

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS - PART IX

JESUS OPENING THE WAY TO THE SANCTUARY OF HEAVEN

I. Chapter 9 begins with a brief description of the Tent of Dwelling, which was the basis for the Temple, in order to draw an analogy to how Jesus provides us the way to heaven.

A. The passage focuses on the Tent of Dwelling, which Moses was commanded to make as a house for the Ark of the Covenant.

- The Temple that Solomon built, and then the Temple that was rebuilt in the 6th century B.C. and then augmented by King Herod, were based upon that Tent, but were more elaborate.

- By focusing on the Tent (in Latin "tabernaculum"), rather than the more extensive Temple, the letter is re-focusing attention back to the primordial covenant with Moses, rather than on later additions. The idea is that the earthly grandeur and beauty of the Temple was not the crucial element, but rather the fact that it represented the old covenant, which would lead the way to the new covenant of Christ.

B. The letter focuses especially on the fact that there were two sacred areas, the outer tent where the priests in general ministered, and the inner tent, called the Holy of Holies.

1. The letter refers to the fact that the Ark of the Covenant contained the Ten Commandments, Aaron's rod and an urn with some of the manna from the desert, reflecting the laws, the power and the providence of the covenant, or wisdom, power, and goodness, according to St. Thomas. See Ex. 16:33, 25:16; Num. 17:8, 25. (There is a reference in 1 Kings 8:9 to the Ark containing only the Ten Commandments; St. Thomas Aquinas explains that the Ten Commandments was the most important item in the Ark.) The letter also speaks of the altar of incense, which was in front of the Holy of Holies. The incense from that altar created a cloud that would surround the Holy of Holies, setting it aside as sacred and utterly mysterious. See Ex. 30:6, 40:29, Lev. 16:12-13..

3. This area was God's special dwelling place on earth. The images of cherubim above the Ark would, in a sense, be holding up a seat for the presence of God. See, e.g., Ex, 25:22; Ps. 80:2. Moses would sometimes enter it and come out

transfigured into God's glory, with a face so bright that he had to wear a veil.

4. After the death of Moses, the high priest alone could enter this place for sacrifice, even when the Ark was no longer there, on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, to offer the holy sacrifice. See Lev. 16

- The high priest sacrificed a young ram for his sins and those of the priests. He then went into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled some of its blood on the "propitiary" or mercy seat of the Ark, which the golden angels were holding. See Ex. 25:7-22

- He then slaughtered a goat for the sins of the people, reentered the Holy of Holies, and sprinkled some of its blood on the Ark. Another goat was sent into the desert, reflecting the dismissal of the guilt of the people.

- There were a number of other related ceremonies, such as the wearing of special vestments and the burning of incense that set aside the ceremony so that the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies.

5. If one entered the Holy of Holies unbidden, one risked death, as occurred with Aaron's two oldest sons. See Lev. 10:1-5, 16:2; Num.

C. There was also an outer tent that the priests in general ministered in. The letter describes this place as the general place of worship, set off from the full presence of God. Among other things, a priest would go into the Holy Place to the altar of incense to keep the candles lit and renew the incense in front of the Holy of Holies, reflecting the light of truth and holiness that proceeds from the presence of God.

D. Having reminded the readers of all the elaborate regulations and the gold and fine cloth that surrounds this glorious Tent, the letter then speaks of the Tent (and therefore, by implication of the Temple) as but an image of the age before Christ.

- The image seems to be that even the Chosen People, sometimes described as a priestly people, can only be in the shadows of God. No one, even the high priest, can enter the presence of God on a regular basis. (The further unstated implication is that the outer court of the Israelites is like the more just Gentiles, who are further from God, but still in some way, connected to Him.)

- There was an increasing view among the Jews that the whole universe was, in a sense a large Temple of God and that, somewhere in mystery, there was a Holy of Holies, where God lives.

E. The Jews could hardly imagine being able to enter the Holy of Holies, the very presence of the glory of God. But, the letter points out, being able to do that is but a symbol of the ability to enter the presence of God that Jesus won for us.

- The letter points out that, not only the Day of Atonement, but also all of the feasts and ritual sacrifices of the Old Law, along with the regulations regarding food and drink and cleansings were only images of the New Covenant.

II. The letter then describes the new Tent, or Tabernacle, that Jesus Christ entered as the high priest of the good things to come, or that have come, depending on the text.

A. The new Tent could be Jesus' humanity, which the Son took on, making His human nature the means through which we can approach God.. It could mean also heaven, the final place of God's presence, which no one could enter until the death of Jesus. (This letter does not use the analogy, but the Book of Revelation seems to describe the Blessed Virgin Mary as the new Ark of the Covenant, a symbol that commentators have since then continually used. See Rev. 11:19-12:6.)

- The prophets had spoken of a new Tent or Temple that would never be destroyed. See Is. Is. 33:17-24; Jer. 33:10-11; Ez. 40-45.

- The Psalms had also spoken of the just who alone can enter the tent of the Lord. See Ps. 15:1, 24:3. Jesus thus could enter into the Tabernacle of heaven, and purifies His followers to do the same.

B. The letter then makes clear that the new sacrifice is Christ Himself, with His own blood being offered for our sins.

- The other offerings, from the Day of Atonement and other sacrifices, could only keep the people able to continue being God's Chosen People on earth, and allow the priests to minister in the Temple. But it was only a temporary cleansing and thus could not secure redemption beyond death, which for a time at least cut one off from the worship of God. See, e.g., Ps. 30:10; 88:10; 119:175. The prophets had repeatedly said that the mere offering of sacrifices alone cannot satisfy God. See, e.g., Is. 1:13, Micah 6:7. Here, the letter says that it is the holiness won by Christ that does so.

- The letter describes this sacrifice as, at the same time, once for all, but also through "the eternal Spirit," and obtaining an "eternal redemption," indicating also a certain timelessness.

C. The letter calls upon the people to reflect upon how much care went into the animal sacrifices so that the people could simply continue being near to the Temple, and the priest could continue ministering there for the time. He then brings them from that image to the image of the blood of Christ allowing us to enter into the presence of God forever.

- The letter as an example refers to the purification by means of the sacrifice of a red heifer for the sins of the people. The ashes of the heifer would be sprinkled into water, which would then be used to cleanse a person who has been in contact with a human corpse. See Num. 19.

D. The letter indicates that the sacrifice of Christ cleanses our consciences from "dead works" to serve the "living God."

- The dead works could be works in general that, even if good, are subject to death, or sins that lead to death. See, e.g., Gal. 2:16, 5:19.