There is one way into the presence of God, and it is through His Son Jesus Christ. It was clearly revealed in the Old Testament long before the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The ceremonial worship given to ancient Israel left no doubt that God is holy and, apart from His grace, no sinner may approach Him except through His chosen Savior.

The main point of the *Letter to the Hebrews* is that Jesus Christ is the sinless Son of God and Great High Priest of the New Covenant (Heb. 8:1-13). He alone brings every sinner who trusts Him into fellowship with the heavenly Father. The old covenant of law condemned sin, but its ceremonial worship foreshadowed the true salvation Christ would actually accomplish. Even the layout of the earthly tabernacle provided a temporary model of the eternal, heavenly reality (8:13).

Hebrews 9:1-10:18 explains how Christ’s high priestly ministry under the New Covenant is superior to the symbolism of the old. First, the layout of the earthly sanctuary is given in preparation for the explanation of its limited priestly service. A contrast with the true, heavenly sanctuary and Jesus’ effective ministry as High Priest will follow.
The earthly sanctuary is the subject of Hebrews 9:1-5. A careful look reveals that it was a model for how the sinner must, in reality, approach God. We see here that it originated with God, offers access to God, and orients us toward God’s holiness.

**A Model of Reality (9:1-5)**

*It Originated with God* (v. 1)

Since the first covenant of law was not capable of providing life for the sinner, God made it obsolete when He replaced it with the second covenant — a new covenant of grace (8:13). But that does not mean the Law or the worship God established in conjunction with it was pointless. On the contrary, the Law remains His timeless standard for righteousness, and the way we approach Him remains the same.

What God revealed to Moses regarding the tabernacle was divine instruction — a “copy and shadow of the heavenly things” (8:5). And so verse one says, “*Then indeed, even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary.*” Although it was filled with symbolism that reflected the reality of salvation in Christ, it was nonetheless divine truth. Both the sanctuary and the ordinances conducted by the Levitical priesthood were designed by the LORD to teach us about salvation (cf. 9:6-10).
There are large portions of Moses’ writings in which God gives detailed instructions for the construction of the sanctuary, its layout, the positioning of its furnishings, and the way in which priests conducted their ministry. It is in no way insignificant even though the old covenant is fulfilled in Christ. Through the Law, mankind cannot pass beyond the veil into God’s presence as the writer will so clearly explain. However, what God revealed symbolically is key to understanding how Christ brings us to the Father by grace through faith. It is timeless, divine instruction about the believer’s access to God.

*It Offers Access to God (v. 2)*
The sanctuary wonderfully represents God’s presence, but it also teaches us that we cannot simply come to Him on our own terms. Our sin keeps us from entering into heaven with Him, and even the Christian’s worship in this world is limited and temporary in that we still reside here in unredeemed bodies. But the good news of the earthly sanctuary — even Israel’s wilderness “*tabernacle*” — is that God has provided access to Himself both now and for eternity. This obviously temporary structure, and the later temple in Jerusalem, was “*prepared*” to teach us this truth.

During Israel’s wilderness wanderings, the construction of the Tabernacle (a large tent) was to represent limited access to God, but it anticipated full access. Therefore, it symbolized the work of Christ as High Priest to fully bring us into the Father’s eternal presence (Ex. 25-40).
Not mentioned here was the outer courtyard, which separated the tabernacle from the rest of the camp of Israel that surrounded it. It had only a single entrance. Just as Jesus said that He is the only way to the Father and the door into the kingdom of heaven, so the tabernacle had but one, narrow gate (Matt. 7:13-14; Jn. 10:9; 14:6).

Inside the courtyard, but outside the tabernacle itself, the bronze altar (Ex. 27:1-8) and the bronze laver (Ex. 30:18) were located. The first represented the requirement of a pure and acceptable blood sacrifice, and the second the purity of the priest who offered it before God. Jesus is, of course, both our sinless sacrifice and sufficient High Priest. His work of salvation on our behalf took place on earth, i.e. outside of heaven where God truly dwells.

But inside the sanctuary were three significant furnishings for the priestly ministry. They were overlaid with gold to emphasize the purity of that place of worship before God and the holiness required to be in His presence. These are mentioned by the writer because his attention is focused on the tabernacle proper — the sanctuary of God’s presence itself. However, these items were located in the “first part [of]...the sanctuary.” This is the first room of the tabernacle known as the Holy Place (Ex. 26:33). Only the consecrated priests were allowed to minister there, and they did so daily.
It was in the Holy Place that the priests maintained “the lampstand” (Ex. 27:20-21) representing Christ as our light (Jn. 8:12). This was located on the left inside the entrance. On the right side was “the table” on which “the showbread,” representing the 12 tribes of Israel, was placed each Sabbath Day (Ex. 25:23-30). This represented Christ as the bread from heaven — the bread of life — which feeds our soul (Jn. 6:35ff). So the emphasis here is on the light and sustenance of truth in Christ that leads us to God.

But these are only two of the three articles located in that portion of the sanctuary. There is one more, which the writer will mention in verse four. He seems to associate it with the transition from the outer to the inner sanctuary. For it is there that we are oriented (i.e. pointed) toward God’s holy presence.

*It Orients Us Toward God’s Holiness* (vv. 3-5)
The first part of the sanctuary was entered by the priests through a curtain (Ex. 26:36), but a more intricately woven “second veil” (v. 3; cf. Ex. 26:31-34) separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place or “Holiest of All” (cf. 9:8; a.k.a Holy of Holies). It was in this “part of the tabernacle” that God manifest His glorious presence above “the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold” (v. 4). Again, the abundance of this precious metal overlaying the furniture signifies the holiness required to be in God’s presence. The ark was conspicuously the only piece of furniture in the inner sanctuary.
Inside the ark “were the golden pot that had manna, Aaron’s rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant.” These represented God’s provision for His people, His choice of the priesthood (signifying His plan of salvation), and His Law respectively.

Only the High Priest could enter the inner sanctuary once each year on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). But first, he must pass by the altar on which incense was burned daily before the LORD (Ex. 30:1-10). He would place some of the blood of the atonement on the horns of this altar to consecrate it, take coals from it and place them in a “golden censer” (v. 4) with fine incense to burn inside the Most Holy Place (Lev. 16:11-14). There he sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice before “the mercy seat” on top of the Ark (v. 5) to make propitiation for the sins of the people (cf. Heb. 2:17). Only there could atonement be made — only there would God’s wrath be abated toward sinners.

The mercy seat of the Ark was overshadowed by “the cherubim of glory.” This likeness of holy angels who declare God’s glorious presence in heaven (Ezek. 1; 10; Rev. 4:8) marked the place where Holy God would meet sinful man (Ex. 25:22). But again, only the High Priest was allowed to appear briefly before the LORD on an annual basis. The rest of the priesthood could come only as close as the Holy Place, and the people could come only as close as the outer courtyard. There is great emphasis on our inability to approach God’s presence.
Christ is, however, clearly seen in all of this as the writer will point out in 9:6-10. But here we should note that, although we are still unable to fully approach God in heaven, Christ alone has gone into the Father’s presence for us already. And there He is making intercession for us as represented by the altar of incense associated with the golden censer, and there He has sat down at the Father’s right hand, permanently offering Himself as our sufficient, atoning sacrifice (9:11-15) — Himself being the very mercy seat where God meets mankind (9:23-28).

And since the writer wishes to elaborate of this as his main point, he “cannot now speak in detail” about the earthly tabernacle. It is not germane to the purpose of the letter, although it was necessary to make mention of these things as significant due to their profound symbolism.

There is certainly much more detailed information on the tabernacle, its construction and its layout in the writings of Moses. And we could elaborate more on how it reflects Christ and His ministry as our sufficient High Priest. But the emphasis is on how He is the Mediator of a better covenant, and that should be our focus.

The earthly tabernacle provides a model of the heavenly reality, being a vivid and rich portrait of our Great High Priest. Its divine origin ensures that you as a sinner do have access to God through Jesus Christ His perfect Son. What is your response to this beautiful picture of Christ in the Old Testament Scripture?