

*The Holiness of God: The Eternal Solution*

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*1 Samuel 15:22; Mark 12:28-34; Hebrews 9:11-15, 24-28; 10:11-14*

Today's Scripture readings are portions of Hebrews 9 and 10. We heard parts of this passage last week about the old covenant; now we move into the new one. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. "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 a part of this 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, having obtained eternal redemption. 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! 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 has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant...for Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him...day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy."

Things that last a long time impress us. When I think of ancient things that have stood the test of time, I think of the pyramids. I think of the mysterious Terra Cotta warriors of China. Rome's Pantheon, built in 125 AD, is the oldest still functioning structure in the world. We can see amazing feats of architecture that are 1500 years old still in use.

But we all know that buildings don't last forever. Many of us watched in horror when the medieval cathedral of Notre Dame caught fire in 2019. Thankfully it didn't burn down, but the repairs are estimated to take 15-20 years. Even great buildings don't last forever. When you take a look on line, you can find details about many ancient structures that are now in ruins. We might still have bits of the Acropolis in Athens and the Wailing Wall from the ancient temple in Jerusalem, but so many famous bits of architecture have been lost to time. And in America, we're lucky to find buildings that date back to the colonial era. A building that has stood the test of time for us probably has been around no more than 150 years.

It's not a problem for us because we like new and big and shiny things. To us, one building that works is just as good as another. But what about when we need truly permanent solutions, ones that will outlive us? It makes a difference. If we're trying to sell our home, we might have to put on a new roof, but we'll tend to buy one less expensive than if we know this home will be passed down through generations. A 200,000 mile used car might get you to work, but not if you're an Uber driver. Temporary solutions aren't appropriate when we need a permanent solution.

And that's where we are at this week in our series on The Holiness of God too. For those who might have missed a week, let me give you a quick refresher where we've been. We've been talking about how God's key defining characteristic is His holiness. All of His other attributes are held in perfect balance by His holiness. The perfect balance of love and justice, mercy and wrath, kindness and grace and tenderness but also anger at a world in constant disobedience to His ways, all of this is subsumed in His overwhelming holiness. His holiness means He is different from us and transcendent from us. Only by His deliberate choice can we know Him personally and have a relationship with Him. His utter perfection in and of Himself can be seen in His holiness.

As we also learned, God's holiness is a problem for us. His perfection and might and power become a problem when we, sinful human beings that we are, attempt to enter into His presence. Those who acted nonchalantly towards God and His holiness while in His direct presence wound up either dead or cursed, not because God is malicious in any way but because deliberate, willful disobedience is an affront to the very nature of our perfectly righteous God. Just as we can't stay in the sunshine forever without sunscreen, we cannot stand in the presence of God covered with our sin.

Last week, we delved into the central covenant found in the Old Testament last week – the covenant of the Law made with Israel on Mount Sinai. While there were plenty of rules to follow – 613, to be exact – there was also a detailed ritual system that would allow God's people to enter near to His presence, which is what God desired, without being harmed. There were a great number of sacrifices for sin that could absolve all but the worst crimes. Daily, the priests made sacrifices for the nation, and they helped individuals make sacrifices to cover their sins.

The great problem of the sacrificial system was that it provided a temporary covering for sin but not a permanent solution. It could only deal with past sins, not ones made in the future, meaning that the sacrifices were never-ending. When the temple was destroyed in 586BC and then the rebuilt temple destroyed in 70 AD, there was no way that the sacrifices could continue. To this day, it is impossible to make the sacrifices required of the Jewish people in the law.

And even then, while the sacrifices allowed believers to enter into the temple courts without fear, it didn't change people's hearts. It didn't make them holy. In fact, for some, it made them ready to sin even more because they could just sacrifice for whatever wrongdoing they did. God was clearly displeased with this. In the midst of it all, the greater meaning of the law was lost – the reality that we could not keep the law in full and thus needed the mercy of God to have clear consciences before Him.

That's where we are today, stuck in that place of uncertainty. And, thankfully, this is where Christ comes into the picture. Where once there was an impermanent solution, one that could only cover sin, now there is a permanent solution, which removes sin from us and cleanses us completely – and through Jesus, we can start being made righteous like God and not just have a temporary fix.

So how is this even possible? Let's look at why Jesus can do this for us. First, Jesus is Himself God, part of the triune God of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and yet also in His incarnation He became man. Now this is difficult to understand, but it's extremely important, and it's why the solution works. Jesus needed to be God to reconcile us to God. A mere man couldn't do that. But He also needed to be human so that His sacrifice for humanity would be appropriate. The only way the bridge between God and man could be bridged was through someone who could perfectly relate for both and stand for both parties in the covenant. By the unique situation where the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary, Jesus could be both God and human without the sin nature passed down through Adam entering the equation.

Second, Jesus is perfect Himself. He lives a perfect life. And when we say perfect, we mean that every moment of every day, He was doing the Father's will. It doesn't mean that He never stumbled over a rock or scraped His knee. It means that He perfectly did what the Father desired Him to do. He taught the people; He did miracles; He proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was in their midst. What's amazing is that, unlike what we usually think, it's not just that He did nothing wrong; it's that He did the Father's will right, all the time. Multiple times, the Father spoke from heaven to those around Him proclaiming His pleasure with the Son. This was due to Jesus' total surrender to the Father's will and not His own.

This perfection is also incredibly important, because only the perfect offering could satisfy the justice of God. An imperfect offering, no matter how slight, could not do the trick. But Jesus' perfection is also stunning when you think about His role, to become the new head of humanity for all who would believe and trust in Him. Adam starts off without any flaws. He's in a perfect environment made for him, with God regularly visiting with him, with a companion by his side to be his helper. He has only one way to disobey, and he does so. Adam had every advantage and yet he fell to temptation and sin.

Jesus, on the other hand, has no advantages. He is born into a peasant family. His family has to flee to Egypt for a few years. When they come back, they live in a backwater town in northern Israel of no reputation, Nazareth, so insignificant that one of the disciples when he first learns of Jesus says the catchphrase, "What good can come out of Nazareth?" He lives a three-day journey from Jerusalem, so He has no access to the best scholars of Judaism. Joseph, the man who raised him as his own son, dies well before Jesus starts His ministry at age 30. The religious leaders of the day both hate and fear Him. The people are quick to turn against Him when He has a hard word to say. He is eventually wrongly accused, beaten unmercifully, given a sham trial where He is cleared of the charges by Pontius Pilate but given over for execution anyway to avoid stirring up the Jewish leadership. He has every disadvantage. Through all of that, though, Jesus perseveres. Because of that perseverance, He can be the perfect sacrifice for all time for all of us who become a part of God's Kingdom.

So He's both God and man, so He can bridge the gap between the two parties, and He's perfect, so He is absolutely acceptable in the Father's sight. He is truly and completely holy. That's how He becomes the perfect sacrifice for humanity. He does not act as a priest in the earthly temple. Instead, when He dies, because of who He is, because of His perfection, He can enter into the true temple of the living God in heaven. The temple on earth was just a form of it, a copy, signifying and symbolizing the real thing in God's Kingdom but not the same thing. Christ enters into the Most Holy Place, the place of the Father, and offers Himself. By doing so, the Father calls righteous all who put their faith and trust in Jesus. He considers Jesus to be our head, rather than Adam. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." If you're counted under Jesus, you will live eternally.

And because Jesus was the perfect sacrifice, His sacrifice doesn't need to be repeated. It is once for all. Not only that, but it is Jesus' sacrifice that sanctifies – that's an important word that means to make something holy – Jesus' sacrifice sanctifies not only all believers now, but all believers through time, including those who came before Him. They were saved not by the Law because the Law couldn't save. They were saved by trusting in the Lord, who then accounts Jesus' sacrifice to them and accepts them through Jesus. Because God exists outside of time, He isn't bound to time like we are, so Jesus' sacrifice now covers all who belong to Him throughout all of time.

This is also why our understanding of the Lord's Supper is different from some other churches. I am not a priest in the ancient sense. My job is not to bring the sacrifice of the people to God. Christ has already brought the perfect sacrifice of Himself. When we celebrate Communion, we celebrate Christ's gift for us, we believe we truly commune with Jesus spiritually, but we are not re-presenting the sacrifice of Jesus. The only sacrifice we can bring is one of thanksgiving and praise to the Lord, which is not a sacrifice in the same sense of the ancient sacrifices made for sin.

I'm not going to get into the finer points of that theology and don't want to mis-state what our brother and sisters in other churches believe. The point is, we celebrate that Jesus is risen, we celebrate His sacrifice, but we also always celebrate it as something that is complete and finished, and we don't need a priest to do that for us in some way now. In fact, the Bible says that we are now a kingdom of priests! Because we believe in Christ and trust in Him, we participate in the sacrifice of Christ ourselves and enjoy all its benefits, though not as the priests of the old covenant would.

Now to the question of holiness...how does Jesus fix the problem of our unholiness? How does Jesus make it so that we can forever be in the Father's presence, in His Kingdom, enjoying His goodness with us always? There's two ways Jesus provides the perfect solution. The first is through Himself. His sacrifice wipes away our sin; our sin is sometimes talked about in a financial sense, and in that sense our sin is transferred to His account. When the Father sees us, He does not see us tarnished with sin; instead, He sees the robe of Jesus' righteousness covering us like a garment. We are justified through our faith in Christ. God sees that through faith we are in Jesus; we are united to Him; and we are declared "not guilty." The price for our sin and rebellion has been paid and it is no longer counted against us.

But here's the awesome part, perhaps even the best part: God isn't content for us merely to be covered by Jesus' righteousness and holiness. He wants us to own it ourselves. The Holy Spirit is given to us as believers in this era, what the author of Hebrews calls "the end of the ages," so that we can truly become righteousness and holy. God isn't satisfied with a people that He only calls holy; He wants us to be holy. And so the Holy Spirit is alive in all who believe, guiding us, disciplining us, encouraging us, and transforming us from the inside out so that we will, once we reach our eternal home with Christ, be really and truly sanctified – really and truly made holy like God.

1 Thessalonians 4:3 and Romans 15:16 both point out that our end goal is sanctification, being made truly holy by the Spirit. Now we know that we struggle with sin. We love God, we worship God, we want to honor Him and becoming more like Jesus, but it's crazy difficult in this world. Each one of us has a device in our pockets that has lust, jealousy, envy, greed, slander, all kinds of wickedness available just a click away. In some small towns and cities you had to search for sin; now we carry the possibility of it around with us. So many good things on it, but so many bad ones too.

That's why our sanctification is a process. The Holy Spirit takes up residence in our souls and begins his work of transforming us from the inside out. And that's the kind of transformation we need. We don't need to act better; we need to be better, and then we will act better. As 1 John 1 reminds us, in this life we are never without sin. But the hope is there. The goal is there. The ambition is there that one day, when we stand before the throne of God, we will be holy. We will be righteous. It will only be because of Jesus, but we will stand there and not fear God's wrath. He will have covered us, plead our case for us, interceded for us, and then invite us in as we have been fully remade in the image of God we were meant to carry.

Not only is Jesus the perfect sacrifice and the eternal solution to the problem of holiness, He's the only one. No other way will get you into God's Kingdom. I'm going to say something a little provocative to some people, maybe. Why don't all roads lead to eternal life with God? Why doesn't God make more ways, or why doesn't God accept the ways people try to follow now? Why aren't all religions the same in the eyes of God?

And my answer – here's the provocative part – my answer is this: if you want there to be other ways to reach God, then you don't understand the way we've got or the God we've got. There's no other way to God but Jesus because Jesus is the only One who has made a way to God for us. Other religions offer rules; Christianity offers relationship. Other religions say be good; Christianity provides Someone who was truly good who has paved the way into God's Kingdom. If any other religion had a perfect Savior making things perfectly right between God and humanity, then we might be talking. But there isn't! It's not a matter of pride or boastfulness about being right – it's a matter of humbly stating that no other faith has the truth claims of Christianity and the miraculous wonders to back it up.

Isn't it so good to know that we have an eternal solution to our sin problem? It's a wonderful thing to contemplate. And when we come back next week, we're going to focus more on the holiness of God and how the Spirit works to transform us into holy people. I'm excited!