

The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 22

Hebrews 9:1-5

The Symbol of the Old Covenant

October 21, 2018

Introduction to Chapter 9

“I paused last eve beside the blacksmith’s door,
 And heard the anvil ring, the vesper’s chime,
 And looking in I saw upon the floor
 Old hammers, worn with beating years of time.
 “How many anvils have you had?” said I,
 “To wear and batter all these hammers so?”
 “Just one,” he answered. Then with twinkling eye:
 “The anvil wears the hammers out, you know.”
 And so, I thought, the anvil of God’s Word
 For ages skeptics’ blows have beat upon,
 But though the noise of falling blows was heard
 The anvil is unchanged; the hammers gone.”¹

As we proceed through Hebrews, I could not resist inserting this poem, which tells us that the Bible stands! Jesus Himself said, *“For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.”* (Matt. 5:18). This just serves to remind all of us not to lose our way in this difficult book, so we can truly recognize that the words, sentences and paragraphs are God-breathed, and are meant to touch our hearts and minds in whatever way God intends for us as individuals to be affected, changed, transformed by what we read and understand.

The first 10 verses (and we’ll cover only 5 in this lesson) of chapter 9 serve to offer us a basis of summarizing the OC, to see the parallels and contrasts between it and the NC, of which we (although not the ultimate recipients of all the benefits) partake and enjoy today – the blessings which some of the first readers of Hebrews were ready to forsake and leave behind in order to return to a dying religion, as described here.

The Tabernacle

v. 1

These 5 verses serve as a descriptive picture of the original Tabernacle, built by Moses and the people. This nation had left Israel as a redeemed people, brought out by God Himself (Ex. 20:2) from their plight of slavery. This reminder for the first recipients of Hebrews was intended to show them that, yes, that first covenant had greatness and amazing symbolism attached to it – cf. Heb. 1,13; 9:1.

¹ W.A. Criswell cites this poem by John Clifford in John & Paul Feinberg (eds) – Tradition and Testament, Moody, 1981, p. 295

The tabernacle was a tent – it was mobile – because the people were about to embark on a long journey into the wilderness and would need (God knew, even if they didn't) this symbol of His presence with them as they went. So, as a tent, it seemed pretty drab and bland on the outside. But outward appearances can deceive. Inside, it was filled with a holy concept, holy articles & furnishings, and in fact, the very presence of God Himself!

V. 1 reminds the reader that *“even then first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness.”* So even though it (the religious association with the tabernacle) was *“becoming obsolete”*, growing old and was *“ready to vanish away”*, we are not to assume that it had no value whatsoever. In fact, look back at Heb. 8:1-6. So, as long as the Tabernacle (or the Temple by implication) stand, it was a symbol that the way to open access to God was barred. The contrast with Christ, therefore is vast, because He is “the Way, the Truth and the Life”, so only in Him is access to the Father available. (cf. Heb. 4:14-16; 12:18-24.)

However, before we move on into chapter 9 any further, there is a question I had, and maybe you have the same question. To me, the question crops up in v. 2, when the AH says, “For a tent was prepared...”. The question is: Why does the AH go all the way back to the Tabernacle to describe Judaistic worship, when the Temple had superseded the tabernacle and was then still standing in Jerusalem? Furthermore, the Aaronic / Levitical priesthood was still ministering in that Temple. So why not describe the Temple? Does that strike you as odd?

I found two commentators helpful on this point, while most sailed right past the question. Only Tom Schreiner and John MacArthur dealt with it, with their points not exactly the same, but helpful nonetheless.

Schreiner says,

“Probably the AH refers to the tabernacle rather than the Temple because the former was associated with the enactment of the Sinai Covenant. [i.e., the Old Covenant]”²

John MacArthur nuances his point a bit more helpfully, and he focuses on the impermanence of the tabernacle – which is the very point the AH is making in this whole section.

“Here is a brief description of the old sanctuary – first the tabernacle, and then the temple. The emphasis here, however, is on the tabernacle. It was the first sanctuary and also the most temporary, and the most earthly. Thus, it serves to illustrate back the writer’s point. It was made largely of skins and was designed to be portable. Even from the human view, it was the essence of impermanence. It gave every impression of being transitory.”³

As the AH began to describe the articles or furnishings within the Tabernacle, he is by no means being complete in his detail – in fact, he never mentions the outer courtyard

² Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 258

³ John MacArthur, Hebrews, Moody, p. 221

and the furnishings in that. He is concentrating on those things most important to his presentation & appeal. We could go back to Exodus 25-40 and read the whole account of the planning and building of this tent, plus the preparation for the priesthood associated with it. But suffice to say that the lengthy description, in this sentence or a slight variation of it, is found many times in the original account in the OT. *“And see that you make them after the pattern for them [the tent and all furnishings], which is being shown you on the mountain [Sinai].”* See Ex. 25:1,40; 26:30; 27:8; 31:6,11; Num. 8:4. Clearly, it is of no small importance to God that this tabernacle and all associated with it is done to His standard.

The tabernacle was not just a convenient tent for nomads to carry from place to place, set up by Moses. No, it was the plan of God with an intention of Him dwelling among His chosen people, under rule of His law (the OC) until the tabernacle was no longer needed – cf. Ex. 29:43-46. The tabernacle served Israel for years, until, finally, initiated by King David and erected by his son, King Solomon in about 1015 BC⁴, the tabernacle fades into the past and the temple takes over as the central feature of Judaism, worship, at a specific spot in Jerusalem – the very spot where Abraham ‘sacrificed’ Isaac – on Mt. Moriah, on the threshing floor of Araunah, which David had purchased for this very purpose – cf. I Chron. 21:18-22; II Chron. 3:1 & II Sam. 24:18-25.

So the tabernacle was never meant to be a permanent fixture for Israel. Later on, in Heb. 9:8, we are told that it (and the temple) were transitory and as long as they were the focal point of Israel’s worship, access to the Holy places is not yet open. So, if some go back, as they longed to do, they would be going back to a dying system, that, even when alive and operating in full force, could not give them the access to God they craved.

The Tabernacle’s Design

vv. 2-3

Now v. 2 tells us that this tent, which had been prepared as *“an earthly place of holiness”* (v. 1), had 2 sections. The first – called the Holy Place, and the 2nd, the Most Holy Place, also referred to elsewhere as *“the Holy of Holies”*. A 3rd place, the Outer Courtyard is not mentioned here.

The Holy Place

v. 2

This first holy chamber was rectangular - 20 cubits long, 10 cubits wide, and 10 cubits high (30’ x15’ x15’). The details are found in Exodus and Leviticus regarding what furnishings were in this room, and the AH supplies this information; the Lampstand, the Table and the Shewbread (the Bread of the Presence).

The Lampstand – the ‘Menorah’ – had 7 branches, with oil lamps on each branch. One main center stem and 3 on either side of that. The role of the priests was to ensure

⁴ Per Jones’ Chronology

that the oil supply (daily) was sufficient to support keeping the lamps burning on a continuous basis.

The next item is ‘the table and the bread of the presence’. This table (Ex. 20:30) was made of acacia wood, and covered in gold. Every sabbath, 12 loaves (each 1 represented one of the 12 tribes) were placed there on the table – likely freshly baked the day before. It was to be eaten by the priests (and only the priests) by the end of the week. The compartment all these things were in is ‘the Holy Place’.

The Holy of Holies

vv. 3-5

Then in v. 3, the second compartment is described. The thing that separated this area from the Holy Place was a curtain or veil. There was also a curtain between the Holy Place and the Outer Court, but that is not mentioned here. This veil or curtain was incredibly important because of what was housed behind it, and what it represented. Only the High Priest, and only one time per year on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) could even enter into this Most Holy Place, to sprinkle blood of that day’s special sacrifices especially on the Mercy Seat (the Ark of the Covenant) in order to make atonement for his own sins and the people of Israel’s sins. It was only after an elaborate and specific set of rituals that the High Priest could safely access this area. See Leviticus 16.

Interestingly, the AH says that there were two furnishings in the Holy of Holies – the Altar of Incense and the Ark of the Covenant. However, the Altar of Incense clearly (from virtually all other biblical accounts) stood next to veil in the Holy Place, not inside the Holy of Holies. Is this a discrepancy? Did this OT expert author who wrote the book of Hebrews not know this? We have to assume that he did, so why list it inside the veil? A Bible critic would almost immediately claim Bible error, but OT expert, E.J. Young says this should not be the immediate claim of a Bible believer. Here’s his point;

“When we meet difficulties in Scripture, it is well to be cautious about asserting the presence of error. We as Bible believers are not called upon to offer an answer to all the problems in the Bible any more than we are called upon to offer an explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity. It is perfectly true that our responsibility is to study the Biblical difficulties in order, if possible, to understand and harmonize them. To explain them to everyone’s satisfaction, however, or to provide a harmony in every instance, is not incumbent upon us. Hence, if in light of our present state of knowledge there are some passages which we cannot yet harmonize, we need not become overly discouraged.”⁵

Having cited this, there are a couple of better explanations for this seeming discrepancy. One is from Tom Schreiner;

“Hebrews, of course, places the altar of incense in the most holy place. It is difficult to believe the author, who was familiar with the OT and likely knew Jewish tradition, didn’t know where the altar of incense was located. After all, the priest had to tend it twice a day, and the blood of sin offerings was constantly applied to the horns of the altar. The location of the altar was common knowledge in Judaism (Jdth 9:1; 1 Macc.

⁵ E.J. Young, Thy Word is Truth, Eerdmans, 1957, 1978, p. 124

4:49-50; 2 Macc. 10:3). Both Philo and Josephus put the incense altar in the outer sanctum instead of the most holy place. Zechariah's ministry in the temple confirms this (LK 1:5-23), for his ministry at the altar could not have been in the most holy place since it was accessible only once a year. It seems likely then, that the author links the incense altar closely with the most holy place (cf. also I Kgs.6:20,22), since the incense altar is associated with God's presence. On the day of atonement incense from the altar was taken in (Lev. 16:12-13), and the blood of the sin offering was sprinkled on the horns of the incense altar as well as on the mercy seat (Ex. 30:10; Lev. 16:15). As Hagner says, "Yet so vital was the burning of incense on the Day of Atonement...that the author automatically associates the altar of incense with the Holy of Holies."⁶

Philip Hughes comes to a similar conclusion. This is no error or discrepancy, but a deliberate theological decision by the author.

"It would seem sensible to conclude that the author, so far from being guilty of innocence or eccentricity, was...following a liturgical tradition which recognized a special doctrinal association between the altar of incense and the holy of holies...its place was to be in front of the curtain which concealed the ark of the covenant...so that, although it really stood in the holy place between the candlestick on the south side and the table on the north...it is not only connected to the most holy place in I Kgs.6:22, but is reckoned in Heb. 9:4 as part of the furniture of the most holy place. [J.P. Lange postulates] that we should "rather find a theological idea than an archaeological error" in the passage before us." Certainly, the distinctive Christian understanding, which our author is intent on imparting, and which evidently involves the association of the altar with the holy of holies, the former symbolizing the prayers of God's people and the latter the heavenly sanctuary, is confirmed in Rev. 3:8f., where it is said that, in the celestial reality, incense is offered "with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne."⁷

So, hopefully this helps to clear up something you may have never considered as an issue – if you were not really aware of the tabernacle furnishings. It at least shows that we do not have to immediately cave in and see an error, as E.J. Young pointed out.

In vv. 4b-5, the AH now names and describes the article that definitely was housed in the Holy of Holies – the Ark of the Covenant, This is a unique and significant item, perhaps the singular most critical component, and even the reason for the tabernacle in the first place, because it symbolized God's presence with Israel – hidden but accessible once a year by the High Priest alone. Direct access behind the curtain that blocked off the Ark of the Covenant 364 days of the year was forbidden under pain of death, and in fact, the High Priest, when officially entering that chamber had to follow an elaborate and solemn procedure or he too, could be struck dead.

This, in fact, is what may be described in Leviticus 10:1-3 (cf. Num. 3:3) to Nadab & Abihu, Aaron's sons. So, this symbolic access to God's presence was strictly regulated, and the way to Him was not really open and welcoming. The Day of Atonement pointed forward to that time when full access would be granted to God's people. For

⁶ Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 260

⁷ Hughes, Hebrews, p. 312-313

example, note Heb. 4:14-16 contrasted with Heb. 9:6-8. We will be looking more closely at Heb. 9:6-8 in our next lesson.

But consider the priests who ministered in the tabernacle and later on, in the Temple...being aware that just on the other side of that curtain was God's actual presence (His Shekinah glory) above the mercy seat and between the 2 golden cherubim on either end of that covering, and that blue veil / curtain, a barrier that kept their curiosity in check!

Look at the AH's description of the ark here.

- Covered on all sides with gold
- Inside it – a golden pot of manna
 - Aaron's rod that budded
 - The tablets of the covenant – the very stones on which God had carved the 10 commandments on Sinai
- Above it – the cherubim, overshadowing the mercy seat

The Ark was 2.5 cubits x 1.5 cubits x 1.5 cubits (45" x 24" x 24"). The 2 cherubim that overshadowed the mercy seat (lit. 'propitiatory') were attached to the mercy seat (one on each end) – both they and the mercy seat made of beaten gold. Notice the description of it in Exodus 25:10-22.

At this point (in Exodus), only the 2 tablets of stone were to be placed inside the gold-lined Ark. By the way, the tablets were the second set, since Moses broke the first set in anger when he came down off of Mt. Sinai the first time and the people were worshipping a golden calf idol! The second set's receipt is recorded in Deuteronomy (which means 'Second law') 10:1-5. But the AH says that the Ark contained other items: a golden urn containing manna (likely a sample of it) and Aaron's rod, which had budded. According to I Kings 8:9, there was nothing in the Ark but the 2 tablets of stone. In Numbers 17:1-11, Aaron's rod was placed 'before' the testimony (Ark), not 'in' it.

In Numbers 17:1-11, God was showing that Aaron, and no one else could be the High Priest despite (Numbers 16) Korah's attempt to usurp that position. Twelve rods were laid out (one per tribe) in the Tabernacle and Aaron's rod (which was really a branch off a tree, as all 12 were) budded – it brought forth almonds! In Num. 17:10, God tells Moses put Aaron's rod before the testimony (Ark) as a sign for the rebels so they might not grumble against God and His appointed, chosen authority. Interestingly, in one of the most (perhaps a bit obscure) compelling types in the OT, Moses' strikes the rock a second time to get water to flow out (Ex. 17 – 1st time), and this time, according to Num. 20:9, it is Aaron's staff or rod Moses uses, not his own.

The miraculous and gracious manna kept Israel alive in the wilderness – Ex. 16:4 – and the sample for the Ark is mentioned in 16:33-34 as Moses tells Aaron to put an

‘omer’⁸ of manna in a jar and place it ‘before the Lord’; i.e., in the Ark. Hebrews 9:4 tells us it was a golden pot.

In v. 5, the AH mentions the ‘golden cherubim of glory’ overshadowing the mercy seat. We have already seen that they were made of beaten gold and were actually a part of the covering of the Ark. They were a symbolic reminder of the cherubim who (Isaiah 6) who overlooked God’s throne in heaven.

In I Kings 6:23-28, as Solomon builds the Temple, a new addition is added to the Holy of Holies. Note the sizes here – 10 cubits high (180”), with wings 5 cubits long (7.5 ‘) – cherubim. These were not attached to the mercy seat, but stood in the chamber to frame and overlook the Ark in its entirety. These are of olive wood (v. 23), overlaid with gold (v. 28), not pure, beaten gold like the ones on the mercy seat, and they are not mentioned here in Hebrews 9 because they were unique to the Temple.

We could go on and on looking at these things, even their typical significance⁹, their career (especially the Ark), and their depiction of Christ Himself in type, but the AH tells us in Hebrews 9:5, “*of these things we cannot speak in detail.*” His point is not to detail every nuance of these items, but next, as we move to vv. 6-10, his point will become apparent as he shows how all this was now obsolete because Christ was now here.

⁸ An omer per Ex. 16:16 was the measure of a man – in other words, one man’s daily nutritional requirement.

⁹ If you are interested in that angle, your best source is Arthur W. Pink – Gleanings in Exodus.