

Sermon 24: Hebrews 9:1-10: Old Covenant Fellowship with God

OUTLINE

Earthly Tent
Earthly Priesthood

INTRODUCTION

It is easy for us, on this side of the cross to despise and underestimate the wonder of the Old Covenant. Having tasted the goodness of God in Christ, we can see the inadequacy of the Old Covenant. Right now we are in a whole book that is reinforcing how inadequate the OT was and how necessary Jesus is. The portion before us continues in this vein of showing Jesus as superior. In Hebrews 9:1-10 we have a brief overview of the tent and its furnishings, v1-5 and the priesthood and its ministrations, v6-7. This token survey would have been included merely by way of reminder to make the point that the Old Covenant was inadequate and Jesus is better. But I think that this message falls too easily on our ears. Today I want to do something a little different. I am going to give you the application of this passage up front. And then I want to spend the bulk of our time trying to help you see the wonder and marvel of the old covenant. Standing where we are there is no danger or temptation to go back to the OT; there is no beauty or draw; we do not see God's goodness and gracious dealings in the establishing of it but only all the faults. So today I want to help us gain a sense of wonder at the goodness of God in establishing the old covenant with the tabernacle and priesthood.

But first the application. The application is found in v8-10, '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.' Firstly, though the OT believer could draw near to God in worship in ways other nations could not, the tabernacle with its coverings and rooms made them near but far, close but removed; fellowship with God and sinners was restored but was not the face to face fellowship of Eden—but Christ gives us access. Interestingly, the two rooms of the temple, the holy place and the most holy place are revealed as having redemptive historical significance. The outer room the holy place where priests ministered daily, that represents the Old Covenant, a time of limited and imperfect access to God. But the Most Holy Place where only the high priest went, this is pointing to the New Covenant where Jesus as our High priest has rendered such service so as to tear down the old; has torn the veil; and we can approach the throne of God the ark of the covenant as it were through Him. Secondly, the Old Covenant could not perfect the conscience of the worshiper. Sin was covered, but we would sin again. The laws and repeated sacrifices would only act to increase the knowledge of our sin, but our sins would not cease, the sacrifices only managed but did not eradicate the problem, and we were constantly left feeling as if the axe of God's judgement would fall with no sense of assurance and certainty and security in the presence of this holy God. Jesus by His superior sacrifice and priestly service has dealt with sin once and for all. Thirdly, v10 emphasizes that externalism was a constant problem with the Old. We have seen how many unregenerate Jews could participate in the worship and ritually clean but the heart would remain untouched, the new

covenant renovates the heart where the old did not do it with all but only the remnant. The point of the author is to show how the OT regulations around worship reinforced what the Old could not do and can only be done in Christ. But in order for these points to come home with force you first need to see the grace and mercy of the Old. We have two points as we do a 30 000 foot fly over Old Covenant worship; the earthly tent; and the earthly priesthood.

The earthly tent

V1-5, 'Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. ² 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. ³ Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, ⁴ 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. ⁵ Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.' In 8:5 the author spoke about how Moses tent was a copy and shadow, here he returns to the copy which would have been familiar to the Jews. He does not have Herod's temple; or Zerubbabel's temple; or Solomon's temple in view, but the tabernacle in the wilderness, the tent of meeting.

Lets first appreciate the wonder of this tent. God and man dwelt together in the Garden before sin; when Adam sinned he was driven out of the garden and cherubim were posted to guard the way so Adam could not return. Adam could have fellowship before the gates of the garden but could not enter, Cherubim barred the way. But God made man to have fellowship with him, to bring us into the glory of the fellowship He has with Himself. So God promises in Gen. 3:15 to crush the serpents head by a man born of a woman. We know that this is Christ, but there are progressive and intermediate steps that move us forward to Christ. We do not have the time to stop and talk about the Noahic Covenant; nor the Abrahamic Covenant; but we do want to stop and see the significance of the tent of meeting. The tent and Eden are designed to represent each other. The garden was the place where God dwelt now guarded by cherubim; the tent was where the presence of God dwelt, and under three layers of animals skins the two rooms of the tent were covered in blue curtains representing the heavens with cherubim stitched onto them symbolizing the garden. The only time cherubim are mentioned not in connection with the tent in the Pentateuch is Gen. 3:24. And just as Adam after the fall could only offer his offerings outside the gate of Eden, so the Israelite worshipper was to bring his sacrifices and kill them outside the front entrance to the entrance to the Holy Place. Only the priest could enter, not the regular worshipper. This will help you feel the desperation in the longing to dwell in the house of the Lord forever, to be a doorkeeper, to dwell in the temple and gaze upon the beauty of the Lord. It was called a tent of meeting but the regular worshipper and God did not meet. The priests whose duties are described as 'tending and keeping' the same to describe Adam's in the Garden were a select few who had access to God's presence, painting a picture of sinners getting back into the garden behind the cherubim guardians and having true fellowship with God. Though this picture is limited as the priests could only serve in the Holy Place, and only the High Priest once a year in the Holy of Holies. God was in their midst yes; the Israelites were the people of God; but only representatives could go in. Layers of division were present. The tent had an underlayer of blue curtains, these were invisible as they were covered by goat skins; which were in turn covered by ram skins died

red; and these were in turn covered by a fourth waterproof layer of animal skins. God was in their midst, a holy God in the midst of sinners and is building a pathway back to Eden.

Next the author describes the sections. Now please notice that he leaves off the outer court. The tent was a large outer court which would have had two important pieces of furniture, the bronze altar and bronze basin. This outer court representing the earth was made of less valuable material, bronze. Then there is the Holy Place, which only the priests entered daily; this had three items of furniture, the lampstand; table of the showbread; and the altar of incense; then in the inner sanctum the Holy of Holies/Most holy place you had the Ark of the Covenant, in the early years of Israel's history there was also Aaron's rod that blossomed and the golden urn holding a sample of the manna that was given in the wilderness. These were soon lost and not mentioned in later Jewish history. Now in v4 it talks about the golden altar of incense in the Most holy place, I think that this should rather be translated as golden censer, as Lev. 16:12-13 records that a censer was to be taken into the Most holy place of the day of atonement. The word in the Greek here is literally incense burner, and is used in the LXX to speak of censers not the altar of incense. The author is not giving an exhaustive listing of the items but a sample list. These things would be known to any Jew.

These items of furniture tells an important story, the story of the exodus. The Passover begins with the shedding of blood to ransom Israel; you begin your entrance to God's presence with the bronze altar. After the Passover is the parting of the Red Sea; so between the tent and altar is the Bronze laver/bronze sea, in Solomon's temple this held 44 000 liters of water, a bathtub holds max 300. Then you pass out of Egypt and into the wilderness in the holy place, the lampstand represents God's presence as a pillar of fire and cloud; the table of showbread speaks of God's provision of manna; and the altar of incense could either speak of Moses intercession granting Israel victory, or the pillar of cloud as shade. And then Israel comes to the foot of Mt Sinai; Israel's representatives are not allowed to go up to the summit, only one, Moses goes into the presence of God. The top of the mountain is shrouded in smoke, and so censers are used when the high priest goes in; and there are the 10 commandments in the Ark the symbol of God's throne.

But there is another layer here, because Eden was a mountain, Ez. 28:13-14. Mountains, high places were considered good for holy places, because Eden was a mountain. There was a river flowing down from it, Gen. 2:10. Sinai as a second Eden, now had a way for one man at least to go directly up to the peak, into Eden as it were. The question who may ascend the hill of the Lord focuses the importance of this reentry. A sinful people at the foot of the mountain they cannot touch lest they die; with their representatives only allowed half way up to have a meal where only God's feet are revealed; and only one man allowed to go to the top where a cloud hides God's presence is a scary picture, but also one of movement from separation to fellowship; it holds in tension distance but nearness. The tent is a mobile Sinai capturing this tension in architectural form. Sinai pictures a partial reentry to Eden; and the tent is a picture of Sinai.

The first room of the tent was a picture of the Aaronic blessing. The lampstand as a symbol of God's presence and blessing would cast its light on the 12 loaves of the show bread as a sign of God's presence and blessing upon His people. Then once a week, on the Sabbath day, the priest symbolizing Israel would eat the bread having a fellowship meal with God, a mini marriage supper of the

lamb. This weekly eating of bread as a fellowship meal on a weekly basis is part of a rationale behind a regular observance of the Lord's Supper. This partaking in God's Sabbath day bounty; this entering into Sabbath rest and being able to eat, something Adam fell short of in the Garden of Eden, is here partially through representatives restored.

Each part also speaks of Christ. He is the light of the World; He is the Bread from heaven; and His intercessions on our behalf as the altar of incense are a sweet aroma winning God's favour for us.

Lets consider the furniture of the inner room with the description of the priestly activities in our second point.

Earthly priesthood

V6-7, 'These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, ⁷ but into the second 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.' Our author now focuses on the activities of the priests that the various items of furniture were used in. v6 talks about the regular daily repeated activities; and v7 speaks of the unique duty of the high priest on the Day of Atonement. Regular priestly duties would include burning incense twice a day, Ex. 30:7-8; tending to the oil lamps by trimming their wicks and filling up their oil Ex. 27:20-21; supplying and eating the showbread each sabbath, Ex. 25:30, Lev. 24:5-9; and offering of lambs for the morning and evening sacrifice twice a day outside the entrance of the holy place.

Priestly duties involved 5 different kinds of sacrifices. There was the burnt offering; the grain offering; the peace offering; the sin offering; and the guilt offering. The burnt; grain; and peace offerings were voluntary; but the sin and guilt offering had to be offered for sin. The peace offering was the only sacrifice that the worshipper got to eat from. The priests could eat a portion of all but the burnt offerings where the whole animal was offered to God. Each sacrifice points to Christ. The burnt offering, which was the consecration of the whole animal speaks of Christ offering His whole life for us. His death on the cross, and every moment of obedience in His life; His total consecration for us, including His active obedience is captured by the burnt offering. This was the offering Abraham was told to make of Isaac, and Jesus was this for us; this was the offering after the flood offered by Noah which God found more acceptable than the outpouring of the flood. In our calling to be like Christ, this sacrifice speaks of giving our whole selves to God.

The grain offering, the bloodless offering of unleavened bread made from fine flour, and oil and frankincense is an offering which points to the life of Christ as pleasing to God.

The peace offering which is a fellowship meal with God speaks of Christ reconciling us to God, something we regularly remember at the Lord's Supper and will climactically enjoy at the marriage feast of the Lamb.

The sin offering which focuses on cleansing from sin points to the blood of Jesus which cleanses us from all sin.

The guilt offering which would include reparations if we had sinned against others also has to do with sin but focuses on making payment and reparations. Jesus is the payment of our debts.

The author directs our attention to the high point of Israel's worship in v7, the day of Atonement. An argument has been made that Lev. 16 is the heart of the Pentateuch and I agree. If Genesis begins with man made to live in fellowship with a holy God and then is driven out; and Deuteronomy ends with Israel in fellowship in a new garden, Lev. 16 is the lynch pin that holds it all together, that secures this new fragile fellowship as the sin of the people is covered year by year.

Turn to Lev. 16. The jarring backdrop to the instructions given to Aaron is the death of his two sons who offered strange fire before the Lord. In contrast to the self-willed way in which they sought to go into God's presence, and likely into the Holy of Holies, we are given clear instructions about the only way the high priest can come. Hearing these instructions was the closest the Jewish worshipper would come to being able to be involved. There are three parts to the drama of this day. The sin offerings for Aaron and Israel; the scapegoat; and then the burnt offerings for Aaron and Israel. Aaron has to first make a sin offering for himself and his family; and a sin offering for the house of Israel. These act to ritually cleanse priest and people, and the house of the Lord. You will notice in v4 that there are special dress requirements. The high priest had two layers of clothing, white linen undergarments, and then the colorful priestly garments over. Time will not permit me to extrapolate on each part. But the high priest was not to appear in God's presence not dressed in the usual priestly garments, but here there is something different. The clothes which are for beauty and for glory are stripped away. There is type of Christ here. Christ veiled His divine glory when He became incarnate and served as our high priest. You cannot help but think of the linen shrouds that Jesus' dead body was wrapped in as He ascended to His Father in paradise/the same word for Eden. Twice for both the sin offering and the burnt offering we see this dress code.

The high priest would go into the Holy of Holies, but v12-13 tell us that there was a censer that released incense and an obscuring smoke so that he does not die. The high priest would then sprinkle blood on the east side of the altar, the side of approach, the side that Adam and Eve were driven out. The same side as the entrance into the outer court. A sevenfold sprinkling before the mercy seat with blood applied to it, to cleanse both priest and people is essential, v16, 'Thus he shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins. And so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which dwells with them in the midst of their uncleannesses.' The ark of the covenant in the most holy place, and the altar of incense in the holy place is next and finally the bronze altar. Working from the Most holy place the path that the priest representing Israel would take is cleansed from the inside out. And the sins of both priest and people are ritually cleansed.

Then the scapegoat ritual. V20-22, 'And when he has made an end of atoning for the Holy Place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. ²¹ And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. ²² The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.' Aaron lays hands on the goat, a visual representation of identifying with the substitute animal; he then confesses the sins of Israel, iniquities, transgressions and sins. They are 'put on' the head of

the goat and it is sent out as Adam was from the garden. This act of payment being given, is also an act of removing sin from the midst of Israel. The goat bears their sins away. The goat is said to be set aside for Azazel. This is an unknown reference. Some think it refers to a demonic figure indicating being handed over to satan; or is a name for the wilderness where it is driven or another name for scapegoat, its meaning is not known, we can only guess. The picture of Christ as the one driven from the presence of God is poignantly felt in the words, My My God why have you forsaken me. And just as the goat bears the wrath of being driven away from God's presence and Israel has fellowship with God; Jesus suffers the wrath of God as our sins are placed upon Him and we have fellowship with God.

Then the priest rewashes and redresses in his second suit of plain linen clothing. This is followed by the burnt offerings for atonement for both priest and people, v24. The rituals end with the fat of the sin offering being offered, the best part as a sweet smell indicating that the offerings have been accepted and God is pleased. And the remains of the sin offering are taken outside the city to be burned, the one touching them having to wash before returning to the camp.

These are beautiful pictures of God making provision for sinners to come into God's presence; for God satisfying His holy wrath towards sin so that He can maintain fellowship with sinners. Properly understood the Jew would marvel at the grace and mercy and provision of God. How can one so holy, so powerful, marry Himself to a people so sinful and be so good to them pouring out all of His gifts upon them? The temple was a picture of this reentry into Eden. But of course as the book of Hebrews indicates, it was good and gracious but it was weak and incomplete. The OT tent, and priests and sacrifices were not God's final solution to sin. A lack of full access; a soiled conscience; and external not internal purity were begging for a better solution. These we have in Christ, who is our priest and sacrifice, and He has torn down the holy place when the veil tore at His death; He has fully propitiated God for all of our sins with His perfect death; and He secures a better covenant with better promises where we are given new hearts to walk in His ways. s