

INTRDUCTION

I wonder if you have ever prepared a surprise party for someone, or you were the person who received the surprise. In the past, I have a few surprises for my wife. I can proudly say that I did a better job than my wife in this area. At one time her parents visited us. Her birthday was coming up. I recruited my father-in-law as a supporting cast. His role was to sit on the couch and pretend to read a newspaper. It was a simple set-up. I asked my wife to go to the grocery store to buy something. After she was gone, some brothers and sisters came in, and they hid in the kitchen. Later my wife returned. You can guess the rest of the story. People popped up as my wife walked to the kitchen. Surprise and mission accomplished. But there were other times when my plan failed. One time a brother showed up late. So late that my wife met him in the parking lot. When asked why he was there, he could not come up with an answer. The guy was an honest man and so he did not know how to make something up. Therefore, the whole execution failed miserably because of him. We are caught by surprise when things happen out of the ordinary, or when we discover new meaning in our daily routine. To the Old Testament Israelites, the sacrificial ritual was part of their everyday life. Their priests offered animals on the altar. The ritual was prescribed by God in the Law. Little did they know that such order of worship points to Jesus Christ. From the book of Hebrews chapter 9 we will study the design of the tabernacle and the sacrificial system. We can understand God's wisdom and plan by looking at how He ordained the ceremony. That would help us worship Him more sincerely, especially when we will observe the communion later in our service. Therefore, we will take a break from studying the book Philippians. Through the Hebrews passage, we shall see that Jesus Christ is the center of our worship because He is the ultimate sacrifice for our sins.

EXPLANATION

1. 禮儀的擺設 Equipment for the Ritual (v. 1-5)

First, we will look at the equipment for the ritual. Let us go for a tour to the tabernacle with the help of some pictures. The whole structure was essentially a mobile church for the Israelites when they were wandering in the wilderness. The tabernacle was surrounded by an outer court connected by walls of cloth. It is like a fence around your house. This court measures 150 by 75 feet, which is about 1.5 times the size of our gym. The tabernacle is like a tent that you take to camping. It has two compartments. The front part is called the Holy Place. The inner room is the Most Holy Place. The two sections were separated by a curtain. Next, we will see some major items in the tabernacle. There were the lampstand, table and consecrated bread in the Holy Place. The lampstand was for lighting. The consecrated bread was for the priests to eat. Then in the Most Holy Place there were the altar of incense and ark of the covenant. Inside the ark there were a jar of manna (the food God provided for the Israelites in the wilderness), Aaron's staff and the two tablets of the Ten Commandments. From **verse 5** we know that the cover of the ark was called the atonement cover (or mercy seat), on which two cherubim were crafted. Cherubim are angels. Thanks to the Indiana Jones movie we got a glimpse of how the ark might look like. Please keep in mind that it was just a movie. Every equipment in the tabernacle was made

according to God's detail instructions. **Hebrews 8:5** reads: 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." In the book of Exodus, God gave Moses detail directions of how to make all the equipment - the materials, color and dimensions for everything. Honestly, those passages are quite boring. So why were those chapters included in our Bible? Did God intend to give us some bed-time reading materials to help us fall asleep? Of course not! We need to pay attention to two important words in the verse. The word "copy" means a representation. The tabernacle is a copy of the heavenly sanctuary. It is like an architect builds a model of the future building to show how the finished product will look like. Then there is the word "shadow." A shadow appears when sunlight falls onto an object. The tabernacle is like a shadow of the heavenly sanctuary. Since the tabernacle represented the real thing in heaven, it had to be precise. God only wanted the best. He asked the Israelites to use colorful and expensive materials to build the tabernacle to reflect His glory. Nowadays many churches have beautiful buildings and high-tech instruments. Those are just the hardware. What about the software? I am referring to the people who serve in the church. Are we serving the Lord with our best? We can never be perfect like God. But we should pursue excellence. We should constantly look for more effective ways to use what God has given us. I am a perfectionist by nature. (Watch out!) In the past it might take a while for me to get over bad feeling for my mistakes. Then I understood that I should focus on God rather than my performance. My goal should be to please God, and not to please myself. It is okay to make mistake while trying to do better. How should we pursue excellence? We can receive training to improve our skills. We can pay attention to others serving in the same roles to learn from them. If we allow God to keep refining us like a gemstone then we can be effective instruments for use by Him.

2. 禮儀的程序 Arrangement for the Ritual (v. 6-10)

After introducing the equipment for the Old Testament worship, the author moved on to describe the arrangement for the ritual. There are two types of animal offerings mentioned in this passage. The first one is a routine sacrifice. **Verse 6** reads: When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. This is the daily offering the priests presented. **Numbers 28:3-4** tell us: 3 "Say to them: 'This is the offering made by fire that you are to present to the Lord: two lambs a year old without defect, as a regular burnt offering each day. 4 Prepare one lamb in the morning and the other at twilight.'" The priests were to offer one lamb in the morning and one in the evening. Chapters 28 and 29 also prescribe additional offerings. On the Sabbath, which is the Saturday, the priests had to offer two more lambs on the top of the daily sacrifice. Then two more animals on every first day of the month. They were all burnt offerings, meaning that the whole animal was burned up to present to God. No one could eat the BBQ. Besides, there were a few festivals every year that required additional animal sacrifices. One of them was the Day of Atonement mentioned in **verse 7**: But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. The inner room was the Most Holy Place where the ark was placed. The ark represents God's presence. Only the high priest was allowed to enter the inner room once a year. Ordinary people could not go inside. Do you see the limitations in such ritual? First, only the priests could offer sacrifice. Then one among the many priests could go into the Most Holy Place once a year. Layer after layer only

selected people could come before God. But there was another more serious deficiency in the ritual. Let us look at **verse 9**: 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. The ritual only provided limited cleansing of people's sins. It had no effect in clearing people's conscience. In fact, people were reminded of their sins every time they thought of the offering. The priests had to keep repeating the ritual to make sure that people could maintain a right standing with God. One of my former seminary professors made an interesting observation about the tabernacle. Of all the furniture in the tabernacle one item was missing – a chair. The priests entered the tabernacle to work, not to rest! Today as we come to the church, do we come here to work or to rest? Sometimes we go one of the two extremes. Some coworkers are so busy serving that attending church becomes their second job. Then there are other brothers and sisters who come here simply to enjoy our facilities and programs. We need a good balance. There are times to serve people and there are times to rest in the Lord. Even when we serve, we should not do so out of obligation. Someone said religion without relationship is meaningless. Compared to the Old Testament Israelites, today we have an intimate relationship with God. We serve God out of love. You see, there should be a significant difference between paying your tax and giving money to your elderly parents or to your children. If there is no loving relationship, then everything becomes a tedious duty. The same principle applies to our money offering. We give not because we have to. God wants our hearts more than anything else. If there is no love for God, then you may as well keep the money in your wallet.

3. 禮儀的實現 Fulfillment of the Ritual (v. 11-15)

In this passage, the author talked about the equipment and the arrangement for the ritual. Then he switched to the fulfillment of the ritual. The whole animal sacrificial system was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. From verse 11 to 15 the writer contrasted the differences between offering of animals, and Christ offering Himself on the cross. I put the comparison in a table on the screen. Jesus Christ made the ritual significant by fulfilling the meaning behind it. All along the priests were only having rehearsals for an upcoming surprise party they could not imagine. It is like young kids playing kitchen toy-set versus a five-star chef cooking real food. The sanctuary represents Jesus' body and the animals' blood symbolizes Jesus' blood. Jesus was the perfect high priest and the perfect sacrifice. Only Jesus could achieve eternal salvation for us. Why? Let us look at **Hebrews 10:19-20** – 19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, 20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body. When Jesus died on the cross, He paid the price to redeem us from sin. Unlike animal sacrifice, Jesus had to shed His blood only once. His sacrifice achieved our salvation forever. Through Jesus' blood we have access to the Holy God. It was as if Jesus carried us through the curtain of the tabernacle into the Most Holy Place. When Jesus died on the cross something dramatic happened in the temple. **Mark 15:37-38** recorded: 37 With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. 38 The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. In his gospel, the apostle John told us the last words Jesus said were "It is finished!" Jesus did not say: "It is over." Jesus' salvation work had been completed by His death. Jesus torn the curtain apart. In the past, only the high priests could go into the Most Holy Place once a year. From now on, all those who are in Christ can come to the Father. In Christ, we have a 24-7 connection with the heavenly Father. Jesus is the bridge that crosses over the chasm of sins. Every time the priests served they were afraid that God might strike them dead if there was any sin that had not been

taken care of. Today we have no fear as we worship God. We know that our sins have been covered by the blood of Christ. The Heavenly Father looks at us with love. We have been accepted as children. However, sometimes we may misuse our privilege in Christ. We trivialize our relationship with God. We see Him as our buddy. We arrive late to church meetings. Even when we are sitting in this room to worship God our hearts wander elsewhere. We think about where to have lunch, grocery shopping, Chinese school, work or school projects, and yes, the super bowl party this evening too! We check on our cellphone every time it vibrates, and we chat with the person sitting next to us. It is true that as Christians, we have an intimate relationship with the Heavenly Father. But we not lose sight of the fact that He is God. We must treat God with respect. We should always be aware that God is present in our life.

CONCLUSION

Jesus Christ is the center of our worship because He is the ultimate sacrifice for our sins. We no longer need all the equipment in the tabernacle. We have direct access to the Heavenly Father through Jesus Christ. With or without a church building we can freely worship God wherever we are. It does not matter whether we are bed-rested at home or traveling on an airplane. But that does not diminish the value of corporate worship. In the Bible, God commanded us to gather with brothers and sisters to worship Him. In the Old Testament times, a crucial element of worship was to seek God's forgiveness through animal sacrifice. Now we worship God by giving thanks for Christ's completed salvation work. We worship with joy, rather than doubt or fear, because we know that our sins have been forgiven. No matter what worship format we use, Jesus Christ must be the focus. Song presentation by different groups is not for our entertainment. I know it takes time to change a habit, but from now on please do not applaud. The singing is to guide us worship God. Therefore, if you can identify with the lyrics, simply respond with "amen" at the end. For the same reason, our song leaders are not doing a performance. They stand on the podium to lead us in worshipping God through our voices. Your neighbor may not have a perfect voice. But that is okay. God is pleased if our voices speak for our hearts. Even when you listen to the preaching you as the audience can still actively participate in worship. Whether the speaker says something humorous or boring his responsibility is to explain God Word. Echo in your heart with "amen" when you agree with what you hear. You should also pray for the speaker so that the Holy Spirit will speak to him first, then speak through him to you. All the worship leaders on the podium, and brothers and sisters sitting on the pews serve together to worship God as one people. Ultimately, God receives all the glory from us.