

Epistle to the Hebrews — Session 8a

Hebrews 9:1–10:18: Christ Our Atonement (Part 1)

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Abstract

This session analyzes Hebrews 9:1–10:18, examining the theological significance of Christ's death and ascension through the lens of a heavenly priesthood after the order of Melchizedek. Dr. David A. deSilva contrasts the spatial and ritual limitations of the Levitical priesthood with Christ's once-for-all entry into the true, heavenly sanctuary to inaugurate the New Covenant. By combining the Day of Atonement rituals with the covenant-inauguration rites of Exodus 24, the lecture demonstrates how Christ's sacrifice achieves eternal redemption and purifies the believer's inner conscience rather than merely providing external cleansing. Ultimately, the session highlights the eschatological and pastoral implications of Christ's finished work, encouraging believers to endure in faithfulness.

Outline

I. Introduction to Hebrews 9:1–10:18

A. Two Core Pastoral and Theological Questions

1. What is the meaning of Jesus' death and ascension when understood as the work of a royal priest of Melchizedek?
2. What are the consequences for believers who approach God through Jesus' mediation instead of Levitical mediation?

B. Structural Overview of the Section

1. Hebrews 9:1–10: Spatial layout of the tabernacle and its structural limitations
2. Hebrews 9:11–14: Christ's ascension as entrance into the heavenly Holy of Holies
3. Hebrews 9:15–22: Pivot from Day of Atonement rites to the inauguration of the Covenant (Exodus 24)
4. Hebrews 9:23–28: Christ's entry into the heavenly sanctuary as a cosmic, final Day of Atonement
5. Hebrews 10:1–10: Inefficacy of repeated sacrifices contrasted with Christ's once-for-all offering (Psalm 40:6–8)

6. Hebrews 10:11–18: Christ's seated posture at God's right hand as proof of finished work (Psalm 110:1)

II. The Earthly Sanctuary and Levitical Limitations (Hebrews 9:1–10)

A. Layout and Furnishings of the Tabernacle

1. Outer chamber (Holy Place): Lampstand, table, and showbread
2. Inner chamber (Holy of Holies), separated by the second curtain:
 - a. Golden altar of incense (placed in the inner room by Hebrews, an interesting spatial feature)
 - b. Ark of the Covenant, covered in gold on all sides, containing:
 - i. Golden jar of manna
 - ii. Aaron's rod that budded
 - iii. The tablets of the covenant (Ten Commandments)
 - c. Cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat (atonement cover)
3. Contrast with allegorical speculation: Author focuses purely on physical layout rather than extensive spiritual symbolisms (unlike Philo of Alexandria)

B. The Central Flaw of the Levitical System: Graduated Access

1. Ordinary priests enter outer chamber continually to perform daily duties
2. High Priest alone enters inner chamber (Holy of Holies) only once a year, with blood offered for himself and the people's unintentional sins
3. Three levels of holiness: Lay Israelites, ordinary priests, and High Priest
4. Protection over proximity: First covenant rules set up boundaries to protect a defiled nation from God's holy presence
5. Conclusion: The Levitical priesthood maintained a distance between God and humanity rather than achieving true communion

III. The Present Age and the External Regulations (Hebrews 9:8–10)

A. The Holy Spirit's Symbolic Message

1. Spatial barriers signify that the way to the true Holy of Holies is not yet disclosed while the first tabernacle stands
2. The first tabernacle serves as a 'parable' or symbol of the present age (the visible material creation)

B. Nature of the First Covenant Regulations

1. Composed of regulations for the body (food, drink, various washings)
2. Incapable of perfecting the worshiper's conscience or removing inner guilt
3. Valid only until the 'time of reformation' (correction/setting things right)

IV. The Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) Background (Leviticus 16)

A. Ritual Sequence of Yom Kippur

1. High Priest sacrifices a bull as a sin offering for himself and his family
2. Burns incense in the Holy of Holies and sprinkles the bull's blood on the mercy seat
3. Selection of two goats:
 - a. One goat is sacrificed as a sin offering for the people, and its blood is sprinkled on the mercy seat
 - b. Second goat (the scapegoat) is used to carry sins away:
 - i. High Priest confesses the people's sins over its head
 - ii. It is led out and released in the wilderness to Azazel (representing demonic/wilderness forces)
4. High Priest bathes, changes garments, and offers sacrificial fat
5. Other priests carry the remains of the bull and goat outside the camp to burn them

B. The Double Function of Yom Kippur

1. Cleansing the sanctuary and mercy seat from the accumulated defilement of human sins (Milgrom's theory of cumulative 'gray effect' on the mercy seat)
2. Cleansing the worshipers from their sins and guilt

V. Christ's Superior Heavenly Ministry (Hebrews 9:11–14)

A. The Heavenly Sanctuary

1. A greater, more perfect tent not made with human hands
2. Exists in the unshakeable, eternal, invisible realm
3. Jesus' entry represents crossing the threshold from the visible/creation to the invisible world

B. The Superior Sacrificial Agent

1. Jesus enters not with animal blood, but with His own blood
2. Obtains eternal, permanent redemption that never needs repeating

C. Inner vs. Outer Cleansing (A Shift in Anthropology)

1. Animal blood and ashes of a red heifer (Numbers 19) only offer external/fleshly purification
2. Christ's self-offering, through the eternal Spirit, purifies the conscience from 'dead works' to serve the living God
3. Contrasts ancient holistic Israelite view (where outer washings cleansed the whole person) with a Hellenistic-influenced dualism separating physical body from inner conscience

VI. The New Covenant and the Testament (Hebrews 9:15–22)

A. Christ as the Mediator of the New Covenant

1. His death redeems transgressions committed under the first covenant
2. Secures the promised eternal inheritance

B. The Double Meaning of Diatheke

1. Translates to both 'covenant' (treaty) and 'testament' (last will)
2. A testament only takes effect upon the death of the testator (diathemenos)

3. Jesus' death makes the divine inheritance legally valid for His heirs

C. The Inauguration of the Mosaic Covenant as a Prototype

1. Exodus 24: Mosaic covenant is established through blood
2. Moses sprinkles the book, the people, the tabernacle, and worship vessels with blood using water, scarlet wool, and hyssop (blending details from other Levitical texts)
3. Moses' declaration: 'This is the blood of the covenant' (Hebrews adapts Exodus 24:8 to mirror Jesus' words in the Gospels)
4. Core theological rule: 'Without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins' (Leviticus 17:11)
5. The Tension: Blood is required for atonement, but animal blood cannot remove sin (Hebrews 10:4); this tension necessitates a perfect human sacrifice (Jesus' obedience)

VII. Cosmic Cleansing and the Eschatological Outlook (Hebrews 9:23–28)

A. Cleansing the Heavenly Realities

1. The earthly sanctuary (copy) is cleansed with animal sacrifices; the heavenly realities require better sacrifices
2. Accumulated human sin creates a 'memory' of defilement in God's presence that must be removed
3. Christ's entry into heaven fulfills Jeremiah's promise: 'I will remember their sins no more'

B. Once-for-All vs. Repetition

1. Earthly high priest enters the sanctuary yearly with the blood of others
2. Christ appeared once at the climax of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself

C. Eschatological Expectation

1. Just as humans are appointed to die once and face judgment, Christ was sacrificed once to bear sins
2. He will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to bring final salvation (soteria) to those who wait for Him
3. Salvation is framed as a future inheritance to encourage pastoral endurance amidst local hostility

VIII. Conclusion: The Sufficiency of Christ's Work (Hebrews 10:1–18)

A. Inefficacy of Repeated Sacrifices (Hebrews 10:1–10)

1. Annual repetition is a proof of failure; it reminds worshipers of sin without removing it
2. Citation of Psalm 40:6–8: God does not desire animal sacrifices, but the obedience and bodily offering of Christ

B. Seated Posture as Proof of Completion (Hebrews 10:11–18)

1. Levitical priests stand daily to offer the same futile sacrifices
2. Christ sat down at the right hand of God (citing Psalm 110:1) as a sign of a completed, definitive priestly act

3. Sins are decisively removed from the believer's conscience and God's presence, fulfilling the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:33–34)