NOTES on Preparing to Teach Hebrews VI (9:1-10:25)

Let’s remember where we were when we left off last time. The final verse of Hebrews 8 reads:
**“By means of saying, ‘NEW,” [covenant], the first was declared obsolete, and the aged will soon disappear [lit. not be seen].” [PJT]**

Of course, some people aren’t willing to give up tradition. Old seems more valuable to them than anything new. So, the preacher speaking and writing to the Hebrews wants them to know that he (or she) was aware of the old covenant but wanted to show how the new covenant of Jesus’ blood is superior. The word for blood is used nine (9) times in this chapter (7, 12 (2x), 13, 14, 19, 20, 21, 22). This is very significant when we are looking at the old sacrificial system.

But before we look at these verses, let’s follow our usual pattern of examining the flow in outline, list, or summary form from various biblical scholars.

Charles Trantham, a Baptist pastor, sketched out the argument in his commentary, as follows.

**VII. The new covenant (8:7-9:28)
 1. Inward and effective (8:7-13)
 2. Place of the old covenant
 (9:1-28)
 (1) Ark of the covenant (9:1-5)
 (2) System of exclusion (9:6-10)
 (3) A superior tabernacle (9:11)
 (4) A superior sacrifice (9:12-23)
 (5) The superior hope (9:25-28)**

**VIII. The Ultimate Will of God (10:1-39)
 1. Failure of the Law (10:1-4)
 2. Final Sacrifice (10:5-10)
 3. Final Forgiveness (10:11-18)
 4. The Invitation (10:19-25)
 5. The Warning (10:26-31)
 6. The Encouragement (10:32-39)**

Trantham, Charles A., “Hebrews” in Clifton J. Allen (ed.), *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 12: Hebrews-Revelation, General Articles* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1972), p. 13**.**

If you’re looking for something a little more succinct, you could use this section of Norman Geisler’s outline from his introductory look at the New Testament. As you may remember, he lists the first ten (10) chapters under the general heading of “Doctrinal.”

**I. Doctrinal—Christ is Better than Anything Else (Chapters 1-10)
 G. Old Covenant (8:6-9:22)
 H. Sacrifices (9:23-10:39)**

Geisler, Norman L. *A Popular Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007),
p. 256. Of course, succinct is not always helpful in pointing out issues.

Pheme Perkins, whom we have quoted before and will quote again later in this session, is somewhat succinct, but felt it necessary to explain just a little bit more.

**Christ as mediator of the new covenant makes the sacrifices of the old covenant unnecessary (9:1-22)**

**Christ’s sacrifice for sin takes place once-for-all in the heavenly sanctuary (9:23-10:18)**

Perkins, Pheme. *Reading the New Testament: An Introduction: Third Edition* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012), p. 250.

One of my relatively new commentaries tries to be both succinct in the main points, but detailed in the description. The following is from DeSilva, David A. *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “to the Hebrews”* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 74.

 **9:1-28 Admission to God’s Presence
 The Levitical priests could not prepare the worshipers
 to enter into God’s presence (symbolized by the earthly
 holy places), but Christ’s single sacrifice has cleansed the
 conscience of the worshiper for direct access to God’s favor;
 Christ’s ascension into the heavenly sanctuary allows him
 also to cleanse the true tabernacle of the defilement of human
 sins, erasing their negative testimony from God’s memory.**

**10:1-18 Proof from Scripture (Psalm 40:6-8)
 God has set aside the repetitious, ineffective animal sacrifices
 in favor of Jesus’ single sacrifice of himself, which cleanses
 the worshiper’s conscience once and for all.**

But, the classic commentary on the subject by F. F. Bruce delineates the outline in list form, as follows:

**V. Covenant, Sanctuary, and Sacrifice (8:1-10:18)
 1. Priesthood and Promise (8:1-7)
 2. The Old Covenant Superseded (8:8-13)
 3. The Sanctuary under the Old Covenant (9:1-5)
 4. A Temporary Ritual (9:6-10)
 5. Christ’s Eternal Redemption (9:11-14)
 6. The Mediator of the New Covenant (9:15-22)
 7. The Perfect Sacrifice (9:23-28)
 8. The Old Order a Shadow of the Reality (10:1-4)
 9. The New Order the Reality (10:5-10)
 10. The Enthroned High Priest (10:11-18).**

Notice that his top line treats Chapter 8 as dealing with covenant, Chapter 9 as dealing with sanctuary, and Chapter 10 as dealing with sacrifice. Bruce, F. F. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1964), p. lxiii-lxiv.

With those road maps, let’s plunge into the verses at hand.

The preacher begins with the idea in verse 1 that even the first covenant had standards or regulations for serving in the tabernacle, the place of God’s holiness. Remember that there was a curtained courtyard with an entrance bounded by two large pillars, an area around the altar for burnt offerings where the sacrificial animals would be prepared for sacrifice, and a large laver, later called a sea. The rabbis said that the pillars represented pillars holding up the earth and the laver represented the sea. So, the whole earth and sea was represented by the courtyard, but heaven was represented in the tent itself.

The courtyard was half the length of a football field (50 yards) and 75 feet wide. It is surrounded with a white linen curtain symbolizing the holiness of God and what would be God’s presence in heaven. One could theoretically see through the pillar gateway and into the altar to see the smoke streaming up from the sacrifices on the acacia altar that was sheathed in brass so that it wouldn’t burn up. As the smoke billowed upward and dissipated in the atmosphere, it was believed that God has breathed in the smoke and received it as a sacrifice. Notice that the parts given to God in sacrifice were always the fattiest and bloodiest portions so that they made LOTS of smoke. Because God was believed to have inhaled the sacrifices, lots of smoke was said to have a “sweet smelling savor” to God (even if it would have been a nasty stink to you and me).

If we look inside the holy place, the anteroom of God’s presence, we see three items, all of which needed to be tended by priests who had been cleansed by animal sacrifices. There was a golden lampstand. It was to be fueled by virgin olive oil and kept burning night and day. It may have represented both God’s holiness (since fire burns) and that God is light (and brings illumination). That it never goes out would be symbolic of God’s eternal vigilance. Also, assuming it was a sevenfold “menorah” candlestick, it may have represented the Holy Spirit Who brings the created order (4) and the divine reality/eternity (3) together (7).

Second, there was a table of demonstration bread. There were twelve (12) loaves representing the 12 tribes and changed each Sabbath to demonstrate God’s faithfulness to God’s people. At this point, I might ask my students a trivia question about who was allowed to eat the loaves when they rotated out and who violated that rule at one point in the Bible [Only priests were allowed to eat the loaves after they were removed and David violated the rule when he was on the run from King Saul.]

The third item was the incense altar. Some debate exactly where the incense altar stood, but it makes sense to have it in front of the curtain so that the sweet smoke would offer a sense of mystery and of otherness. The smoke would also create another boundary between the consecrated holy place area and the inner holy of holies. That way, people wouldn’t encroach on the symbol of God’s presence by mistake and carelessness. At this point, I would probably ask the question about Nadab and Abihu, and ask students to comment on what they think the “strange fire” might have been and what the lesson to be learned from it might be—even for modern worshippers.

But that’s not all. Of course, there is also the ark of the covenant. This is a big golden box, a chest which contains several treasures of the faith. The first is a golden pot of manna. Not only does it represent God’s miraculous provision in the wilderness, but Jesus said that it pointed to Him, as He was that manna in John 6:33-35). This may also be symbolic of the hidden manna in Revelation 2:17.

Aaron’s rod was also in the ark. In Numbers 16:47-48, after the people had called down the wrath of God against them by grumbling against Aaron and Moses, Aaron made a sacrifice for sin and stood between death and the people—a true mediator. As a result of Aaron’s mediation, lives were spared. But so that the people wouldn’t forget it, twelve rods of leaders from the tribes with Aaron represented, too, were brought to the tabernacle and left overnight. They were told that God would cause the rod of the one He approved to blossom. The next morning, Aaron’s rod blossomed and so, it was revealed that God favored the one who stood between life and death, God and God’s people, as a mediator. Of course, our preacher in Hebrews is about to tell us that Jesus is the supreme mediator.

The third object in the ark was, of course, the 10 commands, the law given to Moses and kept in the ark as a reminder of the peace treaty/covenant between God and God’s people. In the ancient world, a peace treaty was deposited in a temple or at the base of an idol so that the god would guarantee the deal which was made. By putting the tablets in the ark of the covenant, God Himself became the guarantor of the treaty.

Verses 6-10 deal with limitations. Not everyone could enter the holy place and then, only covered by blood. And only the high priest could enter into the holy of holies on an annual basis. There is an interesting verb used here for when v. 6 describes the entry by the priests into the tabernacle and the high priest into the holy of holies. In the Greek, it is a present active form that could either mean “continually enters” (as some, including the Holman Christian Standard Bible, translate it) or a historical present.

The historical present means that the writer is trying to put you in the scene as though it is happening right now. Notice that this idea of entering the tabernacle follows the idea of “these things,” the description of the Mosaic tabernacle and the sacred furniture within, already (perfect tense) being set up. So, this historical perfect where the priesthood keeps on entering the holy tent is like where we re-run a scene on a video over and over. And it fits very well because the emphasis the writer of Hebrews is trying to make is that those sacrifices under the old covenant had to be made over and over. If they hadn’t been made according to God’s command, they would seem to be futile. But they weren’t futile because every one of them pointed to Jesus as the perfect sacrifice.

Regarding this section, I really liked this quotation from Pheme Perkins of Boston College: **“The Levitical cult established rules for worship in an earthly sanctuary. But such rules could only affect the body. They did not affect the conscience. The earthly tent symbolizes the present age. Christ’s sacrifice does not take place in the earthly tent. It implies entry into the heavenly world.”** [Perkins, Pheme. *Reading the New Testament: An Introduction: Third Edition* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012), p. 254.]

With that in mind, I would take this moment to ask students two questions:

* **What does this mean for our access to God?**
* **If the heavenly world is superior, why do so many believers still
allow earthly concerns to be their priorities?**

Historically, we know from the non-biblical book of 2 Maccabees that, not only was the Mosaic tabernacle long lost, but during the intertestamental period (between the Old Testament and the New Testament), the temple itself was defiled. First, many of the golden vessels used in the temple were sold due to the greed of a so-called high priest named Menelaus who had purchased his position (see 2 Maccabees 4:39: “Lysimachus committed many acts of sacrilegious plunder with the connivance of Menelaus. When the news of them became public and people had heard that much of the gold plate had been disposed of, they banded together against Lysimachus.”) But that wasn’t the end of it! Antiochus Epiphanes actually appointed an individual to defile the temple and dispose of its treasures (see 2 Maccabees 6:2 “He was also commissioned to pollute the temple at Jerusalem and dedicate it to Olympian Zeus, …” and 6:4-5 “The Gentiles filled the temple with licentious revelry: they took their pleasure with prostitutes and had intercourse with women in the sacred precincts. They also brought forbidden things inside and heaped the altar with impure offerings prohibited by the law.”). With this kind of treachery, even if the sacred vessels and furniture described earlier in Hebrews 9 had managed to survive the Exile and were returned in the period of Ezra and Nehemiah (which seems unlikely), they would have been sold off during this horrendous period.

So, we can be fairly certain that the writer of Hebrews is not indicating a cultic observance that was still going on exactly as he was describing the Mosaic covenant here. Yes, the observances still went on in the temple until 70 AD, but the writer of Hebrews was underscoring that even in the relative pristine days of the Mosaic Era, the sacrifices weren’t good enough to solve the overall “Sin” problem of humanity rather than the individual sinful actions problems disposed of by the sacrifices. Franz Delitzsch puts it this way in his commentary: “Nevertheless he expressly mentions the ark here, because it is the original divinely-ordered arrangement. … in order to exhibit the full pre-eminence of the new covenant over the old, he must compare it with the latter in its highest completeness and perfection.” [Delitzsch, Franz, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews: Volume 2* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1870), p. 63.]

If anyone is interested in how the Jews believe the Yom Kippur ceremonial was handled, the high priest was first to ***sprinkle*** the blood, once above the mercy seat and seven times on it. With what was left of the blood, the high priest was to exit the holy of holies and go out to the incense altar and ***smear*** the blood on the horns of the incense altar and then, ***sprinkle*** the blood seven times before that altar. Finally, the remainder of the blood was to be ***poured out*** at the base of the altar of burnt offering where the victim had been sacrificed. In Hebrews 9, the emphasis is on *sprinkled* and *purified*—the smearing and pouring out representing the latter.

When we get to Hebrews 9:11, the English translation misses some of the majesty of the Christ (first in the sentence for emphasis) “having become” the high priest of these mysterious good things that already are. The word for “having become” usually designates the appearance of a leader or hero who represents a turning point in history. As F. F. Bruce put it: “His appearance is properly announced with a triumphant trumpet-flourish…” [Bruce, F. F. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1964), p. 199.]

There is always some confusion when we get to Hebrews 9:11 because some translations indicate things that are to come and some indicate things that have already come. A. T. Robertson’s masterful work on the New Testament addresses both readings (as found in different manuscripts) and comes to the conclusion: “Both aspects are true, for Christ is High Priest of good things that have already come as well as of the glorious future of hope.” [Robertson, A. T., *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume V: The Fourth Gospel, The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1932), p. 398.] New Testament scholars often use the big words “realized eschatology” to explain this combination of accomplished and not quite experienced aspects of our spiritual inheritance. Christ’s work is done and there are lots of good things for us to appropriate from His accomplishments. We receive the fruits of the Spirit, but our own failures and lack of obedience keep us from experiencing them as fully as we will in the eternal dimension of heaven. So, like the child whose parents allow her to open a present before Christmas, she has the joy of a present before Christmas is fully realized, BUT still has the hope and anticipation of more presents on the day. Such is what we experience in tasting heavenly blessings.

Notice how the idea of God’s sanctuary not made with human hands echoes the emphasis in the early church. Since two of those references specifically touch on Jesus’ death, it segues nicely into the idea of the “much more” that Jesus’ blood accomplishes over the old sacrificial system and into the assertion in verse 14 that one doesn’t get to acquire the inheritance from a will until a death occurs. This section offers a vivid contrast between the old covenant and this new perfect covenant through Jesus.

I hope you’ll forgive me for pounding a little bit on Hebrews 9:27. There are so many people in our society, and among Asian immigrants especially, who are enamored with the idea of reincarnation. I don’t know if it’s idea of thinking one was more important or significant in a presumed former life or the idea of getting a second chance (positive) or seeing the justice of karmic payback (negative), but it is popular. We see it in Asian immigrants, but even Wilmette has a B’hai temple and the B’hai believe in a form of reincarnation in which personal identity evolves after death (not exactly the Eastern religion belief, but still significant).

The problem is that Hebrews 9:27 clearly teaches that we die ONCE and then, the judgment. This underscores a major problem with reincarnation. Reincarnation cheapens THIS life. It doesn’t offer an appropriate ending and it doesn’t attach enough significance to this life. The fact that God judges one after death tells us that this life counts. The fact that we die ONCE (this, of course, does not mean that near-death experiences or clinical deaths where people come back to life count against this dying ONCE—they are different) means that God wants us to make the most of this life before entering the eternal dimension.

But let’s transition into Chapter 10. It isn’t a very abrupt transition because you’ll immediately see some resemblance between Hebrews 9:9 and Hebrews 10:1. Both verses tell us that the sacrificial system could never “perfect” the consciences of or worshipers in general enough to enter into God’s presence. So, the theme of limitations continues, but the new emphasis is on access to God.

The last part of that verse talks about Jesus as did this scholar quoted in Delitzsch’s commentary: “…the essential form of the things themselves in relation to the merely typical and shadowy representation of them.” (p. 143) By being the True Human (as well as True God), Jesus is the real thing where other attempts to approach God are just shadows. I like to compare it with shadow boxing. Sometimes, boxers will train by looking at themselves in the mirror as they go through their “form” by countering their own actions. Of course, you can never “knock out” your shadow or mirror image anymore than you can be “knocked out” by your shadow or mirror image. They aren’t substance. But you can improve your form by going through that exercise. Similarly, the rituals of the old covenant don’t have saving power in themselves, but they point to that new covenant which DOES have saving power in Jesus. Following the scriptural argument here, which would you rather have when you need help, the shadow or the real thing? Fortunately, God has provided the real thing to us.

Having established that, the writer of Hebrews does what he does best, he goes to the Old Testament. In this case, he quotes from the Greek translation of Psalm 40:6-8. Why is that important? It is important because: “…there are many places where the Greek and Hebrew do not agree. …The seemingly minor differences between the Greek of Psalm 40 in the Septuagint and the way Hebrews quotes it in 10:5-7 express the discontinuity. For instance, in Psalm 40:8, David expresses his desire to do the will of God (‘I desire to do your will, my God’). But in Hebrews 10:7, when the words are in the incarnate Christ’s mouth, the quote is truncated to read, ‘I have come to do your will, my God.’ What David could only desire, Jesus Christ did fully and perfectly.” [Jobes, Karen H*., Letters to the Church: A Survey of Hebrews and the General Epistles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic Publishing, 2011), pp. 68-69.

One simply cannot be in God’s will, much less experience a comfortable relationship with God, unless one’s heart (one’s will, one’s “decider”) is synchronized with what God wants. Other Old Testament texts such as Micah 6:6-8 (Jimmy Carter’s presidential inaugural text), Hosea 6:6, and Amos 5:18-20, not to mention Psalm 51: 16-17, agree that the heart, the attitude, and subsequent obedience is more important than sacrifices or ritual. Of course, Jesus is the only One with perfect will, attitude, and obedience, so He is the only One Who can introduce us to access with God.

The next section brings us right back to Jeremiah’s covenant in Jeremiah 31. If I would have had unlimited time in the session, I would have added these thoughts to that part of the discussion. Compared to the old covenant, “The new covenant announced by Jeremiah, however, promises the removal of sins from the very memory of God and the implanting of the way to please God upon the human mind and heart. … The worshiper would at last be ‘cleansed’ throughout and be able to come into God’s very presence (as 10:19-25 will invite the hearers to do). … Of special interest is the way in which the author has grounded the work of Jesus in the texts of the OT: even while the first covenant is ‘obsolete’ (8:13) in terms of a means of approaching God, the ‘oracles of God’ remain the essential foundation for legitimating and comprehending the new arrangements.” [DeSilva, David A. ***Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “to the Hebrews”* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), p. 327.]**

Karen Jobes had an interesting illustration related to the new covenant. She wrote: “As a professor, I can write all the ‘laws’ I want to into my syllabus, but there is no ‘law’ I can write to make a student love to study the New Testament.” (p. 74) There has to be something inside, some “want to” in order for a person to voluntarily do what they should do. That’s why we need a “heart” covenant to replace the “written” covenant.

I also think that as we approach Hebrews 10:19-25, it is instructive to ask students to compare Hebrews 4 and Hebrews 10 as I did in the session. Here is a sample worksheet (though you can also use the Excel spreadsheet I have provided on this web page) with which to do that (answers of course on are Slide 23 of the PowerPoint).

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| **Hebrews 4:14-16** | **Hebrews 10: 19-25** |
| **Having a great high priest (v. 14)** | **(v. 19)** |
| **Jesus (v. 14)** | **(v. 19)** |
| **Hold fast this confession (v. 14)** | **(v. 23)** |
| **Boldness (v. 16)** | **(v. 19)** |
| **Draw near then with … (v. 16)** | **(v. 22)** |

But above all, notice that Jesus has made it possible for us to be in God’s presence without being damned or destroyed, and without having to jump through the ritual hoops of the old covenant. This is why His blood and His death are so MUCH MORE important than the Mosaic sacrifices.