

## 18. Understanding the Purpose of the Old Testament Priesthood

In our last topic, we saw that we want to help our physical and spiritual children learn to understand and be able to explain the new covenant. We saw that the new covenant is far superior to the old covenant because it takes away sin, instead of just covering it. As a result, there is no longer a need for the old covenant. In this topic, we are going to see that the writer of the book of Hebrews explained the purpose of the Old Testament priesthood. We will see that the Old Testament priesthood was important because it showed that there was a need for a new priesthood.

Hebrews 9:1-5 says, “Then indeed, even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary. For a tabernacle was prepared: the first part, in which was the lampstand, the table, and the showbread, which is called the sanctuary; and behind the second veil, the part of the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of All, which had the golden censer and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which were the golden pot that had the manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.” Since Christ had not yet come to pay the penalty for sin, Moses was given very detailed instructions about the building of the tabernacle and the ordinances that were to be carried out by the priests.

God also gave Moses the Ten Commandments. Hebrews 10:1 says, “For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect.” The law could only show sin but it could not give blessing. As a result, we see that the law, the tabernacle, the sacrifices and the ordinances were only a shadow of the good things to come. The sacrifices never made those who offered them perfect. Here, in Hebrews 9, we have that tabernacle described. The tabernacle contained two parts. The first part was called the Holy Place. In it were three pieces of furniture; the lampstand, the table which had twelve loaves of bread placed on it to represent the twelve tribes of Israel and the altar of incense. A priest went into the Holy Place every morning and every evening to add oil to the lamps on the lampstand and to burn incense on the altar of incense.

The second part of the tabernacle was called the Holy of Holies and the high priest could only go behind the veil and enter the Holy of Holies one day during the year, the Day of Atonement. The Holy of Holies only contained one piece of furniture which was the Ark of the Covenant. On the way into the Holy of Holies, the priest would take a golden censer with live coals and take some incense from the altar of incense. Then, Leviticus 16:12-13 says, “Then he shall take a censer full of burning coals of fire from the altar before the Lord, with his hands full of sweet incense beaten fine, and bring it inside the veil. And he shall put the incense on the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of incense may cover the mercy seat that is on the Testimony, lest he die.” The High Priest had to burn incense on the mercy seat so that he would not die when he went into the Holy of Holies.

The Ark of the Covenant was overlaid with gold. Inside the Ark of the Covenant were three things: a golden pot that contained manna that the Lord provided as food for the forty years that Israel was

in the wilderness; the rod of Aaron that budded when some of the people rebelled against the leadership of Moses and Aaron; and the tablets of the covenant (pieces of stone) that had the Ten Commandments written on them. On the cover of the Ark was the mercy seat with two cherubim (angelic beings made of gold), one on each end of the mercy seat overshadowing the mercy seat. This was the place where the High Priest would meet with God that one day each year.

Hebrews 9:6-8 says, “Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people's sins committed in ignorance; the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing.” Every morning, and every evening, the priests would go into the Holy Place to put oil in the lamps and incense on the altar. Once a week, they would also place twelve new loaves of bread on the table of showbread, one loaf for each of the twelve tribes of Israel.

On the Day of Atonement, the High Priest would go into the Holy of Holies by himself. There, he would place blood on the mercy seat first as a covering for his sins and then as a covering for the sins of the people. This blood was an offering that the High Priest offering for the sins of ignorance that he and the people had committed during the previous year. The word translated “sins of ignorance” means *a sin that they did not know or a sin committed without understanding*. As Christ hung on the cross He said in Luke 23:34, “Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.’ And they divided His garments and cast lots.” None of those involved in the crucifixion of Christ had an understanding of what they were really doing. None of the people, including the chief priests, the Sanhedrin, Pilate or the soldiers, understood that Christ was shedding His blood and dying to pay for their sins and for the sins of all people.

Even though the High Priest placed blood on the Mercy Seat each year, that action did not bring him close to God. In fact, as he placed blood on the Mercy Seat the High Priest was filled with fear. Since Leviticus 16:13 says, “And he shall put the incense on the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of incense may cover the mercy seat that is on the Testimony, lest he die.” The High Priest knew that if he did anything wrong, while in the Holy of Holies, that he would die. As a result, throughout the Old Testament, the people did not feel that they could come close to God.

In contrast, Hebrews 9:12 says, “Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.” Christ entered into the presence of the Father with His own blood and with it obtained eternal redemption for all who come to Christ by faith. That is why Hebrews 4:14-16 tells us, “Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” It is only through Christ that we can come boldly to the Father.

That is why Hebrew 9:8 says, “The Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All

was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing.” The Old Testament tabernacle and priesthood were only a shadow because they gave a picture of what Christ would do when He presented His own blood to the Father in heaven after his death and resurrection. Christ told Mary in John 20:17, “Jesus said to her, ‘Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.’”” That evening Christ told the disciples, in Luke 24:39, “Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.” Between the time that Christ appeared to Mary in the morning and the disciples later in the day, He presented His blood to the Father in heaven. The Old Testament High Priest was a shadow when he put blood on the Mercy Seat of what Christ would do when He presented His own blood to the Father.

Hebrews 9:9-10 goes on to say, “It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience--concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation.” The Old Testament ministry of the High Priest as he placed the blood on the Mercy Seat was a parable or a symbol of what Christ did when Christ paid the penalty for sin once for all.

The Old Testament sacrifices were never designed to give a person a clear conscience because they never took away sin. Those sacrifices only provided a covering for sin until the time when Christ would come to take away sin. That is why John the Baptist introduced Christ, in John 1:29, by saying, “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’” John the Baptist pointed out the fact that Christ was the One for whom the Jews had waited throughout the Old Testament. They had patiently waited for the One who could take away sin and give them boldness to come to the Father.

The Old Testament priests presented both gifts and sacrifices to God. Even though they presented those sacrifices for their own sins, as well as the sins of the people, we see that they could never have a clear conscience. They could never feel free to come close to God. However, they did have a very important ministry. The Old Testament priests could show their faith by the outward sacrifices but they offered. However, God told Samuel that He is the One who looks on the heart and He knew throughout the Old Testament those priests that had true faith. We want to help our physical and spiritual children understand that the Old Testament priests did have an important ministry even though they did not have a clear conscience. We also want to help our children understand that they will have a clear conscience as they confess their sins. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children understand this great privilege.