

Ultimate Atonement

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[0 : 0 0] Please take a seat and we'll ask God to bless our time together. Heavenly Father, you have said that we are your temple by the Holy Spirit on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone.

Please build us up in him and through your word as we fix our eyes on your heavenly temple and the great work of our true high priest.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord.

Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage as they pass through the valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs. The autumn rains also cover it with pools.

They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion. Well, living near God, as Andrew observed in his sermon last week, is the most wonderful, glorious and enchanting privilege that humans can experience.

[1 : 2 1] Where God lives among people, there is liberty for captives and protection from enemies. Where God lives among people, there is an abundance of life and healing.

Where God lives among people, rivers of living water flow forth from the Garden of Eden at the beginning of the Bible, from the temple, from the temple, in the visions of Ezekiel and Revelation, from human hearts, as Jesus describes in John's Gospel.

For humans, living near God is the greatest possible blessing. And indeed, it's the source of every other blessing. And yet, as we've seen in the last two weeks, living near God is also a paradoxical thing.

First, in the Old Testament, it is dangerous to come near God. He's a holy God who destroys sinners and destroys those who come close to him in a careless or arrogant manner.

Coming near to God, therefore, requires sacrifices and ceremonies and priestly mediators. Ordinary people in the Old Testament can come to the place where God puts his presence.

[2 : 4 1] They can come near to Mount Sinai. They can come to the tabernacle or temple. But they can't get too close or they will die. Coming close to God is dangerous.

Another aspect of this in the Old Testament is that getting close to God is actually impossible. One of the peculiar things about the Old Testament is the way it keeps sending mixed signals about the presence of God.

A classic example of this is in Exodus 33, verse 11, where we read that Moses met with God and spoke to him face to face as a man speaks with a friend. And yet only nine verses later, God warns Moses that he cannot see him face to face.

No one can see my face and live, he tells Moses. The same kind of paradox occurs when God establishes his presence among the Israelites through the tabernacle.

And the most important part of that structure is the small room at the center where God is most present and nobody can go except for the high priest, very briefly, one time a year.

[3 : 50] Another aspect of this same paradox is where Solomon turns that tabernacle into a temple and acknowledges as he does so that God doesn't actually live in temples.

1 Kings 8, verse 27, he says, But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you, how much less this temple I have built.

So the Old Testament leaves us with a very strange situation. Getting close to God is highly desirable. And yet it is also dangerous and impossible.

The New Testament, however, has a very different message. Not because God has become relaxed about sin or because sinners themselves have become less sinful. In the New Testament, things have changed radically because God has done something radical through Jesus Christ.

And that's what our passage from Hebrews today is all about. The author of Hebrews wants us to understand that through Jesus Christ, God has overcome all the problems of approaching God.

[4 : 59] The work of God in Jesus has given us far better access to God, a far better sacrifice for sins, and a far better life to live now.

Far better access to God, a far better sacrifice for sins, and a far better life to live now. The first thing that the writer of Hebrews wants us to know is that Jesus gives us far better access to God.

In his Chronicle Jewish Antiquities, the Jewish historian and Levite, Josephus, says that the Jewish tabernacle was originally designed as a model of heaven and earth.

He says that the holy place where the priests did their daily work and offered their sacrifices was a symbol of the land and sea where mortals dwell. He says that the inner sanctuary, or the most holy place, symbolized heaven itself, a place peculiar to God, as he puts it.

Now, the Old Testament doesn't quite spell things out like this, but his explanation of the temple does fit. We now know that there were many temples of the ancient world that had a similar structure, and many of them were explicitly designed as models of the cosmos.

[6 : 16] And other Jewish writings outside the Old Testament say similar things. Some suggest that the candlestick of the priestly area symbolized the stars of the lower heavens. Elsewhere we read that the washing basin stood for the sea, or that the curtain which separated the most holy place from the outer room was a symbol of the firmament which divides the world of mortals from the heavens.

And most importantly, of course, Josephus' explanation resonates with what the writer of Hebrews tells us. He writes in chapter 8, verse 5, that they, that is the Jewish priesthood, serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and a shadow of what is in heaven.

For the writer of Hebrews, the tabernacle or temple provides a model of heaven, and the inner part of it, the most holy place, is designed specifically to show that humans have no place in heaven.

As he puts it in chapter 9, verses 7 and 8, 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.

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 in operation.

[7 : 43] Now, the reason why our writer wants to stress this is because he is very keen to highlight the difference between the priesthood of Jesus Christ and that of the Old Testament.

Hebrews is written to people who are being tempted to give up on Christianity and go back to the religion of the Old Testament, to a religion of signs and symbols.

But the point of Hebrews, consistently, is that this would be a huge mistake. Turning away from Jesus and going back to signs and ceremonies might be tempting because there's more to show for your religion.

Signs and symbols do have an attraction. But Jesus gives us more than signs and symbols. In fact, the argument here and elsewhere in Hebrews is that he gives us the very thing that those signs and symbols are pointing towards.

Verses 1 and 2 of chapter 8 make the point very clearly. The point of what we are saying is this. We do have such a high priest who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the majesty in heaven and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man.

[8 : 57] Jesus then is the true priest who serves in the true tabernacle. He repeats the point in verse 11 of chapter 9. When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not part of this creation.

The overall point is that there is an immense contrast between the priesthood of the Old Testament and Jesus. The high priest entered a model of God's presence once a year.

He sprinkled a bit of blood around to atone for his own sins and the sins of the people of Israel and then he fled for his life. In Leviticus 16.13 we read that the first thing he had to do was fill that room with smoke from incense just in case he should glimpse a vision of God and be struck down for it.

But with Jesus everything is different. He has entered not a model but heaven itself. He has entered not just for a short time but forever.

He has entered not simply with fear and trembling. In fact, he has been enthroned beside God's own throne in heaven. A statement which indicates firstly that his work is complete and secondly that he is as much at home in heaven as God himself.

[10 : 35] Jesus, in other words, gives us a perfected priesthood. The Old Testament system works with models but Jesus is the substance. Only Jesus has really seen the face of God.

Only Jesus has really gone into the presence of God. Only Jesus has remained there and is there right now. Now this is incredible and we should see it as incredible but we may not see just how incredible it is.

If we are aware of a bit of Christology and Trinitarian theology our temptation might be to think of course Jesus can go into heaven. He is God the Son the second person of the Trinity and he is perfect.

Of course he is at home in heaven. There is nothing particularly startling about that. But Hebrews 8 and 9 is not talking about Jesus as God's Son but in his capacity as our priest and representative.

The going into heaven that Hebrews is talking about is about the entry of our ambassador into the presence of God. Do you see why that is remarkable?

[11 : 51] If Jesus is our representative then his own righteousness can't help him. The priest and the people stand together. If the people are unacceptable the priest is unacceptable.

The only way Jesus can enter heaven like this is if the people he represents are pleasing to God as well. So how is that possible? How can sinners be acceptable to a holy God?

How can Jesus their representative stand or sit in heaven itself? Well verse 12 gives us the answer doesn't it?

How does Jesus enter heaven? He did not enter in chapter 9 verse 12. He did not enter by the means of the blood of goats and calves but he entered the most holy place once for all by his own blood having obtained eternal redemption.

Well this brings us to our next point doesn't it? Jesus enters gives us far better access to God by giving us a far better sacrifice for sins.

[13 : 04] Once again of course the thing to understand is that the Old Testament priesthood was all about symbols and outward signs. It operated out of a symbol of heaven. It used symbolic sacrifices in the form of bulls and goats and it dealt with sin symbolically making people ceremonially clean without really dealing at the fundamental level with their sins.

But the writer of Hebrews says that Jesus gives access to the true presence of God and he achieves it with a real sacrifice. Look at how he puts it in verses 13 and 14.

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.

So once again the thing that makes the difference is the blood of Christ. Christ the sacrifice of Jesus actually changed things. It happened once and it secured eternal redemption.

It means that anyone who puts their trust in Jesus hands their life over to him can be absolutely assured that their sins have been paid for. They have been bought back or redeemed as the passage says.

[14 : 34] They can approach with absolute confidence as the writer of Hebrews will go on to talk about in the next chapter. They have exactly the same access to God that Jesus their representative has.

No matter what sins they have committed in the past, no matter what sins they continue to struggle with in the present. The blood of Christ has taken care of it.

His death has taken it all away. A writer also tells us that the sacrifice of Jesus was a spiritual event. It happened in verse 14 through the eternal spirit and it has power to change lives.

This brings us to our third and final point about the work of Jesus. It gives us a far better life to live now. In Hebrews 9.13 the writer speaks of blood being sprinkled on those who are ceremonially clean.

Here I think he's referring not to the day of atonement so much but to Exodus 24. That was the moment at Sinai where the covenant was ratified. Moses read the law to the people and they shouted with one voice in response everything the Lord has said we will do.

[15 : 48] And Moses sprinkled them with the blood of the sacrifices and he turned and went up the mountain to meet with God. But as the history of Israel reveals the people were simply not able to live up to that commitment.

Within a matter of days of Moses departure the people had turned to idolatry and made themselves a golden calf. And that of course was just the beginning of a long and sad cycle of sin, judgment, repentance, mercy, followed by more sin and more judgment.

Jeremiah 31 God gives his assessment of the situation in the words that are quoted in Hebrews 8 verses 8 to 10. But God found fault with the people and said the time is coming declares the Lord when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.

It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt because they did not remain faithful to my covenant and I turned away from them declares the Lord.

This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people.

[17:05] So here is another problem with the Old Testament system. It lacked power to change people from within and Jesus fixes this too. How does he do it? Well a short answer might simply be to say that he does it by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus paid for our sins and he sends his spirit to help us change. And that answer would be right of course. Jesus both justifies us from our sins, makes us acceptable to God and he sends his spirit to sanctify us in the old terminology, to change us, to change our lives and actions and dispositions and affections.

He is changing us now. that is true but it's not quite what the writer of Hebrews wants to tell us here. He wants us to understand that the work of Christ which paid for our sins is the same work that makes us new in our actions.

Listen again to how he puts it in verses 13 and 14 of chapter 9. 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?

[18:32] Do you see what it is that allows us to serve the living God and to have our lives changed? Not a separate event that happens after we are forgiven here but it's the power of Jesus' blood itself.

The Holy Spirit changes us by assuring us that we can have clean consciences. He changes us by showing us that through Christ our High Priest we have complete access to God's presence.

That we are already as it were standing before God with our Saviour. In 2 Kings chapter 6 the prophet Elisha and his servant find themselves in a city that is besieged by enemy forces.

Elisha's servant of course is panicked by this and desperately is concerned about what will happen but Elisha prays that the servant's eyes would be opened and suddenly as the man looks about he sees that the hills are filled with horses and chariots of fire the angels of God.

Well the writer of Hebrews wants something similar for us. We, like his original readers, are full of distractions and worries and desperate cries.

[19:54] Christian faith often seems remote, something that has no great relevance for our daily lives and concerns. our eyes are full of ordinariness of the world and sometimes we even see Jesus that way too.

What he has done can seem ordinary to us. But Hebrews tells us that nothing could be further from the truth. God has raised us up with Christ and seated us in the heavenly realm, says Paul in Ephesians 2.6.

Our lives are hidden with God, he says in Colossians 3. 3. 3. 3. 3. 3. 3. 3. 3. 4. If our eyes were working perfectly, we would see that the gates of the heavenly sanctuary are open to us.

If our ears were working perfectly, we would hear the song of victory of tens of millions of angels and of the saints who have gone before us. If our nostrils were serving us truly, we would smell the incense from God's presence.

Hebrews 12. Hebrews 12.22-23 says, But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.

[21 : 09] You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect.

All this is true in Christ now. J.I. Packer in his book *Laid Back Religion* discusses the lost art of meditating on heaven.

He suggests that if we learn from our Puritan forebears and spend more time thinking about the great reality that Jesus has opened to us and that lies ahead of us, we would find it much easier to serve God in the present.

I think that is correct. The writer of Hebrews is trying to make the same point. If we had a clearer sense of what Christ has opened up to us, it would change our hearts and enable us to serve the living God.

It would change our prayers because we would know that they are presented to God by a perfect priest. It would change our attitude to our sufferings because we would know that they in no way indicate that God is against us.

[22 : 22] it would loosen our attachment to this world because we would know that a better and more real world is already upon us. It would fit us for service because we would know that our lives are already under the eye of our Lord and Saviour.

Jesus Christ has given us far better access to God, a far better sacrifice for sin, and in so doing has given us a far better life to live now.

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty. My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord. Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage as they pass through the valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs.

The autumn rains also cover it with pools. They go from strength to strength till each appears before God in Zion. Hear my prayer, O Lord God Almighty.

Listen to me, O God of Jacob. Amen.