

Effectual Conscience-Cleansing

Hebrews 9:1 Then indeed, even the first *covenant* had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary. 2 For a tabernacle was prepared: the first *part*, in which *was* the lampstand, the table, and the showbread, which is called the sanctuary; 3 and behind the second veil, the part of the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of All, 4 which had the golden censer and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which *were* the golden pot that had the manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; 5 and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail. 6 Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. 7 But into the second part the high priest *went* alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and *for* the people's sins *committed* in ignorance; 8 the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing. 9 It *was* symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience-- 10 *concerned* only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation.

11 But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. 12 Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, 14 how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Heb. 9:1-14)

The conscience is that inner alarm that tells us when we have done right or done wrong. The conscience can be warped, it can be ignored, it can be shaped, but it can never be entirely removed. And there it always sits witnessing against us that we have done wrong, that we need forgiveness, that something remains unpaid, undealt with.

That sense of unsettled accounts with God still haunts millions of people. It is a conscience that is unsettled.

But the true faith of the Bible offers a truly cleansed and settled conscience. Hebrews 9:1-14 is making a comparison between the old system of priests that could not cleanse the conscience, and the High Priesthood of Jesus that can cleanse the conscience.

If I compare something good to something bad, you will want to choose the good, because no one wants to choose what is bad. A dry bowl of oats is better than stale and mouldy bread. But if I compare something good to something better, now your admiration for the better thing is set to soar. Something even better than 1 carat diamonds will pique your interest.

This is what the writer does here. He does not speak of the first tabernacle or of the service of the High Priest as if there was something wrong with it. On the contrary, it's clear he sees the beauty in it: he lingers over the descriptions, lovingly recounting what was so dear to the Hebrews. In the first part, he wants you to see how beautiful and glorious the old covenant was, how impressive and solemn was the service of the High Priest. When you have seen that all this beauty and ceremony still was imperfect – it still couldn't deal with the conscience, he will then show you the glory of Messiah's work. That's what verse 1 introduces.

I. The Sanctuary and Service of the First Tabernacle

He begins with sanctuary in verses 2 through 5, after which he'll describe the service in verses 6 through 10.

His descriptions really pertain to the original Tabernacle made in Moses' day and retained until Solomon built the Temple. But the transience and the portability of the Tabernacle had a message of its own: something temporary, something not established, and that is really where he wants our focus.

Had you approached the Tabernacle in Moses' day you would have seen a long rectangular structure about the size of an Olympic swimming pool – about 45m long and 25 metres wide. It was fenced by a series of white linen curtains about 2,2 metres high, hung on wooden pillars, 20 of them on each of the long side, 10 of them on each of the shorter sides. They had silver on top and bronze sockets. So here is this large and tall white fence, a barrier against all who would rush into the Holy Presence of God.

There was only one entrance into the Tabernacle, exclusive one way access. It was a large gate in one of the short sides, the east side, 9 metres wide, also linen, but embroidered with blue and purple and scarlet. A lot of people could enter at once, and once you did, you were in the Court of the Tabernacle. If you were a regular worshipper, and not a priest, this is as far as you could get.

As soon as you were in that court, nearly directly ahead of you, you would have seen the bronze altar, a perfectly square 2,2 metre wooden altar, about 1,4 metres high. Very much like our braais or grills today, it had a bronze grating, the coals went under that, the animal was placed on top of the grating, and there were four horns that you would bind the sacrifice to.

Just beyond that you would have seen the laver, the basin, made from brass mirrors. The priests would wash their hands or even feet before going into the sanctuary. The amount of blood and fat and animal skin and dirt must have been prolific.

As you kept walking in the same direction from which you came, you now approached the Tabernacle proper. This was another rectangle, around 13,5 metres long and 4,5 metres wide. However, this time, the sides were not linen but wooden boards, connected to 48 pillars, also acacia wood plated with gold and in silver sockets. It was a good 4,5 metres high, just over a 1 story building. It had a roof of four coverings: linen, goat hair, ram skin, and badger skin.

This is what our writer is really concerned with, this main sanctuary. It was divided into two parts, a rectangular holy place, taking up two thirds of the area, and then the Most Holy, a perfect cube of 4,5 metres.

Only the priests could enter here. After washing in the laver, the priest would approach the door, which had five pillars of gold, with a curtain just like the main entrance, of purple, scarlet and blue. Upon entering, there would have been no natural light except for the candlelight of the Golden Lampstand, on his left hand side. Made out of one piece of solid gold, its seven arms held olive oil, and were always lit. On his right hand side would have been the Table of Shewbread, a small rectangular table made of wood and plated in solid gold, about a metre by half a metre, and only about 70 cm high.

Here twelve loaves in two rows of six were placed, and replaced every Sabbath, and only then the priests could eat them.

And now further in, toward the middle you would have seen another golden object, and behind it a curtain. This was the altar of incense, a perfect square about 45cm, and about a metre high. Here incense was burned in front of the curtain.

Behind the altar of incense, once again embroidered in scarlet, blue and purple was a veil. Every

entrance was made like this: the entrance to the Tabernacle courtyard, the entrance to the Tabernacle itself, and now the entrance as it were to the Most Holy Place. A door keeps people out and lets them in. It controls access.

Behind that veil, in that perfect 4, 5 m cube stood the Ark of the Covenant. Just over a metre long and 70 cm wide and high, essentially a wooden box plated with gold inside and out. Inside the box were placed the golden pot of manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the two tables of the Law. The Ark had a lid, a lid of solid gold, with two golden cherubim with wings outstretched towards each other. This was the Mercy Seat, where atonement was made, and sometimes considered the throne-seat of God.

By the time of the Second Temple, the Ark was not present, perhaps hidden by Jeremiah during the siege of Jerusalem. Instead, a stone slab stood where the Ark had been. But the writer says in verse 5 that he cannot spend much more time than simply mentioning the furniture of the Tabernacle, because he wants to move on from the structure of the sanctuary to its service.

The service, just like the structure was in two parts. He reminds us in verses 6 and 7 that the regular priests only operated in the first part of the Tabernacle, lighting the menorah, offering incense, and exchanging the bread.

But the second part, the Holy of Holies was restricted to a once a year event, with only one man, the High Priest. This was the day of Israel's conscience being unburdened.

Very early on the Day of Atonement, he got up and washed himself. He put on his special uniform. First the white linen breeches down to the feet. Then over that, the dark blue robe of the ephod, with a fringe of tassels like pomegranates with the same colours as those three entrances – blue, purple and scarlet, along with a number of golden bells. Then the ephod, another tunic, with two stones on the shoulders, and a square breastplate with 12 stones, within was the Urim and Thummim. On his head he put the mitre, made of linen with a plate of gold inscribed with the words “Holiness unto the Lord”.

First, he did the usual every day things: the morning sacrifices, the morning incense, trimmed the lamp.

Then, he began the special work. Still in the purple robes, he went to the bronze altar and sacrificed one bull, seven lambs and one ram. He took off the special robes, washed in water, and now dressed only in the simple white linen garments.

He now took a bull he had bought with his own money. He put his hands on its head and confessed his own sins. Two goats were then brought. An urn with two lots was also there, one marked for Yahweh, the other for Azazel (the scape goat). The one chosen to be scapegoat had a piece of scarlet tied to its horn.

The goats were left for a moment, and he turned to the bull and killed it. The blood was caught in a basin, and another priest would have kept swilling it to prevent it from coagulating. The High Priest then took coals from the altar, put it in a golden censer (mentioned in verse 4), put incense on it, and went for the first time into the Holy of Holies to burn incense. The people waited outside with baited breath to see him come out again alive.

When he did, he took the basin of bull's blood, went back into the Holy of Holies, sprinkled it seven

times up and seven times down. He came out, killed the goat marked for Yahweh, took its blood and went back into the Holy Place and sprinkled the blood again on the Mercy Seat.

He came out again, mixed the blood of the bull and the goat, went back in, sprinkled the altar of incense seven times, first the horns, then the altar.

The rest he poured at the foot of the bronze altar.

Now the scapegoat was brought. He laid his hands on it confessed his sin and the sins of the people. It was led away into the wilderness, and there someone killed it.

He then prepared the killed bull and goat. He prayed and read Scripture.

Now he washed again, put on all his robes, and now sacrificed a kid of the goats for the people, as well as those prepared parts of the animals.

Again, he washed himself, took off the robes, put on only the linen, and for the fourth and last time went into the Most Holy Place to remove the golden censer of incense still burning there.

For the last time, he washed himself, put on all his robes, burnt the evening incense, trimmed the lamps, and his work was done.

Now all of this was saturated with meaning, from the colours to the shapes, to the sizes, to the materials, to the motions. But with all this beauty, all this glory, embedded in the meaning God had deliberately encoded that it was not sufficient and not final.

8 the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing. 9 It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience-- 10 *concerned* only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation. (Heb. 9:8-10)

The two most obvious weakness were these: First, according to verse 8, access to God's presence was still restricted. The people could only come into the court, and only the priest could go into the tabernacle, and only the High Priest into the Most Holy Place. Three entrances, and each entrance restricts more people, until the last entrance allows only one person once a year. Clearly this system has not brought God to man and man to God in close, perpetual fellowship. And the real barrier between God and man was not the curtains: it was the internal barrier of sin and the conscience.

The second obvious weakness is in verse 9 and 10. This was all symbolic of cleansing, not effectual. It used gifts, sacrifices, food, drink, washings, outward commands, to picture what God could and would do, but it could not actually do it. These were imposed until the time of reformation, the time when Messiah would come and perform the actual, effectual sacrifice that all this beauty pictured.

Part of the idea of the Day of Atonement was to catch all the sins that the people had not already presented sacrifices for during the past year. and *for* the people's sins *committed* in ignorance; (Heb. 9:7) Sins committed without knowing it, or sins they had become unconscious of. So the worshipper's conscience was hoping and trusting that this Day of Atonement would take care of anything missed. But could he be sure?

The two goats represented the satisfaction of God's justice, and the second represented the satisfaction of man's conscience. The one killed suggested God's justice satisfied, and the scapegoat suggested that your sins had now gone into the wilderness not to return and afflict you with guilt.

But in the end, how could the death of an animal make up for the sin of a moral being? An animal is a good representation of innocence, but it isn't truly innocent, because it isn't moral. It's the closest thing to an innocent person being your substitute, but it isn't. So the conscience had to remain uncertain. Has God forgiven me?

And think about the idea of a goat wandering in the wilderness representing your conscience. While it might be nice if it goes away, what if it finds its way back? Sounds a lot like a conscience that is not satisfied, not released, not unburdened.

So really, the two problems were one: barred from the inner Presence of God because of sins not yet effectually cleansed, and a conscience not yet truly unburdened.

All that beauty, all that glory, all that wonder, and yet still a barrier, and still a burden. Now, with that good, but insufficient system described, he now gives us the contrast.

II. The Effectiveness of Christ in the Second Tabernacle

11 But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. (Heb. 9:11)

Jesus the Messiah is the true High Priest of the good things to come. Some translations have good things that have already come, either way it is the idea of the excellences that the shadows and symbols pointed to. He went to the greater Tabernacle, not the ones made with hands, not part of this creation.

What did He do? Verse 12.

Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. (Heb. 9:12)

Look at what He did. Like the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, He entered the Holy of Holies, but not a copy of the Holy of Holies, the inner presence of the Triune God. He entered that place, not with a basin of animal blood, but with the it-is-finished sacrifice of the Cross.

Some commentators have said that Jesus must have taken literal blood into Heaven, but this is when we begin to misunderstand signs and symbols. Blood stands for death. Jesus died, and bled profusely, but all that signified the pouring out and the offering up of a perfect life and the reception of a violent death. He was the moral innocent, the Righteous Human who died for guilty sinners.

Look at verse 14 to see why that death on Calvary was the blood that would obtain eternal redemption. how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God (Heb. 9:14)

First, His death was voluntary. He "offered himself". No animal offered itself. And indeed, no sinner happily offers himself to condemnation. He has to accept it. But Jesus lovingly offered Himself as our substitute, the righteous for the unrighteous, the guiltless for the guilty.

Second, His death was sinless. "without spot" Jesus was the only human who had never committed a single word, thought or deed against God. His life was infinitely valuable, because it was perfect. Without sin is to be without fault. Could Adam have died for our sins before he fell? Well, first, Adam was untested when he was innocent. When he was tempted, he failed. Jesus was tempted by

Satan and passed. Second, Adam could not have borne the weight of all our sins, and survived the crushing holocaust of God's infinite anger. You needed a God-Man. You needed a blameless human also infinite in value to cover the sins of all.

Third, it was trinitarian. We read here that Jesus through the Spirit offered Himself to God. Here is a full work of the three Persons. God the Son being enabled by God the Spirit to offer propitiation to God the Father.

What did this obtain? Look again at verse 12: but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.

How many times did He have to go into the Holy Place of Heaven? Once for all. One offering on the Cross, and it is finished. One presentation of His life through the Spirit and it obtains eternal redemption. Redemption is buying people out of sin and slavery. His purchase is one that has everlasting potential and an everlasting effect. It is perpetual in power, never needs to be repeated. It is permanent in effect: it looses a person from all his sins.

Now comes the final conscience question.

13 For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, 14 how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Heb. 9:13-14)

The sacrifices of the Day of Atonement made one ritually clean. The red heifer was a special ceremony where the red heifer was sacrificed, and its ashes mixed with water and then sprinkled on the unclean. It sanctified the flesh. Outwardly, you had obeyed what God had revealed. A priest could tell you, you are clean. You have done what God prescribed. It had some effect.

But there could still have been the lingering doubt. Did I do everything? What if something was left out? And what if God didn't accept what the High Priest did?

So here is the contrast: if that animal death had some cleansing, some setting apart effect, and it was only animals, how much more will the blood, the death of Messiah, the sinless Son of God, who worked with the Father and the Spirit to purchase redemption, how much more will that sacrifice cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

To know that a true Innocent died for me, is to know that my guilt has been taken away. To know that an infinitely valuable Man was accepted as payment for me is to know that I have been bought and ransomed from my debt. To know that the sinless Son of God absorbed wrath that had me in its sights is to know I am forgiven, I am cleansed, I am washed, I am sanctified. Animals are not sinners. But one like me, a real Man among men acted as my substitute, and He had no sin.

John Bunyan, the writer of Pilgrim's Progress was once was afflicted by deep uncertainty. He did not know whether or not he could find certainty about eternity. "Everyone doth think his own Religion rightest," he said, "both Jews and [Moslems] and Pagans; and [what] if all our Faith and Christ and Scriptures should be but a 'Think so' too?" But something happened to Bunyan in his life. When it did, he ran out crying, "Now I know! I know!"

What did Bunyan find? He found the full relief of his conscience. He describes it in Pilgrim's Progress when Christian has this burden on his back, the burden of his sin and soiled conscience.

He has tried everything. Morality, law-keeping, worldliness, but nothing has eased the conscience.

He ran thus till he came to a place somewhat ascending, and upon that place stood a cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a sepulchre. So I saw in my dream, that just as Christian came up with the cross, his burden loosed from of his shoulders, and fell from of his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do, till it came to the mouth of the sepulchre, where it fell in, and I saw it no more. Then was Christian glad and lightsome, and said, with a merry heart, "He hath given me rest by His sorrow, and life by His death." Then he stood still awhile to look and wonder; for it was very surprising to him, that the sight of the cross should thus ease him of his burden. He looked, therefore, and looked again, even till the springs that were in his head sent the waters down his checks.

How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?