

The Perfect Tabernacle

Christ is Enough Series

Hebrews 9:1-14

Pastor Bryan Clark

The writer of Hebrews is writing to a group, primarily of Jewish Christians, who are right on the threshold of experiencing intense persecution. The message of the gospel he delivers to them is not a message of health and wealth and prosperity. It is ultimately a reminder that the hope of the gospel is that one day we will be delivered, saved from this world, and delivered to a new heaven and a new earth that will be everything our souls long for today. One of the most familiar descriptions of that is found in Revelation, Chapter 21—a *place with no more tears, with no more sorrow, no more pain*. It does raise a question: “How exactly do we get there and what does it have to do with the tabernacle?” Well, that’s what we want to talk about today. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Hebrews, Chapter 9. This is our last week in Hebrews as we’ll take a break for Christmas and the New Year, and come back to it later in January. We’re still in the midst of this very complicated, complex part of Hebrews. The writer reminded us...taught us last week that the old covenant has served its purpose and is now obsolete. It’s been replaced by a new covenant that is a *better covenant, built on better promises*. He continues that discussion then in Chapter 9.

Now even the first *covenant* (or the old covenant) had regulations of divine worship and the earthly sanctuary. (*NASB, Hebrews 9:1)

So we learned last week that the true tabernacle is in heaven, the very dwelling place of God, and the earthly tabernacle was basically a replica...a shadow...a picture of the dwelling place of God. In verse 1 what he’s saying is that when God gave the blueprint to Moses on Sinai for the Old Testament or the old covenant tabernacle—and then that would morph into the temple—it was full of very specific **regulations** and rules. Most religions were just kind of made up. They could do as they pleased, but for Israel that wasn’t an option. They were to follow the blueprint, the regulations, the guidelines exactly as God had told them because everything pictured a greater reality in the heavenlies. So that’s what Verse 1 is talking about.

For there was a tabernacle prepared, the outer one, in which *were* the lampstand and the table and the sacred bread; this is called the holy place. Behind the second veil there was a tabernacle which is called the Holy of Holies, having a golden altar of incense and the Ark of the Covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden jar holding the manna, and Aaron’s rod which budded, and the tables of the covenant; and above it *were* the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat; but of these things we cannot now speak in detail. (Vs. 2-5)

So let me unpack what he’s saying there. Basically he is describing the old covenant tabernacle. When it says **prepared**, literally it’s *furnished*, so how it was furnished and set up in order to picture this greater reality. So I’m going to see if we can create it in your mind this morning. Basically imagine the nation of Israel—well over a million people—in the wilderness, all in tents, organized by the twelve tribes—so a massive landscape of tents! In the center of that was the **tabernacle**. The tabernacle was in essence a mobile temple. It started with a curtain or a fence that basically outlined the area. It was 75 feet wide (the fence), so about the three front sections of our

auditorium and 150 feet long. It was always oriented east to west, so just like this... So that was the courtyard basically. Any Israelite was allowed in that courtyard. You entered from the east and the first thing you encountered was the altar where sacrifices were made. This is a courtyard; it's outdoors. You go farther and there's a laver, a basin of water that was at the entrance to the tabernacle itself for the priests to cleanse themselves before they entered into the tent. At the western end, basically of this courtyard area, was the **tabernacle**. It was a tent that was 45 feet long east to west and 15 feet wide. So if you want some orientation, the white scrim behind me is roughly that same length. So pretend that's our tabernacle; pull it out and orient it this way. It would have been about two-thirds the height of that screen—15 feet wide. When you entered, the first thing was called the **holy place**. It was what the text is calling the first tabernacle or the first tent. It was 30 feet long and 15 feet wide. As soon as you entered into that, and only the priests were allowed into this area, on the south wall was the **lampstand**, a beautiful solid gold lampstand with seven lamps burning. We think of this as the *menorah*. This was virtually the only light in the room, so it was maintained 24/7. Directly across from that was the sacred **table**. It was a table built out of acacia wood and covered with solid gold. On top of that were twelve loaves of bread, one loaf of bread for each of the twelve tribes. Those loaves of bread were changed out once a week, on the weekly Sabbath. The old bread was consumed by the priests and they remained in the holy place while they ate it. Directly then in front—so straight through the first veil—was *the* veil that separated the holy place from the **Holy of Holies** which was the place where the very presence of God dwelled. In front of that veil there was an altar of incense—a **golden altar of incense**—that created this sweet aroma that basically defined the entrance into the presence of God. Behind the veil, only the high priest could go, and only once a year. Within that Holy of Holies, there was the **Ark of the Covenant**. There was **Aaron's rod that budded**, a **golden jar with manna** from their time in the wilderness, and the **tablets** which God gave Moses on Mount Sinai. The Ark of the Covenant was 45 inches long; it was 27 inches wide and 27 inches deep, and it was solid gold. On the lid were **two winged cherubim** that faced one another. In between them was what was referred to as the **mercy seat**, often also referred to as the very throne of God. The mercy seat was the place where the blood once a year was poured—basically the place where a holy God would meet sinful men and women.

Now a comment on the veil—there's a tendency to think of the veil as kind of like a glorified shower curtain. It wasn't like that at all. As a matter of fact, it was the most substantial wall in the entire tabernacle. It was the entire width of 15 feet floor to ceiling and it was described as the width of a man's hand, so roughly 4-5 inches. Now this may be hyperbole, but Jewish tradition said it took three hundred priests to lift it and hang it. It was also Jewish tradition that if you took a team of horses, tied them to both top corners, they could not tear the veil. So it wasn't a curtain; it was a fabric wall. It was a beautiful wall, woven with purples and blues and scarlet. So that separated the presence of God, the Holy of Holies, from the holy place. So imagine as an Israelite you understood that God dwelt in the Holy of Holies but you could not get anywhere close to the presence of God. The closest you could come is that outside courtyard area. That's what he just described; that's how it was set up according to God's design. Verse 6:

Now when these things have been so prepared (or furnished, set up exactly how God wanted), **the priests are continually entering the outer tabernacle** (so that's the holy place) **performing the divine worship, but into the second** (the Holy of Holies), **only the high priest enters once a year, not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance.** (Vs. 6-7)

So the priests could go into the *holy place*, and they had various functions on a daily basis. But **only the high priest and only once a year** was he allowed to go behind the veil and only **with blood** in order to make payment for sin. This was a day of utter terror for the people of Israel as they stood and waited, wondering if the high priest would come out alive. If he came out alive, it indicated that God had accepted the offering for another year. So that's what he's describing here. Verse 8:

The Holy Spirit is signifying this (in other words the Holy Spirit is unveiling this), **that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed while the outer tabernacle is still standing, which is a symbol for the present time.** (Vs. 8-9a)

Now what he just said there is *when* this functions according to God's design. So he's not saying because the tabernacle, or in this case the temple, continues to function during the time of his writing, that's not what he's referring to. That's the problem; it just continues and it should have concluded. What he's saying here is when it's functioning according to God's design in a way that's pleasing to God, it indicates that the Messiah has not yet come because if the Messiah had come, then the purpose of the tabernacle and the temple would be completed. So again this is the same argument he's made over and over again. When the Christ comes, He's not assimilated into the old covenant. He doesn't just take a role in the ritual and what's being done, but rather He's the fulfillment. All of these are pictures or shadows of the coming promised one...the Messiah! So as long as it's still functioning according to God's plan, it's indicative of the fact the Messiah has not yet come.

Accordingly (he says) **both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience, since they relate only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation.** (Vs. 9b-10)

What he is saying is because that's true, because the temple and the tabernacle were merely a shadow of the promised one—that as long as that was true—accordingly the gifts, the offerings, the sacrifices could not make anyone perfect before a holy God. Now this he's told us multiple times—that the old covenant was weak and useless in terms of its ability to make one perfect or right before a holy God. So as long as the tabernacle and the temple are functioning, the Messiah has not yet come and they understand that there is still no true sanctification; there's no true salvation, and that's what he says...**cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience.** The people understood this is just water; this is just food; this is just a ritual; these are just symbols; but until the Messiah actually comes, we're not truly saved! The people understood the day after Yom Kippur, the one day where the high priest would go into the Holy of Holies, the next day they would sin, and they would wait for an entire year for the offering to be made again and they just lived in this terror and fear and reality of their sin before a holy God. That's why the new covenant was a better covenant built on better promises. Again, the argument is why would you go back to that when you have something now so much better? So imagine the average Israelite would see daily this fenced off area, this tabernacle, and know that they were not allowed to enter the tent, so they were far removed from the presence of God. Only the priests entered into the holy place, but even they understood only the high priest and only once a year with a blood offering does one person enter behind the veil into the very presence of God. Now imagine hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years of that, and that's all you've ever known. Then something dramatically changes! Verse 11:

But when Christ (remembering Christ is not his name, it's His title—anointed one—He is the Christ; He is the long-awaited Messiah) **appeared as a high priest of the good**

things to come (meaning the new covenant. What did he do?). **He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle...**

Now again, get in your mind this setup with the courtyard, with the tabernacle, with the holy place and the Holy of Holies. This whole language of **He entered** as they had seen priests do for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years, only He's not entering the earthly tabernacle; He is entering the true tabernacle in the heavenlies.

He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained (or purchased) **eternal redemption.** (Vs. 11b-12)

So they waited and they waited and they waited and they waited. Finally the Christ comes—the ultimate High Priest who would enter into the holy place! Not a place made with human hands, but the ultimate presence of God as the ultimate High Priest! You remember the teaser last week in Chapter 8, Verse 3—that the ultimate High Priest would have Himself to make an offering. This is now where he's defining what that is—that He would go directly into the presence of God, the Holy of Holies, only He's not offering the blood of bulls and goats which had no real power to make anyone clean—but would actually offer Himself. He would offer His own blood as payment for sin, placed there upon the mercy seat. The *mercy seat* is literally the Greek for *propitiation*. It can be translated either way. We learned in Hebrews that Jesus became the propitiation, the very mercy seat upon which payment would be made to satisfy the anger and the wrath of a holy God. So Jesus then is the fulfillment and by doing that, not daily, not yearly, but once for all, in order to obtain...to purchase eternal redemption! We learned that as long as the ultimate High Priest lives, His payment for sin is valid, and because He is eternal, then His payment for sin is eternal—so the redemption that He provides is an eternal redemption! Verse 13:

For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer (The heifer was sacrificed and the ashes were used to make people clean when they had become unclean. That's what he's referring to.) **sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh,** (In other words, if you bought into these rituals that only pictured the promise to come and only ultimately dealt with the external...) **how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?** (Vs. 13-14)

So in other words he's saying if, for hundreds of years there was buy-in that by following God's strict rules and regulations there was the promise that one day there would be salvation, if there was buy-in on that—merely a shadow or symbolic—how much more should there be buy-in to the fulfillment of the promise! Therefore, the old covenant had served its purpose. It's old; it's obsolete; it's done; replaced by a new covenant—a *better covenant with better promises*—because the ultimate High Priest has offered the ultimate sacrifice of Himself as a lamb without blemish, once for all to a holy God—to make it possible to move from the rituals and the dead works—to an actual relationship with the living God! Now imagine being an Israelite and for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years you were outside the fence; you were outside the tent; not even the priests had access into the presence of God except for one, and once a year. Now, all of a sudden you're being told because the shadows and pictures have been fulfilled, the Messiah has come and made offering once for all time! It is now possible for anyone to move from the ritual and the practice to

an actual intimate relationship with the holy God of the universe! The argument is: “If God offers that, why would you ever go back and settle for the other?”

Now that’s as far as we’re going to go this morning, but in closing I want to connect some dots and try to put more of the story together. So, all of this is built on this picture in our minds of this tent and the holy place and the furnishings and the veil and the Holy of Holies and the Ark of the Covenant and the mercy seat. One of the most familiar verses from John, Chapter 1, verse 1, quoted at Christmas is where he says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” But what’s emphasized at Christmastime is verse 14, “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.” You want to know what the actual Greek says in verse 14? “*And the word became flesh and tabernacled among us.*” That’s the literal translation. The God of the universe had taken on human flesh. He Himself had become the tabernacle. Jesus had not come to serve in the tabernacle. He had not come to be assimilated into the system. He had come to be the long-awaited fulfillment of what had been pictured for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years.

You entered the holy place always from east to west. Jesus would identify Himself as the *door*, as the *gate*, as the *entrance*. You go into the holy place and Jesus would identify Himself. In John, Chapter 8, He says, “I am the light of the world.” (*I’m the lampstand.*) “...he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the light of life.” Jesus identifies Himself on the north side. In John, Chapter 6, “I am the bread of life. He who eats of Me will never hunger again.” At the entrance to the Holy of Holies was the golden altar of incense that the priests lit twice a day to give off this beautiful aroma at the entrance into the presence of God. But the apostle Paul would have the audacity to actually write, “Because of what Jesus has done for you, you as sinful men and women actually can, yourselves, become a fragrant aroma in the nostrils of a holy God.” Jesus and Jesus alone would enter behind the veil, and Jesus as the ultimate High Priest would offer the ultimate sacrifice once and for all, with His own blood as that spotless lamb of God. He Himself would become the propitiation. He Himself would become the mercy seat on a Roman cross to make ultimate payment for sin, fulfilling the picture of the tabernacle.

There is this miraculous moment when Jesus’ work on the cross is finished, where miraculously this massive veil in the temple just tears in two. Now, again, think about these hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years with no access into the presence of God! That’s all they’d ever known, and suddenly, as a result of what Jesus had done, the veil is torn and there is access for every person directly into the presence of God. You remember Hebrews described Jesus as the *pioneer*, as the *trailblazer*, the *One* who made a way. Hebrews chapter 4: “We come (*how?*) boldly, confidently into the very presence of a holy God.” Jesus didn’t go *through* the holy place, Jesus *is* the holy place. Jesus is the entrance; He’s the lampstand; He’s the bread; He’s the incense; He’s the offering. He is now the holy place that sinful men and women go through to access the presence of the holy living God! Think about Jesus’ words—familiar words—“I am the way.” You hear it? “I am the way!” The Word became flesh to tabernacle among us. He didn’t enter through the holy place; He became the holy place through which we access the very presence of God. He is the fulfillment of all that was promised for hundreds and hundreds of years!

Some of the most familiar words to describe the new heaven and the new earth are found beginning in Revelation 21, but I wonder how many times have we read this and missed a very important detail? Let me read it for you.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, (But the tabernacle is not a place; it's a person. Again, behold the tabernacle of God is among men,) and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them.

Jesus did not go *through* the holy place; He *became* the holy place. Jesus did not go *into* the tabernacle; He *is* the tabernacle. He is the fulfillment of everything that was shadowed and pictured there in order to make it possible for sinful men and women to move from cold, dead, religious ritual to an actual intimate relationship with the living, holy God of the universe. The new heaven and the new earth will have as its center the tabernacle once again, but it won't be a tent. It will be a Person! It will be *the light*; it will be *the bread*; it will be *the Savior*! The result of that is that He will wipe away every tear...every tear from their eyes, and there will no longer be any death. There will no longer be any mourning...no more crying...no more pain. The first things—they've all passed away.

This is the story of Christmas. This is what it's all about. *For unto you is born this day in the city of David...it's the Savior...it's the long-awaited Christ...it's the fulfillment of the picture and shadows. It's the One who makes it possible for sinful men and women to enter boldly into the presence of a holy God, and He offers that this morning freely—freely as a gift!*

There have got to be some of you here this morning who would say, "I've never understood this before." I don't know; maybe you're up to your eyebrows in religion. The marks of religion are fear and anxiety and worry and restlessness. In religion: When is enough, enough?...And how could you possibly know that?...And at the end of the story, religion is weak and useless to make you right before a holy God. It's just a gift. It's a gift freely offered from the One who paid the price for you. This morning, it doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter if you're old or young, rich or poor. It doesn't matter the color of your skin. It doesn't matter what you've done. It doesn't matter what's been done to you. It doesn't matter! The gift is freely offered if you're just willing to receive it by faith. That's the story of Christmas. "Unto you was born that day in the city of David, the Savior, the Savior for you—Christ the Lord!"

Our Father, we really celebrate the message of Christmas this morning. It's about the truth that, after hundreds of years, You've fulfilled Your promise to send a Savior to be the ultimate tabernacle, that You would make the ultimate sacrifice in payment for sin, that we as sinful men and women could know forgiveness and dwell with You in an unimaginable place for all eternity. God, my prayer is that no one would leave this place this morning without having received this amazing gift. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Opening Discussion

1. What do you think of when you think about the idea of “entering into the presence of God?” What does that mean to you?
2. How is that access gained?
3. Try to imagine life in the Old Covenant when you were on the outside and God dwelt in the Holy of Holies. How would that feel? What would you long for?

Bible Study

1. Read Hebrews 9:1-10. Review what Hebrews 8 had to say about the earthly Tabernacle and the True Tabernacle.
2. See if you can draw out the design for the earthly tabernacle. You should be able to check the internet for various details. Where does the furniture go? Where is the Holy of Holies and what do you know about the veil? Who could go where?
3. According to Hebrews 9:1-10, what was the feeling of the people even if they observed all the regulations and practices required? Why?
4. Read Hebrews 9:11-14. What did Jesus do when He came according to the text? Go back and review the set up in the Tabernacle. How does Jesus fulfill the pictures created by the earthly Tabernacle?
5. How do these texts help connect the earthly tabernacle with Jesus and His fulfillment? John 1:14 (dwelt = literally tabernacle) John 6:35; 8:12; Rev. 21:1-4.
6. Go back and review your drawing of the tabernacle. Now imagine Jesus coming through the Holy Place as the fulfillment of each shadow in there and ultimately offering Himself

to God at the ultimate mercy seat. Compare that then with what the writer says in Hebrews 4:16 and the better promises of the New Covenant from Jeremiah quoted in Hebrews 8. What's new and why is it better?

Application

1. What does Hebrews have to do with the celebration of Christmas?
2. What in all this imagery of the Old Tabernacle impacts you the most as you think about your life in Christ in the New Covenant?