

Restoration and Worship

There is continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament, but nowhere is this relationship better illustrated than in the way Israel worshipped God and the way Christians today can worship God. If God is to restore His church to the glory and majesty intended for her, then the restoration of worship is vital. God gave Israel a highly detailed way of worshipping Him and it centred on the tabernacle. He was very specific about the tabernacle's construction, and He disallowed any innovation or creative renovation. Everything had to be made to exact specification (as commanded), because it was a copy/shadow of something very real - namely, the way God is.

Let's take a look at the main elements of the Old Testament tabernacle and see how this can benefit us:

The tabernacle's main symbols

In Hebrews 9:1-7 we find only a brief description of the tabernacle because the author's Jewish audience was so familiar with it. However, we need a little more help. So let me try to summarise the main symbolism of the tabernacle:

First of all, the tabernacle was always to be set up in the midst of Israel's campsite. Symbolising God's desire to **dwelt** among his people. God does not desire to be aloof or distant—he desires to be accessible to us.

In fact, he desires to dwell inside us both individually and corporately. But there is a problem, and the tabernacle also symbolised this problem. Any Israelite could go into the outer court of the tabernacle as long as they were ritually clean, but there were restrictions and barriers that prevented most people from getting closer to God. Only the Levitical priests could go into the Holy Place. And no one (with one exception) could go into God's dwelling-place, the Holy of Holies.

To secure this, a thick veil separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies – as if God was saying: “Yes, I desire to have you in my presence—but you are not allowed in the way you are. So until this is resolved there can be no real intimacy between us.” The problem that God had was explained (symbolically) by what was inside the Holy of Holies.

In the Holy of Holies there was only one piece of furniture, and this was a wooden box called the “ark of the covenant.” Yet every article in this box was highly symbolic. There were three things that symbolised the problem God had with the Israelites:

There was **(a)** a jar of manna - God's **provision**. This was the food that God supernaturally provided for the Israelites during their 40 years in the wilderness. And it was the same food that the Israelites complained about. So it symbolised their ungrateful *rejection of God's provision*. There was also **(b)** Aaron's walking stick. This stick represented God's anointed **leadership** through Moses and Aaron.

Over and over again the Israelites rebelled against their leadership, so that God had to confirm that Moses and Aaron were his chosen leaders by supernaturally causing his staff to bud. Therefore, this staff symbolised their *rebellion against God's leadership*. Finally, **(c)** there were the 10 Commandments – the two stone tablets that summarised **God's law**. Even as Moses brought these tablets down from Mt. Sinai, the Israelites were having an idolatrous orgy. Moses furiously threw them down and smashed them, so God made another copy and told him to put them in the ark. They symbolised their *disobedience to God's law*.

What else do we find in the meeting room with God? A record of why man deserves to be condemned by Him! On top of the ark stood two statues of cherubim - angelic beings who are associated with banishment from God's presence (Genesis 3:24). The cherubim's faces were directed downward, into the contents of the ark. It's like they are saying: *"Look at what these people have done! God definitely has a problem with these people. Surely God must judge them!"* And this is the main issue. Yes, God loves His people. Yes, God desires to have personal closeness with them. But He can't because the people have violated His righteous character in so many ways – and the penalty for this is death.

If that was all there was in the Holy of Holies, this would be a very depressing message. However, there was something else; something called the "mercy seat."

It was the lid over top of the ark, and what happened on this lid symbolised God's solution to the problem He had with us. Because God is holy, God must judge our sin with death. But because God is loving, he provided a way to judge our sin without judging us. He provided a substitute who was killed in our place. Once a year, the High Priest selected a goat without any physical defect.

After symbolically transferring the nation's guilt for that year on to the goat by laying his hands on the goat's head, the goat was slain and its blood (demonstrating his death) was carried in by the High Priest into the Holy of Holies and poured out onto the mercy seat. The blood covered the lid so that the both cherubim now "see" the death rather than the people's sins. The sins have been covered by the substitute's death. After pouring out this blood, the High Priest came back out and laid his hands on another defect-free goat. Then he sent the goat off into the wilderness. Symbolically, God's judgement for their sins was "sent off" because of the death of the first goat.

This ritual sacrifice on the Day of Atonement was a beautiful picture of God's plan of forgiveness and cleansing from sin. But it was never more than a temporary and defective picture because it never actually solved the problem of our separation from God. This is what is emphasised in **Hebrews 9:8-10**. The high priests were sinful people just like us, not sinless mediators. And they only went into a man-made tent, not into the actual heavenly presence of God.

The sacrifices they offered were just animals, not human. (In fact, the Old Testament strictly forbade human sacrifice. It demanded human death for human guilt, but prohibited sinful human sacrifices.)

Therefore, the tabernacle system only cleansed people ceremonially/symbolically (re-qualifying them to come into the outer court), it didn't actually forgive the people. The proof of this is twofold: (1) the sacrifices had to be repeated every year, and even then (2) the worshippers couldn't go into God's presence. As Hebrews 9:10 says, it only applied *until* God brought the real solution.

Fulfilment in Jesus. Here is the really good news! Jesus came as the fulfilment of the Old Testament tabernacle system:

He was the real high priest – from a superior priestly order, and a sinless High Priest who is therefore qualified to fix our sin problems with God because He doesn't have any of His own sin problems.

What's more, Jesus went into the real tabernacle - the actual presence of God with His solution. He voluntarily offered his own blood, his own perfect and sinless life in order to pay for our sins. Therefore,

Jesus has truly accomplished a permanent solution for our guilt before God – He has died “once for all” and obtained an “eternal redemption.” All that the Old Testament sacrifices could secure was ritual cleansing, the right to go into the outer court (never into God’s presence). But Jesus’ sacrifice actually removes guilt and cleanses our conscience.

We can now receive God’s forgiveness so that we can “**worship**” God and enjoy his *personal presence*!

There is no dividing veil or restrictive rituals. We can come boldly into the throne room of grace and worship Him in spirit and in truth. The implications that flow from Jesus’ death on the cross are huge. It changes the whole way we relate to God. And, the ritualistic worship of God is now obsolete!

Christianity is about a personal love relationship with God, *not* about ritualistic worship! You can’t miss this shift if you were to read and compare the OT to the NT. In the Old Testament, God prescribes hundreds of rituals, and he gives detailed instructions on how to observe these rituals (because of their symbolic / prophetic significance). However, when you go past Jesus’ death, we see a dramatic change; now instead of hundreds of prescribed rituals, there are virtually no instructions on how to worship (because we celebrate what has already been done).

This contrast is because the Old Testament worship system was the practice of ritual observances. But New Testament worship is a lifestyle of love and intimate relationship with God. Through our personal **worship** we can now enter a heavenly sanctuary – a more perfect tabernacle not made with hands. We can come into His divine presence – beyond the veil. God wants to restore His awesome presence in the midst of His people. But we have a responsibility to respond by **worshipping** Him in the freedom and liberty that Jesus has secured for us.