**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**Hebrews (24): The Book Of Better Things**

**“A Tour Of The Tabernacle”**

**Hebrews 9:1-10**

**June 16, 2024**

If you ever travel to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, you will want to spend some time at the Mennonite Life Visitors Center. It’s the only place I know where you can see a full-size reproduction of the original Hebrew tabernacle. It’s definitely worth the ride.

Once you arrive, look for “The Biblical Tabernacle Experience.” A tour guide will give you a brief orientation, and then take you inside the Tabernacle. There you will see life-sized replicas of the golden lampstand, the table of consecrated bread, the altar of incense, and the Ark of the Covenant. There’s also a 35-minute multimedia presentation that explains the purpose and spiritual significance of each of these items, as well as the ministry of the priests.

In a similar way, that’s what the author of Hebrews is doing in the verses before us today. He’s giving us a tour of the Old Testament Tabernacle, its furnishings, and it worship practices. His goal is to demonstrate the superiority of the New Covenant to the first covenant; so “he naturally draws attention to the ineffectiveness of the old as reflected in the way the tabernacle was set up and used” (Leon Morris). This description of the Old Testament sanctuary and its rituals sets the stage for the coming attraction: Christ’s priestly service in the heavenly sanctuary (vv. 11-28).

**A. The Opening Statement (v. 1):** “*Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary*.” The first covenant is the Old Covenant, or the Mosaic Covenant. Here, our author announces two aspects of this covenant which he then treats in reverse order: its earthly sanctuary (vv. 2-5) and its regulations for worship (vv. 6-7). He concludes by giving us special insight into the meaning and purpose of these Old Testament provisions (vv. 8-10).

**B. The Earthly Sanctuary (vv. 2-5):** “*A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron’s staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover* (or, “*the mercy seat*,” ESV). *But we cannot discuss these things in detail now*.”

For lack of better terms, the tabernacle was a portable tent with a movable courtyard. The detailed instructions for building this structure are found in Exodus 25-40. There we learn that the courtyard itself was approximately 150 feet long and 75 feet wide. By way of comparison, our church building sits on a lot which is about 100 feet long and 75 feet wide. So the courtyard was just as wide as our property, but 50 feet longer. The fence surrounding the courtyard was about 7 ½ feet high, enclosing both the tabernacle and the Altar of Burnt Offering (Ex. 27:1-8; 38:1-7). Near the altar would be a stand on which a bronze basin was filled with water, where ceremonial washings would occur (Ex. 30:17-21; 38:8).

The entire tabernacle was 45 feet long, 15 feet wide, and 15 feet high. Again, by way of comparison, our chapel is 40 feet long and 20 feet wide. So, the tabernacle was only 5 feet longer and 5 feet narrower than where you and I are sitting today. The entire tent was framed by wood, overlaid with gold, and then covered with beautifully embroidered curtains, tanned animal skins, and leathered hides (Ex. 16:1-14).

The “first room” or “the Holy Place,” was 30 feet long, 15 feet wide, and 15 feet high. In it were three items. *First*, there was a seven-branched golden lampstand (Cf. Ex. 25:31-40; 37:17-24). Since there were no windows in the tabernacle, this provided the only light for the priests’ ministries that took place within. Many believe that it symbolized the fullness of light that is found in Jesus Christ, who is Himself “*the light of the world*” (John 8:12).

*Second*, there was a table on which was placed the consecrated bread, or “*the bread of the Presence*” (Ex. 25:23-30, ESV). The table was also overlaid with gold and was about 3 feet wide, 18 inches deep and 27 inches high. The bread consisted of twelve loaves, one for each tribe, which were placed on the table every Sabbath (Lev. 24:5-8). The “Presence” refers to the presence of God Himself (as in Ex. 33:14-15), and the bread “represented a perpetual bread offering to the Lord, by which Israel declared that it consecrated to God the fruit of its labors, and . . . at the same time acknowledged that all such fruit had been provided only by God’s blessing” (NIV Study Bible note, Ex. 25:30).

*Third*, there was the golden altar of incense (Ex. 30:1-10; 37:25-29). This altar was just outside the curtain of the Most Holy Place (Cf. Ex. 40:26). Yet its function was so closely associated with the Holy of Holies and the ark within it (Ex. 30:6) that it “*belonged to the inner sanctuary*” (Cf. 1 Kings 6:22). Perhaps that’s the reason the author places it “behind the second curtain,” (in the Most Holy Place.) For on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would put fragrant incense on the coals from this altar, so that the smoke of the incense would conceal the Mercy Seat above the Ark of the Covenant (Lev. 16:12-13).

The “Most Holy Place,” or the “Holy of Holies,” was a smaller compartment, a perfect cube (15 x 15 x 15 feet). It was separated from the Holy Place by a thick veil made of embroidered linen, with blue, purple, and scarlet coloring. There were pictures of cherubim (a special class of angels) sewn into it with golden thread. This was the veil that was torn from top to bottom when the Lord Jesus Christ offered Himself as the once for all sacrifice for our sin (Matt. 27:51ff), opening the way for us to have free and direct access to Him.

The Holy of Holies contained the Ark of the Covenant, which was a wooden chest only 45 inches long and 27 inches in both width and height. It was covered with gold, and a slab of pure gold fit perfectly on top of it (“the atonement cover” or the “the mercy seat”). Hovering over it, and facing each other, were the golden figures of two cherubim. It was there that the “glory” of Yahweh’s presence would descend when He met with His people (Ex. 25:22). On the Day of Atonement, the blood from the sin offering was sprinkled on the Mercy Seat which covered the tablets of the Law within the Ark. On that Day, God did not look at the broken Law; He only saw the blood.

**C. The Regulations for Worship (vv. 6-7):** “*When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance*.”

Here our tour guide is presenting a brief contrast of the daily rituals of “the outer room” and the yearly ritual of the “inner room.” The priests would enter the outer room regularly: to replace the bread of the Presence (Ex. 25:30; Lev. 24:5-9), to keep the lampstand burning (Ex. 27:20-21; Lev. 24:1-4), and to burn fragrant incense twice daily, symbolizing the people’s prayers (Ex. 30:7-9; Luke 1:8-10; Rev. 8:3). But the inner room had restricted access; only the High Priest, and only once a year, and only with special preparation, could enter the “Most Holy Place.” And he could only offer an atoning sacrifice for sins that were done in ignorance, or unintentionally (Lev. 4-5; Num. 15:22-29), not for anyone “*who sins defiantly*” (Num. 15:30-31).

**D. The Lesson to be Learned (vv. 8-10):** “*The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle. This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings – external regulations applying until the time of the new order*.”

Once again, our author views the Holy Spirit as the One who has given us the Old Testament Scripture (Cf. 3:7). By recording these tabernacle arrangements and the Levitical offerings, He has a lesson to teach us (as in other parts of the Old Testament). **Q.** What lesson, then, does He want us to learn from these detailed instructions about the Day of Atonement? **A.**  As long as the tabernacle (and later the temple) was standing, there was no direct access to God. The “way into the Holy Place” was barred by the inner veil. Further, free and unimpeded access to the presence of God had not been “disclosed” at that time, since the first tabernacle (the earthly sanctuary) was still in operation (v. 8).

This restriction of one’s entrance into the Holy of Holies also serves as an “illustration” (literally, “a parable”) for the present time. In what sense? By pointing to “the *contrast* between the *free access* to God now guaranteed through Christ and the *strictly limited access* permitted by the structure and ceremonial of the earthly sanctuary” (F. F. Bruce).

Yes, says our author, in the earthly sanctuary “*gifts and sacrifices*” were indeed offered. But they could never deal *effectively* with sin because they could never cleanse one’s conscience from the *guilt* of sin. In that sense, the sacrificial blood of bulls and goats was useless. In fact, the entire Mosaic system dealt with external regulations, not internal heart changes. The regulations concerning food and drink and a variety of ritual washings could only effect, at best, a ceremonial and symbolical removal of pollution.

But all of this would only last “*until the time of the new order*” (NIV) or “*the time of the restoration*” (ESV). That new order has arrived with the New Covenant and its new priesthood, its new sanctuary, and its new sacrifice – all introduced by the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ!

This earthly tabernacle – and everything in it – pointed to the coming of Jesus Christ, and His atoning sacrifice on Calvary’s cross. We may recall that when the Apostle John described the incarnation of the Son of God, he said, “*And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten Son, full of grace and truth*.” The word that is translated “dwelt” is literally “tabernacled” (as seen in the NASB footnote). That helps us understand that the mercy and grace and forgiveness and glory that the tabernacle embodied has now come to us, fully and finally, in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is all we will ever need!