

Perfect Priest, Perfect Sacrifice

Hebrews 9:1-14

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Good morning. It's good to see everyone here this morning. For those of you who don't know, my name is Tobias. I'm the Associate Pastor, and I get two privileges today, apparently. I get to step in and preach while Penny is away, and I also get to try, however feebly, to look like Jason, an RUF stalwart, a cycling legend, all-around good guy. Thank you, Jason, for helping us out this morning. As we have continued in our study of the book of Hebrews, you'll remember last week, Penny walked us through chapter 8. And once again, we heard the author pick up on what is arguably the central theme of this book, that Jesus is superior to all those who had come before in the providence of God, whether that be Moses or angels or Levitical priests. And here, last week, in chapter 8, he made the point that Jesus is superior because he's the mediator of a new and better covenant, a covenant through which the Lord has perfectly reconciled his people to himself, a covenant wherein he's implanted his word within our hearts.

And a covenant through which he's eternally forgiven our sins. And as we heard the author bring that section to a close in verse 13, we heard him say that this new and better covenant has made the old Mosaic covenant obsolete and ready to vanish away. And you know, this is a striking statement to me. I mean, it suggests that the old covenant, the Mosaic covenant, a covenant which had been designed and instituted by God, that it had limitations, that it was in some way insufficient. But he doesn't really tell us how or why it was insufficient. And so I think we're left wanting more from the author, at least I am. We're left hoping that he'll give some fuller explanation for this radical change in his covenantal economy. Well, as the author moves forward in chapter 9, thankfully he does just this. And so I invite you to open your copy of God's Word to chapter 9, if you haven't already.

And we're going to be looking at the first 14 verses of chapter 9. Let's read.

“Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. 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. Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, 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. Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.

These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, 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. 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 (which is symbolic for the present age). 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.

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of

this creation) 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. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, 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.” (ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let's pray.

Almighty God, we bow before you, creator of heaven and earth, of all things seen and unseen. We bow before you and we ask humbly that you by your spirit will open our eyes and ears this morning to receive what you would have us receive from this passage. Feed us from your word, O Lord, and may we leave as people more fully convinced of your power and your glory and your kindness and your grace to sinners. May that be true this morning, Lord. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Well, I was recently re-reading J.I. Packer's classic work, which you probably could probably just say, *Knowing God*. And if you've not read that book before, I highly recommend it to you, *Knowing God* by J.I. Packer. And as I was reflecting this week on the passage before us, I was reminded of a series of questions and answers that he uses to get us thinking about what is really most important in life. Listen to what he says. He says, “What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God. What is the eternal life bringing that Jesus gives? Knowledge of God. What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight, and contentment than anything else? Knowledge of God.” And listen to how he concludes. He says, “What makes life worthwhile is having a big enough objective, something which catches our imagination and lays hold of our allegiance. And this the Christian has in a way that no other person has. For what higher, more exalted, and more compelling goal can there be than to know God?”

So what about you? How do you answer these questions? Is knowing God a big enough objective for you? Is knowing God what catches your imagination and lays hold of your allegiance? Are you convinced that there's no higher, more exalted, and more compelling goal in life than to know God? Well, friends, I think these are some of the most important questions we can ever ask ourselves. And I actually think that they're the driving force behind the words of the writer of Hebrews in our passage this morning. You see, like the psalmist who said, As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. The author believes that to know God is the very heartbeat of the biblical story. And yet he's convinced, as he ought to be, that this longing, this need we have to know God cannot ever be fully realized through attending to the rituals of the old covenant. It can only be fully realized through the new and better covenant mediated by Jesus. And this is why we see him in the first 14 verses of chapter 9 compare the tabernacle rituals of the old covenant with the heavenly tabernacle work of Jesus. You see, he wants us to grasp the profound limitations inherent in the old covenant by weighing them against the inestimably more beautiful blessings of the new.

And he wants us to grasp this, y'all, because he wants us, he wants us to see and to know these things that we might truly come to know the living God. Well, so how does he do this? Well, he starts by orienting us to the basic architecture of the tabernacle in verses 1 through 5. And then he quickly follows this in verses 6 through 10 with a description of the priestly

service within the tabernacle. And then he concludes by contrasting all of this with the high priestly work of Jesus in verses 11 through 14. So that's the basic structure of the passage before us this morning. So let's look at the first part. Take a look at verses 1 through 5. And notice what he says. He says several things. He says that the tabernacle or the tent as the ESV translates it, which was this kind of transport, if you're not familiar, transportable house of worship, which God had instructed the Israelites to build when he covenanted with them at Sinai. This tent, this tabernacle had two sections, two rooms. It had an outer one called the holy place, and it had an inner one called the most holy place, or sometimes called the holy of holies. And he tells us that the entrances to both of these sections were fixed with curtains or veils. And he gives us details too about how these sections were furnished. He says the outer room had the lampstand and the table and the bread of presents. And he tells us that the inner room had the golden altar of incense. And it also had as its focal point the Ark of the Covenant, which held within it the golden urn of manna, Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant, which the Lord himself had inscribed. And then he adds one final detail about the furnishings of the most holy place. He mentions the golden cherubim, which were perched atop the Ark of the Covenant, and their wings were spread, and their faces looked at one another, and they formed a sort of space for the presence of God to reside, called the mercy seat.

Now I've been a Christian long enough to suspect that in a room this size full of Christians, I suspect that some of you have made a bit of a study of the tabernacle. And if that's true of some of you, you might actually be disappointed in the brevity of his description here. Some of you might be thinking, my word, what did we just read with this? Because it sounds so foreign. But others, you might be going, come on, where's the other stuff? I mean, I can sympathize. He doesn't elaborate on any of the artistic embellishments that we know were there. He doesn't expand on the symbolic relevance of any of the things, like the furnishings that we've mentioned. Zechariah does. He links the lampstand with the all-seeing eyes of the Lord that range throughout the earth. And John does in Revelation. He links the wafting of the smoke of the altar of incense with the prayers of the saints. But the writer of Hebrews doesn't do any of this. Instead, once he's finished with this almost sprint through the tabernacle architecture, he simply, and perhaps frustratingly, says, of these things, we cannot now speak in detail. And it's almost like he's saying, look, y'all, I know others have extolled the many virtues of the tabernacle. And like them, we could spend our time plumbing the depths of the mysteries and symbolism of all the items I just mentioned. But that would sidetrack us. And in fact, it would be to miss the point that I want you to see.

And so, friends, I have to tell you at this point, at the risk, perhaps, of disappointing some of you, I'm just going to follow the author's lead and say to you of these things, we cannot now speak in detail. But you know, I really think this is how it should be. You see, the architectural details by themselves, they're not what's significant. No. In the author's argument, they serve a greater purpose. And that's to provide the setting for the work of the priest, which he's hurrying to get to, and which he lays out for us in verses 6 through 10.

So take a look what he says there in verses 6 through 10. He says several things there. First, he tells us that there are priests who only minister in the first section, the holy place. And they have regular ritual duties that they perform there. And these would have included things like daily and weekly tasks, like keeping the lampstand lit, or replenishing the bread of presents. And then he tells us that there's a distinct priest, the high priest, who alone has the right to enter the second intersection, the most holy place. And although he, like the other priest, has a ritual task to perform, the author tells us that his task is different in several ways. It involves

blood. It's not done daily or weekly, but only once a year. And it's done for the express purpose of making an offering for his and the people's sins. And of course, what he's describing here, as I'm sure many of you know, is the yearly ritual performed by the high priest on the Day of Atonement. And this is detailed by Moses in Leviticus 16. And it was on this day, and only on this day, that the other priests had to stop their daily work in the outer section. They couldn't enter it at all. And the high priest alone would at last commence his work. And so he'd set about to sacrifice a bull for himself and a goat for the people. And he'd take the blood of these animals one after another. And he'd enter the most holy place and sprinkle the mercy seat with it, in order to make atonement for the sins of the people and for himself.

Well, here's what the author of Hebrews has told us. These are the things that the priests and the high priests did in their tabernacle service. And they seem pretty straightforward and effective enough, maybe, even if a bit bizarre to us as moderns. But now I want you to notice the peculiar thing the author says in verse 8, and the beginning of verse 9. Listen to what he says. He says, "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 (which is symbolic for the present age)." This is a confusing statement, don't you think? So what's he getting at here? Well, I think what the author's doing is leveraging the imagery of the architecture. He's leveraging the imagery of the two sections and their activities. And he's doing this to make a profound point, which is namely, that the entire Old Covenant tabernacle arrangement, including both sections, the entirety of it, was insufficient. And it works like this.

In the author's illustration, the second inner section of the tabernacle, the holy places, as he calls it here, this represents the goal of the worshipper. And this makes sense. Think about it. The most holy place is where the presence of the Lord resides. That's where the mercy seat is. This is where he resides. This is where he can be enjoyed. It's the place where the Lord can be known intimately. And of course, as worshippers, this is our heart's desire. The first section, the holy place, on the other hand, this represents not just the rituals attendant to that section. Instead, it represents the entirety. It stands in for the entirety of tabernacle worship. And without getting too bogged down in the details, what the author is saying through this illustration is basically this. He's saying so long as this tabernacle and these rituals are the focal point of your worship, so long as they have standing as the means by which you seek to access and enjoy the presence of God, the way to his presence will forever remain shut. But how could this be? I mean, this entire system was designed and given by God himself. How could it be insufficient? Well, the author goes on to tell us in verses 9 through 10. Listen to what he says there. He says, "according to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation."

Friends, did you catch that? He says these things cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper, and they were never designed to. Instead, they served as signposts, and they were only ever aimed at providing external ceremonial and temporary cleansing until a better arrangement, a new order of things, a time of reformation, as the author says, would be revealed. And you know what? This is exactly what the author's readers needed to hear. You see, he knew that many of them, they were flirting with taking up the rituals of the old covenant, and he needed them to see that this whole arrangement by its very design could never overcome, nor was it ever designed to overcome, the real problem we all face in enjoying the presence of God, in knowing him freely and intimately, and that is the sinfulness of the human heart. To put it another way, what the author needed them to see with crystal

clarity was that the message of this old arrangement, which seemed to have captured their fancy, its message wasn't, you are clean, your sins are forgiven, enter into my presence. No. Instead, the overwhelming message of this system was, you are still dirty, your guilt remains, access denied. And yet, as hopeless as all this sounds, he also wanted them to see that this wasn't actually cause for despair. You see, the author knew that the time of reformation had already come in the person and work of Jesus, the high priest of the new and better covenant, and this is why he turns to this in the final section of our passage this morning.

So go ahead and briefly look down in verses 11 through 14, and as you do so, I think you'll notice right off the bat that there are many similarities with what we've already seen in verses 1 through 10, particularly with the role of the high priest. For example, Christ himself is called a high priest. Christ serves in a tabernacle, just like the high priest. He enters the holy places, that is the most holy place, again, just like the high priest, and he offers a sacrifice of blood, again, just like the high priest. And friends, while all these similarities are important, what's truly important for us to grasp here is that by themselves, these similarities, they don't account for why Jesus's ministry is better. You see, in this case, it's the differences that make all the difference. You see, unlike the earthly high priest who entered the earthly tabernacle every year, a tabernacle which was transient and subject to decay, Christ entered the perfect heavenly tabernacle, a tabernacle not made with human hands. In other words, Christ entered into the very presence of God who dwells in inapproachable light, and he did it once for all. And unlike the earthly high priest who brought an offering of animal blood, not only to atone for the people's sins, but his own sins as well, Christ, in his sinlessness, offered himself as a perfect, unblemished sacrifice, and he brought his own blood into the presence of the Lord.

And friends, unlike the earthly high priest whose sacrificial work only served as a temporary external cleansing, which was in need of constant renewal, Christ's sacrifice secured our eternal redemption, the purification of our consciences from dead works, and free access to serve as priests ourselves. Think of the priesthood of all believers in the presence of the living God. You see, friends, it's the differences, it's the differences in Christ's priesthood that make all the differences. We started this morning by suggesting that to know God, the true and living God, is what we were made for. Jesus said in John 17:3, in his high priestly prayer, he said, "and this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." The prophet Jeremiah said in Jeremiah 9:23, "this is what the Lord says, let not the wise man boast of his wisdom, or the strong man boast of his strength, or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts about this, that he understands and knows me."

You know, in light of our passage this morning, I'm convinced that the author of Hebrews would agree with this, absolutely. You see, all the details and the argumentation he's provided for us, they're meant to reveal to us how we can do just this, and his answer is simple. We need forgiveness. We need our guilty consciences set free. Perhaps you're here today, and your conscience has been pricking at you for some time. You've been living a life filled with shame because of the weight of your sin, and you felt distanced from God because of it, and that you've never really enjoyed his presence, or truly known him at all. And perhaps you've thought of ways to somehow overcome your guilt and shame. You've decided to give your money generously to the needy. You've decided to show kindness even in the face of hostility.

You've decided to live sacrificially with your time and be the first to volunteer. You've decided to do all these things somehow to make up for your shame. Friends, just as we've seen that the old covenant rituals were unable to provide the forgiveness we so desperately

need, so too we need to recognize here and now that nothing else we could ever devise, however good, can accomplish this for us. No, what we need is to be washed in the blood of Jesus who gave his life that we might know him and enjoy his presence forever. This is his gift to us, and it's matchless. And you know, I'm reminded of the beautiful words of Charles Wesley in his hymn, And Can It Be? And as we close this morning, I want you to think about them as I read them. Listen to what he says. "No condemnation, now I dread. Jesus and all in him is mine. Alive in him, my living head and clothed with righteousness divine, bold I approach the eternal throne and claim the crown through Christ my own. Amazing love, how can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?" Let's pray.

Oh Father, thank you once again for your great redemption, for your kindness, thank you for the work of our High Priest, your Son, our Savior Jesus. Oh Father, strengthen us this morning as we reflect on what he has done for us. We pray all this in the name of Jesus. Amen.