

Hebrews 9:1-10  
The Limited Access of the Old Covenant

**Introduction**

I remember the one time I met a real TV star. I was around 10 years old. *Happy Days* was the hit TV show. “The Fonz” was the coolest character. And I could hardly believe it. Henry Winkler, the actor who played “The Fonz,” was scheduled to appear at the Spokane Fairgrounds. And make no mistake, I was gonna meet “The Fonz”! After standing in line for hours, Henry Winkler finally appeared. Each person got about 5 seconds with Henry. It was definitely **limited access**. When my turn finally came, I remember thinking, “he’s a lot shorter than I expected.” But Henry greeted me with a smile, shook my hand, and said “snap that picture.” A nice way of saying “move along.” I quickly snapped the picture and that...was it. Like I said, it was **limited access**.

**limited access** captures the main idea in our text. The author of Hebrews writes to Jewish Christians who are tempted to go back to the Old Covenant. He wants his readers to remember the Old Covenant **limitations** so that they appreciate what they have in Jesus – and the New Covenant. And even though we’re not tempted to go back to the Old Covenant, **every Christian can grow in their appreciation of Jesus by understanding the limitations of the Old Covenant.**

The author begins by reminding his readers that the first, or “Old,” Covenant had regulations. “**Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness (Heb. 9:1).**” Had they forgotten there were regulations governing how to worship God and where to approach God? In what follows, the author describes the regulations governing the tabernacle and the priestly ministry. Each of these illustrates **limited access**. Then, he tells us that through these regulations the Holy Spirit meant to indicate **limited access**.

1. Limited Access Illustrated.
2. Limited Access Indicated.

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1. **Limited Access Illustrated.**

a. **Limited access illustrated in the tabernacle.**

Beginning in verse 2. “For a tent was prepared...” [Show Tabernacle+Courtyard slide.] The tabernacle is a portable tent and courtyard. It was built according to God’s regulations and contained furniture used by the priests for sacrificial ministry. God wanted to dwell with his people. Though God is everywhere present, he chose to manifest his presence in the tabernacle for the benefit of his people. He did something similar in the garden of Eden. The garden was a temple where God manifested his presence for the benefit of Adam and Eve. But because of sin and rebellion, God cast them out of his presence. He banished them from the garden and placed a Cherubim at the entrance to guard it (Gen. 3:24). But God promised to remedy this separation. And in the tabernacle, God takes a significant step forward in fulfilling this promise. [Show Israel Camp slide.]

The author continues in verse 2. “For a tent was prepared, the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence. It is called the Holy Place.”

[Show Tabernacle slide.] Any Israelite could enter the courtyard. But **access** to the tent itself was **limited** only to priests. The tent contained two sections: The HOLY PLACE and the MOST HOLY PLACE.

**The writer first describes the HOLY PLACE with its furniture.** The [Show LAMPSTAND slide] is made of pure gold and looks like a tree; with a central trunk and six branches on either side. At the end of each branch – and the trunk – is a cup and flower where the flame is located. The lamp burned continually and provided the only source of light within the tabernacle. The LAMPSTAND was reminiscent of the tree of life in the garden – it symbolized the blessing of divine light, life, and perfect relationship with God.

The TABLE and the [Show BREAD OF PRESENCE slide] are opposite the LAMPSTAND in the HOLY PLACE. The TABLE is made of wood overlaid with

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gold. The BREAD represented the 12 tribes of Israel, God's provision for his people, and the intimate communion between God and his people. That's the **HOLY PLACE**.

**Next, the writer describes the second section with its furniture.** Look at verse 3, "Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant. Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat."

The [Show MOST HOLY PLACE slide] is where God revealed, or manifested, his presence. Only the high priest could enter the MOST HOLY PLACE – and only once a year. The MOST HOLY PLACE was separated from the HOLY PLACE by a thick curtain. Cherubim are embroidered on the curtain. Reminiscent of the Cherubim guarding the garden. The dimensions of the MOST HOLY PLACE are a perfect cube symbolizing God's perfection; while the surrounding blue curtains symbolize heaven.

**The author mentions two pieces of furniture associated with the MOST HOLY PLACE:** the GOLDEN ALTAR OF INCENSE and the ARK OF THE COVENANT.

The [Show GOLDEN ALTAR OF INCENSE slide] was actually located in the HOLY PLACE just in front of the second curtain. This enabled the priests to burn incense every day – morning and evening – as an offering. The author certainly knows this. By saying the MOST HOLY PLACE "having" the ALTAR he highlights the close association between the two. The ALTAR isn't "in" the MOST HOLY PLACE but is linked to it because on the Day of Atonement the high priest carried incense from the ALTAR into the MOST HOLY PLACE.

The [Show ARK OF COVENANT slide] was the focal point of the MOST HOLY PLACE. The ark was made of wood and overlaid with gold. A lid, called the "MERCY SEAT", covered the ark. The MERCY SEAT was made of pure gold. On top of the "MERCY SEAT" were CHERUBIM with their wings spread

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out. It was here between the wings of the CHERUBIM that God manifested his presence once a year to the high priest.

The [Show ARK Items slide] contained three items: A GOLDEN URN, AARON'S STAFF, and the TABLETS OF THE COVENANT. The GOLDEN URN contained manna to remind the Israelites of God's provision. AARON'S STAFF, which had budded miraculously after Korah's rebellion, warned against rebellion. The TABLETS OF THE COVENANT were the ten commandments, the terms of the first covenant. Each of these items was like a witness in a court of law, testifying against Israel for their failure to trust God's provision, their repeated rebellion, and their failure to keep the ten commandments. The mercy seat covered these witnesses so as to silence them lest Israel experience God's right judgment and condemnation.

So, the tabernacle was a significant step forward in God's promise to remedy the separation between God and man. Yet, in every aspect of the tabernacle **limited access** is illustrated. A few other important things are also illustrated.

The tabernacle illustrates that **God is holy**. He is set apart from everything else. He is unique in his being. He's not just a bigger, better version of you and me. No. He is self-existent, eternal, and infinite. He is unique in his character. He is morally pure. He is infinitely and perfectly good, just, merciful, and loving. He requires perfect purity for those who approach him.

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The tabernacle also illustrates **man is sinful**. God reveals his presence in an inner part of a tent that is closed to almost everyone because of man's sin and rebellion. The tablets testify against us. Our gods are money, approval, success, and sex. The manna testifies against us. Our trust is in our capabilities and achievements. Aaron's staff testifies against us. We look to our own way. In light of our sin and rebellion, the tabernacle's **limited access** is a protection for us. God's reflexive response to our sin is condemnation.

Finally, the tabernacle illustrates that **God desires people to approach him**. Adam and Eve were banished from the garden. In the tabernacle and sacrificial system, God takes a significant step toward his people. Yes, **access is limited**. Still, God desires people to approach him.

**Limited access** is illustrated in the tabernacle. Limited access is also illustrated in the priestly ministry.

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**b. Limited Access Illustrated in the Priestly Ministry.**

Look at verse 6. “These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties...” The keyword is “regularly.” The priestly ministry involved daily responsibilities in the tabernacle. “Worshippers brought their sacrifices to the great bronze altar in the outer courtyard one after another. Week by week priests were chosen by lot for the high honor of their career to serve in the first room, the HOLY PLACE (Hughes, Hebrews, Vol. 1, 225).” Even the priests had **limited access** to the HOLY PLACE.

The priestly ministry began with cleansing in the [Show BRONZE WASH BASIN slide]. Being clean was a matter of life and death. God warned the priests that they must be clean or die. The priest had to wash in the BRONZE WASH BASIN every time they entered the tent because no single washing could provide complete purification.

Once cleansed, the priestly ministry involved keeping The LAMPSTAND burning. The priest refilled each of the seven lamps with oil regularly. They also replaced the BREAD OF PRESENCE every week on the Sabbath day. Morning and evening the priests burned INCENSE and offered prayers on behalf of the people. In all of these duties, the priests did not even dare to look at the MOST HOLY PLACE for fear of death. They had no **access** at all.

The daily work of many priests is contrasted with the yearly duty of a single priest in verse 7. “but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people.” Many priests perform regular duties in the HOLY PLACE but only the high priest can go into the MOST HOLY PLACE – and only once a year. On the Day of Atonement. That’s **limited access**.

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And when the high priest enters the MOST HOLY PLACE, he must take blood for his own sins and those of the people. Blood was a central feature of the tabernacle. Because, **“Only blood could provide atonement (Lev. 17). The Hebrew word for atonement literally means ‘to cover.’ God appointed the blood to cover our souls.”** So, the high priest would first offer an animal to cover his own sin before offering a sacrifice for the sins of the people. Dressed only in white, the high priest would *carefully* enter the MOST HOLY PLACE with incense. Then he would sprinkle blood on the mercy seat. This secured temporary forgiveness of sin until the next year it happened all over again.

**Limited access** is illustrated in the priestly ministry. Another important thing is illustrated.

The priestly ministry illustrates that **God defines how people may approach him**. We cannot come to God anyway we want. He is holy, we are not. God appointed blood to cover our souls so that we may approach him. Nadab and Abihu were first generation priests. They were instructed to approach God a certain way. They disregarded these instructions. Inside the tent they experimented with incense and fire. “And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord.” Commentators think that Nadab and Abihu not only experimented with incense and fire, but they attempted to enter the MOST HOLY PLACE while drunk. These two men thought they could approach God any way they wanted.

We’re not tempted to go back to the Old Covenant. In our context, the temptation is to think that there are many ways to God. As long as we’re sincere, we can each decide how we approach God. We live in a culture of DIY religion. But the priestly ministry illustrates that God defines how people may approach him. A priest and blood are necessary. We must come to God on his terms.

So, **limited access** is illustrated in the tabernacle and the priestly ministry. Finally, we learn that in the Old Covenant the Holy Spirit meant to indicate **limited access**.

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**2. Limited Access Indicated.**

**a. Limited Access to the Holy Places**

Look at verses 8-9a. “By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing (which is symbolic for the present age).”

“By this” means through the tabernacle and priestly ministry. By this the Holy Spirit indicates – declares, reveals – that “the way of INTIMATE ACCESS for all God’s people had not yet appeared.” The Old Covenant regulations are God indicating that his promise to remedy our separation from him was not yet complete.

As long as the tabernacle and its system of sacrifice remained the focal of worship, only **limited access** was possible. That’s what is meant, “...the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing.” But now that Christ has come and sacrificed himself, the tabernacle is no longer “standing” in the sense that it is no longer the focal of worship. Jesus is. The Old Covenant was a step forward in salvation history but now a new era has arrived.

**b. Limited Access Because of Limited Cleansing (v. 9-10b)**

So, the Holy Spirit indicates that while the tabernacle and system of sacrifice remained the focal of worship, the way into the holy places was not open. Why? Because the Old Covenant only brought **limited** cleansing. Look at verses 9-10b, “According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.”

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**Limited access** because of **limited** cleansing. The gifts and sacrifices offered according to the Old Covenant could not perfect the conscience of the worshiper. The writer said the same thing earlier, “the law’s inability to perfect means it can’t bring people near to God (7:19).” And he says the same thing later, “the same sacrifices can’t make perfect those who draw near (10:1).” The limitation with the Old Covenant sacrifices is that they didn’t truly cleanse the conscience of sin.

That’s because they were fundamentally external. They dealt with “**food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body...**” They were appropriate as God took a significant step toward his people. But the Old Covenant sacrifices point to a greater washing and cleansing to come.

**c. Limited access points to a time of reformation (v. 10c)**

The **limitations** of the sacrifices and the **limited access** point to a time of “reformation.” The word means to “straighten completely.” In the Old Covenant, God moved toward his people. But he always meant to go the whole way – to straighten completely. Jesus is the fulfillment of what God began.

Jesus is our high priest who enters once-for-all into the better holy place of heaven and offers the better sacrifice of himself once-for-all for our sin. And through Jesus’ better sacrifice, our conscience is completely cleansed. God sees us as perfectly clean inside and out. When Jesus died on the cross, we’re told that the curtain to the MOST HOLY PLACE – the curtain with the Cherubim guarding God’s presence – was torn in two from top to bottom. Because we’re perfectly clean we have access! Intimate access to God. Now. You don’t gain this access through your own performance. Access is given by trusting in Jesus’ sacrifice for you. In Christ, God has done everything to give you intimate access. You simply need to receive it!

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### 3. Application

You might be thinking, if the tabernacle is no longer the focal for worship then where is God's presence? In the Old Covenant, God manifested his presence in a tent. In the New Covenant, God manifests his presence in you! Everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ is given the indwelling Holy Spirit. As God promised, "I will put my Spirit within you... (Ezekiel 36:27)." That's **intimate access!**

#### a. **This means that you can know God.**

God wants you to approach him. He's done everything to give you intimate access. Through faith in Christ we can call this holy God "our Father." Through faith in Christ we can call Jesus "our Brother." And he is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters. Through the Holy Spirit we have intimate communion with the Father and the Son.

This is the intimate access we were made for. But we've got so many other things that compete for our time and attention. Netflix, sports, video games, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and cell phones. Nothing inherently wrong with any of those things. But in our cultural moment, here's one of the most radical things you can do. When you wake up tomorrow morning before checking your phone spend time with God. Seriously. Try it this week. Before checking your phone spend time with God. You have intimate access. You can know God.

#### b. **And you can grow in holiness.**

God is holy. We were made to reflect him. Because we have the indwelling Spirit, we have power to grow in holiness. The key word is "grow." You're not perfect. God knows you are not perfect. But God has given you his Spirit so that you can grow in holiness. What could that look like for you this week? Growth in holiness could look like confessing your sin and asking forgiveness more quickly; or granting forgiveness. Growth in holiness could look like going to a social event even when you're tempted to stay home out of fear. Growth in holiness could look like squeegeeing the shower without my wife asking me. You can grow in holiness. What could that look like for you this week?

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c. **And you can hope.**

By faith in Christ and through the Holy Spirit you have been given intimate access to God now. But this is only a foretaste of what's to come. This current intimate access will find its consummation in the new heavens and new earth. In Rev. 21, we read, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place [literally, 'tent' or 'tabernacle'] of God is with man... He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more." God is not the God of the dead but of the living. We will dwell face-to-face with God. We're all tempted to place our hope in this life. For sure, this life is a gift. But this fallen world isn't life as God meant it. God will consummate all his promises in a renewed earth. So, no matter what you are facing you can hope because you have a glorious future.

### **Conclusion**

The original readers of this passage were tempted to go back to the Old Covenant. The author says, "how can you go back to the Old Covenant? It's like choosing a five second encounter with the Fonz over adoption into the family of God." **Limited access** versus **total** and **intimate access**. Although we're not tempted to go back to the Old Covenant, we may be tempted to quit Jesus. Maybe that's you today. Let the illustrations of the Old Covenant and the indications of the Holy Spirit stir your appreciation for Jesus and the New Covenant. Because of Jesus you can know God; you can grow in holiness; you can hope.