

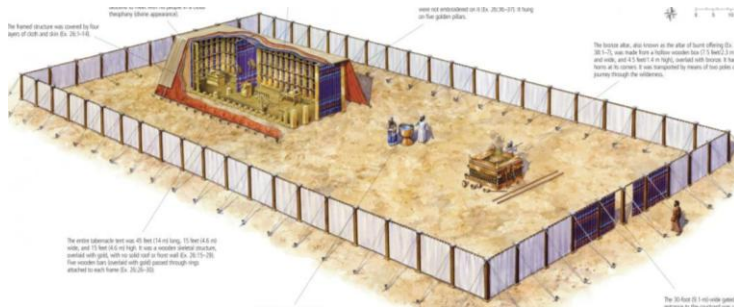


(Play the theme from [Raiders of the Lost Ark](#).) The original Raiders of the Lost Ark was released the summer I graduated from high school and I went to see it in the theaters as soon as it came out. I had no idea what the “ark” was when I saw this movie as a teenager. I thought it was Noah’s ark. I knew what Noah’s Ark was but I had no idea what the “ark of the covenant” was all about. I was really clueless. I was a new believer then and I attended the movie with my Christian friend. He tried to explain this “ark” to me but I still didn’t quite get it.

Let me show you a [brief clip](#) from the movie which describes the purpose of the ark.<sup>1</sup> This man told Indiana Jones, “It’s a transmitter. It’s a radio for speaking to God.” What do you think of his definition—is it accurate or is it merely Hollywood mumbo jumbo? Most of you are probably thinking the latter but I want to explain why I don’t think this character’s definition is too far off target. But first, let’s walk through the first part of chapter nine to get a basic picture of the ark.

*Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary.<sup>2</sup> A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place.<sup>3</sup> Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place,<sup>4</sup> which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron’s staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant.<sup>5</sup> Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover, But we cannot discuss these things in detail now.*

*<sup>6</sup> When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry.<sup>7</sup> 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.*



As soon as Moses was given the Ten Commandments, God gave him the exact procedure for the construction and use of the Tabernacle in the wilderness. The entire Tabernacle area was only 150 feet long and 75 feet wide. If you took the footprint of our building and multiplied it times 2.5, you would have almost the exact

layout. As you approached the Tabernacle the first thing you would have seen was the gate,

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which was approximately seven feet high. Of course only the priest could enter through the gate so the rest of the two million or so Israelites could not even see into Tabernacle court. Had you been able to enter the gate, the next thing you would see would have been the altar where all of the animal sacrifices were burned. In addition to the animals, grain offerings were also offered on the altar to be burned.

One can only imagine how bloody of a place this would have been. All of the animals were slaughtered at the entrance to the tent, so where this priest is standing the ground would have been stained with blood. And do not forget that this was no modern slaughterhouse where the animals get a quick bonk on the head that kills them. The priest would slit the neck of the animal and drain the blood from its neck. Much of the blood would be gathered in bowls and sprinkled on the altar and other places.



Let's assume for a moment that you were an average Israelite living during this time. If you sin against the Lord and are made aware of it, you would need to start the process of atonement for your sins. If you had a genuine conviction in regard to this sin, you would be carrying around a guilty conscience. You would know full well that God is a holy God. You would have seen the earthquake when Moses was on the mountain. You would have seen the shining face of Moses whenever he spoke with God. Your guilt would have been real and

your conscience would have been burdened.

While carrying that guilt with you, you would have walked among your flocks and carefully selected the very best of the herd. In those days the best animals in the herd would have been selected and set aside for mating so that the strong animals in the herd would reproduce. Nowadays, we just call Accelerated Genetics and Aaron Stalsberg will stop by your farm and help your herd become and remain as healthy and strong as possible. But the Israelites had to do it the old-fashioned way. But just like it is today, a strong, healthy herd would have made you

more wealthy and prosperous. Animals were as good as gold and every household wanted a healthy, thriving herd.

But instead of setting aside your best animals for reproduction, you would have selected the very best for your sin offering. Your sin was going to hurt you in the pocketbook at the very least. After selecting the very best animal, you would walk to the gate of the Tabernacle. Do you know what would have happened next? Many of us probably lose sight of the details at this point and probably assume that all you needed to do was to hand the animal off to the priest so that he could slaughter it. Here is a description that is repeated many times in the first few chapters of Leviticus.

*<sup>28</sup> When he is made aware of the sin he committed, he must bring as his offering for the sin he committed a female goat without defect. <sup>29</sup> He is to lay his hand on the head of the sin offering and slaughter it at the place of the burnt offering. <sup>30</sup> Then the priest is to take some of the blood with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour out the rest of the blood at the base of the altar. <sup>31</sup> He shall remove all the fat, just as the fat is removed from the fellowship offering, and the priest shall burn it on the altar as an aroma pleasing to the LORD. In this way the priest will make atonement for him, and he will be forgiven (Leviticus 4:28-31).*

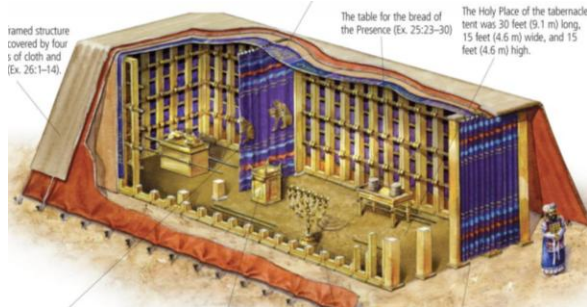
This was a two step process. First, the sinner placed his hand upon the head of the animal and then surprisingly, the offender was the one who lifted the knife and sliced the neck of the animal. It would have looked something [like this](#). I intentionally stopped the video after the knife was applied to the neck of the animal but before the cut was made. I realize that some of you probably slaughter your chickens and this is not that big of a deal for you, but I am guessing that very few, if any, have held an animal while you cut its neck and then proceeded to hold it as it squirmed and the life blood was slowly drained from it. For the average Israelite, this would have been a common practice. For us it's all a bloody and perhaps stomach churning process, but for them it would have been a regular part of their life. This is why we must not miss the significance of the first step. *He is to lay his hand on the head of the sin offering...*

Do you see the meaning of this step? The person who had sinned was symbolically transferring their own sin onto the animal. This process was not like delivering an animal to the slaughterhouse and letting the employees do the dirty work. First the sins were transferred to the animal and the sinner had to sacrifice the animal that was bearing their sin. This was a substitutionary sacrifice. The blood of the animal was shed in place of their own blood. As our author says later in the chapter, "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." But again, this was not just the blood of some random animal. This was the animal that belonged to the one who sinned, who placed his sins upon the animal and who slit the throat of the substitutionary sacrifice.

If the people were truly conscious of their sins, there would have been a long line of sinners standing at the entrance to the gate waiting to sacrifice their animal. This was part of the daily atoning sacrifices but our text focuses on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, which the Jews celebrated eight days ago. As a priest, you would have walked past the altar of sacrifice and entered into the Holy Place. There you would have seen the table of showbread, the golden lampstand and the altar of incense.



The only remaining part of the Tabernacle that we have not visited is the Most Holy Place, a fifteen foot cube the space of which is mostly occupied by the ark of the covenant. If I had only had this chapter of Hebrews way back in 1981 I may have been able to understand exactly what Indiana Jones and the hordes of Nazis were looking for. It is called the ark of the covenant because it contained the stone tablets of the covenant, the two tablets carved by the finger of God and carried down from the mountain by Moses. Verse five tells us that *Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover*. The atonement cover in Hebrew is kippur, as in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The New Testament word for atonement is propitiation which is a satisfaction of wrath, specifically the wrath of God. The blood of bulls and goats did not merely cover over sins like a blanket or a gigantic bottle of white out. Sin rightly deserves the full wrath of God as punishment for sin, therefore, atonement for sin must satisfy God's wrath. The substitutionary death of the animal appeased God's powerful wrath.



As verses six and seven remind us, the priests carried out daily priestly service within the Holy Place. They would replace the showbread with fresh bread and place some of the blood of the animals on the horns of the altar of incense. But the most important day of the year was the Day of Atonement when the high priest would offer the blood of a bull to cover his own sins before he could mediate the atonement for the people.

This is what I meant when I said that the ark was a type of transmitter. It was the only vehicle for meeting with God—obviously not in the way that Hollywood meant, but it was nevertheless a tool for communication.

If daily sacrifices were offered for the atonement for sins, why was this one day necessary? Or we could ask the question another way. If this one day of atonement was so important, why were the daily sacrifices for sin necessary? I think this is the way to think about this. The Day of Atonement is the main source for forgiveness of sins. This was the day when the sins were wiped clean. This was the thorough, spiritual house cleaning. The other 364 days of the year were upkeep on the cleaning—forgiveness of sins that happens between the annual Day of Atonement.

But there's a problem with this whole scenario which is revealed in verse eight. *The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as*

*the first tabernacle was still standing.* This is the key verse in this section—*the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed.* What was the purpose of all of the sacrifices and blood? The typical answer and the one we have been focusing on is the forgiveness of sins. After all, it is called the Day of Atonement. Forgiveness is absolutely necessary but why was forgiveness necessary? Because the goal of forgiveness was not an end in itself. Forgiveness is not just the absence of punishment. The goal of forgiveness was to be granted access into the Most Holy Place.

Remember when I said that unless you were a priest you could not enter the court of the Tabernacle nor could you see into the court since the perimeter fence was seven feet high. You would be able to see the outside of the Tabernacle since it was fifteen feet high and would have been clearly visible from any angle. But there was one prominent feature of the Tabernacle that



would have been visible to every Israelite—the cloud of glory; the Shekinah Glory that rose into the sky as a pillar of cloud by day and pillar fire by night.

Here is a description of the cloud from Numbers chapter nine.

<sup>15</sup> *On the day the tabernacle, the Tent of the Testimony, was set up, the cloud covered it. From evening till morning the cloud above the tabernacle looked like fire.*

<sup>16</sup> *That is how it continued to be; the cloud covered it, and at night it looked like fire.* <sup>17</sup> *Whenever the cloud*

*lifted from above the Tent, the Israelites set out; wherever the cloud settled, the Israelites encamped.* <sup>18</sup> *At the LORD's command the Israelites set out, and at his command they encamped. As long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle, they remained in camp.* <sup>19</sup> *When the cloud remained over the tabernacle a long time, the Israelites obeyed the LORD's order and did not set out.* <sup>20</sup> *Sometimes the cloud was over the tabernacle only a few days; at the LORD's command they would encamp, and then at his command they would set out.* <sup>21</sup> *Sometimes the cloud stayed only from evening till morning, and when it lifted in the morning, they set out. Whether by day or by night, whenever the cloud lifted, they set out.* <sup>22</sup> *Whether the cloud stayed over the tabernacle for two days or a month or a year, the Israelites would remain in camp and not set out; but when it lifted, they would set out.* <sup>23</sup> *At the LORD's command they encamped, and at the LORD's command they set out. They obeyed the LORD's order, in accordance with his command through Moses (Numbers 9:15-23).*

The presence of God who dwelled in the cloud was visible from a distance but was blocked to all. “The way into the Most Holy Place had not been disclosed.” This had been blocked since Eve and Adam ate of the forbidden fruit. They were cast from the garden and banished from the presence of God. Sin is not just wrong. Sin does not merely bring judgment. Sin separates. Sin divides and even though God had laid down explicit instructions for the priestly service and the construction of the tabernacle and the shedding of blood, verse nine clarifies the problem. <sup>9</sup> *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.* <sup>10</sup> *They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.*

The way to the Most Holy Place was not disclosed. What every man, woman and child needed was to be in the presence of God but their sin separated them. Their consciences were not clear. Does this mean that anyone living under the old covenant could not be saved, that their sins could not be forgiven? It most definitely does not mean this. The individuals in the Old Testament were saved in the same way that you and I are saved—by faith. But even then there was no unrestricted access to the presence of God.

*<sup>11</sup> When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. <sup>12</sup> He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. <sup>13</sup> The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. <sup>14</sup> How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God.*

I love verse fourteen. *How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God.* Here is the relevance for us in the church living under the new covenant. Even though the way into the Most Holy Place has been opened for us and even though our consciences have been cleared by the atoning blood of Christ, many of us do not experience a clear conscience. And if your conscience isn't clear you cannot experience the presence of God. Some of you still feel shame for your sins, and everyone of us have done shameful things—there is no debate about that. But how does one get a clear conscience? How do you lift this lingering shame off of your shoulders?

Can I give you some good news this morning? Here it is again—verse fourteen. *How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God.* Do you see? If you have placed your faith in Christ alone for your salvation, then your conscience is already clear. It is done. To use Jesus' words—It is finished. Jesus did not atone for your sins because you didn't do those things that bring you shame. He atoned for your sin because you did do those shameful things. It was as if you placed your hand on the head of Jesus, transferred your sins to him and then slit his throat open. He died instead of you. The Father's wrath was upon him. By his wounds you were healed.

1 John 4:10 says, *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* Your conscience is clear—now live in that truth. This is why we can approach the throne of grace with confidence. Under the old covenant we would only approach the throne with fear and trembling but now we can come with boldness and confidence. Therefore, if you feel bits of shame left over from your shameful deeds this is proof that you are still living under the old covenant. Your conscience has been cleared but you are living as if it has not. You are the richest person on the planet living like a pauper. You do not see what you have been given.

Some of you may not have a clear conscience because you are not yet saved. The path for you is to place your trust in Christ alone.

Some of you are saved but you are holding onto a sin and need to clean your spiritual house—you need to repent.

We need to make an important distinction between guilt for the ongoing sins of life and the shame of condemnation. The first one is normal but the second is not ours to bear. Our consciences have been cleared by the blood of Christ. There is no condemnation. You are free in Christ, now live as a free person.

Rich Maurer  
October 15, 2011

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<sup>1</sup> Character says to Indiana Jones: “Jones, do you know what the ark is? It’s a transmitter. It’s a radio for speaking to God.”