

The Holiness of God: A Temporary Solution
By Jason Huff
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Exodus 3:1-6; Luke 5:1-11; Hebrews 9:1-10, 10:1-4

Our final Scripture reading today is Hebrews 9:1-10 and 10:1-4. May God bless the reading of His holy, perfect, infallible Word. “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, the table and the 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. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now. When everything had been arranged like this, the priests 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. 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 standing. This is 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 are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings and external regulations applying until the time of the new order...The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”

Have you ever found a temporary solution to something that needed a permanent fix? I know I have. Duct tape is the handyman's secret weapon, good for fixing anything temporarily. My family and I get a kick out of the super strong tape they advertise on TV as good enough to seal two halves of a boat back together. You can't tell me that anyone would sail like that for long, but in a pinch, we've all been tempted to try something like that. Every time I've recorded a song I've written, I'd love to go back and get it just right, but I realize that I'm recording it for maybe a hundred people that will hear it over my lifetime. I don't have the time or talent to get it perfect knowing that it's just something fun so people can hear what my songs sound like. (If anyone wants to buy me recording studio time and a backup band, just let me know!)

Sometimes a temporary solution lasts for a very long time because the temporary solution is so good. The first year we lived in our home, the heating system didn't work. I called out the A/C company; the guy worked on it for five minutes and charged me a hundred bucks. Happened again the next season. Finally the guy showed me what was wrong – two metal pieces connected to a tube just needed to be cleaned out with nothing more than a straightened paper clip. It's saved thousands of dollars in visits and potentially a new HVAC unit. I have to do it every year, but I'd rather spend five minutes with a paper clip than the alternative.

Today, we're continuing our series on the holiness of God, and we're going to discuss the core of the old covenant, the covenant that God made with Israel. The holiness of God is reflected in the old covenant just as much as the new, and the old covenant establishes just what kind of being God truly is. What God did with the old covenant with Israel is beautiful in so many ways. It perfectly accomplished what it was meant to do. But it was also meant to be temporary. Why would God provide a temporary solution to the problem of our sin? That's one question we'll answer today as we dig into the old covenant and the beauty of God's holiness.

For those who might have missed the start of the series, we've been talking about the holiness of God, and how everything that God is – His love, justice, mercy, longsuffering, kindness, wrath, grace – are all wrapped up and a part of His holiness. His holiness demonstrates how different God is from us. In God's holiness, He is transcendent; He is completely beyond us. Yet He condescends to make Himself known to us. He is truly the King of the universe, worthy of our honor and praise and glory and deep respect and humility. He is truth; He is beauty; He is goodness personified. He is holy, holy, holy.

But because of our sin, God's holiness presents a problem for us. God, by nature of His supreme holiness, cannot be in the same place as unholiness and direct disobedience. Last week, we saw how on several different occasions, people lost their lives when they didn't take the divine presence of God in their midst seriously. Others wound up struck with diseases and scourges because they in their arrogance thought that God's rules respecting His holiness didn't apply to them. We also recognized that we have the same problem, that someday we will stand before the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and have to face His perfect holiness in light of our sinfulness and unholiness. Without a solution to that problem, we can only expect condemnation and to be sent out of God's presence. It creates a massive dilemma for us. And that's kind of where we left it last week.

So what happens when people who respect God, who recognize their unholy state, find themselves in His presence? Their first reaction, typically, is to want out of the situation. Moses goes out to see what is going on with this burning bush that is not eaten up by the flames. He hears a voice calling him and telling him to take off his sandals, for this is holy ground. This is the presence of the LORD. His first reaction is fear. He hides his face. How could he possibly look at God?

God speaks to Moses and lays out for Moses the course of action he's going to take. And while we didn't hear all that, after making a bunch of excuses, Moses replies, "Please, LORD, send someone else." God doesn't let Moses off the hook. Yet Moses recognizes his radical inadequacy in the face of pure holiness and wants to flee. The story of Moses is the story of a man who grows faithful in the face of an impossible situation. But his first instinct was to flee.

Same with Simon Peter. He's a fisherman, not a scribe, not a Pharisee, a very common Israelite with a very common job. We know from tales of Peter in Scripture that he had a quick wit and tongue, brash and boastful until Jesus took hold of his heart. When Peter and the gang have been out fishing all night without success and Jesus tells them how to get a catch, Peter is flabbergasted. Who's the fisherman here? But when the nets are filled to almost breaking with fish, his response? "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"

Peter too wants to run away. He knows he is in the presence of someone special. He doesn't know who yet; he doesn't know that this is the promised Messiah, God in the flesh; but he knows enough to recognize holiness and his lack of it. It is only after Jesus' promise that he will become a fisher of men – that Jesus will teach him holiness and train him how to bring people into the Kingdom of God – that Peter follows.

Holiness presents us with a double-sided problem. People who have no respect for God, who treat His holiness as nothing, have a habit of winding up cursed or worse. The people that God wants to pursue, the people after His own heart, the people who would become a part of His Kingdom – they want to get out of His presence, not because they didn't care about God or pray or anything like that, but because in God's presence, they recognized their sinfulness and hypocrisy. They knew it was dangerous for them to be near God in their current state. So if the callous and careless can't approach God without irreparable harm and those who are more righteous are afraid to approach God, what is God – who wants a close relationship with the people He created – supposed to do? How can God make a way for His sinful people to live in His presence and learn from Him and learn to love Him?

The way God does this is through covenant. A covenant is a solemn agreement, binding on both parties. God makes several covenants throughout the Bible. God promises not to flood the earth again with Noah. God makes a covenant with Abraham to bless him and his descendants, and later confirms that covenant with the mark of circumcision for all Jewish men. But the key covenant, the one that we are almost always referring to when we say the "old covenant," is the covenant of the Law given to the Hebrews through Moses on Mount Sinai.

The covenant was given to the Israelites because God had promised to bless the offspring of Abraham, and because God had rescued His people out of their slavery in Egypt. Repeatedly in the Law, God places reminders that they are to obey the Law because God has already kept His part of the covenant by bringing them out of Egypt and into the Promised Land.

Most of the time, we think of the Law as the Ten Commandments, but there's so much more than that. According to the way the ancient rabbis read the Law, there were 613 rules to follow. There are patterns in the law that are intended to teach us not just individual rules but principles by which God designed creation. Those 613 laws also included detailed ceremonial information on how the Israelites could enter near to the presence of the LORD. There were rules about what things would make you ritually unclean so that you could not approach God's temple. Most were temporary, but a few were potentially permanent, like leprosy. There were rules on how to get clean again. There were rules about who could and couldn't be a priest in God's temple. There were things you shouldn't do and things that you should do.

And at the heart of it all is a sacrificial system. There are many kinds of sacrifices, different items you can sacrifice, some to give thanks to God for His blessings, others after a child's birth, lots of different things. But the core of the sacrificial system are sacrifices made for sin – the sin of the entire Israelite community, and sins committed by individuals within the community.

The sacrificial system existed for several reasons. One was to atone for sin, to make things right, to reconcile us to God. The sacrificial system also existed so that the Israelites could dwell in the presence of God without constant fear of being destroyed in light of His holiness. It also reminded the people that disobedience to God came at the cost of life, and the animal's life was given in their place.

Even then, God wasn't directly approachable by everyone. He wasn't. The temple had multiple courts – one for foreigners, one for women, one for men, and then the sanctuary. Only the chosen priests could enter the sanctuary, and then only into an area called the Holy Place, and then only when they were on duty. When you made a sacrifice for your sins, you couldn't approach God with the sacrifice – you were a sinner. You brought it to the altar out in the court, and the priest on duty would kill the animal, go into the sanctuary, and bring out the portions you were to eat as thanksgiving to the LORD for His forgiveness.

Now the Most Holy Place was the place beyond the Holy Place in the sanctuary where God's presence was manifest. The Holy Place and the Most Holy Place were separated by a giant, incredibly thick veil. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, a special sacrifice for the whole community was made. On that day only, the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place to make atonement for the sins of all the Israelites. The Day of Atonement was the most holy day on the Jewish calendar. It was that day that the high priest entered into God's direct presence. The high priest would go in with a rope tied around his waist in case he was struck down in the Most Holy Place so that others could pull him out without violating the space.

Now, there are two things to keep in mind – the old covenant and its system was good, and the old covenant was temporary. When King David talked about the law in Psalm 19, he said, "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple." The Law truly is good. It gives us a revelation of how God expects us to live. We are not stumbling around in the dark without a clue.

But the Law is also, in essence, temporary. The principles of the Law are good and solid. Most contemporary law has a basis in it. Parts of the law are in place permanently, and those we as Christians need to learn and live by. But the Law as a whole wasn't a permanent solution to the problem of holiness and our relationship with God. That's because it is incomplete. It's perfect, but it's not everything. You see, the Law was not just about rules. As Paul writes in Galatians 3, the law is a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ, so that we might be justified by faith. Once that faith has come, the schoolmaster is no longer necessary.

If the Law was just rules, well, it would have to expand forever for every scenario, every situation. But it wasn't. The key to the Law is that we can't keep it. The Law was not only meant to give us a way to live with one another, it was meant to show us how impossible it is for us to follow it completely. The Law was meant to drive us to our knees in repentance asking for forgiveness because we can't do it. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus helped His listeners understand what the Law was meant to teach us – and once we hear from Him, it's plain to see that none of us can stand under the true meaning of the Law, where we aren't just to avoid murder but hating our neighbor, not just to avoid adultery but lusting after someone else.

The sacrifices were also only meant to be temporary. You see, the reason that the animal sacrifices under the old covenant when on day after day, year after year, generation after generation, was because they were a covering, not a cure. They covered the people's sin so they could approach God and live in His land, but they didn't remove the sin entirely or cure the sin nature. God accepted them and condescended to approve them out of His love and kindness.

But they weren't the final solution, only a temporary one – again, designed to teach the Israelites that they needed something greater, a permanent solution from the hand of God. But like humans are wont to do, Israel got the wrong message. Instead of looking at these never-ending sacrifices and saying, “We need to become holy,” they sinned freely and said to themselves, “Our sacrifices will cover our wrongdoing before the LORD.” It got so bad that the LORD eventually told Israel through the prophet Amos that He despised their religious feasts and assemblies and would no longer accept their sacrifices.

He wanted their hearts, not their animals; He wanted them to live justly, not to excuse their awful behavior with sacrifices. We need a sacrifice that would not only cover our sins but remove them entirely, a sacrifice that would not leave us in our sorry state of sinful human nature but would allow us to become more like God through His perfecting work in our lives. And that sacrifice would come, the sacrifice that would enable us to approach God's throne of grace with confidence, the sacrifice that would tear down the veil that separated the Most Holy Place from the rest of the temple and allow us to be with our God forever. That sacrifice would be Jesus.

A core question, one that I said we'd answer near the beginning of today's sermon is this: why did God make a temporary solution rather than giving us Christ at the start? The Jewish people lived under the law for nearly 1,500 years before Christ's sacrifice. Why didn't God just skip the temporary part and move to Jesus?

There are a few parts to the answer. The first is that God shows more than He tells. Because of the way we are, we don't get something just through reading it. We have to live it. God gave us a written law, but we needed to play out over the centuries to see both its goodness and the reality of its temporary nature. You can't learn to drive a car just by reading the manual; you have to practice, and that's a relatively easy thing. With something as monumental as God's holiness and how to live in His presence, we as the human race needed the time to understand God's law and process it and learn to live in it – and to learn our inability to follow every command. We needed the temporary solution to understand the grace God gives us in Jesus.

A second part of the answer comes in Romans 5 and Galatians 4, which says Jesus came at the appointed time, the perfect time. It's fascinating that Jesus came at a point which the Roman empire was at its early height, where word of Him could spread across the Mediterranean world quickly. Had Jesus come earlier, would word of His salvation for the sins of all who would come to Him gotten where it needed to go? And if the people of Jesus' own day who had determined to try and follow the Law perfectly couldn't deal with His righteousness, how would He have been received by the ancient Jews who tried to ignore it? The solution of Jesus comes just when we could receive it properly. We also have to remember that Jesus is a fulfillment of the Law; He becomes the perfect offering that we only knew about due to the Law. The temporary solution points the way to and sets the stage for the permanent solution to come.

There's so much more we could say on this if it weren't for time. But we know this: God wanted us to be able to approach Him in His holiness. He has always desired for us to be His people and to dwell among us. Through the Law, God made a way for His ancient people to do so. And through Christ, He has created a means to for all people throughout all time to become His. I'll be excited to talk about Jesus and His salvation role next week, and how He gives us the opportunity to enter God's holy presence with confidence and courage.