

Breaking the Barrier

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[0 : 00] So I wonder if you've ever been refused entry anywhere, if you've ever been told you can't come in, if you've ever been told keep out. Lots of reasons it might happen. Maybe you weren't dressed properly. Maybe you weren't a member of an exclusive group.

Maybe it was private property or maybe there was something going on that you just hadn't been invited to. Maybe it wasn't safe because there was something happening. Back when I used to work for the police and police headquarters in Inverness, there were rooms and entire corridors that I wasn't allowed into.

Even though I'd worked there for 17 years, I didn't have the right security clearance. I couldn't go in. Sometimes it's easy to understand why you can't go in somewhere, but there's something about being told that you have to keep out, isn't there?

That makes you really want to know what's going on. It makes you really want to go in and see what's happening. Now, in the passage that we just read from Genesis, we finish with Adam and Eve being told to keep out.

And that's what we're going to look at in some ways. This warning, this keep out that we see. And they knew exactly what it was that they were missing, what they were being kept out from.

[1 : 24] Because they had been there. And then they got thrown out. Because the book of Genesis, it's the beginning of the big story of the Bible.

And it tells of a perfect world. A garden. A fantastic place. Where everything you could ever want was right there.

It had been created to be just right for Adam and Eve to be in. And the most wonderful thing about it, the most amazing thing, was that God was there.

And not just in the same way that we can say that God is everywhere. God was there in a special way. He was present there. He walked with our first parents.

And he talked with them. And they saw him face to face, enjoying his presence. Now, it's hard for us to get our head around that, isn't it?

[2 : 26] Can you imagine what that must have been like? Because in the garden, there was no sadness. There was no death.

There was no remorse. There was no loneliness. There was no emptiness. Surely you would think that that would be everything anybody could ever want.

You would think. But no. Because our first parents, our forebearers, they wanted more.

They wanted to take God's place. That's what the fall is really about. That's what sin really is. They had been denied nothing that they needed.

But they were unwilling to let God be in charge. They were not content to be with God. They wanted to be God. They wanted to be in control.

[3 : 25] So they rejected God's authority. And that is what it means to sin. But there was a consequence. They wanted to reject God.

And in their way, they managed to do that. But you see, a perfect place must be without sin. You cannot have sin and perfection together.

And people often ask, if there's a God, why doesn't he just get rid of all the evil, all the sin? But what they fail to understand is that in order to do that, he has to remove every person with sin and evil in their hearts.

Even just a trace. That would be all of us. And so it was that there was no place in this perfect garden for sin. Adam and Eve had their wish, in a way.

They were free from God. But at what a terrible price. Because by taking the fruit that God had told them not to eat, they gave up their place in paradise.

[4 : 30] Sin cannot stand in the presence of God. And so they had to leave. We read about that in verses 22 and 23 of the passage that we looked at.

God had to drive them out. And in verse 24, at the entrance, to ensure that they understood that there was no going back, God placed the cherubim.

Their job, as it would be again and again, was to stand before the presence of God and guard the way to the throne. Now, before we go on, it's really important that we get one thing clear.

Some of you may be aware cherubim is just a Hebrew plural of the word cherub. So cherubim, cherubs. But it's really, really important that we shake off any image that we have of chubby little children with feathery wings and very small bow and arrows.

That's not what the Bible is talking about. The cherubim are God's throne guard. And they are terrifying. In the book of Ezekiel, he tries to describe them as he sees them as part of his vision.

[5 : 52] In the first 15 verses of chapter 1 of Ezekiel, he describes them as a windstorm. He talks about them as flashing lightning, shapes within a fire, like humans, but with four faces and four wings.

And there's something about the way his descriptions of them vary slightly every time he talks about them that makes it clear that what he is trying to encapsulate in words, what he's trying to capture is something which transcends language.

He's trying to describe the indescribable. You don't get a much clearer keep out sign than a cherubim with a flaming sword.

You're not going to see that on a Christmas card anytime soon. So there in the garden, we have God's presence right there. And if we look at verse 22 of Genesis, we see that the tree of life was also right there for the taking.

How wonderful that would be. How amazing. How amazing. But because of their sin, they cannot go in. Keep out.

[7 : 04] And so there they are. And there we are, represented by our first parents. Cast out of the garden. Shut out from the glory of God's presence.

Because of our sin, we can't go in. This theme is going to be something which is repeated again and again throughout the Bible. In the book of Exodus, God calls his people out in Egypt.

And he starts forming them into a nation. And at this point, they're nomadic. They're wandering in the desert. But before they start their journey, God gives them some special instructions.

He tells them to build a tabernacle. A tabernacle is basically an enormous tent. It's like a portable building. That can be set up when you make camp and then broken down and moved on in time for the next camp.

And the whole point of the tabernacle is to remind the people that God's presence is there. To remind them of God's presence.

[8 : 10] In fact, deep inside the tabernacle is a special room called the Holy of Holies. The most holy place. And in that place, you can find the glory of God himself.

That symbolic manifestation of his presence right there at the heart of the camp every day and every night. How amazing would that be?

God's presence and the camp centered on it. But God ordered them to do something else, you see. He ordered them to make a massive curtain.

An enormous curtain. Listen to what it says in Exodus chapter 26 verses 31 to 33. Where we read God's instructions to the people. He says, make a curtain of blue, purple and scarlet yarn.

And finely twisted linen with cherubim woven into it by a skilled worker. Hang it with gold hooks on four posts of acacia wood overlaid with gold and standing on four silver bases.

[9 : 17] Hang the curtain from the clasps and place the Ark of the Covenant law behind the curtain. The curtain will separate the holy place from the most holy place.

There they are again. Verse 31. The cherubim. Just as they were in Genesis chapter 3. Standing before the presence of God. Blocking the way into the most holy place and saying, keep out.

God is present in your midst. But because of your sin, you can't come in. A reminder of what humanity had lost when sin entered the world and our ancestors were cast from the garden.

And for hundreds of years, this would continue. The tabernacle traveled with the Israelites throughout their wanderings.

And in time, they settled in the land that God had promised them. And the tabernacle was set up there. Eventually, the tabernacle was replaced by a permanent building. The temple.

[10:22] So that they'd have that permanent reminder to symbolically remind them of God's dwelling with them. And if you ever take the time to read the descriptions of the decorations inside the temple.

It screams garden. And right within it was the Holy of Holies. God's dwelling place. And all throughout that time, it was there.

And so was the curtain. The curtain with its fearsome, forbidden cherubim. Taking us right back to Genesis 3. Keep out. Just imagine that.

For hundreds of years, that bittersweet tension between having God's presence right there at the heart of your community. But being kept from it.

Because of your sin, you can't come in. Keep out. A constant reminder of what had been lost in the fall. God was present, but none could stand in his presence.

[11:30] And so the cherubim remained, warning us to keep out. And then, one day, something happened.

Someone new came onto the scene. Someone new, but at the same time, immeasurably old. Because God knew that we couldn't come into his presence. So instead, he came to us. Jesus, God incarnate.

God as man, walked this earth. He came to teach. He came to teach. In the towns. In the streets. In the courts of the temple itself.

Jesus told the people that he had come to make things right. To repair the damage done by our sin. He brought a radical message.

[12:31] For hope. For hope. But once again, the people made a dark and terrible choice.

Just like Adam and Eve, when they believed the serpent's lie, they chose to reject God. We will not have this man to rule over us.

That's what they said. We would rather turn our backs on everything wonderful that God has to offer than acknowledge that he is in control.

And just to make this absolutely clear, they took Jesus and they killed him. They trumped up charges of sedition and blasphemy and they nailed him to a cross to die in agony.

And we can read about his last moments in Mark's Gospel, chapter 15. Listen to what God's Word says. Mark, chapter 15, verse 33. At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon.

[13:46] And at three in the afternoon, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani. Which means, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

When some of those standing near heard this, they said, listen, he's calling Elijah. Someone ran and filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff and offered it to Jesus to drink.

Now, leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down, he said. With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

Look again at that last verse there. The curtain of the temple was torn in two. As the light of the world hung, dying in darkness, as the incarnate God, through whom and by whom all things were created, was reduced to crying out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

At the very moment that he breathed his last and gave up his spirit, the curtain, the keep out curtain, with its cherubim, was torn in two.

[15:06] Through his sacrifice, the keep out sign was finally ripped aside. And in that way, he said, come in.

Oh, my children, come in. Come in. For all this time, our sin, the result of that fall in Genesis 3, had kept us from being able to come into God's presence.

And the keep out curtain, this angelic guard, had reminded us of that, reminding us of the garden paradise that we could not return to. Throughout the history of God's people, there had only been one way a person could pass the cherubim and come into God's presence.

Once a year, at the time of atonement, the high priest and him alone could enter in. But he could only do so after making sacrifices for his own sins and only in order to make sacrifice for the people. Only when cleansed with the blood of sacrificial lambs could he cross through and pass between the cherubim. And this ritual served as a reminder of God's promises to his people.

[16:30] While the sacrifice lambs served as a reminder of the price of sin. But no amount of lamb's blood could pay the price of humanity's sin.

And so the ritual had to be repeated again and again, year in and year out. Every time passing the cherubim, that reminder of the terrible consequences of trying to stand before God in our sin. But in Jesus, finally, we see the realization of the promise which was first hinted at in Genesis 3, verse 15.

The promised one who comes to crush Satan's head. We see the culmination of the thread that unravels the curtain.

Because not only was Jesus the final and perfect high priest, who has no sin of his own that he has to make restitution for, but he was the perfect and final lamb, whose blood pays the price, is sufficient to pay the price for the sins of everybody who trusts in him.

[17 : 49] And Hebrews, Hebrews chapter 10 tells us that when this high priest had made his sacrifice, he sat down. Job done. It is finished.

And so, at last, the keep out sign, the curtain, and its fearsome cherubim is torn apart. And he says, come in, come home.

The barrier is gone, and the way back home is thrown open. Come in, come in. And that is how it is for the believer in Jesus.

So, how is it for you? Is the curtain still there for you?

Do the cherubim still bar your way, reminding you that because of your sin, you can't come in? In your sin, you can't stand before God? Because it doesn't have to be that way.

[19 : 00] Jesus' sacrifice is sufficient to cover all the sins for all those who trust in him. And if you don't want to be standing out here on the wrong side of the curtain, on the wrong side of the cherubim, then all you need to do is to call out to him.

To put your trust in him. And when you do that, when you do that, he will take away your sin.

Not just that. He will give you his righteousness in its place. He will tear open the keep-out curtain and he will say to you, come in.

Come home. Psalm 118, verses 19 and 20 says, Open for me the gates of the righteous.

I will enter and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter. We can't be righteous in our own stead.

[20 : 27] We can't be righteous in our own right. But we can with him. Will you come in, my friends? Will you come in?

Let's bow our heads briefly in prayer. Lord God, we thank you for this word. We thank you for your word, for the promises contained within it.

We thank you for the fact that you have paid the price which we never could, that your son, Jesus Christ, God incarnate, perfect priest, perfect lamb, has broken down the barriers so that we might stand one day in your presence wrapped in his righteousness.

We pray now, Lord, that you would bless the word to our hearts, that you would speak to us, that you would enliven us, that you would set it on fire within us, that it would be working within us and changing us and challenging us.

We thank you for your goodness and your grace. In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.