

THE MODEL OF OUR AGONY

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Hebrews 9: 11, 12

As you know we often have to make models before we can visualize the ways things really are.

At the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago there is a model of the human heart that is bigger than two people. Visitors can walk around it and look up at the left ventricle above them. It is that big. Once you've seen it, you'll never forget how your heart looks, that's for certain.

And in the same museum there are fascinating models of structures so small we cannot see them with the naked eye. Colorful balls and sticks are carefully arranged to show molecules and atoms. Such models peel back the mystery of the substances around us and we get a slight impression of how they are made and put together. Models like that help a great deal.

Some models are themselves so functional that we can learn how the real thing will act by watching them. Models of experimental aircraft, for example, can be put through their paces in a wind tunnel, and observers can learn important facts about the way the airframe will act at various air speeds.

So then, we need models in order to get things straight in our minds. We have to draw pictures for ourselves and sketch diagrams so that we can understand the way things really are. Some-

times parents, irritated because their children do not seem to understand their instructions say, "What do you want me to draw you; picture!" Well, some times we need pictures because we cannot understand any other way.

Wouldn't it be helpful if someone could make a model of what is really wrong? I mean wouldn't it be helpful if we could find ways to visualize what has gone wrong with our lives and the lives of so many others? If we could make some kind of schematic diagram that would help us picture the real state of human affairs, perhaps we could diagnose our trouble and make corrections. We cannot do much to straighten things out when we don't know exactly where the trouble lies.

There is so much about the way we live that is off center and mixed up. Need I cite the evidence that somewhere, here has gone horribly wrong? Let me just bring a few things into focus, here, to make sure we are both thinking about the same thing.

The wars lately to mention a massive element with recent events, seem to be bathed in a new and terrifying irrationality that dooms the enemies to shame no matter what the cause or issue.

The ugliness of our major cities, too, contributes to the fearsome contours of man's present predicament. From Chicago to Sao Paulo to Sydney to Belfast the cities of our world have become the location of social malfunction that downgrades the quality of life on an appalling scale.

And the family today presents a grotesque picture. Think of the Louds of Santa Barbara for example. With their sickness compounded by their willfulness to let the TV cameras intrude upon their disintegrating lives, they

proved that the private dimension of human experience cannot go public without being destroyed in the process

Thus, with it all, individual experience has often become dreamy, and for a growing number, not really worth the effort. Whereas it used to be that wise philosophers suspected that life was a joke and suicide was sensible, teenagers now claim they have few reasons for going on. There is a terror in the minds of men that is fed by the inescapable conclusion that life is meaningless and not worth working at. That's why orgiastic sex ... and drugs ... and sorcery.

If we could build a model of the problem so that we could visualize it better, perhaps we could start making efforts at righting some of the glaring wrongs that numb our senses. Maybe if some all-wise computer could spew out a diagram that would depict with accuracy just where things got bent out of shape, we could start doing something that would start the reconstruction that is obviously so desperately needed. We need a model, don't we ... so that we can begin to see where the trouble lies

"O my God, won't you help us?"

He will, and He does, and He did.

God has given us a model of our agony. There are chapters and chapters in the Bible that can only be understood as models God has given so that we can begin to understand the full dimensions of our predicament. Maybe you have picked up the Bible and stumbled into these sections, more by mistake than anything else, and you have recoiled in dread. Books like Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy in the Old Testament are full material that contributes to our understanding of the way evil has conquered humanity.

in them we find the blueprint of the tabernacle the people of Israel carried with them as they plodded through the desert toward the promised land. And the tabernacle and the events that occurred within it are the models of what is really wrong with our world and with ourselves.

If you want a thumbnail sketch of the Old Testament tells us about this awesome model of our predicament, the tabernacle and the events that occurred within it, several verses from the New Testament took of He brews bring the many elements together. It's called the tent of meeting and is described this way:

"Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. For a tent was prepared, the outer one, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence; it is called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain stood a tent called the Holy of Holies, having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, which contained a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded; and the tables of the covenant; above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.

"These preparations having thus been made, the priests go continually into the outer tent, performing their ritual duties; 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 errors of the people. By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the sanctuary is not yet opened as long as the outer tent is still

standing (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal with food and drink and various ablutions, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation." (Hebrews 9:1-10)

It is scarcely possible for many of us to imagine the deep impression the age-long rituals described in Hebrews 9 must have made upon the people of Israel. At the center of the ceremonies conducted within the tabernacle and later within the temple were the bloody offerings that consisted of slaughtered bulls, goats, and lambs. And though these were offered with little intermission year after year, the overall impression that was left by it was that the way into the presence of God was closed. For the area that symbolized the holy presence of God remained inaccessible for once a year when the high priest would enter it on the Great Day of Atonement.

The blood of the offerings flowed as a dramatic reminder of the nature of human sin. As the animals were destroyed, day after day, those who witnessed the events knew that the wages of sin is death and that they were inescapably involved. They viewed the animals they brought for slaughter as a substitution for their own lives, and they were constantly reminded that they had sinned against God to such an extent that they were worthy of destruction.

The events that occurred within the tabernacle, then, and the tabernacle itself, were models of what is really wrong with humanity. It is, in fact, precisely the model we were looking for when we asked, a few moments ago, if God would help us find one. Well, this is the model God has furnished. And it is a model

that leaves no doubt about the seriousness of the trouble we are in. Mankind is caught in the power of sin. He has brought upon himself. The result of sin is death, and this is why death stares us in the face every time we turn corner. We are alienated from God, and there is no way to get back to Him. The debt of our sin stands between us and God all the time.

Now, if all this revolts you, and if you think it all quite primitive, I can understand why. It is only natural to be repelled by the exquisite care with which the tabernacle was put together and the tedious way the offerings had to be made. There is something repulsive about all this. And it is somewhat insulting to suggest that smart people like us must use a model bathed in blood to understand the full dimensions of our predicament.

Granted. But remember, the precise rituals God used to depict our problem constitute a model, with all the limitations that a model necessarily has. The way the tabernacle was put together and the way the sacrifices had to be prepared were not significant in themselves. But they were significant because they reflected certain realities that you and I must get straight in our heads before we can hope to escape the awfulness of the situation we are in. And if we are serious about wanting to bring some light into the darkness that is now so prevalent, and serious about wanting to bring some solutions to the problems of the present moment, we are foolish to ignore the model and its message.

Well, we talked about that, the problems of our cities, we talked about that, and the problems in our families and within our own lives - all these vicious, crippling forces reflected in the death-colored rituals that oc-

curred in the tabernacle of Israel centuries ago. So this is extremely practical, you see. We cannot hope to devise solutions to human problems unless we are willing to read the diagram that describes where everything has broken down. We must take seriously the model that tells us where the ruptures are that tear our lives to shreds.

If the model of man's sin and of his alienation from God is not a pleasant one, we must remember that neither is the reality of the modern life I can understand why ladies and gentlemen a century or so ago considered the Bible's description of the human problem barbaric and savage. A hundred years ago, some still believed in the perfectibility of mankind. But after all we've seen over the last decades, we cannot afford to ignore the Biblical model of the way things really are. We've seen too much blood ourselves, often spilled for no good reason. We are so much wiser about the full potential for evil that is part of the human destiny than men used to be.

And when we read the rest of the chapter we read a few moments ago, we discover to our amazement that the news that comes from these strange paragraphs is utterly not bleak and terrifying, but it is of gloriously redeeming value. For the book of Hebrews does not leave us aghast at the description of human agony, but it sweeps on to announce that which could never be accomplished by the old sacrifices in the old tabernacle has been accomplished fully in the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Yes this is the final message that comes across for those who are willing to study the Biblical data all the way. The message reads like this: the Old Testament rituals and

the tabernacle are a model of what is really wrong with mankind. They illustrate man's sin and his consequent alienation from God. They illustrate the fact that the wages of sin is death. And they illustrate the fact that no human performance can ever really pay the price of sin. But Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God, has come to accomplish what the old rituals could never accomplish.

You see, immediately after the Bible tells about the significance of that old model we have been talking about, it talks about Jesus and it shows how He came to do what that model could never do. Listen to this:

"But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ash of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your consciences from dead works to serve the living God

"Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rituals, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, but into heaven itself, to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor did he offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the Holy Place yearly with blood not his own; for he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the

world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all, at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." (Hebrews 9:11-14; 23-26)

See what it says in verse 23. We were looking for a model, weren't we, a model of what is really wrong. Well verse 23 calls all the tabernacle and all the furniture in it and the sacrifices that were made, copies of heavenly things. They were models of heavenly realities. They were copies of the way things really are between men and God. They demonstrate the futility of trying to find our way back into the presence of the Almighty. Our sins are just too great to allow it.

So Jesus comes and He does what no priest on this earth has ever done nor could ever. He brought an offering, but it wasn't an animal. He gave Himself. And He didn't do it in the tabernacle or the temple, but He brought His blood right into the holiest place in the universe, into the very presence of God. And He paid for sin, once and for all.

It's all over now. Jesus Christ, the great high priest has entered into the very sanctuary of heaven and has paid for human sin fully. "[He] has appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself."

If you have stumbled by mistake at some time or another into those areas of the Bible that tell of the way the tabernacle had to be made and of the way the sacrifices had to be brought, I wouldn't be surprised if you had recoiled in horror. You might have said, "What kind of a book is this, anyway? It's horrible. It's ugly I don't want anything to do with a religion that is like this." I can understand why you might say this. But now don't you see that what we have in some of those terrible passages

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in the Old Testament is a model of our agony. The Bible does not stop with this. It tells about the Lord Jesus Christ who has made right every thing that was already portrayed in the model.

Now you and I can build upon the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. You remember we asked a while ago if then we could make a model of what is really wrong with our world. And then we found this model in the Bible. But the Bible contains a message of human restoration and peace and joy, not just a report of our problems, but it is a full description of God's solution to our problems.

You can be saved by this great Jesus Christ. You must admit first that the Bible's description of human sin and unrighteousness is the truth. You must start with that. You must start by saying, "I'm a sinner, too. I'm a part of it." And then you must turn to Jesus and confess that He alone can save you. You must believe that He did what no other man could ever do. He paid the price of sin fully.

Today we have seen the model of our agony. We've seen, too, the reality of our salvation. Are you still too proud or arrogant to believe that the model we have seen of your sin is accurate? Humble yourself beneath the beautiful sound of the gospel. Listen to the good news:

"[Christ] having been offered once to bear the sins of many will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him (Hebrews 9:28). Repent of your sins and start waiting for Jesus with eagerness.

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