

THE HIGH PRIESTHOOD OF JESUS – ADVANCED COURSE (2): PRIESTLY WORSHIP, OLD AND NEW

Hebrews 9:1-15

Last week we began the long anticipated walk through this middle section of the sermon to the Hebrew congregation. We looked at the first of five sub-sections, the one dealing with the priestly order of Melchizedek. I thought it might be good idea to write down the various headings of this whole section so that you can see what we are doing, where we have been and where we are going. This evening we will look at sub-section two – “Priestly worship, Old and New”.

The Preacher begins these verses with a trip to the old tabernacle, the first sanctuary under the old covenant. His guided tour, which roughly follows the description in Exodus 25-40, take us right through the tabernacle, even into the places marked, “No unauthorised entry – not open to public”.

The old sanctuary was a tent divided by curtains into two parts. Our guided tour enters by the same route the priests used – into the outer part where we see the lamp stand and the table for the bread. This is called the Holy Place (9:2). But there is a second space behind the dividing curtain. It is called the Most Holy Place (9:3) and only the high priest may enter. The Preacher, however, pulls back the curtain and says, “have a look at this!” As we look into this chamber the first thing we see is that everything seems to be made of gold: the incense altar, the Ark itself, the jar containing the manna, the mercy Seat, (that is the covering of the Ark) and two cherubim. Everything is gold – but what does it all mean or signify? Many people have speculated on this and many books have been written on the subject – but what does the Preacher do – he suddenly drops the curtain, cutting off our view, and says, “Well, we can’t hang about here all day.” (9:5)

Why not? Surely if, as the Preacher told us back in 8:5ff, this is a “copy and shadow of what is in heaven” then we ought to make time to understand. It seems, at least in part, the Preacher is telling us that, as impressive as all these details are, they are beside the point. Don’t forget, his point is to contrast the old and the new, what happened, or rather failed to happen, in the old sanctuary with what happens through the priestly ministry of Jesus.

But that’s not all. By giving this glimpse into the Most Holy Place the Preacher has wet our appetites. We want to look closer, we want to understand and gain a deeper knowledge of what all this is about. Maybe here we will find what we are looking for that will lift our flagging spirits, straighten our weary arms. We want to go into this Holy of Holies. In a few verses the Preacher will return to the sanctuary, but

not to this old one, rather to “the greater and more perfect tabernacle” that is Jesus (9:11). This tabernacle is the reality of which the old is but a picture. In the old there were statues of cherubim; in the new, there are real angels. In the old there was the Law written on stone; in the new, there are people whose hearts of flesh, God has written the new law. To our protests at being shut of somewhat prematurely from the Most Holy Place the preacher says, “You aint seen nothing yet!”

Before turning to the new, the Preacher makes a couple of comments about the old priesthood, (9:6-10). He gives us two quick word-pictures. The first is of a normal days work in the life of a priest under the old system. The day-to-day busy-ness of the priest performing their duties, constantly coming and going. The second picture is of a special day – The Day of Atonement. On this one day in each year the high-priest only enters the Most Holy Place, taking with him blood offered as a sacrifice for his own sins as well as the sins of the people. This contrast, the preacher claims in 9:9, is a picture of the present situation. In fact, he goes so far as to say this inner/outer arrangement is a kind of visual parable of the very theological and pastoral problems the whole sermon is trying to redress.

The preacher knows that this congregation, like many others, often feels burdened by the toil of Christian life, shut off from its joy and peace. What they, and we, need is an encounter with God – they, and we, want to go into the Most Holy place, to have access to God’s mercy and forgiveness. What they find is that the way seems blocked by religious duties. They feel stuck in the outer chamber where the old rules still seem to apply. They fiddle with the wicks on the lamp stand and pour gallons of energy meeting their religious obligations, but they never get where they need to go.

People want God, but instead they often get information about God. People want an authentic experience of God, but they frequently get regulations, procedures and preliminaries. People are trapped in the vestibule, when what they want is to get into the sanctuary. They are busy, very busy with the day-to-day minutia of church life, put to work studying the Bible, organising prayer chains and church outings. Planning campaigns and strategies and generally working hard at the business of being religious. None of these activities is actually wrong; most is good and useful, but it is not the thing itself, the thing we really want and need – access to the living God.

This is the problem of a religion confined to the outer chamber. It is a life of bustle and activity, but lacks a holy encounter. So much hard work, so little real worship; so much struggle and toil, so little Sabbath rest. No wonder people grow weary and give up.

The Preacher sees all this represented in the old priesthood. Everybody hungers for access to the holy, but under the old system, only the high priest could go in; everybody needs God’s mercy and help every day, but the high priest could only approach the Holy of Holies once a year. Everyone thirsts for freedom from guilt, for a fresh start, for a healed spirit but the blood sacrifices of the old high priest could not “clear the conscience of the worshipper” (9:9).

The old system simply did not provide what was needed, what was promised. So, when the time was right a new high priest, a new covenant, a new law and a new and open sanctuary were provided. This is the good news, says the Preacher.

Having set out the inadequacies of the old system and hinting at the new, the Preacher now sets out more explicit teaching about the new sanctuary and the new high priest (9:12-15).

The Preacher's comments about the new sanctuary are not to be taken as a lesson in divine geography; as though the old sanctuary is gone and been replaced by a new one in heaven. It's about the passing of the temporary, the provisional and the imperfect, to be replaced by the greater and more perfect tabernacle (9:11) where God is ever praised and mercy and forgiveness are everlasting.

The final few verses (9:12-15) are a 'how-much-more' style of argument that contrasts the priestly ministry of Jesus with the old system. The old priests offered blood, that is, animal, sacrifices that although they gave a certain external purity that allowed people to participate in public worship could never fully clean the conscience. Jesus, on the other hand, provides "eternal redemption" (9:12) through the perfect sacrifice of his own blood (9:14).

Jesus is, therefore, the mediator of the new covenant (9:15). Among other things, a mediator is a sign, in this case a sign that God will not leave us weary and spent and without hope – he will fulfil his promises.

Amen

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