

Faith: Draw Near

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[0 : 0 0] If you're looking in one of the Pew Bibles, it's page 1007. Hebrews chapter 10, beginning at verse 19, says this, Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain that is through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Let me pray for us. Lord, we pray that as you call us to draw near to you, that you would draw near to us today by your spirit, as we listen to your word.

In Jesus' name, amen. If you take a walk this afternoon through downtown New Haven, and if you look carefully at some of the buildings along the edges of the Yale campus, you may notice several buildings that have no windows.

One of them is just a few blocks up Grove Street. So a two-story marble building with impressive Corinthian columns facing the entrance to the Grove Street Cemetery.

[1 : 5 8] It belongs to a society called Book and Snake, one of Yale's older secret societies, founded 150 years ago. There are several other such buildings throughout campus.

Now over the years, Yale's secret societies have aroused plenty of curiosity. What is contained inside these imposing windowless buildings, known as tombs, that no one else is allowed to enter?

What exactly happens when the societies meet on Thursday and Sunday nights? Are some of these societies at the center of a giant conspiracy to take over the world? Well, conspiracy theories aside, the phenomenon of secret societies is interesting because of how they have persisted over time, and even grown.

There are probably a dozen or even more active secret societies for seniors at Yale. Every April, a new class of rising seniors is tapped, and you can see them walking around campus in all kinds of masks and costumes on some night a couple weeks ago and invited to join each society for the next year.

Now you might ask, what is the point of speaking about this in a sermon at church, and what is the attraction of these secret societies? Well, I would say the phenomenon of secret societies is only one instance of a widespread human longing.

[3 : 1 5] Don't we all long to be on the inside of something great and important, of something intimate and personal? Isn't that a large part of what attracts Yale students to secret societies?

They promise a road to potential greatness, an elite network of students and alumni to which you are now connected for the rest of your life. And they also promise a place of intimate trust, where everyone shares their life stories and their deepest secrets, and you know that you are safe.

Now whether it's a secret society or a college fraternity or a sports team or a political movement or a military hierarchy or a musician's collective or a mom's network or an inner city gang or simply a group of friends, don't we all long to be on the inside of something or other?

We want to be connected to something great and important, and we want to be accepted intimately and personally. Now our desire to be on the inside can also create problems.

C.S. Lewis wrote a thought-provoking essay on this topic entitled *The Inner Ring*. Now he said the fact that inner rings or inner circles exist is not inherently bad.

[4 : 32] In fact, it's necessary for families and societies and governments to run. But he says our desire to get in or stay in, an inner circle, presents one of the most powerful temptations to compromise what we know to be true and right.

And besides that, being on the inside isn't always what it's rumored to be. To take just one example, from the outside, it might seem like if you can get into Yale, you've got it made.

You have all the brains and all the connections that you will ever need. But if you are on the inside, if you're a Yale student, almost no one thinks that way. I don't think I've ever met a Yale student except for an occasional freshman.

Who is fully satisfied simply by being at Yale. Right? When you get into Yale, it's like peeling back the outer layer of an onion.

And you see how many more inner circles are contained inside. And how much farther you have to go to really make it in. Isn't that one of the driving motivations behind the 300 extracurricular organizations that exist at Yale?

[5 : 48] And all the career networks and secret societies and all everything else. We long to be on the inside of something great and intimate and lasting. But we feel that we haven't got there yet.

Or even if we have made it in, we have to constantly work to maintain our status. to make sure that we don't get pushed out, left behind.

Now the passage we're looking at this morning speaks to our human longing to be on the inside of something great and intimate and lasting.

And it shows us that there is a way to enter in to what we were truly made for. Verse 19 says, We have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus.

By a new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain. And then it says, Therefore let us draw near with a true heart and full assurance of faith.

[6 : 51] Now this morning's passage comes at a crucial turning point in the book of Hebrews, which we've been going through as a church this year. Up to this point, Hebrews has been primarily teaching about who Jesus Christ is.

The Son of God who became our brother. The King of Heaven who became our priest. The mediator of a new covenant.

Opening the way to a new relationship with God through his sacrifice on the cross. But from here on out, the emphasis shifts to application or exhortation. In other words, what it looks like practically to live in light of the reality of Jesus.

And this morning's passage is the hinge on which almost the whole book of Hebrews turns. Verses 19 through 25 are one long sentence in the original Greek.

And verses 19 through 21 point back to what we've already seen. Verses 22 through 25 lay out the agenda for the rest of the book. And so we'll be looking at these verses not only this week but also the next two weeks.

[8 : 00] There are three exhortations that he presents in verses 22 through 25. First, to draw near with faith in Christ. Second, to hold fast to hope.

And third, to stir up one another to love. Faith, hope, and love. And the rest of the book of Hebrews develops these themes in greater detail. So chapter 11 focuses on the theme of faith.

Giving examples and pictures of what it means to live by faith. Chapter 12 focuses on hope. Looking forward to the eternal kingdom of God that cannot be shaken.

That sustains us through painful suffering in the present. And chapter 13 focuses on love. And gives concrete exhortations and encouragements to love one another both within the Christian community and outside it.

So that's what we'll be looking for, at, for the, for our, our summer until the end of August. Is these themes, is these themes of faith and hope and love as a response to who Jesus Christ is.

[9 : 10] And these themes are, are intertwined. They're sort of like a rope that you can't, that's tangled together. Faith is defined as assurance or conviction that God is trustworthy based on what God has done in the past.

Hope looks forward to the future, to the joy set before us. And love is what we are called to display in the present. Now this morning we're focusing in particular on the theme of faith and the invitation to draw near to God in faith, not to enter in.

So I want to look at three questions. First, what exactly are we entering into? Second, why can we be confident to enter in?

And third, how can we enter in? What, why, and how? So first, what exactly is Hebrews promising that we can get into? Well the answer is the presence of God.

Verse 19, he calls it the holy places. Verse 21, he calls it the house of God. Now according to the Bible, human beings were made in God's image to dwell in God's presence.

[10 : 24] The book of Genesis describes the home that God created for human beings as a fruitful garden. And this garden would be a temple where God, the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, would dwell in intimate and secure and loving relationship with his people, providing for them.

Walking with them, speaking with them as a father with his children. And this garden would also be a palace from which God would extend his glorious reign through all the earth.

Through us, his image bearers, his representatives, his vice regents. The garden was the ultimate place of greatness and intimacy.

Dwelling with the sovereign Lord of the universe, ruling over his creation, and we were on the inside. But then one day, an intruder made his way into the garden who questioned God's power and God's goodness and tempted our first parents to listen to him instead of God.

And instead of taking up our rightful authority and kicking him out, we took his side. We decided that instead of living with God, we should try to be our own God.

[11 : 43] instead of trusting God, we should trust ourselves more than God. Instead of living within God's purposes, we should make our own meaning.

And so we messed everything up. And all of us have continued down that same track. And so the story goes, we had to leave the garden. We had to leave the palace of God's glorious greatness and the temple of God's intimate presence.

and we became outsiders, excluded from God's presence by our own willful rebellion. And in our fallen state, every one of us has continued in that direction.

But even in our fallen state, we still bear the image of God. And so we long for what we lost so long ago. We long to get back on the inside of something great intimate.

And when we look at human history, or even when we think about the story of our own lives, isn't it full of attempts to construct a fruitful garden, a glorious palace, an intimate temple?

[12 : 57] Isn't that what we seek in so many different ways? But the problem is even our best efforts only produce temporary copies and fading shadows or even cheap substitutes of what we lost so long ago, the glorious presence of God himself.

But now the author of Hebrews says, there is a new and living way open for us to enter the holy places, to enter this glorious palace of God's presence in this intimate temple of his mercy, to enter into his house and be part of his family.

That's why he calls the people brothers and sisters. That's those who have been brought in to the family of God.

So that's the promise of what we can enter into. But that raises the second question. how can the writer be so confident that we can enter in?

If we've been excluded from God's presence by our rebellion and we've messed it all up, how can we be so confident that we can enter in?

[14 : 20] Now in the historical context when he was writing, the writer of Hebrews was making an unprecedented claim here. He was writing to people coming from a Jewish background who would have been familiar with the temple in Jerusalem and the laws and regulations in the Old Testament.

But the temple in Jerusalem was certainly not open to all. There was an outer court where anyone could go, but then there was a wall separating the outer court from the inner court.

And there were large warning signs posted warning all Gentiles. anyone who was not Jewish, warning all Gentiles not to enter the inner court on penalty of death.

And even if you were Jewish, you could go into the inner court but not into the actual holy places. Only the priests could enter into the holy places to offer sacrifices on the altar.

And only the high priest could enter into the most holy place, which represented the very throne room of God. it was a place which had within it something called the mercy seat.

[15 : 34] The very throne of God, the very presence of God, and only, he could only enter once a year, and only with a sacrifice to offer on behalf of himself and on behalf of the people.

And this was not just the custom of the Jewish people at that time, it was the command of God in the Hebrew Bible, in the Old Testament. You see, the temple in Jerusalem was not a place where anyone and everyone could come freely into the presence of God, it was more like a miniature version of the Forbidden City, where no one could enter or leave without the emperor's permission on pain of death.

Now, in our modern culture, we can often assume that God should be accessible to us, that God should be available.

We've lost the sense of the barriers between us and the holy and perfect creator of the universe. We've lost the sense that they would have had of the inherent danger of rebellious human beings, self-centered human beings encountering a radically pure and holy God.

The writer of Hebrews probably understood this better than most of us naturally do. And so it's even more striking that he says, as he does in verse 19, we have confidence to enter the holy places.

[17 : 06] In other words, we have official authorization, we have freedom of access, we have a promised welcome, because a new and living way has been opened for us.

Through the curtain, through the barriers that separated us from God himself. The image is of a trail being blazed, of a highway being laid down through previously inaccessible territory.

That's the image of a champion who throws himself into the middle of a raging battle so that he might open a new path to victory along the track of his own life blood.

And the writer of Hebrews says, this is what Jesus, the Son of God, has done. The eternal Son of God, the King of Glory, became flesh and blood.

In other words, a fully human being. He willingly became our brother. He lived the life that we ought to have lived. A life of perfect, trusting obedience to God, even to the point of death on the cross, where he died the death that we deserve to die.

[18 : 25] And then he rose again. Three days later, demonstrating his victory over sin and death for all who would believe. Verse 12 in this chapter says, he offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins.

And then he sat down at the right hand of God, having completed his work. Through his flesh and through his blood, offered on our behalf, Jesus has opened up a new and living way for us to enter into the presence of God.

Because, and he can do this because he is the Lord of heaven and earth. He's the great king who rules over everything, but he has become our priest. In other words, our advocate, the one who stands for us and intercedes for us.

And as our brother, as our priest, as a fellow human being, he has gone into the very presence of God. He is seated at the right hand of God. So we can enter into the palace of God's glorious greatness, knowing that the one who sits on the throne is our very own flesh and blood.

Our brother. Our champion. Our king. Jesus. And not only that, Jesus is the son of God, who lived from all eternity in intimate relationship with the father and the Holy Spirit.

[19 : 55] And he has now become our brother so that he might join us to himself and that we might enter into that intimate union with God himself.

And know God's secure and loving presence. He's saying that through Jesus we can approach God with the confidence of a little child running up to her daddy.

We can be confident to enter God's glorious and intimate presence through Jesus. So third, how?

What does it look like? How do we actually enter in to God's presence? Well, in the Old Testament, the high priest would enter into the most holy place, but he would only enter in for a very short time.

He would offer his sacrifices, he would do his thing, and then he would get out until next year because it wasn't safe for him to stay. But the offer of Hebrews is saying not only can we go in to the presence of God, we can stay.

[21 : 08] We can rest. We can be there. We don't have to worry about being pushed out because our status as sons and daughters of the king is secure.

So he says in verse 22, he says in light of all this that Jesus has done, he says let us draw near. With a true heart. In full assurance of faith.

With our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. If you want to summarize this verse in two words, it would be truth and trust.

Draw near to God in truth, he says, with a true heart. A heart that has been sprinkled clean from an evil conscience. Well, for one thing, that means we should approach God without pretending.

Without trying to hide our flaws or without trying to impress him by our good deeds. It's almost the exact opposite of how any career services office would tell you to approach a job interview.

[22 : 18] Right? They would say, dress smartly. Bring a resume listing all your skills and accomplishments and none of your weaknesses and failures. Put your best foot forward.

But with God, all of that would be utterly futile and foolish. It would be as futile as a high school student waking up in the morning, getting dressed in your nicest clothes, printing out a copy of your resume on resume paper, and writing a snazzy cover letter in order to go downstairs and present yourself to your mom, who's cooking you breakfast, hoping to make an impression on her and earn her favor.

I think your mom will not be very impressed. She might be amused. She might think you're doing this to practice. But if she realizes that you're doing this to try to impress her, she already knows everything about you.

She knows your strengths and weaknesses better than you do. And her love for you is not dependent on the image that you project. I mean, she changed your messy diapers for years before you even knew what she was doing.

You're already an object of her love and favor. You're already on the inside. And it wasn't because you did anything to deserve it.

[23 : 43] Just because she's your mom and she will always love you. And in the same way, faking with God is futile.

Not only because God sees and knows the truth about us, but also because in Jesus Christ we are objects of His eternal favor. His unmerited grace.

He gave His own life for us on the cross to prove it so that we who were once outsiders might come in and be part of His family forever.

So we can draw near to God in truth. But also we can draw near to God in trust. In the full assurance of faith. Because He has proven Himself worthy of our trust.

You know, when the Bible talks about faith, it does not mean what some people think. It does not mean believing that something is true apart from any evidence and contrary to all rational thought.

[24 : 50] That is wishful thinking. That is not biblical faith. If you're skeptical whether there is solid evidence for the Christian faith, I encourage you to look into it.

Read through one of the New Testament Gospels. Read through Tim Keller's book, *The Reason for God*, as a start. Talk to people who are Christians and consider.

But in the context of the Bible, faith refers to trust. Trusting a person. In particular, trusting the person of Jesus Christ who died and rose from the grave.

Who has demonstrated Himself through His death and resurrection to be supremely worthy of our trust. trust. So let us draw near to God in truth and in trust.

And you know, it's interesting, it doesn't simply say, let each one of you draw near to God in truth and trust, but it says, let us draw near.

[25 : 56] So this truth and trust should increasingly characterize not only our individual relationships with God, but also our community life, our worship and prayer and fellowship and community as a church.

So let me close with four brief exhortations for us built on this invitation to draw near. First, let us confess our sins and share our struggles honestly.

Instead of feeling like we have to hide or make excuses or justify them. because the sacrifice of Jesus Christ covers our sin and our guilt.

In Jesus Christ our hearts have been made new and so we're free to acknowledge our sins before God and even before each other, knowing that in Jesus Christ we have found mercy.

And we will continue to find mercy. James 5 says, confess your sins to one another and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

[27 : 02] confession of sin is the first step toward freedom from its grip. So let us be honest and not hide.

Second, let us bring before God our grief, our anger, our sorrow and all the other ugly emotions that we feel. Let us bring those into the presence of God through prayer instead of stuffing them away or trying to deal with them in some other way.

You know, if you read the Psalms, they will help you do this. To bring everything that we might feel into the presence of God. So let's bring our emotional life before God so that in his presence our emotions can be healed and transformed.

Third, let us praise God with assurance and joy and abandon. Drawing near is not only about confessing our sin or dealing with our negative emotions, it's also about rejoicing with exceeding great joy.

The way has been opened. We have freedom of access to go into the palace of God's greatness and the temple of his intimate presence. That's a reason to praise the Lord.

[28 : 24] It's a reason to say amen. So whether you shout amen or raise your hands in surrender or kneel before God in adoration or clap your hands or jump for joy or simply smile and sing, rejoice.

For we have a great privilege in drawing near to God through Jesus. Fourth, and finally, let us celebrate baptism.

that's what we're going to do today. And it even connects to our text. Verse 22 says, Our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Baptism is a public expression of what it means to draw near to God with truth and trust. Most likely the author is reminding the hearers of their baptism, the physical sign of identifying with Jesus through faith in his death and resurrection.

And because it is a physical act, baptism also reminds us that the cleansing work of Christ extends even to our physical bodies.

[29 : 40] You know, our hearts and our bodies have been affected by our fallen nature. Right? He's talked about how our hearts and our conscience can be cleansed, our sin and guilt and shame can be removed.

But even our bodies are set apart for God in a new way through the work of Christ. You know, some of you might feel this very keenly, the sense of how our fallen nature has affected our bodies.

Maybe you can identify particular destructive behaviors from the past that have brought harm to your body. perhaps when you look at yourself in the mirror, you feel ashamed.

You feel dirty and defiled because of something that you did or someone else did to you in the past. But this verse has good news for you.

It's saying that in Jesus Christ your heart has been washed clean and your body has also been washed. Your body has been set apart for life in God's kingdom.

[30 : 47] your body is not damaged goods. Your physical body has been purified by the sacrifice of Christ. And it is now a vessel dedicated for holy and honorable service to God.

The Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6, do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you?

Whom you have from God. You are not your own, for you were bought at a great price. So glorify God in your body. And baptism, having our body plunged into the water and raised again, is a physical sign of the totality of Christ's cleansing work.

That he has purified our conscience and he has set us apart body and soul for life in his kingdom, in his family. So let us draw near with truth and trust because we have confidence to enter through Jesus.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we praise you, our great king and our brother who is drawn near to us.

[32 : 25] Lord, it is only because you have drawn near to us and even become one of us and took our guilt and sin upon yourself and carried it to the grave and rose again and you are seated at the right hand of God, interceding for us, advocating for us.

Lord, because of that, we have this great confidence to approach you. Lord, we pray that we would draw near with truth and with trust, with reverence and with joy, with confidence and assurance.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.