

The imperfect and provisional First Covenant (Hebrews 9:1-10)

Christians are attracted to different forms of worship with varying ideas of biblical support. A correct understanding of the “First Covenant” will affect our understanding of how we approach God today. The letter to the Hebrews answers this by looking at the superiority of Jesus Christ. The audience, early Jewish Christians, needed this because of the temptation to revert back to a reliance upon Judaism. They are exhorted not to revert to that first covenant. Nevertheless there are lessons to learn from it by considering its provisions, imperfections, and purposes.

I. *First Covenant provisions (9:1–5)*

1. *An earthly sanctuary*

- a. God prescribed for Moses the building of a tabernacle, based upon a heavenly pattern of the “true” sanctuary (cf. 9:24), divided into two sections (or “tents”): a “holy place” and a “holy of holies”.
- b. It teaches us about God’s pleasure in dwelling among His people and His desire for our worship. But an earthly copy anticipates what will be said explicitly that the opening of the way into the heavenly sanctuary frees the worshiper from bondage to an earthly sanctuary.

2. *Symbolic rituals and objects*

- a. “Symbolic” objects and rituals point to important truth. The symbolic nature of the sanctuary and its rituals is explicit in vv. 8–9 but also hinted at in the functional association of the altar of incense with the ark of the covenant in the most holy place (cf. Exodus 30:6; 40:5; 1 Kings 6:22).
- b. Symbols are only a shadow of a reality (Hebrews 10:1; cf. Colossians 2:17). Since under the New Covenant believers have the reality, we should never let the symbols become a substitute for the reality, even though it is good to learn from the symbolism.

II. *First Covenant imperfections (9:6–10)*

1. *It provided no access into the presence of God (9:6–8).*

- a. The lack of access is seen in the limitation of priests to the holy place and only the high priest to the most holy one day a year and that only with the blood of a sacrifice that had to be repeated yearly.
- b. Restricted access in the tabernacle under the First Covenant revealed that the way into God’s presence had not yet been opened (v.8). This situation which changed when Jesus Christ finished His work on the cross and that inner curtain was torn open.

2. *It had no ability to clear the conscience (9:9–10).*

- a. Both the restricted access and the repeated sacrifices removed any confidence that the worshiper had been fully accepted by God. All the regulations had to do with externals, when the real issue was the defilement of the heart. O.T. believers knew this from the warnings that sacrifices were of no help if the heart was wrong and from the positive statements that forgiveness was a gracious gift of God (cf. Psalm 32:1, 5).
- b. For believers today as well externals do not work spiritual change. Neither do feelings determine whether a person has access to God or not. Only through Jesus Christ and His ultimate sacrifice can a person come into the presence of God.

III. *First Covenant purposes*

1. *The provisions of the first covenant were given to worship God (v.1)*, though they were ineffective in granting an upright standing before God.
2. *The provisions of the first covenant were to teach until the time of the new order.*
 - a. Symbolic objects and rituals taught spiritual principles.
 - b. The time of the “new order” or “reformation” is the time when the ineffectiveness of the First Covenant was corrected in the New Covenant, which was made possible through Jesus Christ and His sacrifice.

The First Covenant has become obsolete (8:13) but not useless. We may not revert to what is obsolete when we have the effectual work of Christ, but we may still learn the spiritual truths that were taught and gain a better appreciation for the work of Jesus Christ.

Questions for further thought and discussion:

- What examples of First Covenant thinking or practice exist in Christendom which deny New Covenant truth? What is the attraction which some people have toward such practices? Does this danger exist for you? How should you combat it?
- What “rituals” do Christians wrongly rely upon to make them clean in conscience? Do you have any? Are you consciously, regularly relying upon the work of Christ alone? If not, what could help?