

Continuing to compare and contrast the priesthood of Jesus Christ with the Levitical priesthood, the writer of Hebrews now compares the tabernacles in which each serve, pointing out that direct access to the presence of God was extremely restricted under the Mosaic Law. However, Jesus Christ removes this restriction so that we may “come boldly unto the throne of grace” (Heb. 4:16).

1 Then verily the first *covenant* had also ordinances of divine service, and a worldly sanctuary. 2 For there was a tabernacle made; the first, wherein was the candlestick, and the table, and the shewbread; which is called the sanctuary.

“Then verily the first covenant had also ordinances of divine service, and a worldly sanctuary” – The writer is continuing his comparison of the first and second covenant, the first being the Mosaic Law and the second being the one of grace under Jesus Christ. The writer points out that the first covenant had “ordinances of divine service” (all the rituals and sacrifices required by the law) which were performed in a “worldly” (earthly) sanctuary. These things had been ordained in the law as the means through which Israel was to worship God.

“For there was a tabernacle made” – The writer now focuses on the tabernacle, focusing on the two rooms: the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place (also called the Holy of Holies). He calls each of these rooms “tabernacles” even though they both comprise the tabernacle proper as God instructed Moses.

“the first, wherein was the candlestick, and the table, and the shewbread” – The first “tabernacle” (or the first room) was the Holy Place, and this was where the golden seven-branched candlestick and the table of shewbread were placed (Ex. 25:23-40; Ex. 40:22-25).

“which is called the sanctuary [holy place]” – This room is called the “Holy Place” in the OT, which is the meaning of the word “sanctuary.”

3 And after the second veil, the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of all;

Scripture does not record that there were two veils dividing the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place in either Moses’ tabernacle or Solomon’s temple, but Jewish writers do speak of two veils separating the rooms. When the temple was rebuilt after the Jews returned from their Babylonian captivity, apparently two veils were used to separate the two areas of the temple with a one-cubit gap between them. The writer is reminding his Jewish readers that on the other side of the second of the two veils was the “Holiest of All” (the Most Holy Place).

4 Which had the golden censer, and the ark of the covenant overlaid round about with gold, wherein was the golden pot that had manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant; 5 And over it the cherubims of glory shadowing the mercyseat; of which we cannot now speak particularly.

The writer then describes the contents of the Holiest of all: the golden censer (altar of incense) and the ark of the covenant. He lists the contents of the ark and mentions the golden cherubims that had their wings stretched out over the mercy seat on top of the ark. The mercy seat represented the presence of God and was where the high priest sprinkled the blood of the atonement once a year in behalf of the people. The writer then says that he does not have the space or time to speak “particularly” (in detail) about these things, implying that he could say a lot more but it would be beyond the scope of his subject.

6 Now when these things were thus ordained, the priests went always into the first tabernacle, accomplishing the service of God.

When God gave the law, it ordained that any of the priests were allowed to enter into the “first tabernacle” (the Holy Place) every day and even multiple times a day. They could come and go as their duties required, keeping fresh shewbread on the table of shewbread, keeping the candlestick full of oil so that it was always burning, etc.

7 But into the second *went* the high priest alone once every year, not without blood, which he offered for himself, and for the errors of the people:

“But into the second went the high priest alone once every year” – Any of the priests could enter the “first tabernacle” (the Holy Place) throughout the year but the “second tabernacle” (the Holiest of all) could only be entered by the high priest. He was required to go alone and he could only go once a year – on the Day of Atonement. **Lev. 16:2** “*And the LORD said unto Moses, Speak unto Aaron thy brother, that he come not at all times into the holy place within the vail before the mercy seat, which is upon the ark; that he die not: for I will appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat.*”

“not without blood, which he offered for himself, and for the errors of the people” – When the high priest entered the Holiest of all, he could not go empty handed. He had to bring the blood from the sin offering that was for himself and for the people.

8 The Holy Ghost this signifying, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while as the first tabernacle was yet standing:

Under the Mosaic Law, access to the presence of God was extremely restricted. Only one man (the high priest), once a year, was allowed in the presence of God where the ark was. Even then the high priest was required to burn incense while he was in the room so that the smoke would obscure his view of the mercy seat where the presence of God resided (Lev. 16:13). The writer of Hebrews states that the Holy Ghost used these restrictions to illustrate to us that the Mosaic Law, which depended on human effort, did not allow direct access to the presence of God for the saints. Judging by the context of the sentence, the “first tabernacle” here may refer to the earthly tabernacle (as well as the earthly temples that were later built) as opposed to the heavenly tabernacle where Jesus Christ serves as our high priest. Only through Christ do we have access to God. **John 14:6** “*Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.*”

9 Which was a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience; 10 *Which stood* only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed *on them* until the time of reformation.

“Which was a figure [placing two things side by side for comparison] for the time then present” – The Greek word for “figure” is the same word used for “parable” in the gospels. The restricted access under the law was a parable to show us that our access to God can only come through Jesus Christ. This figure was in effect under the law, which was “the time then present,” from Moses’ time (“then”) to the time the writer was writing (“present”). We can look back and appreciate the fact that we have much greater access to God through Jesus Christ than Israel ever did through the law when it was given.

“in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience” – The law required the priests to offer gifts and sacrifices to atone for their own sins as well as for those of the people they served. However, these gifts and sacrifices could not redeem these men or cleanse them from sin. They were always conscious of the fact that they would have to offer more gifts and sacrifices the next day because there would be more sins needing atonement.

“Which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances” – The law only dealt with things that could be accomplished by human beings and could not deal with spiritual transformation. The “meats and drinks” refers to the meat and drink offerings that were offered to the LORD. The “divers washings” refers to the various requirements for articles to be washed before/after use, as well as the times the priest was required to bathe before and/or after accomplishing certain tasks. The “carnal ordinances” were the rituals that only dealt with the external flesh but could not alter the spiritual condition of the people.

“imposed on them until the time of reformation” – Even though these things could not truly produce righteousness and salvation in the people, the law required that they be done until “the time of reformation” when salvation through faith in Jesus Christ was revealed.

11 But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building;

“But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come” – Jesus Christ has become a high priest Who ministers the “good things” that are coming. The good things include such things as eternal life, cleansing and justification from sin, and an eternity with Jesus Christ.

“by a greater and more perfect tabernacle” – Christ ministers from “a greater and more perfect tabernacle” – the one that is in heaven. This is a pure and holy temple in contrast with the earthly temple which was imperfect, made from earthly materials and tainted by the hands of the sinful men who constructed it.

“not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building” – The tabernacle that Christ ministers from was built by God (Heb. 8:2) and no human hand helped in its construction, unlike “this building” (the earthly tabernacle/temple). The two tabernacles are distinct in their origin, location, purity and effectiveness.

12 Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption *for us*.

“Neither by the blood of goats and calves” – The Levitical priests ministered by offering the blood of goats and calves but not so with Jesus Christ.

“but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place” – Instead of the blood of goats and calves, which can never take away sin (Heb. 10:4), Christ entered into the holy place to offer His own blood to atone for our sins. He did not offer it in the earthly tabernacle but did so in the holy place that is in the tabernacle that is in heaven. This He did once because it will never need to be repeated, unlike the offerings made by the Levitical high priests.

“having obtained eternal redemption for us” – The atonement through the blood of bulls and goats on the Day of Atonement was temporary because it was only symbolic of the true sacrifice that would take away our sins (**John 1:29** “*The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.*”). The atonement that comes through Christ’s blood is eternal because it brings us complete and eternal redemption from our sins.