

HOLY HELP FOR THE HOPELESS CANNOT COME THROUGH EXTERNAL RITUALS

Hebrews 9:1-10

Please review this week's catechism question.

Did you meet a person new to you this past Sunday after worship?

INTRODUCTION

Honestly, do you view God as the end or as a means to the end? (In other words, are you a Christian and do you live as a Christian because knowing God is the best thing you can imagine happening to you or because you believe God will give you some other good thing?) What might be some ways you could tell whether you viewed God as the end or as a means to an end?

The fundamental assumption of this letter, indeed of the entire Bible, is that God himself is the goal of all existence and that seeking to use God in order to obtain something else is the greatest betrayal in the universe. The central theme of this letter is answering the question of how it is that sinners like us can know and love and enjoy and thus glorify God. The author is contrasting two ways of seeking to know and enjoy God. The first way is to seek to draw near to God by means of the OT laws and regulations and religious rituals that God gave to Moses and to the people of Israel on Mt. Sinai, following the Exodus from Egypt. The second way is to draw near to God through Christ alone. The author's point has been and will continue to be that if you are using the Law given on Mt. Sinai as the means for approaching God you are using it incorrectly and you will fail in your quest to know God. God will reject you. His point is that now that Christ has come the purpose of that Law has been fulfilled. In this passage the author is going to tell us how the OC regulations for worship and the tabernacle showed that the OC was inadequate and that someone greater and something better was yet to come.

STUDY

1. 9:1 in the ESV says, "Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness (sanctuary)." Why does the author say "even"? See 8:5. What does this mean for anyone who wants to know God or go to heaven?

This word means that the reason the first covenant, the OC, the Law of Moses, has regulations for worship and a sanctuary is because the reality it represents has regulations for worship and a holy place, a sanctuary. This word is seeking to repeat and intensify what was said earlier in 8:5, "They (the human priests who were descended from Aaron) serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven." In other words there are regulations for worship and there is an earthly sanctuary because there are regulations for worship in heaven, God's ultimate "sanctuary." The average person in the U.S. does not think there are any regulations governing life with God in heaven. Most people simply assume that you die and then you go to heaven. The average person believes that God just throws the doors open and welcomes everyone, except perhaps those who torture children. However, this little word tells us that there are regulations governing how it is that human beings relate to God in heaven.

2. In vv. 2-5 the author describes the earthly sanctuary. What features of that sanctuary does he highlight?

First he describes the tent or the tabernacle, which was the central feature in Israel's worship. The point of emphasis is that there are two rooms in this tent, the first room, which is called the Holy Place and the second room, behind the second veil, which is called the Holy of Holies. The furniture in each room is briefly mentioned. However, the author's concern is not with the furniture but with the fact that there is an outer room and an inner room, separated from one another by a curtain.

3. There are scores of regulations for worship associated with the tabernacle. What regulations does he refer to in vv. 6-7?

In v. 6 he makes a general statement that all the priests regularly entered the outer room to carry out their acts of service. While he

doesn't describe them this would include the twice a day work of making sure the lamp stays lit and the incense is burnt and the weekly work of removing the bread of the presence and replacing it with fresh baked bread. But again, the focus is not on what happens in the first room, the Holy Place but with what takes place in the second room the Holy of Holies. Verse 7 is a brief description of the Day of Atonement that is fully described in Leviticus 16. On that day, the tenth day of the seventh month, and only on that day, the high priest and only the high priest, gets to enter into the Holy of Holies with the blood of the bull and of the sheep to splatter it on the Ark of the Covenant to atone for his own sins and the sins the people of Israel committed without knowing it.

4. As you look at vv. 2-7 what would you say is the point of emphasis of the author? What appears to be the ultimate purpose of the “regulations for worship and the earthly sanctuary?” See Exodus 25:22 & 29:42-46.

God set up the tabernacle and established the priesthood and all the regulations regarding their service so that his people could know him, so that he could dwell with them and he with them. His glory, his presence is in that inner room, over the Cherubim of Glory on the Ark of the Covenant. What human beings lost when Adam and Eve sinned and God put them out of the Garden of Eden and put two cherubim at the entrance to guard the way into it, was God himself. We are separated from him by his holiness and by our hatred of his holiness. God's goal from before the world was made was to make a way for his people to live with him. He wants all of his people to join him in that holy place and to live with him forever there. This entire system is set up so that you can safely enter into God's very presence to know him. You don't enter the Holy of Holies to get something other than God. You enter into the inner room to be near God and with God. The Day of Atonement demonstrates that the sacrifices and other acts of worship are not to get God to destroy the enemies of Israel or to give them plenty of food and children and herds but so that they can live with God.

The regulations for worship and the earthly sanctuary God gave Moses on Mt. Sinai show that the purpose of life is to know and enjoy and thus glorify God.

5. According to vv. 8-9a what is being communicated by these regulations and this tabernacle and who is doing the communicating?

Verse 8 simply says that the point of the priesthood, the tabernacle and all the regulations associated with them and especially the rituals on the Day of Atonement was to demonstrate to everyone with eyes to see that the way into God's presence was not yet revealed as long as this system was in place. It is no one less than God the Holy Spirit who uses this tent and these rituals to show throughout the long course of Israel's history that the way to God was not to be found in these things but in something and someone yet to come. He was present, speaking in and through the tabernacle and its regulations every day for hundreds of years prior to the coming of Jesus. In the middle of the verse, when it says that the way into the Most Holy place was not yet disclosed, "Most Holy Place" is not referring to the inner room of the earthly tent but to heaven itself. The reason we know this is because it is put in contrast to the earthly tabernacle at the end of the verse. Thus, the Holy Spirit, as I said in my first point, was always teaching through the existence of the tabernacle and especially the inner room that the goal of life was to live with God, in his very presence but that the way to live with God was not to be found in this system.

6. How did the HS show through the tabernacle and the Day of Atonement ritual that the way into the heavenly holy place was not yet revealed? See especially Numbers 15:22-36 in light of the last clause of v. 7.

First, the entire arrangement of the tabernacle and the courtyard and the whole ritual of sacrifice limited access to God. God said he had come to live with all the Israelites and yet only one Israelite could enter into his presence and then only on one day each year. Second, that one person could not enter into God's presence without killing a bull and taking its blood into God's presence with him. The death of an innocent victim had to occur each year in order for the high priest to enter the inner room. Third, this ritual was repeated year after year

by a succession of priests. Nobody remained in God's presence forever. It was always temporary. Fourth, while the cloud representing God's glory rested over the tabernacle and over the Ark of the Covenant, everyone knew the cloud is not God but merely a representation of God. Entry into the Most Holy Place was not entry into God's actual presence but into the representation of his presence. Fifth, notice that the blood of atonement for the people was only for the sins committed in ignorance. The author, by this one word is drawing attention to something that receives extended explanation in the OT. In Leviticus 4-5 and Numbers 15 the law specifically says that a sin offering, which is what the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement was, only covers the sins which people commit unintentionally or "in ignorance." In Numbers 15, as was read for us earlier, sins which are committed on purpose, arrogantly, in direct opposition to God, cannot be forgiven through these sacrifices. Those who committed intentional sins were to be killed, just like the guy who picked up sticks on the Sabbath was killed as recorded in Numbers 15. Every believing Israelite knew that while they committed many sins in ignorance, they also committed sins on purpose. Therefore, they knew that until there was a provision for intentional sins there would be no safe entry into God's presence.

7. Use your imagination to describe how a Jewish person might "hear" the Holy Spirit telling him or her about the inability of this system to bring them to God. How would it feel to be a part of this system and know that only "unintentional sins" are forgiven?

Let's say you are just an average Jewish woman living in those early years after Israel had entered the Land of Promise. You come to the tabernacle which is at Shiloh with your husband because you believe the promise that God wants you to know him. Each year at the three feasts you and your husband bring your lamb to be sacrificed at the tabernacle. However, you, because you are a woman, have to stop at the wall of the courtyard and watch as your husband takes the sheep in to be slaughtered. He enters behind the curtain of the courtyard to where the brazen altar is but then he can go no further. All you can see is the smoke from the altar of burnt offering as the animals are burned and cooked and the top of the tabernacle. You can hear the bleating and mooing of animals. You can hear the murmur of the

voices of the priests and men as the animals are sacrificed. You know about the work of the priests in regard to the tabernacle and how the high priest enters the Most Holy Place on 10th day of the seventh month of each year. However, you never see the ceremonies, much less participate in them. You think to yourself, "I know that God wants me to live with him forever. I know he wants me to behold him in his sanctuary and to meditate on his beauty. But I can't get near him. This entire system separates me from him. And it's not only me but none of us can get near him, not really." Then the thing that really grips you is when you remember how you took an extra pomegranate from the street merchant when he turned his back the other day and you remember how you lit a fire and baked a loaf of bread on the Sabbath day a month ago and how you lied to your husband about how the chair was broken and you realize that the animal sacrifice your husband is offering for you is only sufficient for the sins you don't even know you've committed. These sins of stealing and Sabbath breaking and lying are not and cannot be forgiven by anything that is happening in the tabernacle. You know that you deserve death for these sins and that no animal sacrifice can pay the penalty for you. If you are an Israelite who has eyes to see you hear the Holy Spirit telling you that these things are not given to you in order for you to know God. Rather these things are given to teach that someone greater than the priests and something better than animal blood and washings with water are needed for you to know God. It is through these signs and symbols that you place your faith in God's provision of a Savior who is going to come and who will make a once for all sacrifice that will actually cover all your sins.

The regulations for worship and the earthly sanctuary God gave Moses on Mt. Sinai show that God cannot be known through them.

8. In v. 9 what does the author assume is necessary for a worshipper to be able to truly draw near to God?

He or she must have their "conscience made perfect" (v. 11 literally says, "...the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to make perfect the worshipper in conscience.")

9. What is our conscience? What is wrong with our conscience that makes it necessary for it to be made perfect or to ask it another way, what does it mean to have an imperfect conscience? See Hebrews 10:22 (ESV), Mark 7:14-23 & Matthew 12:33-36.

Conscience refers to the interior life of every human being where moral decisions are made, where our values and affections are seated. Our conscience is that place where we love and trust and fear and desire. The more common biblical term for this is "heart." Hebrews 10:22 shows the identification of conscience with heart when the author describes the effects of Christ's work for us in this way, "having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a conscience of evil." What this word tells us is that our problem is not that we behave wrong but that we love and value and trust the wrong things and therefore we do the wrong things. We all have an imperfect conscience or as 10:22 said, a conscience of evil. By nature, we do not love God but we love evil. That is our problem. An evil heart produces evil actions.

10. What is a perfect conscience?

The word perfect is not primarily referring to moral perfection but as the word is used in the letter to the Hebrews (see 2:10 & 5:9 as it is used in reference to Jesus.) it refers to the completion of a process through which a person or object is made fit for something. It means to have obtained the goal or end for which something exists. Jesus was made ready to be our high priest by what he suffered. He is our perfect high priest by virtue of all that he did and suffered. Our conscience must be made fit for heaven and the external rituals cannot do it for they only affect my external body, not my heart or conscience. I must have my conscience cleansed of its evil desires and given new desires. This is referring to that internal work of the new covenant where God writes his law on our hearts, he takes out our hearts of stone and gives us new hearts, he puts his spirit within us.

11. Why must we have a perfect conscience if we are going to enter into the Most Holy Place?

If our conscience is not made perfect we will not want to go to heaven and we will not love what heaven loves. No sinner wants to go live

with God his enemy forever unless he or she is given a perfect conscience.

12. Why is it that the regulations for worship and the tabernacle cannot make our conscience perfect?

They only deal with matters of food and drink and various ceremonial washings that are external to our heart. These external acts cannot give me a new heart.

13. Are there any ways you are expecting external actions to make your conscience perfect?

14. When do you most often feel the need to have a perfect conscience?

The regulations for worship and the earthly sanctuary God gave Moses on Mt. Sinai show that knowing God requires an internal work that no external action can accomplish.