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A Better Covenant

Hebrews 9 v 1-14

Introduction

In 1999, LucasFilm released the first prequel to the Star Wars trilogy. As a teaser for the film they put out a poster. It featured a young boy in front of a stone house. The sun casts a shadow of the boy onto the house. The shape of the shadow is that of a cloaked figure with a helmet.

Now if you were a kid in 1999 you might have seen this poster and been none the wiser. It's just a boy and his shadow. If you were observant you might have seen that the shadow looked like a different sort of figure than you would expect.

However, for those of us who were kids in 1977, when the first of the Star Wars films came out, the shadow was obviously that of the villain of the films, Darth Vader. And so it was clear that the new film was going to tell the origin story of one of the greatest villains of all time.

Shadows are a funny thing. They're not made of anything, except a lack of light. They are a projection of something, showing us the shape of the thing. But they are not the thing. In fact they are a poor substitute for the real thing.

Context

The book of Hebrews was written to Jews and the writer wants to tackle how Christianity affects them? Does it cancel out what they had? Is it a reversal, or a poor imitation?

He has said Jesus is better than angels, yet made a little lower than the angels so he can be fully human, that by his death he could break the power of him who holds the power of death.

He said Jesus is greater than Moses, who led the house of Israel, but Jesus made the house.

He called Jesus the great high priest, perfect and eternal, a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

He said Jesus brought in a new covenant, and the old has fallen away. We no longer need the priests who served, as the writer said in verse 5 of chapter 8:

> *They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: "See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain."*
>
> *[Hebrews 8 v 5]*

Reassurance

These statements must have been shocking and frightening to the Jews. They had grown up with the rituals of temple worship and offerings. Did all that mean nothing? Should we throw our old testaments away?

By no means! And in chapter 9 the writer wants to make it clear that the old testament objects and rituals were always shadows, signs pointing to a greater reality. They were beautiful, but they weren't the thing. They showed us the shape of the thing but weren't the thing itself. And looking back now we can see much more clearly how those shadows pointed to a greater reality.

How do we know we are right to look for pointers to Jesus in the Old Testament scriptures? Jesus did it himself, on the road to Emmaus, as he showed two disciples how all the scriptures were really about him. Or remember the Ethiopian eunuch, reading from the book of Isaiah as he travelled home from Jerusalem. When Philip met with him he explained to him how all the things he was reading had been fulfilled in Jesus.

The writer takes us on a quick tour of the tabernacle, built by the Jews in the desert as a place of worship. He says "*we cannot discuss these things in detail now*", maybe because he didn't have enough space or maybe because the tabernacle artefacts had been lost. They couldn't examine them any more.

So let us take a walk through the tabernacle, and look not at not just the items themselves, but what they tell us about the Lord.

I have some pictures to help us through this. Some of which are of a model I made years ago, out of cardboard and gold chocolate wrappers.

A Journey Through the Shadows

Let's start outside the court. This was an area fenced off with curtains that surrounded the tabernacle itself. The court had a linen gate, and only the Israelites were allowed to enter.

In the court of the tabernacle we find fire and smoke, blood and noise, as the children of Israel bring their offerings to the priests.

Here we find the brazen altar, where the sacrifices were burned. Imagine all the blood that was shed as countless animals were taken into the court, slaughtered by the priests and burned on the brazen altar. It reminds us of God's justice, that demands a price be paid for sin, and that the price inevitably included blood.

Let's walk past the brazen altar, and we see the laver, where the priests washed their hands and feet, so they might be ceremonially clean for the Lord's service. Remember, everything's a picture, a shadow, and we see that a clean heart is required to enter the house of God. And we know that that cleansing can only come from Jesus.

As we pass through the linen screen, between the pillars, we come into the holy place. Only the priests are allowed in here, and the noise and bustle of the court is quieted by our separation from the world. A few priests quietly go about their business in this holy place.

To the left we have the lamp stand, a golden candle stick with 7 branches and 7 lamps. The light from the oil burning in the lamps is the only light in the holy place. It reminds us of the light of the world, come down into darkness to light the way to God.

On the right hand side is the table of shewbread, with twelve loaves placed in two rows of six. We think of fellowship with God, and the times Jesus sat down to a meal with his followers.

The priests change the loaves on the table, and fill the lamps on the lamp stand. They also burn incense on the small altar, a picture of the prayers of the saints going up to God, a sweet smelling savour to the Lord.

The altar of incense stands in front of the veil, a full height curtain of linen, with threads of red, blue and purple, and images of angels. It's a heavenly picture. We were only able to get this far by being a priest. We can only go further as the high priest, and then only on the day of atonement, and only with the blood of a bull and a goat, for his sin and the people's.

The high priest dabs some of the blood on the altar of incense. He takes one of the coals and puts it into a censer, then makes his way through the veil into the holy of holies, smoke from the incense filling the room as he goes.

It is quiet in here. There is no human light, but the glory of God lights the room. The gold-covered ark of the covenant stands before him. In that box are three items: the golden pot of manna reminds him of the people's grumbling and God's great provision. The budding rod reminds him of the people's rebellion as they sought different leaders, and of God's choice of Aaron, the first high priest. The third item is a pair of stone tablets, with the law of God written on them. God's standard is perfection and the law reminds the high priest that he is here to sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on the solid gold lid of the ark, known as the mercy seat. Sitting on the mercy seat are two golden angels, wings outstretched and touching, declaring the glory of God.

As the high priest sprinkles the blood of the sacrifice on the mercy seat he knows that the sins of the people are covered for another year. Not forgiven, but covered, because the blood of animals cannot pay for the sins of people. The sacrifice is just another shadow, another picture, of the one God was going to send to redeem his people.

As we read in our passage:

This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

[Hebrews 9 v 9-10]

The True Tabernacle

So if all that was just a shadow, what was the real thing? What was it a picture of? The writer gives us a clue:

But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this

creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

[Hebrews 9 v 11-12]

The time of the new order is now. Jesus has come. And he has come to the tabernacle. Not the one on earth: that's just a shadow, but the one in heaven. What is that like? I don't really know. The earthly tabernacle gives us a clue, an outline, and we know that the real thing must be much greater than its shadow. It might be significant that the layout of the altar, laver, lamp stand, table, altar and ark make the shape of a cross.

Jesus entered that tabernacle. Remember there were rules for who could go in each place. Jesus was a Jew, so he could enter the courtyard. He wasn't a Levite, but was a priest after the order of Melchizedek, so he could come into the holy place. And indeed he is the great high priest, so he could even enter the holy of holies. But remember, there was a specified time, once per year, and the high priest had to come in with the blood of the sacrifice, for his sins and the sins of the people.

Well, Jesus came in at the right time. Not just for the year but for eternity. Once for all. He didn't have to bring blood for his own sins because he was sinless. And the blood that he brought for the sins of the people wasn't the blood of a goat, but his own blood. It wasn't just effective in covering our sin but it paid for our sin, redeeming us completely. Read that verse again:

He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

[Hebrews 9 v 12]

Isn't that a better day of atonement, a better tabernacle, a better high priest, a better sacrifice?

Our Service

So what is the purpose of the tabernacle to the Jews, once the new covenant has come into effect? And what is the purpose for us, looking on as outsiders to the old covenant? Its practical use has faded away. But as a shadow, an illustration, it draws us in, focuses our minds and produces both worship and service. Look at the final verse in our passage:

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

[Hebrews 9 v 14]

As believers we are cleansed by the blood of Jesus, so that we might serve him. How do we serve? As priests! Remember Peter said that we are "*a chosen people, a royal priesthood*". We have been adopted into the family of God and are made sons of Abraham, so we can enter the court. Because of the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus we are cleansed, and because of our priesthood we can enter the tent. Inside we see the lamp stand and it reminds us of our duty to be a light to the world, showing Christ. We see the table and it reminds us of our fellowship

with God and with one another. And it's that, our love for one another, that shows the world that we are his disciples. As we approach the altar of incense we are reminded to pray, not just because we care about those we pray for, but also because our prayers are sweet smelling to God.

We are not high priests, only Jesus can make that claim, but look at the veil? It has been torn in two and the way into the most holy place is open. So we can see the mercy seat where Jesus sprinkled his blood to redeem us. Inside the ark we find the manna to remind us of God's provision, Aaron's rod to remind us that we are chosen by God, and the tablets of the law, reminding us that God has now written his law on our hearts.

There is no service for us to do in the most holy place. Jesus has done it all, and all we can do is worship.

Application

When Jesus had died and risen, and met the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, he talked to them about all the scriptures, and he explained how it all pointed to him. The bible tells us that their eyes were opened. And they recognised Jesus.

That's what the writer to the Hebrews wants to happen to these Jewish Christians. He wants them to go back to the scriptures and to examine them, and to have their eyes opened. It's all about Jesus. It was always about Jesus.

Let's worship him.