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THE TWO SANCTUARIES

The hour of the evening sacrifice has arrived. The priest stands in the court of Jerusalem's Temple, ready to offer the specially chosen lamb as an offering. Clothed in his beautiful garments, with raised knife in hand, he prepares to kill the victim as the people look on with intense interest. Suddenly the earth shakes and trembles; the knife drops from the nerveless hand of the priest. The lamb escapes in the confusion and excitement of the earthquake. Then all at once an unseen hand tears the Temple veil in two from top to bottom, exposing the innermost sacred room of the sanctuary. No one but the high priest had ever looked into the most holy place before, but now it stands open to the multitude.

At that precise moment, only a few hundred yards away, Jesus, the Lamb of God, is dying on the cross to take away the sins of the world. He shouts, "It is finished!" and dies. At that moment the earthquake shakes Jerusalem, the evening sacrifice escapes, the Temple services lose their significance. Symbol has met reality and must give way before it. The great sacrifice which all the Temple services prefigured has occurred, and so the ritual symbols must end. From this time on, Jesus will officiate both as priest and as sacrifice in the sanctuary of heaven.

Fifteen hundred years before, on Mount Sinai, God showed Moses a method by which the children of Israel could understand His plan to redeem mankind. God told Moses, "Let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. According to all that I shew thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle,...even so shall ye make it: (Exodus 25:8,9).

God intended to live symbolically with His people. He wanted to reveal Himself more fully to them, and He did this through an elaborate system of sacrifices. God told Moses exactly how to build the sanctuary, because the earthly Tabernacle was designed to be an accurate copy of the one in heaven. Hebrews 8:5 says of the ancient priests of Israel, "They serve a copy and a shadow of the heavenly sanctuary; for when Moses was about to erect the tabernacle, he was instructed by God, saying, 'See that you make everything according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain'" (RSV, margin).

The Tabernacle Moses built was a small portable structure, part wood and metal, and part cloth hangings. A curtain "of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen, of needlework" (Exodus 36:37) closed the entrance on the east side. The roof of the building consisted of four layers of linen material and animal skins. The innermost layer of blue, purple, and scarlet linen had the figures of angels embroidered on it in gold thread. Above this a covering of goats' hair, another of rams' skins, and a fourth of sealskin provided protection from the weather.

A low wall of linen curtains surrounded the Tabernacle itself, forming a courtyard around the building. Within this court stood the altar of burnt offering on which the priests sacrificed the animal offerings, and the laver which they used for washing. (See Exodus 27:1-8; 30:18-21.)

This Tabernacle, although not really large, displayed intricate and beautiful design. It represented the dwelling place of God and was to remind Israel of the beauty of the heavenly sanctuary and God's throne. The presence of God visibly rested on the Tabernacle in a pillar of cloud by day and a fiery cloud at night. Constantly the people had evidence that God indeed dwelt with them.

Inside the Tabernacle a veil of the same blue, purple, and scarlet material with embroidered angels separated the building into two rooms, or apartments. The smaller of these, called the most holy place, contained a single piece of furniture - a small wooden chest approximately four feet long and two and a half feet wide. This chest, known as the ark, was covered inside and out with pure gold. A lid of solid gold, which the Bible calls the mercy seat, covered it. Two angels, each made from a single piece of solid gold, faced each other from opposite ends of the mercy seat. Inside the ark rested the two tables of stone on which God Himself had written the Ten Commandment law.

This ark constituted the focal point of the entire sanctuary. Between the angels, whose wings arched over the mercy seat, God manifested Himself to the priest in a soft glow of light known as the Shekinah glory. This piece of furniture represented the throne of God in heaven. The psalmist said, "Thou that dwellest between the cherubims, shine forth" (Psalm 80:1).

The arrangement of this symbolic throne of God carried a great significance. God covered His Ten Commandment law with the mercy seat. The justice which His law demands, mercy satisfies. Mercy and justice meet here at God's throne. Paul says that God is both "just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus" (Romans 3:26). God symbolized here how the sinner's hope might revive. Here he could meet the demands of the law through the mercy and grace made available in Christ.

Today the sinner comes to God, not through a human priest, but through Jesus, who paid the supreme price on Calvary. Jesus said, "No man cometh unto the Father, but by Me" (John 14:6). Hebrews 7:25 assures us of the mercy we may find in Christ: "He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them."

No one except the high priest could enter this sacred room where the ark stood, and he could do so only once each year at the special ceremony of atonement. However, any priest might enter the larger of the two rooms called the holy place. In this room the daily services of the Temple took place.

As a priest entered the first room, he saw directly in front of him the altar of incense standing before the veil which separated the two rooms. Like the ark, it was constructed of wood overlaid with gold. God specified that a priest should burn incense on this altar each morning and evening. The priest brought live coals from the altar of burnt offering, and as he placed the incense on the altar, the smoke filled both rooms of the sanctuary. The apostle John wrote, "And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand" (Revelation 8:4).

As the incense rose, the priest looked in faith to the ark with its mercy seat, which he could not see behind the veil. Today God's people look to Christ in prayer through faith. These prayers ascend to the throne of God as sweet incense. (See Revelation 5:8) Although we do not see Him, yet we know that He stands in the heavenly sanctuary above, pleading in our behalf.

On the right side of the holy place stood the table of shewbread, or "bread of the presence." This table, too, was overlaid with pure gold and ornamented with a crown of gold running about the edge. Each Sabbath day the priests placed twelve fresh cakes of unleavened bread on it. All week the bread lay on the table, until at the end of the week the priests removed it and ate it. (See Leviticus 24:5-9) The bread represented Christ, the Bread of heaven. Jesus said, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh" (John 6:51).

On the left side of the first room stood the seven-branched candlestick made of a single piece of pure gold. The priests continually kept its seven lamps trimmed and burning. The light never went out except when the Tabernacle moved from one location to another during the Israelites' travels. No one but the priests could carry out this sacred work of keeping the lamps burning. Christ, as our High Priest, is the only one who can keep the light of our life burning today, through the oil of His Holy Spirit. He trims our lamps; He furnishes the oil to keep us burning.

The constantly burning light from the lampstand represented Jesus, the Light of the world. Every ray of light which shines into our sin-darkened world has come from Jesus. He is the Light of the world. "That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (John 1:9).

The ceremonies which took place in the sanctuary consisted of two main services - the daily service which repeated itself each day, and the yearly service which occurred only once each year.

Every day sacrifices were offered morning and evening at the altar of burnt offering in the court. In addition, numerous sacrifices for individuals were also offered here. The priest ministered daily in the first room, the holy place. The incense, the lamps, and the bread required daily attention from the priests.

The individual who sinned brought as an offering a female kid of the goats. Laying his hands upon the animal, the sinner confessed his sin, and with his own hand killed it. The priest caught some of the blood in a small bowl and either applied some of the blood to each corner of the altar of burnt offering or carried the blood into the first room of the sanctuary and sprinkled it seven times upon the veil which separated the two apartments. In either case, the ceremony symbolized the transfer of the sin from the sinner to the sacrifice to the sanctuary. This service continued day after day as sinners accepted by faith the salvation which would come through the promised Messiah. Today we do not need to bring the blood of animals. We look to Christ, who has given His blood for the forgiveness of sins, for "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" (Hebrews 9:12).

The yearly sacrifice occurred each year on the tenth day of the seventh month, the Day of Atonement. This most solemn service of the entire year represented the final eradication of sin from the universe. Day after day sin had symbolically accumulated in the sanctuary, but on the Day of Atonement the sins received ceremonial atonement.

On that day the people gathered about the Tabernacle, spending the day in sober, thoughtful meditation and prayer as the high priest ministered in the sanctuary. This was a day of judgment, in which those who had not confessed their sins were cut off from the congregation. The priest first offered a bull for himself and his family before he performed any other service. After the priest had become qualified to serve, he cast lots upon two goats which stood at the door of the Tabernacle. One goat was chosen as the Lord's goat, and the other became the scapegoat, or Azazel's goat. (See Leviticus 16:8). Azazel represented Satan; hence one goat symbolized Satan and the other stood for Christ. God instructed that the priest "bring the goat upon which the Lord's lot fell, and offer him for a sin offering" (verse 9).

The priest then took the blood and went past the veil into the most holy place, where the ark and the mercy seat stood. This was the only time in the entire year that anyone came into this sacred room - the room where God's presence dwelt. The priest sprinkled the blood upon the mercy seat, before the mercy seat, and also upon the alter of incense out in the first room of the Tabernacle, and finally upon the alter of burnt offering in the court. In this way the entire sanctuary was symbolically cleansed of the accumulated sins of the year.

When the priest had cleansed the sanctuary, he brought the live goat, the scapegoat representing Satan, to the door of the Tabernacle. God instructed that the priest "lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and ... send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness: and the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness" (Leviticus 16:21, 22).

This goat died in the wilderness, symbolizing the complete eradication of sin. This ceremony did not make Satan the people's sinbearer. Christ is the Saviour. But the service acknowledged Satan's ultimate responsibility for sin. In the reality which the sanctuary service foreshadowed, Satan will be forced to bear the final responsibility for sin, and then the great act of cleansing the entire universe of all sin will be forever complete. (See Revelation 21:4.)

The sanctuary service here on earth in the Old Testament represented what takes place in reality in heaven. Hebrews 9:23,24 notes, "It was therefore necessary that the patterns of things in the heavens (the earthly Tabernacle) should be purified with these [animal blood]; but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us."

Today Christ is in the most holy place of the heavenly temple, performing the cleansing service symbolized by the Day of Atonement. We are living in the heart-searching, solemn day of judgment. How thankful we should be that "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Not only are our sins forgiven, but they are blotted out completely.

"My sin - O the bliss of the glorious thought!
My sin - not in part, but the whole,
Is nailed to His cross, and I bear it no more;
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!"