

Worship at the Real Sanctuary
(Hebrews 4, 8-10)

Turn to Hebrews 4. The NT describes a few different places as God's dwelling or God's temple. One of them is our own bodies. Our physical body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, we learn in 1 Corinthians 6.

In that paragraph the Scripture urges us to flee from sexual immorality, get scared of sexuality and run from it, and one of the reasons is that our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is in us, each one of us is a temple for the Holy Spirit.

A few Sundays ago we talked about a second kind of temple in the NT, and that is the group. We learn that that whole church was God's temple and that God's Spirit lived in the middle of the group.

Jesus himself spoke of this when he said that where two or three were gathered together in his name, he was there in the middle of them. A group of believers is a place where God lives, where he makes his home.

But the letter to the Hebrews has a quite different way of describing God's Temple or Sanctuary, and that's what we'll talk about for the rest of today's teaching. First, though, we should review the Sanctuary that Moses made for God.

Review of Exodus Tabernacle

Last Sunday I handed out a chart of the Exodus Tabernacle, and I want to review that now, because the writer of Hebrews knew all that and had thought about it a lot.

The Tabernacle God instructed Moses about was an elaborate tent, not very big, about 15 feet by 45 feet, or 5 meters by 15 meters if that suits you better. It was also 15 feet high.

Two things are real important about the Tabernacle: one, the Tabernacle was God's home with Israel, it was his palace; and two, it was completely portable. Israel could take it down and move it and set it up as often as they needed to. Israel and God travelled together. It was made to be God's Temple, and it was made to be portable.

The Tabernacle was divided into two parts. Priests came in through a heavy curtain at the end, and the first part as they came in was the Holy Place. The bread table and the Lampstand were in there, and priests went in there every day.

The second part was the Most Holy Place, also called the Holy of Holies. One went through another heavy curtain to get into the Most Holy Place. It was a perfect square at the back, actually a cube, about 5 meters by 5 meters by 5 meters.

That second room was the real raw dwelling of God. The Ark of the Covenant was there, and the Atonement cover with the two golden cherubim (angels) built onto the Atonement cover. Our invisible God was present in there. The cherubim were like his throne. The ark and the cherubim were God's throne.

400 years later this happens: (2 Samuel 6:2) *David and all his men went to Baalah in Judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the Name, the name of the LORD Almighty, who is enthroned between the cherubim on the ark.*

Only the high priest could go into the second part, the Most Holy Place, and only one day of the year, the Day of Atonement. No one else ever went in to the Most Holy Place, and the High Priest did it only once a year. Even he did not go in any other day.

Jesus the High Priest

The main teaching of Hebrews is that Jesus is a better High Priest than the priests that God set up under Moses.

The main teaching of Hebrews is *not* that Jesus is a better sacrifice. That's sort of what we want it to be, because we don't know anything about priests.

Hebrews does teach that Jesus was a sacrifice, and a better one, but Jesus the better *sacrifice* is just one of several reasons why Jesus is a better *priest*.

Hebrews 4:14-16 - *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

We have a high priest who has gone into heaven. Twice in this text, Jesus is called "high priest." He's our high priest, and he's in heaven, and he's sympathetic toward us.

He was tempted in every way, just as we are, and this made him able to empathize with our weaknesses. This isn't about physical weakness, it's about how weak we are to resist temptation. This is surely one of the most encouraging lines in the Bible.

I hope you make use of this. I hope you assume that the thing you fight with – the temptation and sin, the desire to just quit – Jesus also fought with.

And his fight made him sympathetic, empathetic. (They say there's a difference between those two, but I don't really get it myself.)

So, it says we should *approach God's throne of grace with confidence*. Where do you think that throne might be, that throne of grace?

In the Exodus Tabernacle, the LORD Almighty was enthroned between the cherubim on the ark. The high priest went in there once a year.

Jesus the high priest waits by the throne of grace, the grace throne, and the writer of Hebrews urges us to come confidently to God's throne, the throne of grace. What throne is that? Where is that throne, the one we are to approach confidently?

Hebrews 8-9 – the Real Sanctuary in Heaven

Hebrews 8:1-2 - *Now the main point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven,² and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being.*

Our high priest, who is Jesus, is beside God's throne in heaven. But the throne is not the only thing there. It is in the sanctuary in heaven, the true tabernacle there.

So there is a tabernacle in heaven, the true tabernacle, God's throne is there, and Jesus the priest is there. Remember Hebrews 4:14-16 – *Since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

The throne of grace that we approach is in the real sanctuary in heaven, the true tabernacle. Jesus the high priest waits for us there, *and we go there.*

Hebrews 8:3-5 - *Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer.⁴ If he (i.e. Jesus) were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law.⁵ They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: "See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain."*

The Tabernacle described in Exodus "is a copy and a shadow of what is in heaven." That is why Moses was told not to change his instructions, not to improvise. The tabernacle in the wilderness was patterned after what already existed in heaven.

Now I am going to read to you from Hebrews 9. I am not going to explain these verses very much, because by now it will be clear to you.

Hebrews 9:1-8 - *Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary.² A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand and the table with its consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place.³ Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place,⁴ 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.⁵ Above the ark were the cherubim*

of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now.

⁶ When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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 functioning.

Hebrews 9:11 – *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 not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. [Again, Christ did go into a tabernacle, but it was the real one in heaven not the one Moses built.]*

Hebrews 9:24 - *For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence.*

The Real Question

Now we are ready to ask the question that Hebrews answers: where exactly do we meet with God? The NT has more than one answer to this question – where to we meet with God? We mentioned two places in which God dwells at the start.

God's Spirit makes our individual bodies his temple. Each believer is a tabernacle for the Holy Spirit. More often the NT teaches that the group of believers is the temple of God, the dwelling of God.

But the letter to the Hebrews answers the question differently. These answers are all true, none contradict each other, they are all a part of how we meet with God.

In Hebrews, God is present in the real tabernacle in heaven, the true sanctuary there, in the true Most Holy Place in heaven. And, when we worship God, when we come before God, *we go to that place.*

In the other pictures of God's presence, God comes to us, lives in our bodies, lives in our congregation. In Hebrews, we go to God, when we worship we enter into his presence there. Instead of God moving to us, we move to him.

When we worship and when we pray we are in some real sense before that real throne in the real tabernacle in heaven.

Hebrews 4:14,16 - *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁶ Let us*

approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

According to Hebrews, that throne is in the real tabernacle, and Jesus the great high priest is there, waiting for us in the Most Holy Place, waiting for us to show up.

Hebrews 10:19-22 - *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.*

In the Old Testament, only the high priest ever entered the Most Holy Place, and that only once a year. But now WE have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus. A new and living way has been opened for us through the curtain.

Jesus himself is the new and living way. And he is seated in the Most Holy Place, beside God's throne. And the writer of Hebrews says we have confidence to enter because of the blood of Jesus, and we have a great priest there waiting for us. SO, let us draw near to God, let's come close to God.

When we come to God to worship and to pray, according to Hebrews, he does not come near to us. We go near to him. God does not come to earth.

We approach God in heaven, we go into the real Holy of Holies in heaven. THAT is what happens when people approach God.

That means that this is happening now. We gathered in this place to worship God and to pray to him. Perhaps we hoped he would come near, perhaps we had confidence that he already was near.

According to Hebrews, we have boldly to the throne of grace in the true tabernacle in heaven. That's what we were doing when we gathered here to worship.

I am getting this from two things, both clear in Hebrews. One, the true tabernacle, the true sanctuary, is in heaven, and Jesus serves as our high priest in that true sanctuary.

Two, Hebrews urges us to come boldly to the throne of grace because of our great priest, Hebrews says WE have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place, and that WE should draw near to God.

The problem is that I just see you, and you just see me, and we look around at these walls and chairs and so on, and we have trouble convincing ourselves that what's invisible is actually more real than what's visible.

My only comment on this is that it's an old problem. Even in the ancient world, every other god had an image, a statue of some kind, in his or her temple. But what did the Israelites have in their tabernacle, in their Most Holy Place?

Was there a statue in there, an image? No. Israelites said that their God was enthroned between the cherubim. Could anyone see anything there? No. Just empty space. Our God is invisible and present with us, and that's always been a problem.

The Message of Hebrews

The message of Hebrews is not that Christ serves as priest in the real tabernacle in heaven. Hebrews teaches that, but the message is a bit different.

The message of Hebrews is that every possible roadblock between people and God has been removed by Jesus the great high priest. (Hebrews usually calls Jesus just "Jesus," not "Christ" or "Lord," so I am doing that, too.)

All the possible barriers between us and God have been taken away. All the huge problems that come because God is holy, and we are sinful. That God is holy and we are sinful causes many problems between us and God.

This is why in the First Covenant, under Moses, there was a courtyard around the tabernacle, and then Levites camped around the courtyard, and then the rest of Israel camped behind the Levites.

Sinful people had to be insulated from the Holy God that loved them. That is why the High Priest was the only one who could go into the Holy of Holies, and he only once a year. God is holy, people are sinful, therefore many barriers.

God has not changed a speck, and people are still sinful. But this priest, my brothers and sisters, he's the difference. He's so good that he himself lives in the Holy of Holies, he's seated there, and he can get people like you and me in front of God's throne there. That's where we are right now.

Every barrier has been removed. Now, the only reason that people do not come before the throne of grace is that they refuse to come. People are urged and invited but will not come. Hebrews was actually written to people who were beginning to do that, beginning to draw back, not come to God any more. And that is dangerous.

God worked very hard to pave the road into the Most Holy Place. There are signs all along the road, "Grace and mercy just ahead, keep going." Don't refuse God. Hebrews warns against that.

We have two written invitations in Hebrews, invitations to come to God, to come to God's throne in the real sanctuary in heaven.

When we worship and pray, we appear before *that* throne with *these* written invitations in our hand. When we show up there, which is where we are right now, we receive mercy and gracious help. I'm not sure we even need to ask for these. Just show up!

1. Hebrews 4:16 - *Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

2. Hebrews 10:19 - *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.*

Amen.