

## **Superior Sacrifice**

### **Hebrews 9:1-14**

We have been 'enjoying' record snowfall totals the past several weeks and after each snow storm we've had the wonderful opportunity to get some extra exercise clearing the snow. One thing I've noticed is that even though the temps have been well below freezing, the little bit of snow that gets left behind by my snowblower is actually melting on my driveway. How is that possible? It's possible because of the incredible power of the sun. The rays of the sun penetrate the freezing temperatures and cause the snow to melt – not at a fast rate, but it's happening. And we know that when temperatures begin to rise the power of the sun will start to melt the snow even more. Even though it's 93 million miles away, it can still melt snow on a freezing day.

I want you to imagine what would happen if all the snow in your yard was immediately transported to the surface of the sun. The temperature at the surface of the sun is estimated to be 10,000 degrees Fahrenheit. Even with all the snow that's in your yard right now, if that came into contact with the surface of the sun, it would instantaneously vaporize and disappear. Snow is utterly destroyed in the presence of the sun. It cannot exist if it comes in contact with that kind of heat.

Now I want us to think about the holiness of God. The holiness of God is difficult to explain. I've heard it described as the God-ness of God – everything about him that makes him God. It's that which sets him apart from all of creation. It's a purity that is described a lot like the sun – a blinding light and a consuming fire. Now, in the beginning, when God created the earth, he created it in such a way that he, in his holiness, could be in contact with it and all was good. He walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and they were able to enjoy fellowship with him in his presence.

But then Adam and Eve sinned and everything changed. Genesis 3 says that mankind was cursed and even the ground itself came under a curse (cf. Rom. 8:20). They were banished from the Garden and from that point on sinful man has been separated from holy God. It became evident as time went on and as you read in the Old Testament, that if any human being ever came into direct contact with the holiness of God they would immediately be ruined – like a snowflake on the surface of the sun. God's holiness is a consuming fire and anything that has

been corrupted by sin, including us, cannot stand in his presence and survive. Even when a handful of people in the Bible caught just a glimpse of his glory, they trembled in fear and thought they were going to die.

So the holiness of God has become a huge problem for us. Something has to be done about our sin or we will never be able to come into contact with God and live – we will be utterly ruined like a snowflake on the sun. What can counteract the corruption of sin in our lives? The passage we’re going to look at this morning will give us the only answer.

In the book of Hebrews the author has been comparing Jesus, our great high priest with the other high priests under the old covenant, and he’s been pointing out how Jesus was superior to them in every way. He’s superior in his person, like we saw in chapter 7. He’s superior in his position, like we saw in chapter 8. And now in chapter 9 we will see how his sacrifice is superior as well. The author of Hebrews begins chapter 9 by explaining the sacrifice that the other high priests brought to God under the old covenant. It was called the sacrifice of atonement. In these first few verses, he describes the place where this sacrifice would be offered.

Read Hebrews 9:1-5.

*Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. <sup>2</sup> For a tent was prepared, the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place. <sup>3</sup> Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, <sup>4</sup> having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant. <sup>5</sup> Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.*

This describes a little bit about the place where the sacrifice of atonement would be offered. He calls it an “earthly place of holiness.” This was the one place on the cursed earth that was designated by God where he could dwell with his chosen people. He didn’t have to do that – he could have just abandoned us in our sin, but he didn’t. In a demonstration of mercy and love he made a place where he would dwell with us. And in making such a place, he had all kinds of regulations that had to be followed so the people wouldn’t die. A few are mentioned here. You can get all the details in Exodus 25-30.

Here, the author says “a tent was prepared” – this became known as the tabernacle. (Picture) The tabernacle was a rectangle tent made of expensive fabric curtains for the walls and the ceiling. It was 45 feet long, 15 feet wide, and 15 feet high – roughly half the size of our sanctuary. It was divided into two sections that were separated by a heavy curtain that was 30 feet from the entrance. The first section was called the Holy Place and in it were two things: on one side was a golden lampstand that held seven lamps made to resemble a living almond tree and I believe represents the seven Spirits of God in heaven mentioned in Rev. 4:5. On the other side was a golden table that held drink offerings and the “bread of the Presence.” After following other regulations for ritual cleansing, the priests served in this section of the tabernacle every day and they were the only ones allowed to enter. They would keep the oil lamps burning and replace the bread of the Presence.

But the second section was different. Even the priests were prohibited from going in there. This section was behind the dividing curtain and was called the Most Holy Place, and its shape was a perfect cube. It wasn't very big – only 15 feet wide, 15 feet deep, and 15 feet tall. Just in front of its entrance was the golden altar of incense where the priests would burn incense every day. But past the curtain, on the inside of the Most Holy Place was the most sacred object in all the world called the ark of the covenant. (Picture) The base of the ark was a rectangular shaped golden box about 5' wide, 2' deep, and 2' tall. In it were placed three things: the golden urn that held the manna that God provided the Israelites in the wilderness, Aaron's staff that budded as a sign that God sovereignly chose him to be priest, and the tablets of the covenant (Ten Commandments) which were God's witness to the terms of the old covenant. Above the ark was a golden cover that was fashioned in the shape of what's called the mercy seat, which represented the throne of God. On either side of the mercy seat were the cherubim, and these were facing each other with their wings outstretched to overshadow the mercy seat.

I mentioned last week that all these things were specifically designed by God to serve as a copy and shadow of heavenly things and you see this again in what it says in Isaiah 6:1-3: *“In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup> Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. <sup>3</sup> And one called to another and*

*said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!'"* So the Most Holy Place was designed as somewhat of a preview of this actual heavenly place.

As the author of Hebrews mentioned in verse 1, the tabernacle was an earthly place of holiness – a place where God would actually dwell in the midst of his people. His glory would appear in the Most Holy Place in the form of a cloud and he would hover above the ark of the covenant. He would actually allow his holiness and glory to dwell there. But there was a major problem with that – that was like a 10,000 degree blazing inferno in the midst of a bunch of tiny snowflakes... It was actually a deadly situation for people who had been corrupted by sin, and that included all of the Israelites – even the priests who ministered in the tabernacle.

They were not allowed to go into the Most Holy Place because of their sin, but how was that even possible? That's what the author writes about next. Not only did God give them regulations for how to set up the tabernacle so that he wouldn't be in direct contact with them, but he also gave them regulations for worship, so that people could be near him and not be consumed. In particular, he established something called the sacrifice of atonement. And that's what we read about next.

Read Hebrews 9:6-10.

*<sup>6</sup> These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, <sup>7</sup> but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people. <sup>8</sup> By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing <sup>9</sup> (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, <sup>10</sup> but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.*

This is talking about the sacrifice of atonement. All the details about this sacrifice can be found in Leviticus 16. The priests performed their duties in the first section of the tabernacle every day, but they were not allowed to go into the second section or they would die. Only the high priest was allowed to enter the Most Holy Place and that was only on one day of the year – the Day of Atonement. On

that day the high priest had to follow specific instructions and offer specific sacrifices which included bringing a blood sacrifice into the Most Holy place. God allowed the blood of that sacrifice to cover over the sins of the high priest, and the other priests, and the people of Israel. And because of that he could be near them and they would not be destroyed.

But the author also points out in these verses, that's all that sacrifice could do. It could cover over their sins so they could survive in the presence of God, but it couldn't actually purify them so they could be in direct contact with God. As the author points out, that sacrifice could only deal with "*food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.*" In other words, it only went skin deep. It allowed for God's presence to be near them, carefully concealed in the Most Holy Place, without consuming them. But it couldn't "*perfect the conscience of the worshiper*" – it couldn't purify anyone's heart from the guilt of sin. Therefore, they still couldn't come into direct contact with God or they would die. Like he says in verse 8, as long as the priests and the tabernacle were still standing and in operation, access to the holy places and the presence of the holiness of God was prohibited. There had to be something more – the sacrifice of atonement wasn't enough. But like everything else under the old covenant, it pointed to something that was. And that's what we read about in the last few verses.

Read Hebrews 9:11-14.

*<sup>11</sup> But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) <sup>12</sup> he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. <sup>13</sup> For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, <sup>14</sup> how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*

So he points out some critical differences between the sacrifice of atonement that the other priests brought and the sacrifice Jesus provided. First of all, when Christ brought his sacrifice, he didn't bring it into the earthly tabernacle, he brought it directly into the holy places of heaven. Second, he didn't bring it repeatedly, once every year, he brought it once forever. Third, he didn't bring the blood of animals,

he brought his own blood. And finally, his sacrifice didn't provide just a temporary covering for sin, it secured an eternal redemption. Jesus died on the cross and shed his blood to provide the perfect sacrifice for our sins. And after ascending into heaven, he continually intercedes before the throne of God on our behalf to secure salvation for all who trust in him. His sacrifice is far superior to that of the other high priests.

He explains in verses 13-14 that the sacrifices of the other priests were limited to the purification of the flesh, or the body – God allowed them to cover over people's sins temporarily, but they didn't purify the conscience or heart. But Christ's sacrifice did much more than that. Christ provided his own blood and he did so through the eternal Spirit – in other words he did so as God. But he also did so without blemish – or as a sinlessly perfect human being. Thus, as both eternal holy God and as sinlessly perfect man, he was able to offer the perfect sacrifice to not only to cover our sins, but to purify our conscience from sin, or "dead works." God accepts his sacrifice as the only one that can truly wipe away our sins and make us perfect before him. He is the only suitable substitute that could make us pure before a holy God. And with the corruption of sin no longer on our record, we have now been reconciled to God. We have been set free to serve the living God. And he actually comes to dwell in us by his Spirit.

There is no way that a snowflake can survive on the surface of the sun, and there is no way a human being corrupted by sin can survive in the presence of a holy God. But because of the sacrifice that Jesus offered on our behalf, we who were once corrupted by sin have been completely purified. He has made us holy. And one day, when this life is over we will actually be able to be in the presence of God to enjoy him and marvel in his holiness forever – like the way things were way back in the Garden.

So as we move now into a time of reflection and worship, I want us to rejoice in all that Christ has done for us.