As we saw last time in chapter eight, the author adds a new element to his argument, which is that with the coming of Jesus Christ, there is a major shift in the nature and course of redemptive history. The author has shown that the new covenant era foretold by Jeremiah has dawned in the person and work of Jesus Christ, and that the old covenant (that covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai, which included the law, the priesthood, the tabernacle and the sacrifices) was rendered obsolete and is no longer binding upon the people of God. As he writes in Hebrews 8:5, these things “*serve a copy and shadow of*

the heavenly things.” And this is how we must read the Old Testament and understand these things as well. The earthly points us to the heavenly. The types and shadows point to the reality in Christ.

Although the old covenant has passed away the author has also been careful to point out that the earlier covenant promise God made to Abraham remained in place the entire time the Sinaitic covenant was in force—from the time God made a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, until the coming of Jesus Christ. That gracious covenant was grounded in God’s promise to redeem his people, sworn on his sovereign oath and fulfilled by the doing and dying of Jesus Christ. As I pointed out last time, this does not mean that the new covenant is an entirely new covenant, i.e., a covenant of a different kind, and made from scratch with little or no connection to what has gone before. Rather, that the new covenant is same gracious covenant as the Abrahamic covenant, but which is now fulfilled through the work of Christ.

This is why the author of Hebrews grounds the new covenant in that gracious promise God made to Abraham and explains why, with the coming of Jesus Christ, there is such a dramatic shift in the nature and course of redemptive history. But it is not as though God just tears everything up that went before (the old covenant) and institutes something entirely different (apples then oranges). Rather, Jesus fulfills the types and shadows of the Old Testament because they pointed to him (the one apple seed is now a huge forest of lush apple trees). Everything associated with the old covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai was designed to point the people of God ahead to the coming of Jesus Christ. The law, the animal sacrifices, and the priesthood, are but shadows of the unseen and eternal reality that already is in Jesus Christ. When Jesus completes his messianic mission the old covenant is rendered obsolete, the new has come, and the inferior has given way to the superior.

Having established that in Jesus Christ the new covenant era is a reality and the old covenant is no longer in force, the author now elaborates on a theme introduced in his earlier discussions of Melchizedek and in Jeremiah’s prophecy of a new covenant (chapters 7-8). Everything in the Sinaitic covenant was designed to teach the people of God about the superior priesthood of Jesus Christ whose once for all sacrifice for sin renders the people of God perfect. Jesus is the better priest with the better sacrifice, and his death turns aside God’s wrath toward all those for whom he dies.

So, in chapters 9-10 as the author continues to develop this argument, he makes four theological points. In verses 1-10 of chapter 9 (which we are covering this Lord’s day), the author describes the earthly tabernacle and the role it plays in redemptive history. In the balance of chapter nine, the author discusses the death of Jesus, and how his shed blood does what the sacrificial system failed to do, remove the guilt and break the power of sin. In Chapter 10:1-18, the author discusses how the death of Jesus puts an end to all sacrifices for sin as in the old covenant, and then in the balance of chapter 10, the author discusses the wonderful assurance we draw by trusting in what Jesus has done to save us from our sins.

So, we take up the first part of the author’s discussion of the priesthood of Jesus, and that is the proper understanding of the old covenant, and how it foreshadowed the new.

In verses 1-10 of chapters 9, the author takes up the familiar institutions of the old covenant, including the careful detail associated with the tabernacle and the worship conducted within it. This discussion grows out of the author’s comments in Hebrews 8:13 when he summarizes the superiority of the new covenant to the old. *“In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.”* Why then did God give Israel such complicated and detailed instructions for such an inferior and temporary arrangement if it was destined to just pass away? What purpose did all of this serve?

The answer has already been given, in part, but the author will now expand and flesh out his earlier point in much more detail in the opening verses of chapter 9. Because these things so closely associated with the old covenant serve a typological function—they point ahead to a new covenant which is so superior to old, that even though the new covenant had not yet come, it still was the merits of Christ which gave the old covenant sacrifices for sin their efficacy, and which allowed the people of God provisional and temporary relief for their sin.¹ Even in the types and shadows of the tabernacle and the priesthood we see the tender mercies of our God toward sinful people who call upon his name seeking forgiveness.

In verse 1, the author reminds the congregation of the precise regulations for worship which were an essential part of the old covenant. He writes, “*now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness.*” In reminding the congregation of this fact, the author is very effectively making the point that God did indeed make provision for his people to worship him before the coming of Jesus Christ and the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, but worship under the old covenant was tied to earthly things (a tent), and to particular places (where God dwelt among his people in the midst of the Sinai desert thereby rendering the tabernacle “holy”). But such places and manner of worship was necessarily provisional and destined to pass away—which, as the author keeps reminding his audience, they now have.

When viewed through the eyes of faith, it should have been evident to the people of Israel that such an arrangement could not, nor was ever intended to last forever. The same thing holds true of the temple which was eventually built in Jerusalem by Solomon. By the very nature of things, tents and temples are subject to rust and decay, as is everything else which is part of this fallen world. However great their earthly glory, the glory fades, and those structures decay. This earthly place of holiness (the tabernacle) was not an end in itself, but was a very visible and graphic representation and teaching tool of that eternal and unseen reality which is the heavenly temple, where the true high priest performs his priestly work throughout all eternity. These things were given to teach God’s people of what is (the heavenly reality) and who was to come (Jesus Christ in his incarnation).

In verse 2, the author summarizes chapter 25 of Exodus where the construction of the tabernacle is described in great detail. “*For a tent was prepared, the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place.*” The tabernacle had a courtyard, an outer section (the holy place) and then the inner section described in verse 3 as “*the most holy place.*” It was in the outer court that the lampstand and table were placed, as was the bread of presence, which according to Leviticus 24:5-8 were to be made of flour, covered with frankincense and prepared by Aaron and the high priest every Sabbath day. This bread was to be eaten by the priests because they were consecrated unto the Lord, and were therefore “holy” (cf. Leviticus 24:9).

At the west end of the holy place there was a curtain (a “second curtain”) which served as the entrance to the “Most Holy Place.” In verses 3-5, the author of Hebrews describes this arrangement as follows. “*Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant. Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat.*” There are two articles of furniture mentioned because they are part the “the Most Holy Place.” The first article is the golden altar which was technically not in the Most Holy Place, but was certainly connected to what went on behind the second curtain (the veil) because

¹ Vos, The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews, 15.

incense was burnt on it when the annual sacrifice for sin was offered (and this burning of incense was part of the sacrifice), and the sacrificial blood offered on the day of atonement was also spread on the horns of the altar (as recounted in Leviticus 16:15, part of our Old Testament lesson).

The second piece of furniture in the Most Holy Place was the ark of the covenant in which was some of the manna which sustained the Israelites throughout their time in the wilderness. The purpose for this is set out in Exodus 16:33 ff., where we read “*And Moses said to Aaron, ‘Take a jar, and put an omer of manna in it, and place it before the Lord to be kept throughout your generations.’ As the Lord commanded Moses, so Aaron placed it before the testimony to be kept.*” And although it disappears from the historical record in 587 BC when the temple is destroyed and does not reappear until re-discovered by Indiana Jones (?), the ark of the covenant was the only article placed in the Most Holy Place in both the tabernacle and the temple.²

Also inside the ark were the two stone tables of the law which Moses received from the hand of YHWH while up on Mount Sinai with Aaron and the seventy elders. As the basis for the suzerainty treaty (covenant) which YHWH (the great king or Suzerain) had made with his people Israel (his vassals or servants), these two stone tablets were the legal documentation proving that Israel had a covenant with YHWH. At the same time they functioned as the founding documents of that chosen nation (Israel) through which God’s promise regarding a land, people, and nation, would be fulfilled. At the end of this brief catalogue, the author says, “*of these things we cannot now speak in detail.*” Since he is writing to people well familiar with these events, he probably means something like, “you know the story. We don’t have time to cover all of it. Go home and read Exodus 25-26 and Leviticus 16.”

Having described the building itself, the author now discusses that worship to be conducted within the tabernacle. As we read in verse 6, “*these preparations having thus been made,*” i.e., the tabernacle having been built according to God’s directions, “*the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties.*” According to Exodus 25 and 30, and Leviticus 24, the Levites were to go into the holy place and conduct their regular duties which including placing new oil in the lamps, replacing the bread of the presence on the Sabbath, making sure that the incense was burning, as well as making the daily offerings as described in Numbers 28.

But as spelled out in the summary statement in verse 7, “*but into the second [the Most Holy Place] only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people.*” As described in Leviticus 16, on the annual day of atonement the high priest would enter into the Most Holy Place and sprinkle the blood of a sacrificial bull and goat on the mercy seat. He would sacrifice both for himself as well as for the sins of the people. There is a long history of debate over the meaning of the phrase “unintentional sins” which comes from Leviticus 4, and refers to those sins which the people of Israel commit in ignorance, without awareness that a certain act is prohibited by the law, or at least is implied by the law. The author of Hebrews point is that all sin is sin and atonement must be made for it.

In verses 8-9, the author reminds those living in the new covenant era of the purposes of these sacrifices and the way in which they were conducted. He writes, “*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 (which is symbolic for the present age).*” In other words, the day of atonement serves to illustrate that only those priests performing

² Bruce, Hebrews, 202.

their duties in the temple were allowed to enter the presence of God on behalf of the people. In the distinction between the priests and the Israelites, we see that God was teaching his people that Israel's sin and the sin of the high priests (which likewise must be removed), kept the people separate from God. Only the priests could enter the holy of holies and only the high priest could enter into the Most Holy Place, and that once a year and only with sacrificial blood covered with the fragrance of incense. While the tabernacle and temple were standing, these structures served as "holy places" to perform provisional sacrifices for sin, which should make it clear to all that a new and better covenant must be implemented, *if* God's people are to have direct access to his presence. Like Paul, the author of Hebrews is not a millennialist (that there will be a golden age on the earth for the people of God—either before or after Christ comes back). Instead, he speaks in terms of two different ages. This age is temporal (of which the old covenant is representative) and destined to perish, while in the age to come (which dawns in the new covenant in the person of Jesus Christ) is an age of the eternal.

As made plain in the balance of verse 9, "*according to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper.*" The nature of these old covenant sacrifices (and everything tied to this present evil age) was such that God's anger was provisionally and temporarily turned aside in light of Jesus Christ's future priestly work and his sacrifice on the cross. But since the people remained separated from God because of their sin, and since the sacrifices were repeated and only provisional in nature, the people's consciences were still troubled by guilt. The sacrificial blood of bulls and goats offered by a sinful priest, by its very nature, implies that some better and more efficient sacrifice remained. The death of an animal turns aside God's anger for a time, but not once and for all. Therefore, the consciences of God's people were not made perfect. Because of this, the author argues, the sacrificial system belonged to this age, the sacrifices were part of the old covenant, and they could not give peace to a sinners' conscience. In fact, these sacrifices and the priests should have pointed God's people ahead to a final sacrifice and a consummate high priest who could!

The limits upon the old covenant sacrifices are spelled out in verse 10, and were familiar to anyone steeped in the rituals and practices of second temple Judaism. These sacrifices only deal "*with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.*" The reference to food and drink probably refers to Leviticus 11, the "various washings" refers to the account in Leviticus 16 in regard for the need for the high priest to wash himself after performing the rituals in the temple. But as the author of Hebrews reminds us, eating the right food and having a clean body does not deal with the fundamental problem facing sinful men and women—an evil heart from which all kinds of evil actions spring (sins). The external ritual cannot deal with the internal—a heart which is evil from the time we are conceived. But this is the nature of the old covenant (external—the letter), and why it was destined to pass away when the time of reformation finally came.

The time of reformation is the new covenant era in which all the external things—the sacrifices, the priests, the washings and rituals associated with the tabernacle and the worship conducted therein—give way to a once for all sacrifice for sin accomplished by the saving work of Jesus Christ which is then applied to us in and through the power of the Holy Spirit. The earthly—that which belongs to this age and the old covenant—was designed to point us to the reality of a heaven temple and an eternal great high priest. This is the time of reformation described in verses 11-14 (the second of four theological arguments), to which we turn briefly this morning before we take this up in detail next Sunday.

In verses 11-12 the author explains that the long-expected time of reformation began "*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.” As one writer points out, the good things *to* come, are now the good things that *have* come.³ The tabernacle was superceded by the Jerusalem temple, the Jerusalem temple has been superceded by the coming of Jesus Christ. This was just as God intended it to be.

It is not as though the tabernacle and the sacrifices have failed to fulfill God’s purposes for them. On the contrary they have served the exact purpose for which God gave them—to prepare God’s people for the coming of great high priest who offered a much better sacrifice than that of the blood of bulls and goats. This great high priest offered himself—the perfect sacrifice for sin. Sadly, to the Jews, the temple had become an object of boasting and a source of national pride for Israel, and the grandeur of the building became more important than the sacrifices conducted within. These places were holy only because God was present in the midst of his people. Once Jesus Christ entered the heavenly temple, earthly spaces are no longer holy. The people of Israel completely lost sight of the fact that the temple served to teach them about the eternal realities in Jesus Christ they could not see—someone greater than the tabernacle or the temple, who brought the promised good things to the people of God, and who having once for all entered the heavenly temple removed the barrier between sinners and a holy God as the final prophet, priest, and king, and as mediator of a better covenant.

In verse 13 and 14, the author reminds this struggling congregation why the inferior is so inferior, and why the new covenant is so much better. He writes, *“for if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.”* The sacrifices of the old covenant were temporary and provisional. The ashes of a heifer might temporarily remove the ritual impurity from someone who touched a corpse, but ashes could not actually and effectually turn aside the wrath of God. Christ’s blood can and does. If these things secure forgiveness for a time, they do nothing to remove the stain of sin from the human heart—but the blood of Christ can and does. How much more . . .

This is why God established a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai and established holy places of worship and sacrifice in their midst—to teach them about the eternal reality and heavenly temple in which their own Messiah would do everything necessary to save his people from their sin. These earthly holy places pointed to the true holy place, that heavenly temple where our great high rules and reigns over all things, having made the ultimate once for all sacrifice for sin (himself), before taking his place at the right hand of God his holy presence is no longer confined to an earthly locale, but to a living temple, indwelt by his Spirit, of which we are the stones.

What, then, do we take with us from such a text?

It is in an account like this that we are reminded of how to read our Bibles. Scripture is the historical record of our redemption. And because it is, we see the flow of redemptive history move from types and shadows to reality and fulfillment. Human sin is the stark reality staring all of us in the face. Our sin is so offensive to God that we dare not seek to enter into his presence apart from sacrifice and a mediator. We are separated from God because of our sin and this sin must be dealt with before we can freely enter into the presence of God. This one thing the types and shadows were intended to teach us.

³ Bruce, Hebrews, 211.

But now that the reality has come, and Jesus has fulfilled the types and shadows by taking his place in the true holy place (the heavenly temple) which the tabernacle and temple were designed to illustrate. There are no longer holy places on earth where God visits his people while protecting them from his holiness. There are no more sacrifices, nor is there a priesthood to offer them. This is because Jesus has made the final once for all sacrifice for sin—himself. God’s wrath toward our sin has been turned aside—something the blood of animals could ever accomplish. And through indwelling of the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ now lives in all our hearts, therefore we have been reckoned holy, and the holy place now is the assembly of God’s people for worship where each one of us are priests who offer to our gracious God our sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving.