

Undeclared by the Curtain

Hebrews 10:14-25 (NIV)

¹⁴ For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. ¹⁵ The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: ¹⁶ "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." ¹⁷ Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." ¹⁸ And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary. ¹⁹ Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Curtains are such a common, everyday item. Have you ever stepped back to think about what they do? Maybe you think of curtains primarily for decoration - and they often times are. But they do more than just add decor to a room. I was a bit refocused on this household item when I read the Encyclopedia Britannica's entry for a curtain: "in interior design, decorative fabric commonly hung to *regulate the admission of light at windows and to prevent drafts from door or window openings.*"

Did you catch that? Curtains are used to regulate admission. They stop light from coming in to certain areas. They stop an unwanted draft from making your floors or your toes frigid. They stop people from seeing in to your home. Your shower curtains regulate the admission of water to stay in our shower area and go down the drain. Basically, curtains are used to separate.

The Old Testament Israelites knew this. Like many other contemporaries, they used curtains as room dividers, walls to separate rooms and keep people in certain areas. God used them in the same way.

When God was going to physically show that he was dwelling with his people, the Israelites, following their Exodus from Egypt, he gave them specific instructions for his dwelling place, a place where his people were to worship him. He gave them instructions to build a tent, a Tabernacle. It was made out of cloth, and there were no windows for the Tabernacle. Its curtains would regulate admission of who could see in, of who could see God. Only the priests could go inside the Tabernacle (tent) for specific worship purposes; they couldn't come and go or look in as they pleased.

Even inside the Tabernacle, another curtain was sewn and set up to separate the inner Holy Place from the Holy of Holies (also called the Most Holy Place). It was in this third of the tent that the ark of the covenant resided. The ark of the covenant was a wooden box overlaid in gold. In the ark were the two stone tablets of the 10 Commandments, a golden jar of manna, and the staff of Aaron, Moses' brother, the staff which had budded almonds to show that God had chosen him and his family line for the calling of High Priest. On top of the ark was a cover with two golden cherubim (angels). God said specifically that he would meet with his people there and give them his Word.

Do you know how often someone got to go behind the curtain and into the Most Holy Place in Tabernacle? It was one person one time a year: the high priest on the Day of Atonement. He could only come when God told him to, and he had to bring the blood of a sacrifice to sprinkle on the atonement cover because his sins had separated him from God. Blood would make atonement for all the sins of God's people, including that of the high priest. The curtain regulated who could come to God and how they could come to him.

We humans have always tried to find other ways to access God, to be near him. Back in the days of the great flood, people tried to build a tower up to God. Throughout Israelite history, they tried to keep their access to God but also access other gods and worship them. This resulted in God destroying the Tabernacle, destroying the later and more permanent dwelling for God, the Temple, and exiling the Israelites, pushing them farther away from God physically.

We are no different today as we are still trying to make our own ways to access God. Some try to work their way to access God by doing good deeds, going to church, giving to church, giving to charity, trying to live cleanly. Others perform secret rituals behind closed doors that no one gets to see thinking that these are the ways to access God and must be kept from public view and knowledge. Some turn to other ideologies and philosophies thinking that there are many paths, many ways to access the Divine.

Others condemn and forsake all religious institutions and seek to establish their own connection and their own relationship with God saying that they don't need any one or any book or any community for that access.

Instead of circumventing and finding our own way to access God on our own terms, we have sadly sewn together more curtains, more barriers to God, making it more impossible to get to him, doubling the amount of material to go through, thickening these curtains. And then we accuse God of being distant, of not being there for us, that he's keep us at an arm's length when we are the ones who have moved, who have become distant as we sought our own path and access to God.

The curtain restricting us from access to God symbolized what was already true: Every single one of our sins separates us from God, sets up another curtain, putting God farther and farther away from us. We cannot make our way to God. We keep falling short and making more curtains as we do so. As someone recently said to me, "If God feels far away, it's not him who moved; it's you." Then our guilty conscience accuses us and wracks us with guilt over all the curtains we have made, how we have separated ourselves from God. As the sins pile on and the distance grows, we feel defeated by the curtains we have made.

This is why Jesus came. He gives access where none of us could ever go. He is a high priest unlike any other. He's God. So, he's a perfect high priest who never sinned. Never did he have to offer a sacrifice for his sins, not once. Never has he made curtains separating himself from God the Father or God the Holy Spirit; he always had total access day or night. Yet, he made a sacrifice. It was himself. Though perfect, he took on himself all of our sins, all of the curtains we have made that keep separating us from God. Because he's God, he sacrificed himself once for all for all people. The result? We heard it tonight: "For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." (verse 14)

By Jesus, our Great High Priest's one sacrifice, all our sins, all our curtains, are taken down. We're perfect! This is the new covenant, a one-sided covenant, an agreement that rests solely on what God does for us and not what we do for God. With this new covenant, God doesn't even remember our sins or lawless acts. He's chosen to forget them. "And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary." (verse 18) Jesus' one sacrifice means that all our curtains that stop us from accessing God have been removed. Nothing more needs to be done nor can be done. It's accomplished already. This spiritual truth also happened in a physical way on Good Friday. When Jesus died, we're told: "At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom." (Matthew 27:51)

That which separated us from access to God has been torn apart, gotten rid of. We now have total access to God because our sins, our curtains, have been removed by Jesus. "Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water." (verses 19-22)

God has cleansed us. He tore down the curtain that separated us from him by the sacrifice of his life, his body. That guilty conscience of ours is cleansed. All our sins are taken away. We're not allowed to beat ourselves up over our sins any longer. We're washed clean, like the priests as they got ready to pass through the curtain of the Tabernacle to access the Lord. We are washed clean in the blood of the Great High Priest Jesus, a washing that we experience in baptism as well where God connects you to his body, to his sacrifice, what he has done for you to remove all those curtains and give you total access to God.

Our Great High Priest also gave us that new covenant, the one-sided agreement that he has made us perfect forever by his one sacrifice, that he has chosen to forget all our sins, as he gives us his body and his blood in his Supper. As we come to Holy Communion tonight, you're not coming because you have done enough, because you are worthy to receive this. You're invited by the Lord himself because he has torn down all our curtains of sin. He has given us access to him and his one sacrifice for all people that makes us perfect right here and right now.

Knowing that all the curtains have been torn down by Jesus, hold unswervingly to his hope that we profess. God is faithful to what he accomplished for us. That one sacrifice of Jesus has made us perfect forever, has drawn us to God, has put us with him with no separation. Let's spur one another on to that unrestricted access Christ has given us. Let's keep meeting, not separate from each other by our sins, not trying to find our own ways to God. Instead let's encourage one another to stay drawn to God because he has defeated our curtains for us. Because of our Great High Priest and his one sacrifice, we are undefeated by the curtain. God is with us, and we are with God, undefeated. Amen.