

What's So Holy About the Holy Places?

LEVITICUS 16:2-19; HEBREWS 9:1-10

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • February 26, 2017 • BSCC

Congregation of Christ: “One of the specifications of the agreement between Israel and the Antichrist will allow the religious Jews to rebuild the Temple and to initiate daily sacrifices.” Do you agree with this statement? The speaker is talking about a peace treaty between Israel and the Antichrist after Christians are secretly raptured to heaven. In this treaty, the Antichrist will allow Jews to rebuild the Jerusalem Temple on the present site of the Muslim mosque on the Temple Mount.

In a recent survey of Jews in Israel, about two-thirds said they desire to rebuild the temple. This is not a surprise, because Jews regard the temple as the most important part of their lives. But among American evangelicals, also about two-thirds say that in the last days, the temple will be rebuilt, and the priesthood and animal sacrifices will be restored. They also believe that Jesus will reign as King from a throne in Jerusalem, the fulfillment of the restoration of David's kingdom.

But the Bible is entirely opposed to this false teaching. The Bible teaches us that Christ and his church is the Temple. We read in Revelation 21:22 that there is no temple in heaven. What is the temple there? It is *“the Lord the God Almighty and the Lamb”*! And did these false teachers ever read the words of Jesus in John 18:36, *“My kingdom is not of this world”*? Why would he then sit on a throne in Jerusalem?

But the most egregious—even heretical—teaching is the rebuilding of the temple and the restoration of the priesthood and animal sacrifices. These false teachers say that the sacrifices will be to memorialize the sacrifice of Christ. But what did Jesus command us to do to remember him? The Lord's Supper! *“Do this in remembrance of me,”* he commands. Did Jesus say in Matthew 26:26-28, *“Take, eat; this is the meat of the bull,”* and *“Drink of it, all of you, for this is the blood of the bull”*?

And this is what the writer in our text wanted to point out to the Jews who converted to Christ. Because they were being persecuted by fellow Jews and pagan Romans, some of them left Christ and went back to their Old Testament beliefs and practices. The apostle Paul harshly wrote against “Judaizers” in the Galatian churches who wanted to go back to the Old Testament temple worship: *“How can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world [works-righteousness], whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years!”* (Gal 4:9-10).

The writer has explained in Hebrews 7 that Jesus is the superior high priest. In Hebrews 8, the new covenant is superior to the old. Today we will study why going back to the Old Testament temple worship is going back to that which has been made obsolete by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Therefore, Jesus, the new Tabernacle, is superior to the old.

So our theme this morning is, **“What's So Holy About the Holy Places?”** under three headings: **(1) The First Section: “The Holy Place”;** **(2) The Second Section: “The Most Holy Place”** and **(3) Jesus is “The Most Holy Place.”**

The First Section: “The Holy Place”

The first two verses introduce the Old Testament tabernacle or tent in the wilderness. In Exodus and Leviticus there were detailed “regulations” or requirements for worship, including the priesthood, sacrifices and the temple construction. He calls the tent the “earthly sanctuary.” From verses 2-5, he briefly describes the tabernacle.

The tabernacle or tent was a portable structure 45 feet long, 15 feet wide and high. It had a wooden frame overlaid with gold, with a flat roof. It was covered with a layer of blue, purple and scarlet tapestries, and three layers of animal skins. It was divided into two sections or rooms separated by a veil or curtain made of the same-colored tapestries with gold and embroidered with cherubim. The first room from the front is called the *Holy Place*, a 15-foot cube, while the second room, 30 feet long, is called the *Most Holy Place* or Holy of Holies. The whole tent is sometimes called the *Holy Places*.

Inside the first room were the *“lampstand and the table with its consecrated bread.”* There were actually 12 loaves of bread representing the 12 tribes of Israel. The bread is also called the “showbread,” which means it is shown in public, or “bread of the Presence,” which means that it represents the presence of God. The bread was replaced with new bread by the priest every Sabbath, with the old bread eaten by the priest (Lev 24:8). The lampstand was made of pure gold, with seven branches, and which was kept lighted by the priest day and night (Exo 27:20-21). These were the “regular” daily duties of the priest. So this room was the domain of the priests alone.

The Second Section: “The Most Holy Place”

Then in verses 3-5, the Preacher describes the second room, or the Most Holy Place. In this room are *“the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant.”* There are two points of contention here. The first is that the altar of incense is placed just outside the veil in Exodus 30:6. It could not be inside the Most Holy Place, since common priests burn the incense every morning, and only the high priest can enter the Most Holy Place. It may be that the writer makes an intimate connection between the incense and the ark of the covenant, as we read in Exodus 30:6, *“in front of the veil that is above the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is above the testimony.”*

The second contention is that the writer places the manna and Aaron’s staff that budded inside the ark of the covenant. In the Old Testament, these two items were placed in front of the ark of the covenant, not inside. The Preacher might be following a traditional understanding that these were inside the ark. The manna reminded the Israelites that God provided food for them in the desert (Exo 16:32–34). Aaron’s staff that budded with almond blossoms reminded them that it is only Aaron that God had chosen to be his priest, not any other man (Num 17:10–11).

One final note about the two sections: the writer uses “first” or “first tabernacle” to refer to the Holy Place. It doesn’t mean that there were two tabernacles.

Jesus is “The Most Holy Place”

Beginning with verse 6, the Preacher analyzes the Old Testament tabernacle worship he just described. Daily, the priests perform their duties in the first room, the Holy Place. But once a year, the high priest enters the Most Holy Place to offer the blood of sacrificial bulls and goats to God, represented by the ark of the covenant. He burns incense to cover the mercy seat and sprinkles the blood on the mercy seat of the ark and on the ground. The blood of the bull atoned for his and his household’s sins, while the blood of the goat atoned for the “unintentional” sins of the people.

Here, beginning with verse 8, the Preacher shows two inadequacies of the old covenant tabernacle worship. *First, Israel had limited access to God.* Only the high priest had access to God’s presence symbolized by the ark in the Most Holy Place. Only the priests can enter the Holy Place. The rest of the people can only come into the outer court in front of the tent. So, throughout the old covenant history of Israel, no one had direct access to God in the tent.

A second inadequacy of tabernacle worship was that *it offered limited efficacy or sufficiency to atone for the sins of the people.* There are two things involved in the sacrificial animals. One is that it was effective only for “unintentional” sins. What are unintentional sins? These are crimes that were not premeditated or in ignorance. In our day, we call this manslaughter, as when someone is killed in a traffic accident. Murder and homicide are both intentional. So the one who commits murder or homicide had no way out of God’s punishment. David, for example, committed both premeditated adultery and murder. The only way he was forgiven by God was when he confessed and repented of his sin with a contrite heart, as we read in Psalm 51.

The second thing that makes sacrificial animals insufficient is that they “*cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper.*” The worshipers might have partial or temporary clearing of their conscience, but never an absolutely clear conscience. The Day of Atonement is performed only once a year, and the sacrifices are only for unintentional sins. Those who committed murder and other premeditated sins will never have their conscience cleared by the sacrificial animals.

What then is the solution to this problem? The writer says there will be a “*time of reformation.*” The Greek word used is *diorthosis*, which means a “process leading to a new order viewed as something yet to be realized.”¹ Literally it is a “making straight that which is out of line.” The old covenant worship was not “right” or “straight,” so it was waiting for a better time to make it right. The writer says that the first room symbolized the “present age,” referring to the Old Testament inadequacy of limited access to God and limited efficacy of the sacrifices.

When the “time of reformation” arrived, entrance into the Most Holy Place was not restricted to the high priest alone. How was the prohibition abolished? It was abolished when the veil

¹ Bauer, W. (with Arndt, Gingrich & Danker). *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd edition, rev and edit by Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 251.

separating the two sections was removed. In fact, when Jesus died on the cross, the veil of the temple was torn in two, leaving the Most Holy Place open (Mat 27:51).

Now the Preacher makes his point that Jesus is the superior Tabernacle or Temple of the new covenant. All the furnishings of the old tabernacle pointed forward to his person and work. The lampstand that lighted the tabernacle pointed to Jesus as the Light of the world. The lampstand also signified the church (Zec 4:2; Rev 1:20). The 12 loaves of bread representing the 12 tribes of Israel were also fulfilled in Christ's church established by the 12 apostles. The manna was fulfilled when Christ came as the Bread of Life who came down from heaven. The incense symbolized the prayers of the people, and Christ is now our Intercessor who sends our prayers to heaven. It was also fulfilled by Christ as our High Priest serving us in the heavenly temple now. Finally, the ark of the covenant represented God who dwelt in the midst of his people. When Jesus came down from heaven, he was also called "Immanuel," because he now dwells with his people through the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, all these things in the tabernacle, and later the temple, foreshadowed the coming of Christ. This is why Jesus told his disciples that he himself is the Temple (John 2:19-21). You who believe in him are "living stones" that are being built into a temple. And each one of you is a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Dear friends, *God's desire is that you will draw near to him.* But you can only draw near through faith in his Son Jesus Christ. Even the old covenant tent is a picture of God's pleasure in people coming to him from outside the tabernacle into the Holy Place and finally to the Most Holy Place.

But God is also very much concerned with how people draw near to him. He gave detailed instructions to Moses about the materials, design and construction of the tent. The priests had to do exactly as God had commanded, and if they violated those instructions even in minute details, bad things happened to them, even death. The high priest would die in the Holy of Holies if he ever touched the ark of the covenant. The two sons of Aaron the high priest died for committing a seemingly harmless sin of using "unauthorized fire" to burn the incense (Lev 10:1-2).

Therefore, we must ask ourselves today: In our worship, do we obey the Word of God, or do we accommodate what the unbelieving world wants. Or as Charles Spurgeon says, are we entertaining the goats instead of feeding the sheep? Are we adding our own innovations and desires to God's specific commands for worshiping him in our Sunday worship services? Remember that one of God's strict commands in the Old Testament is, "*You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you*" (Deu 4:2).

What is the consequence of disobeying God's strict commands for worship? He warns us in Deuteronomy 4:24, "*God is a consuming fire*"; and again in Hebrews 12:28-29, "*let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.*" The two sons of Aaron were literally consumed by fire from heaven after they violated God's strict requirements for worship.

God's strict demands for worship must not be seen as monotonous repetitive practices. These regulations were commanded by God throughout Israel's generations. But we must consider repetition as a reflection of the holy orderliness of God. God is a God of repeating sunrise and sunset, of summers and winters, of rest every seven days, of the rhythms of life, until life ends. These things were ordained by God in a beautiful, perfect, right order. Therefore, like athletes doing repetitive training, Sunday after Sunday, we are being trained by God to worshiping him with reverence and joy.

Finally, the old tabernacle points us to God's pure holiness and our own sinfulness. God cannot wink or even look upon sin without being displeased and wrathful. If not for Christ's sacrifice on the cross for all our sins, God would consume us all in eternal fire. But God is not only just; he is also merciful. To those who confess and repent of their sins—no matter if our sins are unintentional or in ignorance or premeditated—God will forgive you. But his forgiveness rests on Christ's broken body and shed blood for all the sins of those who believe and trust in him. For he is the only sinless, perfect sacrifice for sin. Like his Father, he is God who alone is worthy to be praised and adored as "Holy, Holy, Holy!"