

FAITH DIVIDED

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Hebrews 9:11-14

The book of Exodus tells of the Israelites' flight from slavery in Egypt and their trek through the wilderness to the land God promised them. While in the wilderness, Moses ascends Mt. Sinai and God gives him the tablets containing God's commandments. Moses takes these commandments back to the people. These tablets are then placed into a chest which is known as the ark. God then provides the Israelites with instructions to construct a tabernacle for the ark. You can read the detailed description of the plans for the tabernacle in Exodus. The tabernacle was to be a tent-like structure. It consisted of a frame covered with fabric. The tabernacle was designed to be disassembled and transported along with the traveling Israelites. When it was set up it was regarded by the Israelites as God's throne on Earth. It was a holy place.

The tabernacle itself consisted of several rooms or courts. Access to these courts was defined by one's status. Regular people were limited to the outer court. Priests could enter the inner court. The tabernacle itself was holy. At the heart of the tabernacle was the Holy of Holies—the actual space where the ark resided. In chapter 26 of Exodus, we find instructions for making the curtain that defined the Holy of Holies. We read there:

You shall make a curtain of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen; it shall be made with cherubim skillfully worked into it. You shall hang it on four pillars of acacia overlaid with gold, which have hooks of gold and rest on four bases of silver. You shall hang the curtain under the clasps, and bring the ark of the covenant in there, within the curtain; and the curtain shall separate for you the holy place from the most holy.

The purpose of this great curtain was to separate the holiest space from the rest of the tabernacle.

Centuries later, even after the ark had been lost, the temples in Jerusalem were designed with a room designated to be the Holy of Holies. There was a curtain, just as we find in the original tabernacle. In the temple, only the high priest was allowed to enter the holy space. And the high priest only entered there once a year. On that date, he would take sacrificial blood and make prayers to God. This was a place of deepest ritual. This was a place separated from the rest of the world. Possibly, the people outside could hear the high priest in this room chanting and singing, but they could not see him. They could not go to this place themselves.

In the gospels, in the accounts of Jesus' death on the cross, we again read about this curtain. In the gospels we read that when Jesus died, several things

happened—among these were that the sun went dark and the earth shook. We also read that the Roman centurion standing guard at the site of the crucifixion declared to himself, *Certainly, this man was innocent.*

The eclipse of the sun represents the darkness of death. The earthquake represents the shaking of creation at the death of God's son. The words of the centurion represent the world's true verdict of Jesus' innocence.

And then there is one more detail—one that I have never really talked with you about before. As we read in the gospel of Luke, *the curtain of the temple was torn in two.* When Jesus died, the great curtain separating the Holy of Holies from the world was ripped apart. As best we can tell, the crucifixion was not located near the temple. These were two separate events, and yet they are connected. At the time of Jesus' death, the Holy of Holies became exposed.

The book we know as the Letter to the Hebrews—the book we have been studying for the past several weeks—is a sermon. It is a sermon composed for a specific struggling congregation in Rome. The purpose of this sermon was to help the people in this congregation understand how vital Jesus is to their salvation. The writer wants the people to know that there is nothing greater than Jesus. If they leave the faith looking for answers elsewhere, they won't find them. Jesus is the ultimate answer to the questions they are asking.

Hebrews is the only place in our bible where we find Jesus described as being a high priest. The writer of Hebrews uses this term because it is language the people in this particular congregation will understand. They are mostly Jews who have converted to Christianity. They will be familiar with the office and role of the high priest. Hebrews has been arguing from the beginning that not only is Jesus a high priest, he is a high priest greater than any other high priest that has ever lived. He is the great high priest.

In Hebrews, the writer reflects on the how in ancient times, the high priests would enter the holiest space of the tabernacle tent armed with the ritual blood of animals. But when Christ came as high priest, he doesn't enter this earthly tabernacle tent. Instead, he enters into *the greater and perfect tent* which is his body. As Hebrews puts it, it is a tent *not made with hands, that is, not of this creation.* The regular high priests enter into the Holy Place each year with their ritual blood and offerings. Christ enters into his Holy Place just once and he takes with him *his own blood.*

Jesus does something different here. The regular high priests offer sacrifices for the peoples' atonement—for their sins—Jesus offers his sacrifice for the people's *redemption*—to change their very being.

Hebrews explains how the regular high priests go into the temple and pour out the blood of goats and bulls and they sprinkle around the ashes of the burnt offerings. The purpose of these rituals is to purify the sinful flesh. I want to be clear that the writer is not making light or mocking these traditions. He honors them. They are the ancient rituals of the Jewish people. But he also compares them to what Jesus brings to the table. Jesus doesn't bring the blood of sacrificed animals, he brings his own blood. His own blood is a sacrifice by the one who is perfect and *without blemish*. His own blood is magnified by the power of the Holy Spirit and offered to God. Hebrews asks us to imagine how that not only purifies our flesh but it purifies our conscience as well. This is redemption. It is change. In Christ we become a new creation.

At the time of Jesus' sacrifice—at his death on the cross—the great curtain in the temple, which for generations had physically separated God from God's people, is destroyed. No longer is God hidden from the world, but God becomes available to all. The tabernacle is not a tent, it is the body of Christ. His blood is not the blood of death, it is the life of the world. In Christ, the past is gone, the old has been changed.

God is not limited to those who have power, God is available to each and every person. God is not sheltered by the tabernacle. God is open. Each person, each voice is valued. Each person is equal before the Lord. All become priests. All are welcome in God's presence—the holiest of places. With Jesus as our great high priest the curtain, for all time, is removed. Amen