

Chapter Six: A Humanitarian at the Temple

Israel camped at Mt. Sinai for close to a year. During that time God provided them with detailed instructions concerning their worship. God designed it to contain numerous visuals of two fundamental spiritual truths: the seriousness of sin and the concept of substitutionary sacrifice. These visuals governed Israel's worship for the next 1,500 years.

On Mt. Sinai God gave Moses detailed blueprints for the tabernacle, the tent which was a predecessor of the temple. One of the most striking aspects of both the tabernacle and the temple was how restrictive access was. Only priests could enter them. This severely limited access because the Old Testament priesthood was restricted to 1) the male members of Aaron's family; and 2) those male members who had no physical defects. This excluded well over 99% of all Israelites! Except for a handful of priests, the Israelites could only proceed as far as the temple's courtyard. Imagine worshipping your entire life in the church's parking lot – never once entering the church. Imagine the message this would engrain in you about your lack of worthiness.

This is what the denial of access communicated loudly and clearly. God was telling them that *sin separates* mankind from him. He was emphasizing that he is holy and nothing

unholy can survive in his presence. His holiness is like intense radiation which destroys any and all imperfections. Just as God gave the law to show mankind the *extent* of their sins, so he severely restricted access to the temple to teach Israel the *dire consequences* of sin. In this graphic way, he made clear that sin erects a wall between God and people.

He emphasized this in an even more striking way. Priests could only enter the first room of the temple. The inner room, variously called the Holy of Holies or the Most Holy Place, was one of the most highly restricted areas in all of history. Only one man, the high priest, could enter it. And he could only go in it one day a year! It was so severely restricted because it held the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of God's presence. Only one man in a nation of millions, on only one day of the year, could even symbolically enter God's presence!

This vividly illustrated that sin is the great destroyer of mankind's relationship with God. God made this point so forcefully because sin not only destroys the relationship. It also blinds people to this fact. Many people assume that all is okay between God and themselves. They view sins as minor infractions, only deserving a slap on the wrist. They don't consider the possibility that each and every sin is a capital crime which merits death.

But a capital crime is exactly what each sin is. "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

God's highlighting of sin's seriousness goes hand in hand with his giving of the law. His motive in both was to give mankind a figurative shake of the shoulders, an attempt to wake them up to the dire situation they were in.

When it came to the temple worship he instituted, God didn't stop with pointing out sin. His main goal was to teach them about his solution for sin.

He accomplished this brilliantly. The heart and core of temple worship was blood – blood sacrificed by one to take away the guilt of another. The main activity performed at the Old Testament temple was animal sacrifice. Day in and day out countless animals were butchered and sacrificed. At the temple dedication alone, Solomon sacrificed 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats! (2 Chronicles 7:5¹⁷) The sights, sounds, and smells of the temple all screamed sacrifice.

Each sacrifice pointed ahead to Jesus, “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). The book of Hebrews further explains this. In reference to Old Testament sacrifices it states: “But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Hebrews 10:3-4). It then continues with what Jesus, our

¹⁷ 2 Chronicles 7:5 And King Solomon offered a sacrifice of twenty-two thousand head of cattle and a hundred and twenty thousand sheep and goats. So the king and all the people dedicated the temple of God.

high priest, did. “But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God” (Hebrews 10:12). As our high priest, Jesus sacrificed himself for us.

That Jesus’ death paid for all sin is something God gave dramatic proof of. At the moment of Jesus’ death “the curtain of the temple was torn in two” (Luke 23:44). This curtain or veil had closed off the Holy of Holies for centuries. It had vividly symbolized that sin separates humanity from God. God now suddenly rips it wide open. He destroyed it because Jesus, by paying for the world’s sin with his death, had reconciled God and mankind. “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

This fundamental principle – that reconciliation with God is achieved through the sacrifice of another – was reinforced every day at the temple. Before the animal was sacrificed, people would hold their hands over the animal’s head and confess their sins. In this vivid way, they were symbolically transferring their sins to the animal. In light of that, imagine the effect this prophecy of the Messiah would have had on an Old Testament believer. “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him [Jesus] the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6). This had to fill their hearts with joy as they realized God would save them, not by giving them an *example* to show them what they had to do, but rather by sending a *substitute* who would pay for their sins.

No place was this principle of salvation through a sacrifice of another more apparent than on the one day when the high priest entered the Holy of Holies. Before he entered, he had to offer various sacrifices to atone for himself, his family, and the entire nation. He would then take blood from each sacrifice, enter the Holy of Holies, and sprinkle it on the cover of the Ark of the Covenant. This graphically made the point that the only way people could approach God, and live to tell about it, was through blood.

The book of Hebrews mentions this, along with the tearing of the veil, to emphasize the tremendous access to God we now have through 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” (Hebrews 10:19-22).

God designed the temple as his great classroom. Its structure stressed that sin separates mankind from God. Its sacrifices portrayed the principle of substitutionary sacrifice and pointed to Jesus who sacrificed himself for the world. The temple was not about people working for God. It was all about showing what God, the ultimate humanitarian, would do for humanity in Jesus Christ.

For Further Reflection

1. The day the high priest entered the Holy of Holies was called the Day of Atonement. (In Hebrew, the original language of the Old Testament, it is Yom Kippur.) There was something else the high priest did only on this day. He sent the scapegoat into the desert to die.

But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the LORD to be used for making atonement by sending it into the wilderness as a scapegoat. . . . When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites – all their sins – and put them on the goat’s head. He shall send the goat away into the wilderness in the care of someone appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place; and the man shall release it in the wilderness (Leviticus 16:10, 20-22).

This was another way God pictured substitutionary sacrifice. Jesus was not only the Lamb of God, he was also the world’s scapegoat.

2. With Jesus’ death, the temple no longer had any reason for existence. Instead Paul asks believers: “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst?” (1 Corinthians 3:16). What is so exhilarating about this statement is that the

Greek word for “temple” is the one used to describe the Holy of Holies! Because of Jesus’ sacrifice, believers become the very thing that was off-limits in the Old Testament. They become the Holy of Holies, the place where God dwells.

3. Leviticus 22:21¹⁸ required that animals sacrificed at the temple be without blemish. Peter refers to this: “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Peter 1:18-19). To be an acceptable sacrifice Jesus had to be without blemish or defect. He had to be sinless.

¹⁸ Leviticus 22:21 When anyone brings from the herd or flock a fellowship offering to the LORD to fulfill a special vow or as a freewill offering, it must be without defect or blemish to be acceptable.

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