

HEBREWS VERSE BY VERSE - The New and Living Way - Part thirty-one

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WHAT ARE "UNINTENTIONAL SINS" AND HOW IS PERFECT PEACE WITH A HOLY GOD POSSIBLE FOR PEOPLE WHO STILL AREN'T PERFECT?

Hebrews 9:1-10 - "Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. [2] 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. [3] Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, [4] 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. [5] Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail. [6] These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, [7] 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. [8] 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 [9] (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, [10] but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation."

There is a sense in which today's text is an explanation of the quick reference our writer made to the construction of the "tent" or *tabernacle* back in **Hebrews 8:5** - "They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain."

At that point our writer was concerned to prove the tabernacle approach to God was prescribed by God Himself in all those construction details. No one had access to God on his or her *own* terms.

And our writer has a present-day reason for these old covenant tabernacle references. In the very same way God restricted access to His presence to the tabernacle in the old covenant He has restricted access to His presence through Jesus the Christ in the new covenant. Jesus, the Christ, is now the prescribed *new covenant approach to God*. There aren't many, or even several, new covenant mediators on our behalf for entrance into God's holy presence.

In this way our writer joins the unanimous voice of every New Testament writer, along with the only recorded words we have from our Lord Himself - "**No one comes to the Father but by me!**" Father God has consistently revealed a *divine intolerance* to religious devotion denying, or even diminishing, the High Priestly access provided through Christ alone.

Today's text picks up our writer's reference to the tabernacle and extends it beyond the general shape and size to its structure and furnishings. But his interest has nothing to do with mere antiquarian history. He draws out material displaying the superiority of the new covenant ministry of Christ and the fading into oblivion of the legal worship structures of the old covenant.

Remember our writer's audience. He writes to Jewish believers being coerced back under the old covenant. He is forcing a message into their ears. In spite of what the Judaisers are telling them, there is no effective old covenant to which they can return. There is nothing left of it that will bring them to God. It is "*obsolete*" and "*fading away*" (8:13). They aren't to be deceived. The *new and living way through Christ* is the only approach available to reach confidence and hope and purity before a holy God.

1) THE MAIN CONCERN OF OUR WRITER IS LIMITED TO THE TWO AREAS OF THE TABERNACLE WHERE THE PRIESTS MINISTERED ON BEHALF OF THE PEOPLE

There is a specific and very important *reason* for the way our writer approaches his description of the two areas of the tabernacle and we'll focus on that in just a minute. For now, just pay attention to the *description* of these two areas:

Hebrews 9:1-5 - "Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. [2] 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.* [3] Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, [4] 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. [5] Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing

the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.”

Notice the way our writer closes these words by telling us he's not interested in pursuing all the varied facets and furnishings of the tabernacle - **“...Of these things we cannot now speak in detail”**(5). He's not interested in all those **“details”**. What he wants to examine are these two separate areas - **“the Holy Place”**(2), and the **“Most Holy Place”**(3).

You may have noticed our writer only describes the sacrificial arrangements of the **temporary tabernacle of the wilderness** and never the **more permanent structure of the temple later constructed in Jerusalem**. And I think there is an important - though not obvious - reason for that.

Our writer restricts his discussion to the **tabernacle** because it was details of that construction that **Moses received on the mountain**. And it was on that mountain, at that time, that the terms of the legal covenant were formed. This is the covenant our writer says is **“old”** and **“obsolete.”**

True, all of the passing limitations of the tabernacle apply also to the temple. But our writer isn't just comparing **places of worship**. He's contrasting **two different covenants**. And the tabernacle fits in better with that contrast because the specifications of the tabernacle were given at the same time and in the same place as the **old covenant law on mount Sinai**:

So this description of the tabernacle worship fits in with our writer's purpose already outlined in **Hebrews 8:5** - **“They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.”**

Back to the two separate rooms. Here's what happened in these two areas.

- a) **First, consider the outer room - The Holy Place.** In the **Holy Place** many different priests would take shifts and present the blood of the sacrifices brought every day by the people. The people **knew** when they had sinned. And they knew God demanded they deal with those sins immediately.

These daily visits to the priest with their offering reminded them they couldn't just **sit in their sin**. It wasn't going to **go away by itself**. And they couldn't just **feel bad** about it. God was showing them they couldn't just count on His love, all by itself, to **pretend their sin didn't happen**. God couldn't **tolerate** or **get used to** their sin.

So off to the Holy Place in the tabernacle they would go with their offering for the priest to kill and prepare for presentation to the Lord. Our writer rushes over the other duties of these priests in the first section with the quick little tag phrase, **“...performing their ritual duties”**(6b).

We know some of these duties, over and above the sacrifices, included the tending of the lamps on the altar, which were never to go out, and the burning of the incense, which could only be burned with fire taken off the altar of the burnt offerings of the people.

There's another powerful picture here illustrating anything - like the smoke of that burning incense - anything **rising up** to a holy God - must first be symbolically purified from sin.

Both of these tasks were repeated every day without exception, both morning and night. And what you may not have thought all the way through is this is where we get those words from a chorus we used to sing all the time - **“Come bless the Lord, all ye servants of the Lord - who stand by night in the house of the Lord. Lift up your hands in the Holy Place, and bless the Lord!”**

Those words, **“in the Holy Place,”** taken from **Psalm 134:1-2**, actually describe the **literal Holy Place** we're considering. It was a real, specific place. And round about 3 a.m. it would be a very lonely, dark place indeed. And so you have these wonderful words of exhortation to these weary priests - and remember we are now **all** called priests and ministers of the most high God - these priests would stir up their own hearts when they may have felt the least inspired to **lift hands and voices in praise to God!**

These priests weren't charismatics. Praise must be **summoned** in the middle of uninspiring duties and routines. I think there's still a good lesson in that.

And do you know what the *people* did while the priest entered the Holy Place to minister on their behalf? We have a picture of almost exactly the same experience in the ministry of the priests in the *temple* rather than the *tabernacle* in the New Testament:

Luke 1:8-10 - "Now while he [Zechariah] was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, [9] according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. [10] And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense."

Get this picture. While the priest was in the Holy Place - *not* the Holy of Holies - all of the people who brought offerings - all those who knew the priest was in there for *their sins* - they were all outside in the outer court of the people, *praying*. This was not a light moment for them. They had a sense of what was at stake. They didn't just *leave* and go home. They *gathered*. They *knelt*. They wept. They *prayed*.

- b) ***Second, consider the inner room - the Holy of Holies.*** This is our writer's main concern - **Hebrews 9:7** - "....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."

This verse doesn't quite capture the whole picture. ***Leviticus 16*** makes clear the High Priest would first take the blood of a bull and sprinkle it in front of the mercy seat *for himself and his own household*. Then he would go *out again* and take the blood of a goat for the sins of the people, re-enter the Holy of Holies a *second time* presenting the blood for the sins of the people.

The solemnity of this work was emphasized by the fact that there could be no other priest ministering in the *Holy Place* outside while the High Priest was in the *Holy of Holies*. Everyone had to clear the entire area. There could be no other people in the tabernacle anywhere while the High Priest presented these offerings to the Lord. Their presence anywhere near the Holy of Holies would result in instant death. Such was the deeply entrenched chasm between the sinner and the holy God.

There are *two* other important issues I want to consider from our text as we begin to wrap up:

- 2) **THE HIGH PRIEST OFFERS SACRIFICE FOR THE "UNINTENTIONAL SINS" OF THE PEOPLE. ARE THOSE THE ONLY FORGIVABLE SINS?**

The hard words are spelled out very specifically in **Hebrews 9:7** - "....but into the second [place] 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."

What are we going to do with these Holy Spirit inspired words? I think simple honesty requires most of us to admit that at least *some* of the sins we've committed we committed with full knowledge that what we were doing wasn't right. Our conscience is certainly fallen and warped, but not usually completely silent. Are we all eternally doomed?

Here's what I see happening in this text - and it's a good lesson on framing difficult verses in their context to see if additional light can be shed on them. That's exactly what happens in this case. There is a truth *around* the statement made in **verse 7** that you wouldn't see looking *just* at **verse 7**. So we're learning how to study the Bible here.

The key is in remembering there is a *reason* our writer gives teaching on *two rooms* rather than just *one*. He begins with the *outer room - the Holy Place* - where all the priests would enter every day, offering sacrifices for the sins of people.

The people would bring these animals for sacrifice when they sinned. They brought the sacrifice because they *knew* they had sinned. And they kept those priests in the Holy Place busy every day because they knew they had to provide sacrifice right away - before they *forgot* about their sin and it was left *un-atoned*.

But what about *other* sins? What about sins they hadn't entered into knowingly? We're not always good at seeing our own fallenness. Were some of our words tainted with pride? Do we have moments - even brief moments - where we delighted in our own glory? Did we push aside some moment to show compassion because we were busy?

God certainly feels the weight of these sins of ours even when we don't. And that's what that annual trip into the Holy of Holies by the High Priest was all about. That High Priest was offering something of a **deeper level of sacrifice** than could take place in the outer room on a daily basis. **More sins** were being covered in that once-a-year sin offering by the High Priest alone.

And here is the New Testament fulfillment of that old covenant holy of holies sin offering - **1 John 1:7-9** - "**But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. [8] If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. [9] If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**"

"If we confess our sins...." Those are the sins we know about. Then come some of the most beautiful, grace-filled words in the whole Bible - **"...he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."**

3) **HOW DOES THE NEW COVENANT "CLEANSE THE CONSCIENCE" AND DOES THAT MEAN CHRISTIANS DON'T FEEL AS BAD WHEN THEY SIN?**

There is one reference to the conscience in our text and one still to come next week. Let's put them both together for now:

Hebrews 9:9 & 14 - **"....According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper....[14] 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."**

Two things stand out in this comparison of the two covenants. The first point is the old covenant **"cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper" (9:9)**. He or she is **reminded** of personal guilt and the ineffectiveness of the sacrifice brought by the fact that they were running out of livestock as their daily sins mounted.

This covenantal barrenness is contrasted with the involvement of the Holy Spirit in the new covenant - **"...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"(14).**

So we know at least this much from these words. The Holy Spirit is somehow involved in the divine end of the new covenant. The Holy Spirit provides something through the Lamb of God that was never provided in the old covenant.

But there's more. The Apostle Paul goes on to tell us the Holy Spirit is involved on **both ends** of the New Covenant - both in the **sending of the Christ** and in the **individual receiving new covenant redemption** - **Romans 8:15-16** - **"For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" [16] The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God...."**

But **how** does the Spirit bear witness with my spirit? And what does this have to do with the power of the new covenant to **"cleanse the conscience"** of the worshiper?

Like all those worshipers under the old covenant, I am still not sinless. Not yet. But here's the difference. The Holy Spirit, according to Paul, does something in my heart that was never possible under the old covenant.

Here's how the Holy Spirit **"bears witness"** with my spirit - even when I sin. The Holy Spirit works in my mind. He awakens a fresh awareness - **"Don, look around. Pour over the Scriptures. Do you see any demand for additional sacrifice for your sins? Since God the Son died and rose and ascended, is there something else demanded?"**

My mind is made to stand on Christ alone **repeatedly** - not just once. My conscience is brought to heel. It is trained by the **finished sacrificial work** of Christ on the cross on my behalf. And it is **freshly cleansed** by the **ongoing priestly work** of Christ at the throne of God.

Now to the last question. **Does the new covenant make me feel less remorse or more when I sin?** It's not a hard question, really. Do you feel more remorse when you fail an officer of the law or break the heart of a father or mother or family member? Failing someone you love hurts the most.

But this is a good pain. It's the kind of pain that sows the seeds of genuine repentance. And repentance is what opens the door of spiritual refreshment by the Spirit of adoption in our hearts:

2 Corinthians 7:8-10 - "For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it—though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. [9] As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. [10] For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death."

There are no more sacrifices. That's the proof of the ongoing power of the new covenant. And the deeper new covenant pain of sin releases the renewing power of the Holy Spirit when we lean with His promptings into deep-cleaning repentance. That's the operating system of the new covenant.