

A Perfect Sacrifice

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[0 : 0 0] Gracious Heavenly Father, as you've caused the scriptures to be written by the power of your Spirit, so by the power of that same Spirit, teach us by these words, that we may know you through your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

In his name we pray. Amen. Well, I'm so pleased to be with you over these three Sundays, and it's a great joy to renew our fellowship in the Lord Jesus.

I do praise God for the ministry of this church, for your gospel ministry, for your outreach, and for your great support for God's global gospel mission.

It's also a great delight to be preaching on the letter to the Hebrews, and as I do so, I remember that William Gouge, who, in the 17th century, at St Anne's Blackfriars in London, preached on Hebrews for 36 years.

I don't intend to go for 36 years this morning, but he did preach for 36 years in Hebrews, and then wrote a commentary for those who were born too late to pick up the early chapters.

[1 : 1 4] It is a great commentary, actually. Well, so often when we read the Bible, we think that we miss out because we can't see the things that the Bible writers and the Bible people saw.

And that might have been your reaction when the lesson was read from Hebrews 9 about the tabernacle and the first room and the holy place and the most holy place.

But please remember that although the temple was still standing when this letter was written, many of the Jews lived far from the Holy Land, and the temple in Jerusalem was actually the second temple recently restored and enlarged by King Herod.

But the articles, such as the Golden Altar of Incense and the gold-covered Ark of the Covenant, they'd been lost when the first temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians.

And when the Romans finally arrived at Jerusalem to destroy the rebuilt temple, they were so surprised that there was no statue in the Holy of Holies.

[2 : 2 6] But please remember that even if you'd been alive in Old Testament days, only the high priest had been able to see the Ark of the Covenant within the most holy place. So don't think that you're kind of second-rate or you've been badly treated because you can't see these things.

You have to do what the people who received the letter had to do, and that is imagine what it was like. But as you do so, remember that even more importantly, the earthly sanctuary described here was meant to be a picture of something else, of a heavenly reality, of a cosmic reality.

This picture of a most holy place and a holy of holies was a sign that God dwells in glory, that God is removed from easy access by human beings, that God is faithful to his promises, that only those chosen by God may enter his presence.

And most significantly, that what hinders us from entering God's presence is not our lack of sight, not our failure of imagination, but our sinfulness and our sin.

So as I read through the first few words of this chapter, please shut your eyes and try to imagine what is being described. You need to think of yourself in the outer court of the tabernacle or of the temple, and you're looking in towards two rooms, a holy place and a most holy place.

[4 : 09] Now the first covenant had regulations for worship, and also an earthly sanctuary. A tabernacle or a tent was set up in the first room with a lampstand and a table with a consecrated bread.

This was called the holy place. But 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. And above the ark were the cherubim of the glory, overshadowing the atonement cover.

And then imagine this scene. Only the high priest entered the inner room, that is, the most holy place, 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.

Now please open your eyes so I know you're still awake. We often think of the question as being, how may sinful people approach a holy God?

[5 : 24] And we think that's the lesson. God is over there, and we're at a distance from God, we're asking the question, how can we, how dare we approach God?

And that's a very good question to ask. But as a matter of fact, the tabernacle and the temple of the Old Testament were set up to ask, to answer a different question, a more basic question, or more fundamental question, and that was this.

Listen to it. How may a holy God live among a sinful people without destroying them? Not, how can a sinful people approach a holy God, but how can a holy God live among his people without them being destroyed?

So we read in Exodus 25, the Lord said to Moses, tell these lights to bring me an offering, then have them make a sanctuary for me, listen, that I may dwell among them.

And then after Moses has built the sanctuary, we read, the cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

[6 : 41] Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted up from the tabernacle, they would set out.

If the cloud did not lift, they did not set out until the day had lifted. So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day and a fire in the cloud by night in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels.

And what was the cloud but the sign of God's presence among them. And when they stopped in the desert during their 40 years wandering, the 12 tribes would gather around and be based around the tabernacle because they were gathering around the God who lived among them, whose glory was present.

And the cloud was a sign that God was making himself present among them. So the question is, what happens to people when God comes down to earth?

What happens to people, to sinful people, like the people of Israel, when God, the holy God, lives among them? And this coming down to earth of God wasn't, of course, the same as the incarnation when God came in person, in flesh, as a human being, when the son of God came down.

[8 : 00] It was a kind of dry run for the incarnation. It was that God made himself, gave them a visible sign that he was indeed among them. And if you read 1 Kings chapter 8, you'll hear Solomon praying, when people pray towards this place, then in heaven forgive.

When people pray towards this place, then you in heaven hear and answer their prayers. You see, the whole story of the Bible is not that we have to approach God, but that God searches us out.

The story of the Bible is not of the sheep looking for the shepherd. The story of the Bible is of the shepherd searching for the sheep.

The story of the Bible is not that we had to go and find the Son of God, but that the Son of God came down to earth, born of Mary, to live among us and die and rise again.

When people talk about a long search to find God, I say, God is a searching God.

[9 : 13] All you have to do is turn around and he's waiting for you. He's been searching for you all these years. So when God was present among his people, who could come really close to God?

God was present among all the people, but he could actually come into the very presence of God. Well, verse 7 gives us a very clear answer. I want you to remember these two phrases, 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.

Who could come near to God? One person, only the high priest. A representative of the people chosen and provided by God.

And the only access the people had to the presence of God among them was through their high priest. Only the high priest, and the second great statement, never without blood.

You'd never approach God without blood, because the death of an animal signified the forgiveness of sins. And the problem of our approaching God is not our lack of ability, or status, or imagination.

[10 : 38] It is our sin that separates us from God. For if a sinful person approaches God without blood, they die. These are very important lessons for people today, you know.

Because people today think how easy it is to enter the presence of God. So someone will say, well, if God came down on earth, I'd just walk up to him and say whatever they want to say to God.

I say, if God came down on earth, you'd be flat on your face, saying, be merciful to me, a sinner. Someone else will say, well, of course, I do pray occasionally when I'm in trouble or upset.

Which I say, well, how do you approach God? How dare you approach God when you neglect him the rest of the time? Doesn't it occur to you that he might say no, or go away, or get lost?

These basic Old Testament lessons are so important, aren't they?

[11 : 58] For unless we learn the Old Testament lessons, we don't know the meaning of Jesus Christ. Who could approach God in the Old Testament? Only the high priest.

And never without blood. So what was God saying in the Old Testament? He was saying, I have come to live among you.

Gather around me, but keep your distance, lest you be destroyed. And the only person who may come is the high priest I've appointed, and he bringing blood for his own sins and for the sins of the people.

You say it again? God is saying, gather round, I'm in your midst, but keep your distance, lest you be destroyed.

Only come to me by the high priest I've appointed and by the blood of sacrifice which brings forgiveness of sin. Only by a high priest, never without blood.

[13 : 14] The writer of Hebrews develops these two themes in this order. He deals with Christ's blood in verses 11 to 22 and then Christ, our high priest, in verses 23 to 28.

Let me read from 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 heaven, not made with human hands, that is to say, not part of our creation.

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

Our high priest took his blood to an eternal and perfect tabernacle and thus secured an eternal redemption.

So how much more will the blood of Christ who through the eternal spirit offered himself unblemished to God cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death that we may serve the living God?

[14 : 21] By the way, when you hear the word conscience, you probably think, oh, well, that's a conscience about things you've done wrong in the past. I remember swearing accidentally on my 16th birthday in the presence of my grandmother.

Now, my grandmother was an Irish lady of generous vocabulary who didn't mind too much, but my father thought this was quite inappropriate. That's still on my conscience. But I think the conscience here is not just an awareness of our past, but also a self-awareness about the future.

That is, to be cleansed by your conscience is to have your very heart changed so that you want to serve God. To be cleansed is not just to have your past sins delivered, but to have the very shaping of your life changed and cleansed by God.

It's to be a person who's renewed by the power of the blood of Christ. So what was offered under the old covenant was the cleansing of the outward body.

What Christ's blood does is to cleanse us from the guilt and power of sin. As we sing in that great hymn, Be of sin the double cure, cleanse me from its guilt and power.

[15 : 40] So the blood of Christ not only achieves our forgiveness, it changes the way we live. It is the power of God within us to change the way we live by the power of Christ's blood.

So, verse 15, for this reason, Christ is the mediator of a new covenant that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance now that he's died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

And then the writer explains that the death of Christ is rather like a person making a will. In the case of a will, it's necessary to prove the death of the one who made it because a will is in force only when someone has died.

It never takes effect while the one who made it is living. That's why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. We read about that from Exodus chapter 25.

In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. No atonement, no forgiveness.

[16 : 54] No death, no forgiveness. No blood, no forgiveness. And it's Christ's blood. Christ who suffers in our place, who is our substitute as he dies.

As one writer has put it, for God to permit a substitute for sinners is very merciful. To provide a substitute is amazing grace.

But for God himself to become the substitute is grace beyond all measure. Not just that God said there is a substitute, it is that God in his son was our substitute.

Christ's blood, Christ our great high priest, verses 23 to 28. It was necessary then for the copies of the heavenly things, that is the copies in the Old Testament tabernacle and temple, they were purified with these sacrifices.

But the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one, he entered heaven itself, the very presence of God there to appear.

[18 : 24] nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again the way the high priest enters the most holy place once every year with blood that's not his own. But he paid once for all of the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.

There was a high priest, there was a sacrifice, Jesus is the high priest and he is the sacrifice. He offers not the blood of animals, the blood of other humans, but his own blood, his own death.

Christ is as our high priest our representative and in his sacrifice our substitute. Just as people are destined to die once and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many and he'll appear a second time not to bear sin but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

Christ has entered heaven itself to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. And so what?

a friend of mine was trying to help his elderly father become a Christian on his deathbed and he told his father of the forgiveness of sins that God offered to all who trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[20 : 04] But his father had a strong memory of all the sins he'd committed throughout his life. He was carrying that burden throughout his life and his son had to assure him as the father went through the list of the fact that God would forgive that sin and that sin and that sin and that sin and that sin as well.

But actually the message of the gospel was not just that God forgives individual sins sins we've committed or things we've failed to do but God accepts sinners.

You see. So the word of the gospel is that just as I am I can come to God.

I wonder if that affects the way you pray. I wonder if you're a good prayer. Let me tell you what a good prayer is. A good prayer is someone who knows that their only access to God is through Christ their high priest.

A good prayer knows that nothing they've done wrong will hinder or hamper their prayer because they come to God through the blood of Jesus Christ not through their own goodness.

[21 : 23] The good prayer doesn't think well I haven't been a very good Christian recently so I'll kind of hang back from the prayer and hang back from asking things of God in case he says no. A good prayer knows that the only way any person ever comes to God is through Christ their great high priest and through his blood shed on the cross.

A good prayer by the way probably remembers to end every prayer with some words like this through Jesus Christ our Lord or through Jesus Christ our Saviour. I often hear young people praying now and they say God please do this and this and this Amen and I think don't you know that you can only come to God through Jesus Christ without a high priest you're lost you won't know the way to God and without the blood of the high priest shed on your behalf you dare not enter the presence of God without the high priest you won't know the way without the death of the high priest you dare not enter the presence of God it's good always when we pray to remember to pray through Jesus Christ because he is the way the truth and the life no one comes to the father but through him as he himself said but it also means that if we've had a time when we've been somewhat distant from God kind of going through the motions of being a believer but actually our hearts been a long way away often our temptation is to think well because I've been a bit negligent recently and I've kind of kept away from

God I should punish myself by not bothering God too soon have you ever done that I have no no the time we wander from God the time we disobey God is the very time we should come back to God full of confidence in Christ our high priest and his shed blood and if this is the way to live let me tell you this is the way to die friend of mine was dying recently at the age of 52 which I think of as being very young he was a believer fortunately so I said to him just a few couple of days before he died you're perfectly safe in God's hands now you're perfectly safe in God's hands as you go through the process of dying however uncomfortable that is and you're perfectly safe in God's hands for eternity perfectly safe in God's hands now as you die and for eternity that's an extraordinary thing to be able to say to somebody isn't it but of course the basis for saying it was not the quality of his life or the sincerity of his faith it was his certainty and my certainty that he had a great high priest whose shed blood meant that this young man had immediate access to God at any time no wonder the writer of

Hebrews says later on therefore since we have this confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus let us draw near to God with a sincere heart with full assurance of faith having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and our bodies washed with pure water where are you when you pray you are in Christ your great high priest who is in heaven praying to his heavenly father where do you live you live in Christ your great high priest as close as you'll ever be to God our gracious heavenly father we don't see that now but it's true the one the writer of Hebrews says you've come to Mount Zion the city of the living God to Jesus the mediator to God the judge of all and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel well I preached a long series on Hebrews a number of years ago and one young man gave me a mug at the end which I always think is a wonderful gift the mug had on it these words

I still have the mug you need a great high priest today please don't think that priests are a matter of the past you you you and you and you and you need a great high priest today or you dare not go near God but we have a great high priest alive now in heaven having offered his single sacrifice of himself once for all having shed his blood for us on the cross people sometimes say to me somewhat cynically well today of course it's not what you know it's who you know and I say yes it is who you know that's what matters not what you know or what you've done but who you know dear brothers and sisters in Christ please know that you are a person who has a great high priest who's entered heaven on your behalf and even now is praying for you and through his blood through his death you have free and perfect access to God a few years ago two years ago as a matter of fact my brother John was dying an older brother mine and I'd often tried to talk to John about Christian matters but he'd always refused to talk to me

[27 : 42] I was overseas I came back I knew I had a week to live so I went to the hospital and I took all my courage in both hands and said John I've come to read the Bible and pray with you expecting him to say no he said of course so having picked myself up off the floor I read the Bible and prayed I went back the next day and did the same thing again on the third day I said to John now John I imagine you'd like to pray to God you don't quite know how to put it into words so why don't I pray a prayer and then if you want to you can say amen at the end John was mentally alert but physically immensely weak alright said John so I thought what prayer would my brother John want to pray well it's quite odd praying someone else's prayer for them John was a kind of decent Australian bloke he was a farmer had a wife and family of course loved his farm loved playing tennis the great passions of his life were family farm and tennis so I made up a prayer I said dear God heavenly father thank you for mum and dad and thank you for my lovely brothers

Peter and Bill that was me I was the lovely brother Peter you see thank you for my gorgeous wife Helen and thank you for my lovely daughters and I went through the daughters and sons-in-law and children and so on thanks for the farm and the happy days there and thank you too that I could play tennis and really loved it and thank you so much that you love me and that Jesus died for me on the cross amen came from the bed I thought to myself my brother has three days to live and nothing to offer God at all he can't say to God I'll offer you the rest of my life there was no rest of his life to offer he couldn't offer to give anything to God all he could do like the dying thief was to receive God's mercy in Jesus Christ he said will you take my funeral well I'd always vowed never to take family funerals but I couldn't say no fortunately he told his daughters that he wanted a Christian funeral and me to take it and he chose two songs

Amazing Grace and The Lord's My Shepherd what a message for anyone to leave behind for all the mourners amazing grace that saved a wretch like me and the Lord's My Shepherd I'll not want there was a man who died well full of trust in God and in Christ his great high priest and Christ's blood shed on the cross Let's end with a prayer from the end of Hebrews Now may the God of peace who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus that great shepherd of the sheep equip you with everything good for doing his will and may he work in us what is pleasing to him through Jesus Christ to whom be glory forever and ever

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