

Hebrews

Hebrews 9:23 to 10:18 - The faith we profess

The author of Hebrews is asking the Christians in his care, “Do you realize what we’ve been given in Christ?” He asks because he knows they’re struggling and life is tough, but rather than look to Christ for help they’re thinking that maybe those old customs they grew up with as Jews were the answer.

But as **Hebrews 9:1** points out, it was “**the first covenant** that had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary (the physical tabernacle, verses 2-5).” In contrast to that, “When Christ came,” **verse 11**, “he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that **isn’t man-made**.” The tabernacle in the old covenant was totally man-made, constructed by human skill and labour out of wood, metal and cloth, etc. But the tabernacle Christ went through was “not a part of this creation” in any way. It wasn’t made out of any material found in creation.

That same point is repeated in **verse 24**, that “Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary.” Instead he entered “the true sanctuary, heaven itself.” But why was this so important for the Christians in Hebrews to know - and for us today too?

Because it’s possible, as Hebrews shows, for Christians to be attracted to what God set up in the old covenant for Israel - and not in what it pictured in the new covenant for Christians. It was tough for those Christians back then, because they were Jews and steeped in those old customs, but there’s still an attraction in those old Israelite customs for Christians today. I remember talking to a Christian pastor, who’d just come back from visiting Israel and he was all for introducing the Old Testament Jewish holy days into his church. There was something about them that he really thought would benefit Christians too.

He too needed these verses in Hebrews, then, because what the author of Hebrews points out is that the entire physical set up for Israel, including the law (7:19), was “only (meant to be) a **shadow** of the good things that are coming,” **Hebrews 10:1**, “not the **realities** themselves.” A shadow is merely an outline or a silhouette; it’s not the real thing. But God also made the shadow amazing, because in everything he set up in the tabernacle and sacrifices, the “various ceremonial washings” and all the other “external regulations” (9:10) that made those Israelites “outwardly clean,” (9:13) pictured what Christ would do when he came. So all those old customs were like barometers hinting at what was coming.

One of my grandmothers had a barometer, and it intrigued me. First thing I did on visiting her was to check the barometer to see if there were any changes in the arrows hinting at a change in the weather.

And God designed the old set up in Israel for just that purpose too, to hint at “good things coming,” a wonderful change in the weather when the shadows would become reality. But at best they were still only a “shadow” of Christ. If those Christians reverted **back to the shadow**, then, it would be like us going back to watching TV in black and white after colour TV came in. Black and white is nothing like colour, but for some people those old black and white movies still have an appeal. But imagine being stuck in a world where there was **only** black and white, and none of the amazingly crisp and dazzling colours we have in film and TV today.

Which is what the author of Hebrews wanted to get across to the Christians in his care, that because of Christ all those shadowy, blurry ‘black and white’ images in the old customs only hinting of things to come, had now burst into dazzling reality. All that old stuff was simply a blueprint of the marvellous building that had emerged and taken on real shape since the death of Christ.

So why go back to the blueprint again? The blueprint is now a reality, folks, a beautiful new building with everything supplied by Jesus Christ, and no longer by that old blood soaked system of sacrifices, long lists of rules to keep (or else), or by the high priest having to enter the Holy Place on the Day of Atonement every year for the sins of the people (9:7). That “former regulation (7:18) has been set aside because it was weak and useless...and it made nothing perfect,” just like a blueprint for a building is useless and adds nothing to the building after it’s built.

But the Christians in Hebrews were saying, “But we like the blueprint, thank you very much,” and even though a beautiful new house was standing right there ready for them to enter and enjoy, they’d much rather fondle and gush over the blueprint. That’s like a person with a new cookbook drooling over the book and its mouth watering pictures but never trying out the recipes to see what they taste like. There’s nothing wrong in just reading the cookbook, just as there’s nothing wrong with keeping a blueprint of your house, but a blueprint of a house doesn’t keep you warm and cozy in the depths of winter, and the pages of a cookbook, no matter how pretty, are neither tasty or nourishing.

But for some odd reason the Christians in Hebrews were thinking that rules, regulations and rituals were the Christian way to go as well. And why was that? Because, as the author of Hebrews points out in **Hebrews 4:11**, they weren’t trying hard enough “to enter God’s rest,” meaning they weren’t “holding firmly to **what we Christians profess**,” verse 14. Which is? - that “we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God,” who - **Hebrews 7:25** - is in the business of “saving completely those who come to God through him,”.

So that’s what the blueprint pictured: it was Jesus “entering heaven itself, appearing for us in God’s presence,” **Hebrews 9:24**. To do what exactly? **Verse 26**, “he appeared once for all at the end of the ages **to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself**.”

Which wasn't available in the old covenant. Sin was not done away with, nor was anyone saved completely. And no one was made perfect (10:1) or "made holy" either (10:10), "because it's impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (10:4). So **why did God set up that system in the first place**, then? Because, **Hebrews 10:3**, all "those sacrifices were an annual reminder of sins." Every time the the Israelites sinned they had to bring a sacrifice to remind them of the price of their sin - the lifeblood of thousands upon thousands of animals. And all because **they didn't have it in them to obey God's will and purpose for them**.

It presented a picture of utter helplessness, because the Israelites hadn't the heart or the will to obey all that God wanted, so the blood of innocent animals was shed by the bucket load to prevent them as individuals (and as a nation) from being wiped out for their sins. And on and on it went, year after year, the blood, the sin and the guilt never ending, and their future never being secure. But the picture that was meant to create for us Christians today is **what Christ did in response to this utter helplessness**.

His response was in **verse 5**, when he said to his Father: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire," and **verse 6**, "with burnt offering and sin offering you were not pleased." Jesus knew that rivers of blood and gore **weren't** what his Father wanted. But Jesus also knew **why** the Father had set up such a system. It was to point forward to **how** the utter helplessness of our human situation would be solved completely and forever **in the sacrifice of his own body**.

That's why the Father "prepared a human body for him," **verse 5**, because it was in Jesus having a human body that "we have been made holy through the **sacrifice** of his body once for all," **verse 10**. "**Made holy**" means becoming what God designed us humans for, which never happened to the Israelites through their animal sacrifices (verse 11) - but - their sacrifices played a part in **pointing forward** to the sacrifice that **would** enable them (and us and all humanity) to become what God designed us for. And fortunately for all of us, Jesus was perfectly willing to go along with his Father's plan, which he stated to the Father personally when he said in **verses 7 and 9**, "Here I am...I **have come to do your will**, O God."

It meant laying down his life, though, because it was his Father's will that only by "his one sacrifice," **verse 14**, could he "make perfect forever the ones being made holy." Only by the sacrifice of Jesus' life could we be perfectly free (or "saved completely") from the guilt of sin, which in turn means we can approach God at any time ("forever") knowing he accepts us fully, whatever state we're in. We need only acknowledge and confess a wrong and forgiveness is already ours.

So that's the relationship we now have with God because of Jesus' sacrifice - but what is **the purpose** of that relationship? We can freely approach him any time, yes, but what for? Well, that's where the second part of verse 14 kicks in, the bit about "**being made holy**." Which takes us into what Christ's sacrifice is doing for us now.

Up to this point Hebrews has told us it's through Jesus' sacrifice that God is restoring us humans to what he created us to be. But Hebrews also tells us that it's through Jesus' humanity that God **modelled** what that restored humanity is like. And first and foremost it's a lovely relationship with God, which Jesus modelled for us when he said to his Father, "Here I am...I have come to do your will, O God."

And Jesus knew what his Father's will was. It would involve laying down his life, not only in death, but also in **his daily existence** as a human. Because Jesus knew what his Father wanted most of all. It was fulfilling what he'd created humans for in the first place, which was to work in and through our human hearts, minds and bodies to bring his heavenly world into our world. What his Father loves most of all, then, is humans who've clued into that, so that in **our daily lives too**, wherever we are and in whatever we say and do, he can work heaven into the nooks and crannies of our world - into families, schools, businesses, communities, neighbours, jails, disaster areas, politics, you name it - he can do it through Christians who know what he's up to and like Jesus say, "Here I am, happy and ready to do your will, O God."

Which is all very noble, but there's a problem, isn't there? - the problem being that we're no different to those Israelites. We don't have it in us to obey God's will and purpose either. Which is another reason why God set things up the way he did in the old covenant, to not only picture what Christ would do, but also to make clear **what we humans cannot do of ourselves**.

To solve what we cannot do, into the picture comes the Holy Spirit, **Hebrews 10:15**, who "testifies to us" - makes it real to us - that "after that time," **verse 16** - after that era of the old covenant - God would "make a new covenant." And in that new covenant the one piece in the jigsaw that was missing in the old covenant would be provided. It would be giving us humans what we so desperately lacked - the desire and ability to do God's will. And how would that be done? **Verse 16**, by "the Lord putting my laws in their hearts, and writing them on their minds."

And the Holy Spirit would make that real in our lives as we find ourselves, just like Jesus, wanting to offer our hearts, minds and bodies to God to work his heavenly ways into every nook and cranny of our world. Which is exactly what he'd planned for us humans from the very beginning. only this time it's with God and his heart and mind in us, so that it becomes **real** to us that the power and desire to fulfill his mighty plan of filling our world with love for God and love for neighbour can only come from him.

Which is why we profess faith in Christ, because it is only by his sacrifice, **verses 17-18**, that God erases our "sins and lawless acts" and he forgives us forever. And also by his sacrifice that the way has been cleared to "making us holy," through the daily process of experiencing our hearts and minds being tuned to his will. With no sacrifice required from us (verse 18). Just simply believing "we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God," who is now "able to save completely those who come to God through him," **Hebrews 7:25**. So at last we begin to know what it's like to enter his rest.