

## The Earthly Sanctuary Hebrews 9:1–10

You may know the person who has, on more than one occasion, spoiled or sought to spoil the end of a good story. You've learned that discussing that book with him/her is off limits; that while watching a movie for the first time, while it's their seventh time, is disastrous to the element of personal surprise and the satisfaction that you'd prefer to unfold naturally. While we may role our eyes at such zeal and impatience, on some level it's understandable. They know the whole story—how it begins, how it develops, how the layers are formed, and how it ends. They can quote lines, reexperience feelings, and live inside of, once again, what is true, what is powerful, and what is beautiful. And we can't get too huffy about it. We all live to know and place ourselves inside of the drama of a good story. And who among us has not been tempted to know the end before the end comes, cast the first stone.

In fact, a desire to know the end of the story, whether it be our own or the world's, is a restless desire. I don't think it's rash to say that this itch is widespread—authors, directors, musicians, the world of science, philosophy, and conservation, all imagining or prognosticating the end and what should or could be done in light of their *infallible* insights. But God knew this thirst of ours and quenched it by what we find in His Word. We might not understand each detail in the book of Revelation with supreme confidence but in reading it we raise our watery eyes from scripture's pages and hope afresh in the promised, sweeping dominion of the enthroned Lamb of God.

Moreover, we're supposed to know about, live in light of, and be moved in our affections concerning the end. Here is how Paul spoke of our story's ending to his young protégé, Timothy, "*Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.*"<sup>1</sup> Now, what is it that causes believers to lovingly long for what they will see in the end? It's not difficult at all—we love and long to see Him who has no rivals. We long with love to be with Jesus our LORD. We want the end. We were made for unlimited access to the relational presence of God where no sin impedes and no Satanic scheme impugns the experience. One could rightly say that this is what God has been up to since before the foundations of the world—removing hindrances to His presence and securing a place where we experience His magnificent company.

These Jewish Christians addressed in this sermon-letter were at least paying attention to a few lies, if not swallowing some of them altogether. The promised Messiah, held up as they heard the gospel of free grace, in their trust and affections He was losing His lustre. Instead of learning the worshipful discipline of drawing near to God through Christ's priestly work, they were being tempted to draw back. And here in chapter nine, the author was led to press in concerning the presence of God. Why? Because with the arrival of God's presence in human flesh, the once important notes that rung out from the tabernacle have been relegated to the background in place of the rich melody of One who has tabernacled among us. The old wineskin of the law, land, and tabernacle, and temple and all the traditions surrounding them weren't meant to hold together under the life-giving reign of grace. The glory of the old is surpassed by the glory of the new.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 4:8

## I. The earthly tabernacle—the holiness about it

Many before me have drawn the conclusion that God created the world to share Himself with the world He's created. From the Garden of Eden, we catch that scent. Adam and Eve were made to be in the unobstructed presence of God, and in their sin, God justly barricaded them out of Eden, a sure indication that something central was lost. But the life of Moses and the unfolding of God's restored plans for Israel to experience the LORD dwelling among them via the tabernacle once again revealed a loving determination on God's part.<sup>2</sup>

This tabernacle, to be sure, existed at the heart of Israel's community. The sheer amount of biblical real estate covering the tabernacle speaks to its importance.<sup>3</sup> But the way God speaks of it tells us more. It was called a *sanctuary* in Exodus, and verse one discloses the same idea, ***Now even the first covenant had regulations of divine worship and the earthly sanctuary.*** This was a place inhabited by a holy God, regulated by the Mosaic *covenant*. It was a hallowed place. The infinite, righteous God came into it and met with a finite and flawed man on behalf of a flawed people. Exodus 33 tells us what regularly occurred in this *earthly sanctuary*, *"Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses, face to face, as a man speaks to his friend."* This alone made it a truly unique place among all the man-made structures erected through the ages. And with a sacred history like that, one might come nearer to understanding the difficulty of these Jews in shifting their understanding regarding the favor and presence of God.

But notice that word *earthly*. The tabernacle is a place made by human hands, in contrast to what we saw in 8:2, which spoke of a *true tabernacle set up by the Lord*. And as things go with what human hands craft, there can be beauty, but there's always inadequacy. Just as we can create things that boggle the mind, we can destroy those things, too. But we're not the only sources of devastation in the world. Jesus talked about the destructive powers of one of the inconspicuous creatures in creation—the moth. He extended his illustration in Matthew 6 by mentioning the subtle powers of what is undetectable in real time—rust.<sup>4</sup> The material world as we know is erratic and always changing. There is life and there is decay. There is creation by human ingenuity and skill, and there is active and passive destruction of all that is made by human hands. The tabernacle, or any temple sanctioned by God, was never meant to last. Nothing man-made escapes being unscathed in this world.

The first verse of our text prepares us for the deeper dive into the specifications of the tabernacle. The old covenant, enacted by God with Moses as the mediator, possessed strict stipulations for priests, the larger Jewish community, as well as Gentiles. Only one priest among many had a pass into the holy of holies. Not every Israelite could move freely about in the outer court of the tabernacle proper. No Gentiles were allowed inside of the tabernacle's encampment. The *holiness* of God's presence was the driving force behind all the strictures of who had access to what parts. Yet, the purpose behind its construction conveys more than God's purity and otherness.

## II. The earthly tabernacle—the features in it

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 25:8, *"And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst."*

<sup>3</sup> About 50 chapters in all, with 4 of those here in Hebrews.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 6:20, *"...but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal."*

<sup>2</sup> *For there was a tabernacle prepared, the outer one, in which were the lampstand and the table and the sacred bread; this is called the holy place.* If you'll flip back to the map supplied by Matt a couple of weeks ago, you can see the tabernacle's entryway curtain that separates it from the courtyard. Going from right to left, just past the men standing at the bronze wash basin and through that first curtain was the *section* known as the *holy place*. Unlike my cluttered office, it's a more modest space with only a few items. Inside were the *lampstand*, *the table*, and *the sacred bread*. The author is defining which space to set up the whole of his argument. It is a distinct area, partitioned off from the courtyard on one end and the *Holy of Holies* on the other. Its sacredness is exceeded only by what is behind *the second curtain*. But these items found in the *holy place* aren't the main point, but simply points of familiarity with these Jewish believers. They would have known the significance of that bread and the angels atop the mercy seat.

But what those items signified in the life of Israel might escape someone who grew up in a small, rural town of Tennessee. And I might reverse the unfamiliarity with a 48-year-old Jewish man if I started talking about jig fishing around Cypress trees, playing shortstop in Little League, and sporting a bright red Michael Jackson jacket, covered with 50 non-functioning zippers and paired with white gloves to accentuate my best breakdancing moves. Matt was right—these items of the tabernacle and their significance would be within our framework of understanding if they stood at the center of my community growing up, but they didn't. We run our fingers over these things,<sup>5</sup> but these Jewish readers had walked a few of these hallowed streets and understood some of their rich symbolism since childhood.

And I use “few” and “some” purposefully. If these items aren't viewed anew by the faith that God now requires, the hallowed streets of every one of the things listed here dead-end with judgment. The apostle Paul writes of these things are not understood without understanding Christ, “*But their [the Jewish peoples of Moses' day] minds were hardened. For to this day, when they [the Jewish community still identifying with the Mosaic system] read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away.*”

It's through Christ that these items find their main purpose. How much could be said of the usage of *golden altar of incense* and its relationship to Jesus and His own intercession for us? Of the *bread of the Presence* and its relationship to Jesus' being the bread from heaven in John 6? Of the angels atop *the ark of the covenant*, covering their faces in holy silence at the work of redemption, which set in motion a grace that has made them long for more? Of the ark going out with God's people beyond their own borders and the Spirit of Christ now going out into the world, dwelling inside of a people purchased for God? Of the *tables* (or tablets) *of the covenant* and its relationship to Christ being the *Logos*? Of the *mercy seat*, the place of atonement, and how this relates to Christ's death opening up heaven for the hell bound? And I'm just walking on the rim's edge of the wells of salvation.<sup>6</sup> But to get where the author is going, I'll adopt his own words: *but of these things we cannot now speak in detail.*

The tabernacle's furniture carries endless and fruitful fascination because in many more ways than I've mentioned they have to do with the greatness of Christ. The veil is removed in Him, the

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<sup>5</sup> One of my favorite illustrations in Hebrews by Matt, found in his pivotal sermon *The True Tabernacle*, Hebrews 8:1-6.

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 12:3, “*With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.*”

promises are *yes* in Him, and all the scriptures, including these tabernacle items, find cohesion in Him.<sup>7</sup> Yet, furniture aside, the curtains and the spaces they mark off come into focus.

### III. The earthly tabernacle—the insufficiency of it

<sup>6</sup>*Now when these things have been so prepared, the priests are continually entering the outer tabernacle performing the divine worship,* Only authorized priests make it in to the first section, the *holy place*, or the *outer* section. Someone had to tend to the needs that would continually rise in this section. The incense burns up. The bread grows stale. The candles burn down. The author wants us to understand and perhaps to even feel the redundancy of the priests' rhythms. And notice that what they perform over and over never gets them beyond the *holy place* into the *Holy of Holies*. How many of them thought about it, or daydreamed about it? Both shaken by the thought and thrilled by it at the same time, if only they could go behind the *second* curtain for themselves. For all their works, they never got to experience the center of it all. Access wasn't theirs, no matter how excellent and faithful they were in carrying out their duties. They were limited by the God-ordained arrangement.

What about the *Holy of Holies*, or the high priest that is allowed to enter there? Verse 7, <sup>7</sup>*but into the second, only the high priest enters once a year, not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance.* More limitations. He's not regularly going into the *Holy of Holies* to enjoy a nap, or as a getaway spot from all the tabernacle hubbub, or even to retreat for prayer and reflection. He's allowed to enter there only one day a year, the Day of Atonement. None but one could go into the *Holy of Holies*, and no one else could draw near to God through that high priest's work. He represented them, yet never with fullness and finality, being a mere man.<sup>8</sup>

Beginning in verse 8 and into verse 9, we start getting into the crux of the main point. <sup>8</sup>*The Holy Spirit is signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed while the outer tabernacle is still standing,* <sup>9</sup>*which is a symbol for the present time.* The third Person of the Trinity enters the picture. He not only superintends the author's sermon-letter, but the *Spirit* is teaching a particular point of the gospel by utilizing tabernacle imagery.

This is tricky because there's some interchange of names for the spaces within the tabernacle going on (you may need to reread this paragraph at home later). But try to track with me...the *outer tabernacle* of verse 8 refers to the *holy place* mentioned in verse 2. The *holy place* mentioned in verse 8 seems to be referring to the *Holy of Holies*. If it weren't, verse 8 would make no sense if it meant, "*the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed while the holy place is still standing.*" So, he's reasoning that if the old covenant is still in any way binding, then it's just as if the structure of the outer tabernacle is still *standing*, which would also be true of the inner sanctuary, the *Holy of Holies*. And if that is so, the same regulations of limited access to God's presence remains and what the *Holy of Holies* pointed to—the *true tabernacle pitched by the Lord*<sup>9</sup>—is shut up by God Himself, *not...disclosed*. If these fresh converts are being tempted to resort back into the Mosaic Law, then regarding the presence of God, they cannot enter, just as they couldn't enter under the old covenant with the restrictions concerning the tabernacle. If they go

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 24:27

<sup>8</sup> Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 380.

<sup>9</sup> Hebrews 8:2

back, they abandon the gospel of grace and only have the curses of the law to fear and not the presence of God to enjoy. The riches of Jeremiah 31 have slipped through their hands of unbelief. They possess no ministering High Priest in the eternal, heavenly tabernacle, neither in the present or the future.

But indeed, the *holy place* has been opened. The work of Christ on earth has subsumed all the purposes of the *earthly* tabernacle, which were only ever meant to be shadows of it. Shadows can be pretty accurate representations, but they can also skew reality. This week I was reading a story out of California about a small town situated among Redwood trees. I've never seen a Redwood, but I aim to one day. However, I did grow up surrounded by large pecan and oak trees. I recall some of the shadows cast by these massive structures that I believed to be matched only by blue whales and city buildings. Especially in the evenings on the neighborhood baseball diamond, the shadow of these green giants seemed to be a mile long when the sun dropped to the right angle. The shadows projected from far away would skew our ability to catch ground balls and fly balls. The shadows, when the sun started setting, were bigger than the trees they represented. And the danger for these Jewish Christians was that as they were setting aside the Son, the old shadows of law, tabernacle, and land were falsely conflating what they were meant to merely represent.

So, the question we're left asking from verses 8 & 9 concerns how we understand the bracketed phrase that begins verse 9, *which is a symbol for the present time*? And to get at this, we need to think about the *already* and *not yet* aspects of scripture. Jesus has already initiated the age to come,<sup>10</sup> but there will always be something amiss in this *present time*. The author is acknowledging the reality of God's plan and timing, but also the reality of unbelief and gaining God's favor by performance. These saints receiving this letter were, and we are still in a world where works-righteousness is dogging millions all over the globe. From Judaism to Islam to Catholicism, from the proud philanthropist seeking the glory that comes from man to the guilt-ridden prisoner who is trying to atone for that grave mistake, for them the *holy place*, by way of metaphor, is *still standing*. For all seeking justification apart from the work of Jesus Christ, God's presence will ever be elusive. And the noise and clamor to get it all right by pulling up one's bootstraps rings out from every nation and peoples. We're still in that not-yet spot. The Jewish professing need an awareness that if they slip back into law-works, they are like those priests who ceaselessly work but are never admitted into the *Holy of Holies*, no matter how faithful or sincere. If they turn their backs on the lavish grace given through faith in this High Priest *exalted above the heavens*, then they will be shut out from access to God in this *present time* and also in the age to come. For all who settle into manual moral labor instead of resting in Emmanuel's work live as if the tabernacle still stands.<sup>11</sup>

But when the flesh of the Great High Priest was torn for us, something theologically telling and doxologically stirring happened in the temple. There, the second curtain into the *Holy of Holies* tore from top to bottom as a sure sign that God's presence was made available to all of His followers through Christ, and that freely!<sup>12</sup> Without condemnation! Into the presence of a King, we can go this very moment with no cowering fear! The Father welcomes us with grace for every time of need. For us, the holiest place has been opened and what was, the tabernacle and all its

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<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 6:5, "...and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come..."

<sup>11</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:12-18 says it better.

<sup>12</sup> Mark 15:38

constraints, has been replaced with the grace of what is and will be by faith—communion in the presence of the Living God.

We're still in flu season.<sup>13</sup> When we have the flu, we open the cabinet or drawer and pull out the thermometer. That thermometer is used to indicate how well or unwell we are. But no one swallows the thermometer in order to get better. In fact, do that and things get more dire. The tabernacle was built to set in motion a means whereby there would an exposé of God's holiness would be on display alongside the exposing of human sin. Going back into the systems of law, land, and tabernacle/temple was like leaving the medicine untouched on the table and, instead, swallowing the thermometer in hopes that what was meant to only reveal could now be the source of healing.<sup>14</sup> The danger all are in who trust in the labors of their own hands.<sup>15</sup>

The last part of our text today reveals an aspect of our lives that needs healing. Look at verse 9, *Accordingly, both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience, <sup>10</sup> since they relate only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation.* The whole tabernacle structure implied limited access to the presence of God, but it also revealed the limits of the tabernacle's practices. The ruptured relationship brought on by sin is compounded by our guilty consciences. The old covenant expressed partly by a functioning *earthly sanctuary* was ineffective to help with the day-to-day guilt that sin would produce. The *gifts and sacrifices* offered to God and the *regulations for the body* had little effect on cleaning out the conscience of law-breakers. But the death of Christ appropriated by faith does what is humanly impossible. Day after day, week after week, and year after year we have access to the salve of the gospel as it relates to our true guilt.<sup>16</sup> Yes, we've sinned and continue to do so, but in Christ, our situation has been fundamentally transformed.

Much of the world lives with a cumbersome conscience. Maybe you're living with one. And the good news of the last phrase of our text is good news indeed. Many turn away from the new and living way in the present time, but *reformation*, or correction has come! The old covenant and its attending practices have been met in the life, death, and resurrection of a perfect Savior, and that Savior has come away with zero guilt. You see, when we cast ourselves at His mercy and promise of life eternal, we find Him to be the answer to our problem of being in God's presence with no fear or guilt.

## Conclusion

In that earthly sanctuary, the Gentiles couldn't come close. The average Jew, a little closer. The priesthood, a bit closer. And even the one individual who could draw the closest had severe limitations in relationship to his own faults and impermanence. But fellowship with the Godhead is ours because God the Son came down to die in our place and was taken up to reign in the most holy place. If you're to know His nearness and a clear conscience in this life, it must be by faith in Jesus Christ. Put down your pride and sin and follow Him. The shadows are deceptive, and thermometers aren't for swallowing, but let them be instructive. Christ is the soaring reality and the cure for our sin and guilt.

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/about/season/index.html#:~:text=The%20exact%20timing%20and%20duration,last%20as%20late%20as%20May>

<sup>14</sup> David Gooding, *Drawing Near to God: Lessons from the Tabernacle Today*, 41.

<sup>15</sup> Rock of Ages, second verse, "Not the labor of my hands/Can fulfill Thy law's demands/Could my zeal no respite know/Could my tears forever flow/All for sin could not atone/Thou must save, and Thou alone."

<sup>16</sup> Parts of Hebrews 10:21-22.

