

# Hebrews 9, Part 1

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As Christians, we walk by faith and not by sight. This means that often the most important things in our lives are things that we cannot see, whether good things or evil ones. None of us have ever seen God, nor have we seen Him intervene directly in our lives. Nor, for that matter, have we ever seen the devil, even though he and his temptations are present in our lives on a daily basis. Even though these spiritual beings are invisible, it is perilous to ignore them.

God, of course, is mindful of our frame. He knows that we have an easier time understanding things that have a concrete existence than things that remain only in the spiritual realm. As a result, during the time of the composition of Scripture, He repeatedly gave us earthly representations of those earthly concepts so that we could grasp His meaning. For instance, He sent Jesus to earth in part as a divine metaphor. The Father Himself is incomprehensible to us. However, we all know what human beings are like. When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, that put the attributes of God in a frame of reference that we could understand. Jesus is what God would be like if God were a man.

God did much the same thing for the work of Jesus, a process that began 1500 years before our Lord drew His first earthly breath. Just imagine, if you will, how hard it would be to understand Jesus dying on the cross for our sins if we didn't have the Old Testament to give that event meaning. What does it mean, for instance, that our sin separates us from God? Why would the death of Jesus somehow atone for the sin of someone else? All of those abstract ideas were given a concrete representation in the Law of Moses. Only as we work through those types of the spiritual reality can we truly understand how God's salvation works in our lives. Let's examine how this works in the first part of Hebrews 9.

## The Earthly Tabernacle

This chapter, which is perhaps the most complete explanation of the sacrifice of Christ anywhere in Scripture, begins with a description of the earthly tabernacle. We find this in Hebrews 9:1-5. As we read this section, one of the first questions that crosses our minds is why the Hebrews writer is discussing the tabernacle at all. After all, the Jews hadn't used the tabernacle for about 1000 years before the time of Christ. When Solomon built the temple, the tabernacle was stripped of its furnishings and presumably abandoned. So why bring up the tabernacle here?

Most likely, the writer describes this antique place of worship because by discussing only the tabernacle, he avoids confusing his audience. Remember, at the time of the writing of Hebrews, the Jews still had a temple. However, that temple did not have the ark of the covenant in it. The ark was lost when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and never again appears in the Scriptural narrative. As a result, both the temple built by the returning exiles and the temple of Herod had a Holy of Holies that was completely empty, and it would have been confusing to Jews of the Hebrews writer's day to refer to the temple containing an ark. He uses the tabernacle as his illustration instead.

In this illustration, the writer begins by describing the furnishings of the Holy Place, the outer room of the tabernacle, and then progresses to the Most Holy Place, which was the inner room. Before we go any further, though, we need to clear up a translation issue. Most translations in Hebrews 9:4 refer to an "altar of incense" in the Holy of Holies. That presents us with a problem, because according to Exodus 30, the altar of incense was clearly located in the outer room, not the inner. However, once we realize that the Greek word here can be translated "censer" as easily as "altar of incense", the difficulty evaporates. It refers to the censer that the high priest carried into the Holy of Holies once a year.

The censer, along with all of the other furnishings of the Holy of Holies, had typical significance. The incense offered from the censer represented the prayers that the high priest offered so that God didn't kill him for coming into His presence. We see incense having this same symbolic function in Revelation 8. The ark of the covenant contained three important symbols of the Mosaic covenant. The tables of the law symbolized the obedience that the people were to offer God, the pot of manna represented the blessings they could expect from God, and Aaron's rod that budded showed that the Levites were to be the ministers of the covenant. The cherubim statues stood for the angelic attendants of God in heaven, and the empty mercy seat represented the invisible presence of God Himself.

Before we go on, let's note that the Hebrews writer considers this a cursory summary of the contents of the tabernacle, and yet, this summary shows a far greater familiarity with the tabernacle than most Christians have today. As with many other things in Hebrews, this indicates that the writer was likely a Jewish Christian who knew the Law well.

## The Ministry of the Priests

All of this imagery helped the Israelites to understand how intimidating it was to come before the Lord, and the way that God arranged the ministry of the priests only furthered this impression. The writer sets this out in Hebrews 9:6-7. Entry into the Holy Place wasn't a big deal. The priests were in and out of the Holy Place all the time—lighting the lamps, changing out the bread on the Table of Showbread, and offering incense at the altar of incense. In other words,

they could get kind of close to God on a regular basis. However, only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and even he only went there once a year. This took place on the Day of Atonement, and it's described in Leviticus 16. On that day, the high priest was commanded to enter with blood, which he sprinkled on the mercy seat as atonement both for his sins and for the sins of the entire people. If he failed to bring blood, he would die, like Nadab and Abihu did.

This concrete pattern of practice taught the Israelites some powerful lessons about their relationship with God. It emphasized that God was holy and that He hated sin. In fact, God was so holy that only the high priest dared to have direct contact with Him, and that he only did so to offer an apology in blood. If interacting with God in this earthly metaphor was so frightening, how much more frightening would it have been to think of seeking out God in heaven?

However, that was only the first lesson that the physical pattern of the tabernacle taught. The Hebrews writer sets the second lesson out in Hebrews 9:8-10. All of the priests who ministered in the Holy Place were only kind of near to God. However, that kind-of nearness was the best that they dared to seek out, because coming any closer was deadly. Their fearful distance from God illustrated the problem with the old covenant. The Israelites could offer Him gifts and sacrifices. They could carry out all kinds of cleansing rituals. However, all of those things were only imperfectly effective, because none of them could cleanse the conscience. They were a stopgap until something better came to take their place.

Today, we take forgiveness of sins almost for granted. A non-Christian can get baptized basically anytime he wants to, and for those of us who are Christians, all we have to do is seek forgiveness from God in our prayers, and we can be confident that He forgives us. All of those sins are gone anytime we want them to go. That is not the way it was under the Law of Moses. The Israelites could never make their lives right. Kind-of close was as close as they could get.

### **The Ministry of Christ**

This huge difference between what the Israelites could expect and what we can expect was accomplished by the ministry of Christ. The Hebrews writer presents his description of this ministry to us in Hebrews 9:11-12. The first thing for us to note here is that Christ in His ministry functioned not as just any old priest, but as the high priest. If you'll recall, the unique function of the high priest that the writer just described was that he entered the Most Holy Place once a year to make atonement for the sins of himself and all the people. Because Christ is also described as a high priest, this tells us that His work is also an atoning work. He made some sacrifice to purchase forgiveness of sins for the people.

However, Christ accomplishes this mission in a far more powerful way than any earthly high priest could. First of all, Christ didn't minister in either the tabernacle or the temple. He had nothing to do with any of the earthly metaphors. Instead, because He was a being of spirit, He was able to interact directly with the spiritual reality that the tabernacle and temple represented. He didn't go into some room on earth where God symbolically dwelt. Instead, He went into the actual presence of God in heaven, a place that doesn't even exist in our creation, to intercede for us.

Second, where the earthly high priest made his atoning sacrifice one time per year, Christ made His atoning sacrifice once for all time. The forgiveness of sins that He purchased was so powerful and so enduring that it will never have to be repeated. This was possible because of the greater sacrifice that Jesus offered. He didn't come before God with the blood of a bull, which is what the earthly high priest offered for himself, or with the blood of a goat, which is what the high priest offered for the people. Instead, He brought His own blood. He offered the sacrifice of His own life, which He had surrendered on the cross, and that sacrifice was incomparably better. The Israelites had to offer the blood of animals, which were lower than they. We are sanctified by the blood of Christ, who is far higher than we.

All of this adds up to a truly great forgiveness of sins. Christ offered His sacrifice in a better tabernacle and He offered a higher grade of lifeblood. Because of this, He only had to make His sacrifice once, but the power of that sacrifice will extend until the end of time. His one selfless act of love has purchased eternal redemption for all of us.

From there, the writer moves on to further explain the difference between the blood of animals and the blood of Christ in Hebrews 9:13-14. First of all, he notes that despite the obvious inferiority of the sacrifices under the Law of Moses, they weren't completely useless. The priests who ministered in the tabernacle could only get kind of near to God, but it's not like they were stuck outside the camp with the ritually unclean. Instead, just like a leper could go through a purification ceremony once his leprosy vanished and become part of the people again, the Israelites could ritually purify their flesh from sin. If they did everything right, God wouldn't embrace them, but He would tolerate them.

Now, if even the blood of a slaughtered animal could make such a difference in the spiritual lives of the Israelites, how much more difference will the blood of Christ make in our lives? All of those sacrificed bulls and goats were to be physically unblemished. They weren't sick or blind or deformed. Jesus, on the other hand, was spiritually unblemished. He was untainted by even a single sin, and that's where the power of His sacrifice came from. Because the sacrifice was greater, its effects were greater. He didn't just ritually purify us in a ceremony that had to be regularly renewed. He cleansed us from our sins once and for all. All of the works of the flesh, by which we earned death for ourselves, have been erased by His grace, so that all of us are able to serve God without fear of divine wrath. Even the Israelite high priest only dared to approach God once a year. We can come before Him in heaven whenever we want.