

Entering the Most Holy Place

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[0 : 00] Well, I didn't get a chance to answer that question earlier, about where somewhere was off-limits that I would like to go. I was sitting there, no one wanted to come up to talk to me.

So I'm going to tell you now. All right? No choice. One of the places I'd like to go is into the Queen's private apartments in Buckingham Palace.

Now, I've been to Buckingham Palace twice, but each time it's only to the state rooms, where, you know, they occasionally open it to the public. And while it's grand to look at all that fancy, you know, gear in those rooms, you know, the paintings, the throne, I don't know, is it the real throne or fake throne?

I don't know, anyway, the throne, and that fancy furniture. What I really want to know is how the Queen really lives normally. I've seen documentaries of her private apartments, but I'm sure those are sort of, you know, stage managed, and she's probably tidied up the rooms before they filmed. So what I really want to know is how does the Queen live when no one's looking? Like, does she have a flat screen TV in her bedroom and it's hooked up to Netflix?

[1 : 12] Does she have a pile of half-finished novels sitting by her bedside, perhaps some of them spilling onto the floor, which she reads and then falls asleep to?

Or maybe she's a good Christian lady that she is. Maybe she's got the Bible by her bedside. And what about her corgis? Do they get to sleep in her bed at night?

What does Prince Philip think about that? I think they sleep in separate beds. Anyway, I don't know. Of course, such is the royal security nowadays that it's probably nigh on impossible to get into her bedroom.

One such person did, however, in case you wanted to know, in 1982. A man by the name of Michael Fagan managed to break into her bedroom while she slept.

And it was some 10 minutes, actually, before they actually apprehended him. And amazingly, he wasn't actually charged for it. Because back then, it wasn't a criminal offense to trespass into the royal palace.

[2 : 19] It is now, though, so please don't try that yourself. Well, tonight, we're going to look at another off-limits place, which the Bible calls the most holy place.

But unlike Michael Fagan, anyone in the Old Testament trying to enter there actually suffers a much worse fate than he. Now, this most holy place is very important as it was located at the heart of Jewish worship.

In the Tabernacle, firstly, which was actually a tent, and then later in the permanent temple at Jerusalem. But it's also important for us as Christians because, as we'll see tonight, it teaches us important lessons about Jesus and about our faith.

You see, the most holy place is actually patterned after the true tabernacle in heaven. And this is where Jesus has entered as our high priest. So if you look at the outline, I've listed three things that we can learn tonight.

And each sort of follows the verses in Hebrews 9, but not quite in places. And so the first thing we learn is that the physical tabernacle illustrates how far humans are separated from God.

[3 : 30] So let me read the first few verses again of chapter 9. But as I do, I've put up a simplified diagram of the tabernacle so you can sort of see where everything is as I read.

So verse 1. Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand and the table with its consecrated bread. This was called the holy place. Behind the second curtain was a room called the most holy place, 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. Above the ark were the cherubim of the glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. And then he adds, but we cannot discuss these things in detail now. And that's because he's actually keen to move on to the activity of the priest, which is his focus, rather than the items in the tabernacle.

[4 : 35] But before we do that, let's just note a few important details. First, we see how God's presence is symbolized in the ark over which the cherubim or angels of the glory set.

That's why it's called the most holy place, which can only be entered via the holy place. And both these places we read in verse 3 are actually separated by a second curtain, meaning, of course, there's actually a first curtain.

And it's not stated here, but we know elsewhere that that was what separated the holy place. Do we have a picture of that still? The holy place from the courtyard.

And the courtyard itself is then surrounded by curtains as well, so that it's separated from the rest of the camp. And we sort of get the picture, don't we, that there's curtain after curtain after curtain, which separates God's people, people that he's actually chosen for himself, from his very presence in the most holy place.

And what's more, as we continue in verse 6, only select people can enter and work in the tabernacle. When everything had been arranged like this, it says, the priest entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry, 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.

[6 : 05] 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 functioning. Only Aaron's descendants, as priests, can enter the holy place, and then only one among them into the most holy place.

What's more, this happened only once a year. And as we read in Leviticus 16 tonight, he has to do all sorts of elaborate preparations, you know, washing, sacrifices, before he can enter.

And what happens when he doesn't follow this? Well, it says in Leviticus chapter 16 and verse 1, I put up the slide, that Aaron's sons died for approaching the Lord unlawfully.

In fact, if you read Leviticus chapter 10, it tells us that what happened was that fire came out from the Lord's presence, which I take to be the most holy place, and consumed them. All this is so, this great separation is so, because of human sinfulness.

The priest's job at the tabernacle, their main job was to represent the people in order to account for their sin. They weren't more holy, and therefore could do the job.

[7 : 30] Rather, we read in the verses here that the sacrifices are offered, the high priest does it, both for himself, and for the people. This entire setup, therefore, was a constant reminder of the gravity of sin.

Yes, it provided a way for God to dwell among his people, and yet at the same time, it showed just what the gulf is between God and humanity.

Now, many of you, I think, would be familiar with this painting. It's actually on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, where Michelangelo depicts God and Adam, you know, those two hands, stretching out their arms so that they barely touch at the fingertips.

And here's a picture, I think, Michelangelo sort of did it to show how tenuous the link was between God and man, and how wide the gap was between divinity and humanity.

And yet, I want to suggest that actually, this separation isn't just due to our humanity and God's divinity. Rather, it's because of God's holiness and our sinfulness.

[8 : 45] And that's exactly what the tabernacle portrays. And I think, sadly, we've lost sight, largely, in our society, of this picture. So today, if people believe in God at all, then it's not a holy and righteous God that they think of, someone we tremble at all at.

Rather, it's a cuddly Santa who's happy to do our bidding, who will affirm our identity, however we choose to define ourselves. And as for our sinfulness, well, there are now minor indiscretions or momentary lapses.

We're not bad people, we just have bad days. And unless we've done something really bad, like kill someone, or nowadays, be a bigot, then no one deserves God's judgment.

But friends, when we lose sight of this gap between God's holiness and our sinfulness, then what we also do is remove the need for Jesus.

We remove the very reason or the need for why he had to come in the first place. But the reality is, one man, once a year, approaching this one specific place and only with blood.

[10:16] Yes, it's possible for God to be with his people, but it comes with great limitations and at great cost. And that's what we discover now as we move on to the second point, that even though it was at great cost and these things were necessary, it was actually inadequate.

that is, all that stuff that they had to do actually didn't do the job properly at the end of the day. It couldn't truly bridge the gulf between God and humans.

So verse 9, what the high priest did each year was merely, it says, an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper.

They're only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings, external regulations applying until the time of the new order. They were ceremonial, you know, they were just pointing of things to come and serving as placeholders until the time of the new order.

And that time is now here with Christ coming. So verse 11, but when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is not part of this creation.

[11:33] He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and cows, but he entered by the most, he entered the most holy place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

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. 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.

And if you think about it, it sort of makes sense, doesn't it? Goats and bulls are very different from humans, so they can never take the place of humans. Not even if they were perfect and without blemish, which was what the law actually required.

No, only a perfect human can take the place of another. And so the sprinkling of blood and ashes as it's described in verse 13 could only affect an outward washing.

That is, it gives an appearance of cleaning or cleansing without really washing away the guilt that was within the conscience. So it was inadequate and yet as inadequate as they were, what they did was act as a pointer to a true cleansing which only Christ's blood could achieve.

[12:56] it's like the symbol of the wedding ring. By itself, a ring can never achieve faithfulness in marriage, can it? You wear this and it doesn't automatically make you faithful.

Just as not wearing it doesn't make you unfaithful either, I must add. And yet we exchange the rings at weddings as a sign of our marriage commitment. We keep wearing them to remind ourselves of our vows.

And it's interesting, isn't it, because often when people, you know, when someone wants to cheat on their spouse, what's the first thing that they do? They take off the ring. Perhaps they go into a nightclub or whatever, they take it off so that they show that they're available or whatever.

They want to hide from others that they're married, that they have this commitment. Or when someone thinks their marriage is over, well, often they take off that ring as well, don't they? And so it is with the old covenant.

The most holy place, you know, it's not really where God dwells, is it? It's just a proxy reminding us of how inaccessible God is because of our sins.

[14:02] Similarly, the blood, the death, and the sacrifice of animals, they can't really cleanse our conscience. But what they do is that they point to a further reality, a true reality, which is that one day, one person will come to do just that, cleanse our conscience.

And that brings us to our next point, the third point, and that is, whether it's the old covenant or the new, blood, death, and sacrifice are crucial to covenant making and covenant keeping.

We had a hint earlier in verse 7 where we read that the high priest never enters without blood. Then here in verse 14, we are told that although the blood of goats and bulls were not adequate, the blood of Christ is.

it's able to truly cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death. And so crucial is this idea of blood that the next eight verses are now devoted to explaining why.

And it turns out what's important is not so much the blood itself as to the shedding of blood, which only comes when there's death or sacrifice.

[15:12] So now we read in verse 15 that Christ is the mediator of a new covenant for those who have been set free from the sins committed under the first covenant. But how, we're told, is this to be achieved?

Well, through Jesus' death, through the shedding of blood, which is the ransom that was paid. The same idea was already there in verse 12 where the shedding of Christ's blood obtains an eternal redemption for the people.

That is, the debt that was owed under the old covenant because of sin and the failure to obey the covenant is now repaid through Jesus' death. And it all seems rather gory and messy, but that's how God has stipulated it.

So look down at verse 22 and it's very explicit. It says, in fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood. And without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness. God requires that there be shedding of blood, that there be death and sacrifice in order for redemption and ransom to be paid so that there can be forgiveness. Sin is that serious.

[16:22] Sin is so serious that the only fitting punishment is death. That was so in the first covenant and God allowed animals to be a substitute even though that was only ceremonial.

But in Jesus' death, we have a perfect human substitute who is able to truly cleanse the conscience and finally do the job properly. Now, the writer also raises another point in verse 16 and it's rather intriguing.

He says that in the case of a will, or if you look down in the footnotes, it could also mean a covenant and that's the same word that's used in verses 15 and 20.

He says that in the case of a covenant, it's necessary to prove the death of the one who made it because a will or covenant is enforced only when someone has died. It never takes effect while the one who made it is living.

This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. When Moses had proclaimed every command of the law to all the people, he took the blood of the calves together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop and sprinkled the scroll and all the people.

[17:32] He said, this is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you to keep. Now, these verses are actually quite hard to try and understand but I think what we're meant to take out of it is that Jesus' death not only satisfied the requirements of the first covenant which you read earlier, it was also necessary to initiate the new covenant.

And that's because if you look at all the covenants in the Bible, each one is actually inaugurated or started with blood. So the specific example here used is the one at Mount Sinai which Moses used blood to initiate.

But there are other examples as well. So the covenant of Noah and Abraham, each one of those actually involved the sacrifice of animals as a right of initiation.

Now, we're not told exactly why this is the case. It could signify that God is actually making a covenant with sinners and therefore forgiveness was needed before God could enter into that covenant. Or it could show the solemnness of the covenant similar to how sometimes blood oaths are used in certain cultures to show how serious these promises are and how seriously the person entering into that covenant has to take it.

Either way, the point is that Jesus' death and blood actually serves a double purpose. First, it was to free the people from the sins under the first covenant and then to initiate the new covenant.

[19:04] In verse 23, it's described as the better sacrifices that are needed for the heavenly things. Not because the heavenly things need a purification, see, there's no sin in heaven, but rather because if sinful humans are to be party to this new covenant and humanity is to enter God's presence, then a perfect sacrifice is needed to initiate this covenant.

And so this is now where the writer finally lands by drawing it all together in verse 24 to 28. Where the first covenant and earthly tabernacle failed in bringing humans into God's presence, Jesus now achieves this through his blood and death and he offers himself as our high priest in the true tabernacle, not on earth, but in heaven.

And this is now the basis for the new covenant. So we read in verse 24, for Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one.

He entered heaven itself now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again the way the high priest entered the most holy place every year with blood that is not his own.

Otherwise, Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. [20 : 29] Just as people are destined to die once and after that to face judgment, Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins for many. And he will appear a second time not to bear sin but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

Now that's a rather long section there and some aspects of it I'm actually going to save for next week because it's actually dealt with again in chapter 10. But tonight I just want to reflect on that remarkable truth in verse 24.

So if you look there it says Jesus has entered heaven itself there to appear for us in God's presence. You see this gulf between humanity and God is finally bridged because Jesus as our human high priest he's a human has entered heaven on our behalf.

He has now opened a way for us to enter God's presence. And so we don't have to rely on an earthly high priest anymore who can only enter this one place called the most holy place once a year which was never where God really dwelled anyway.

Instead our access is opened into God's true tabernacle and we can now approach God anytime anywhere by his spirit.

[21 : 58] And so we now have this really intimate relationship with God that wasn't possible without Jesus. And in fact this intimate relationship with God is still not possible unless you have Jesus.

And we don't need to approach God now with any sort of fear that fire might come out to consume us. There's no need to hide our sin or wrongdoing because Jesus has cleansed our consciences for real.

Every wrong we've done, every hurt we've caused others, everything that you're too ashamed to admit to somebody else, that has all been forgiven by God because of Jesus, because of the shedding of His blood.

And so we are now free as it says in verse 14 to serve the living God. We can approach God and we can serve Him without fear.

But at the same time we still need to realize that the God that we serve is still a holy God. That has not changed.

[23 : 12] The sins that were abhorrent to Him under the old covenant is still abhorrent to Him now under the new. And so serving Him actually means we need to live holy lives that are pleasing to Him.

And so that's the balance we must hold, isn't it? To on the one hand approach God confidently without fear and yet on the other hand, whether we're individuals or as a Christian community at 5 o'clock or as a church at HCD, we need to still realize that we're serving a holy God.

So on the one hand, we must be a gracious and forgiving community because each of us has been graciously cleansed by the blood of Jesus. And yet at the same time, it doesn't mean God's standard of holiness no longer applied.

Lying is still wrong. Being unfaithful is still wrong. Greed, slander, malice, bitterness, sexual impurity, these are all still wrong.

And so we need to strive to rid ourselves of these things, to check ourselves constantly, to lovingly correct one another, so that we encourage each other to live holy lives for God.

[24 : 30] Practically, this means we need to ask the hard questions of each other from time to time. It means praying for each other. It means not putting each other under temptation.

But it also means that we forgive each other when we are wrong, so that we don't weigh others down with the burdens that Jesus himself has already lifted from them.

Friends, I don't know how you feel, but to me, this is one of the greatest joys in life, to be able to live our lives in God's presence. And what a privilege it is to be able to serve him by living holy lives and ridding ourselves of the things that God has died, or Christ has died, to free us from.

We have this true fellowship with God right now. Yes, it is spiritual, but one day, one day if we persevere, it will also be physical.

That is, we will join our high priest in heaven for eternity in God's presence. And I can't wait for that.

[25 : 45] But in the meantime, let us live to serve our holy God. Let's pray. Father, we thank you that Jesus has gone into your presence on our behalf with himself, offering himself, and the blood that he has shed on the cross.

Thank you that we have this great access to you by the Spirit, through Jesus Christ. Help us to live so that we might please you.

Help us to know what great price was paid for our sin, and therefore abhor the very sins that we were saved from. We pray this and ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.