

May 17, 2015  
Sunday Evening Service  
Series: Hebrews  
Community Baptist Church  
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Greer, SC 29650  
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*To Ponder . . .*

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Hebrews 9:1-14

1. What impresses you most about the old tabernacle arrangement?
2. Why was the curtain at the back of the Most Holy Place so significant?
3. What did the high priest do once each year and why?
4. What purpose did the old system of worship serve?
5. In what major matter did the old system fail, but Christ's sacrifice accomplishes?

**WHAT VALUE IS A PURE CONSCIENCE?  
Hebrews 9:1-14**

We live in a day that is very sensitive about germs and bacteria. Germophobia or bacteriophobia was hardly heard of fifty years ago, but paranoia like that grips many people in our culture. When my generation were children, I think our mothers told us to wash our hands before we ate so that we wouldn't get dirt on our food. Okay, our mothers were actually mindful of germs too. But that never prevented us kids from picking up food that fell on the floor and eating it. When I was a kid no church had a bottle of hand sanitizer sitting in the lobby like we do. No restaurant manager ever put a sign in the restroom reminding employees to wash their hands. And we didn't find hand sanitizer stations scattered throughout the hospital hallways and lobbies.

Am I proposing that this generation is too concerned about germs and bacteria? Not at all. I really am against disease. But the extreme emphasis on external purity does remind me of something Jesus said. He taught, "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person." (Matthew 15:11); "Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone" (Matthew 15:17-20).

The essence of Jesus' lesson was this: The Pharisees taught people to be fastidious about ceremonial washings or cleansings that they equated with spiritual purity. Only by doing these external rituals, they taught, would their followers be granted entrance into the kingdom of God. Jesus kept telling the people that they couldn't wash away the problem of a defiled heart no matter how many external rituals they engaged in. The problem is in the heart and works done through human energy, dedication, or even sincerity cannot cleanse the internal part of a person.

That is the same lesson the writer of this letter presented to the Christians who, in the past, had been engulfed by that works-oriented, external religion of Judaism. They had once depended on the regular and annual sacrifices of innocent animals to cleanse them from sin. They, too, like many Jewish people, discovered that it was all so much external ritual that never touched the conscience. After all their sincere works, they were still plagued by a conscience that condemned them.

The answer to that problem is still the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Only the sacrifice of Christ tears down the curtain that separated the sinner from the presence of God. Now we who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ have greater privileges than the Old Testament high priest who went into the presence of God once each year with a sacrifice for the general and temporary cleansing of the peoples' sins. Now God invites us to come into His presence whenever we choose with a clear conscience that no longer condemns us. The blood of Christ has purified our insides which allows us freedom to come to our Creator and fellowship with Him.

**Then (vv.1-7).**

The author gave us a quick review of the regulations and symbols of the old covenant system of worship (vv. 1-5). No one should argue that the place of the old covenant was not holy. We read, *Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness (v.1)*. There were regulations that pointed out the holiness of the items used in worship. Those regulations are scattered about from Exodus 20 – Numbers 10. They prove to us that God prescribed a particular way for worshipping Him. Since He is the Creator, He has this right.

Since our God is the God of Israel who called the nation into existence based on His covenant with Abraham, He had the right to tell them how to worship Him. God established His relationship with these people through the Covenant of His Law that He gave through Moses. In the details of that Law we discover that even the physical place where worship was conducted was considered holy. That flows from the most important fact that God Himself is holy. Therefore, the tabernacle, the furnishings, the priests, and the system of sacrifices were supposed to reflect God's holy character. Therefore also, the tabernacle, all that was connected with the tabernacle, and the worship at the tabernacle had to be unique. Because God is holy, all things pertaining to worshipping God had to be distinct from the world.

We should not be surprised to discover then that the physical elements symbolized holiness (vv.2-5). Consider the Holy Place for example. *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 (v.2)*. The tent was prepared according to God's specific instructions (Exodus 25:10-30:38; 35:30-39:43). Overall the footprint of the tabernacle (including the court) was 150'x75'. There were multiple **sections** in this tent. Actually there is no word in Greek text for this the English word *section*. It is provided by the translators for clarity.

Thinking about the first section of the tabernacle we should conclude that the first section would be the outer section called the court. It was 75' x 75' and located on the south side of the tabernacle. All of the priests carried out duties in this area. Here they offered the sacrifices the people brought on the bronze altar. Here they purified themselves with water from the bronze laver.

Then there was another section of the tabernacle called the Holy Place. Only a few priests at a time worked in this area. One thing that was required was for the priests to change the twelve loaves of bread that

sat on the table weekly. They also replenished the incense on the altar daily and they kept the lamps burning continually. There were generally as many as 20,000 priests at any given time. Obviously, they had to work in rotation or in shifts to keep from running over each other.

The third and most important section of the tabernacle was the Most Holy Place (vv.3-5). A curtain provided an ominous separation of this place from all the rest. *Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place (v.3)*. We might conclude that this curtain was the second most significant item in our thinking. It separated the Holy Place where the common priests ministered from the Most Holy place where the ark was. We will talk more about that in a moment.

The third section is called the Most Holy Place because the ark of the covenant was in that room. The author stated that in this room the high priest (and he alone) would find *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 (v.4)*.

Notice that the author also mentioned that the altar of incense was in the Holy Place. That actually wasn't the case according to God's plan. God told Moses, *And you shall put it in front of the veil that is above the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is above the testimony, where I will meet with you (Exodus 30:6)*. The priests kept incense burning on it continually. From it the high priest filled his censor with incense as he entered the Most Holy Place with the annual sacrifice. It is important to realize that the same Hebrew word is used for our English "censor" and for "altar of incense. Because of this connection of the high priest taking incense from the altar into the Most Holy place, the author placed the location of the altar on the other side of the curtain.

In that room that measured 15'x15' was also the ark of the covenant. It is called the ark of the covenant because it contained the covenant (i.e. a copy of the law God gave to Moses). It also contained important items connected with the covenant such as the urn of manna and Aaron's staff. But most important of all, above (or on top of) the ark was the mercy seat. *Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat (v.5a)*. The mercy seat was the most important item and place in the tabernacle, yes, in all of Israel. This is the spot where God promised to meet with the people through the intercessory work of the high priest. God had instructed Moses, *"There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on*

*the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel” (Exodus 25:22).*

Having said all of this, the author of this letter wrote an interesting note. He wrote, *Of these things we cannot now speak in detail (v.5).* Isn't this detail? Not really. In light of the fact that the Bible dedicates fifty chapters to plans, construction, and work of the tabernacle, this is not detail. Therefore, it is true that the author to the Hebrews just skimmed over the surface.

The regulations regarding the tabernacle and the furnishings shout that this was holy unto God. So does a review of priestly activity (vv.6-7). There were regular ritual duties the priests were expected to carry out. *These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties (v.6).* According to God's plan for the old system, the priests had to perform regular duties. They performed many duties including the daily sacrifices. On special days they were very busy offering sacrifices. But all of those duties pertained only to the Holy Place. No one except the high priest went any further into the tabernacle. Every time those priests entered the Holy Place to perform the required rituals, they saw *the* curtain.

That curtain seemed to highlight the importance of the annual ritual duty of the high priest. Once each year the high priest entered the Most Holy place with blood. The regular priests performed their rituals daily, *but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood (v.7a).* It was only on the Day of Atonement when the high priest offered a sacrifice that broadly covered the sins of all the people in the nation of Israel. He would not dare attempt to enter the Most Holy Place without a blood sacrifice.

The blood of the sacrifice was for sins. It was blood *which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people (v.7b).* There were plenty of sacrifices the people offered for known sins, intentional sins. The sacrifice the high priest offered on the Day of Atonement covered confessed sins, but it also appeased God temporarily for unknown or unintentional sins. It had a very broad application. But since Jesus Christ's sacrifice, things have changed.

**Now (vv.8-14).**

Understand past limitations of the old system (vv.8-10). As long as the old existed, there was no way for anyone to come to God (vv.8-9a). The holy places were not open in the context of the old system. *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 (v.8).* God the Holy Spirit taught that it was useless for the Jewish converts to go back to the old way of seeking for redemption. This was serious stuff even for people who had been saved out of that works-kind of religion.

We can see how the dilemma was illustrated by Paul's visit to Jerusalem at Pentecost in A.D. 56, which was about nine years before this letter was penned. The leaders of the Church were greatly concerned. *And when they heard it [God's work among the Gentiles], they glorified God. And they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come” (Acts 21:20-22).*

Many born again Jews still held the ceremonial aspects of the law God gave through Moses in high esteem. Why would they do that especially in light of the restrictions? Here is the irony of the old system. The doorway or gate to the tabernacle court was 35' wide to allow multitudes of people to enter. And they did by the thousands. But only the priests were allowed in the Holy Place.

As they served in that place every day doing exactly what God required (things that always pictured Jesus Christ), they could not avoid the curtain that separated them from the presence of God which was symbolized on the mercy seat over the ark inside the Most Holy Place. The curtain always declared, “This far and no further.”

So why would people who claimed to be born again through faith in Jesus Christ's sacrifice want to keep that system that kept them out of fellowship with God? Why did they allow the old way to stand? Didn't they realize that as long as that system still stood in their hearts, the curtain still separated them?

The old system was symbolic in its day and continued to be. The writer wrote that it was *symbolic for the present age (v.9a).* He meant that the first section, the Holy Place, separated from God by the curtain symbolized the condition of many people in the present time. They were

counting rituals and human works in an attempt to make them right with God. But they had to admit that their conscience was not cleansed. They knew they were guilty and unwashed before God.

The gifts and sacrifices could not perfect the conscience (vv. 9b-10). Those sacrifices were regulations for the body. *According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.* All of the elements of worship in the old system were temporary. The various food laws (Lev. 11; Deut. 14) were symbolic and temporary. As were the gifts or libations that accompanied the sacrifices (Num. 6:15). So were the various ceremonial washings (Exo. 29:4; Lev. 8:6). Even the sacrifices were temporary. These were all regulations for the body. They dealt only with externals.

They were *imposed until the time of reformation (v.10b)*. God intended them to point out the need for complete reformation, cleansing, redemption. That would be possible only through the final sacrifice, the one acceptable sacrifice Jesus Christ.

Having reminded the Christians of the temporal, fleshly connections of the old system given to Moses in the Law, the writer turned to the focus of his argument. He wanted the people to understand their present benefits (vv.11-14). We benefit because Christ entered the holy places once for all (vv.11-12). He entered the more perfect tent. *But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come (v.11a).*

Jesus Christ is the high priest of the good things that have come. On one hand, we must remember that God created and gave the system that utilized human high priests. In His system, the high priests were special men called by God, ordained by God, used by God. But they were humans who failed like all of us. On the other hand, Jesus Christ is the perfect high priest. Like the human high priests attempted to do, Jesus represents God to us perfectly. *He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Hebrews 1:3).* And as the human high priest tried to do, Jesus represents us to God. *Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them (Hebrews 7:25).*

Our Lord's priestly work involves the good things that have come. That is the final sacrifice for sins. The "good thing" is the cleansing of our conscience. Because of His work, redeemed people enjoy the reality of departed guilt. It is possible only because Jesus Christ entered the presence of the Heavenly Father through the greater tent. Christ appeared as our high priest and entered, *then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) (v.11b)*. The old priest passed through the front compartment of the "tent" to the presence of God at the mercy seat. Jesus Christ, our priest, passed through the heavens (not made with hands) into the presence of God the Father.

By entering the holy place, Christ secured eternal redemption. *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 (v.12)*. Christ entered the presence of God the Father once for all time. He didn't need to take a temporary sacrifice. The sacrifice of Himself was the acceptable sacrifice for sin for all time. Nothing else can or ever will be offered. When Jesus cried, "It is finished," it was finished. To what end?

Christ's work purifies our conscience (vv.13-14). The old system purified the externals. *For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh (v.13)*. This is a reference to the significant ritual of cleansing those who had become physically defiled (i.e. touching a dead body). It is the sacrifice of the Red Heifer (Num. 19). In that ceremony, the perfect red heifer was sacrificed outside the camp. The priest sprinkled its blood before the tabernacle.

Then the body was burned. The priest collected the ashes and stored them outside the camp. If someone became ceremonially impure in the flesh, the priest mixed some of the ashes with water and did a cleansing ceremony. That was God's plan to picture the perfect work of Jesus Christ.

In fulfillment of that picture from the past, the blood of Christ purifies the soul. Compared to the old way the author asks, *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 (v.14)?* The soul and conscience is defiled by the sin principle. We lie, cheat, steal, murder, commit adultery, gossip, get angry, say nasty things because the principle of sin resides in our souls. We get convicted about our sin and do all manner of good works, turn

over new leaves, make resolutions and commitments but the conscience is never cleansed. Only by turning to Jesus Christ and embracing by faith His finished work, His sacrifice, do we find cleansing. The result is a purified conscience so that we can serve the living God.

All around us, all the time, are people trapped in various religions whether they are Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Catholics, Mormons, or Protestants. They sense guilt because of their sins. They do all manner of good works in an effort to win God's favor. They are like old priests who busy themselves with work in the first room because they cannot get into the back room where the mercy seat is. In spite of all their labors of "love," their conscience is still defiled. They still lie, cheat, steal, lust, and so on. Only the blood of Christ is sufficient to cleanse the conscience so that we can come boldly to the throne of God's grace where we find help in our time of need. Plead Christ's blood alone!