11. Longing for More (3Q 2021—Rest in Christ)

Biblical Material: 1 Cor. 10:1–11; Lev. 4:32–35; John 1:29; Heb. 4:1–11; Ps. 95:8–11.

Quotes

• Nothing but a symbol? People die for symbols. People have hope because of symbols. They’re not just lines. They’re histories, cultures, traditions, given shape. *Roshani Chokshi*

• A religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. *Clifford Geertz*

• Far more powerful than religion, far more powerful than money, or even land or violence, are symbols. Symbols are stories. Symbols are pictures, or items, or ideas that represent something else. Human beings attach such meaning and importance to symbols that they can inspire hope, stand in for gods, or convince someone that he or she is dying. These symbols are everywhere around you. *Lia Habel*

• When language was not transcendental enough to complete the meaning of a revelation, symbols were relied upon for heavenly teaching, and familiar images, chosen from the known, were made to mirror the unknown spiritual truth. *William H. Hunt*

• However expressive, symbols can never be the things they stand for. *Aldous Huxley*

Questions

What is the “more” that the lesson title is referring to? What is the danger of focusing on symbols? How do we talk about divine concepts when we don’t even have the vocabulary to do so? What is the value in studying the ceremonial law that is so prominent in the Old Testament? How does Hebrews take us beyond Sabbath requirements to entering into God’s rest?

Bible summary

In 1 Cor. 10:1–11 Paul uses the experience of Israel in the wilderness as a warning against doing wrong. Lev. 4:32–35 are the requirements for a sin offering. In John 1:29 John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Heb. 4:1–11 describes the Sabbath rest that remains. Ps. 95:8–11 tells us not to harden our hearts, otherwise we won’t be able to enter into God’s rest.

Comment

This whole lesson is about “models” or “symbols” or “examples.” The “longing for more” is to go beyond these representations to try and see the reality that is really there. We certainly want to think of God beyond the literal aspects of ceremonial requirements. A preoccupation even with the earthly sanctuary can lead us backwards, not forwards.

It’s interesting that God has to use symbols and make promises and agreements. Why? Because God is feared, and human beings need reassurance. In fact throughout the Bible God has to tell people they do not need to fear him, and to make promises to convince them. Firstly with Adam and Eve. Then with Noah and his descendants. (Remember how God put a rainbow in the sky as a symbol to reassure them that he wouldn’t send another worldwide flood?) Then
Abraham, and the other patriarchs. Down on through the prophets, God is still trying to win his people over—that there is nothing to fear.

Yet despite all his promises, his people persistently reject God and turn away to their own desires. They misunderstand the basis of the agreements, spurn his promises, reject his symbols of salvation. The book of Isaiah is all about a God who has been rejected by his people, a Being who is seen as being “paid off” by sacrifices and offerings, a ritualistic deity that needs to be placated, a God who requires symbolic systems. But God rejects all that. “The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?” says the LORD. “What use are all your many sacrifices to me? asks the Lord. I am sick and tired of your burnt offerings of rams and the fat of sacrificial animals. I don’t delight in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats!” Isaiah 1:11 FBV. God doesn’t want the symbols! Could the sacrifice of Christ also be viewed in this way? Has not even the cross been made a “meaningless sacrifice” (see Isaiah 1:13) and turned into a symbol we put on churches?

Rituals and symbols cannot save. God is not some kind of machine to be fixed or used. The reason he instituted the whole sacrificial system was not for his benefit, but for ours. The cross is the same—not some mechanism by which he can fix it for himself to save us, but designed for our benefit and appreciation. The problem with seeing religion as rules and symbols is that you do not come into the relationship that God most wants—one in which there is mutual understanding, love and acceptance of truth and right.

We are invited into God’s rest (Hebrews 4) and the symbol is the seventh-day Sabbath as is made clear in Hebrews 4:4. But this is not the same as entering into God’s rest, as the whole chapter makes clear. In fact God did not allow many of those Sabbath-keepers to enter his rest because of their unbelief. They observed the Sabbath, but not the Lord of the Sabbath. In terms of this quarter’s studies, this chapter is one of the most significant in terms of resting in Christ. It’s not about the symbols, but what they mean, and coming into a relationship with the one who wants us to find his gracious gift of rest by resting in him.

**Ellen White comment**

The whole system of types and symbols was a compacted prophecy of the gospel, a presentation in which were bound up the promises of redemption. {AA 14.1}

Jesus looked upon the innocent victims of sacrifice, and saw how the Jews had made these great convocations scenes of bloodshed and cruelty. In place of humble repentance of sin, they had multiplied the sacrifice of beasts, as if God could be honored by a heartless service. The priests and rulers had hardened their hearts through selfishness and avarice. The very symbols pointing to the Lamb of God they had made a means of getting gain. Thus in the eyes of the people the sacredness of the sacrificial service had been in a great measure destroyed. {DA 590.1}

The greater their perversion of figures and symbols, the more confused their minds became, so that they could not see the perfect fulfillment of the Jewish economy, instituted and established by Christ, and pointing to Him as the substance. Meats and drinks and divers ordinances were multiplied until ceremonial religion constituted their only worship. {FE 397.3}

May the Lord forbid that the history of the children of Israel in departing from God, in refusing to walk in the light, in refusing to confess their sins of unbelief and rejection of his messages, should be the experience of the people claiming to believe the truth for this time. For if they do as did the children of Israel in the face of warnings and admonitions, the same result will follow in these last days as came upon the children of Israel. [Heb. 4:3 quoted.]

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