

Staring at the Son

Hebrews 10:19-25

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ October 27, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹⁹Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. ²⁴And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:19-25, NRSV)

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We don't know who wrote Hebrews. The letter doesn't include the author's name. We're not even sure about the intended audience though, as the name suggests, it was certainly a Jewish audience because the author assumes the readers possess an extensive knowledge of Hebrew history and of the Hebrew scriptures. The main thrust of the letter was to elevate Jesus. Jesus is superior to the angels and the Torah, to Moses and the Promised Land, to Israel's priests and sacrifices, even to Israel's covenant.¹ This focus on the absolute superiority of Christ is evident from the very opening words of the letter:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.²

With this in mind, we are parachuting into the middle of the letter, at a point where all this theology of Jesus' superiority is about to be applied practically to the church. The verses we just read from chapter 10, like

the rest of the letter, are filled with rich imagery and references rooted in the Old Testament, all of which would have been immediately familiar to the original audience but which may need some explanation for modern readers. One of the key images here and elsewhere in the letter is the image of the Temple curtain.

As some of you know, the Jewish Temple that stood at the center of Jerusalem during the time of Christ was considered, by the Jews, to be the most sacred piece of real estate in the world, the primary place where heaven and earth met together.³ At the center of the Temple was an inner sanctuary called the Holy of Holies. This was the most sacred part of the Temple. The very Ark of the Covenant was kept here, the cabinet which held, among other things, the 10 Commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai. The Jews believed, because the Old Testament taught them to believe, that God himself was present in this holy space. For that reason, only the high priest, and then only once a year on the Day of Atonement, could enter this space to offer a sacrifice.⁴ Otherwise, nobody was allowed inside on penalty of death. As Numbers 18:7 declares, **"any outsider who approaches shall be put to death."⁵**

In our day we often treat God's presence casually. "God is present with us," we say, as if it's the most ordinary thing in the world. The Jews never did that. When Moses realizes it is God speaking to him from the burning bush he hides his face, afraid to look in God's direction.⁶ Later, when Moses gets up the courage to ask to see God's glory, God warns him, **"You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live."⁷** You might remember that when Peter, after Jesus miraculously helped him catch more fish than he had ever caught in his life, suddenly realized who Jesus was he fell to his knees and pleaded, **"Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"⁸** The Jews rightly understood that you don't approach a righteous and holy God if you, yourself, are unrighteous and sinful. Life cannot tolerate death. Light cannot welcome darkness. Goodness cannot suffer evil. Righteousness cannot permit the presence of sin.

³ I'm borrowing language here from N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (Harper, 2006), 64.

⁴ Leviticus 16:2, 12, 15

⁵ NRSV

⁶ Exodus 3:6 (NRSV)

⁷ Exodus 33:20 (NRSV)

⁸ Luke 5:8 (NRSV)

¹ For a wonderful and concise summary of Hebrews go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fNWTZZwgbs>

² Hebrews 1:1-3 (NRSV)

For this reason, the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple was sealed off behind a giant curtain that hung from the ceiling to the floor. Scholars estimate that it was 60 feet long and 30 feet tall and was as thick as the width of a man's hand. In the exaggerated language of the time it was said that it took 300 priests to manipulate it. Whatever its exact dimensions, the point was clear: when you came to worship at the Jerusalem Temple in those days, the place where God's presence dwelled, the curtain made it exceedingly clear that you, as a sinful person, were not to approach God.

I know this is difficult to understand, especially in a day and culture where we want to downplay human sin and emphasize human goodness and potential. Perhaps think about it this way. Many years ago I was with some friends in the lobby of a restaurant in the Bay Area and I walked Jerry Rice who was, at the time, playing wide receiver for the San Francisco 49ers. If you're a football fan and you don't know who Jerry Rice is, you're not a football fan. I'm not a 49er fan and even I will admit he was the greatest receiver of all time. And there he was standing just a few feet from us.

In that moment a crazy idea popped into my head. We actually had a football out in the car and I whispered to my friends that we should ask Jerry Rice if he would be willing to go out to the parking lot and let us run a few routes with him. I had a decent arm in those days and I thought he might even be impressed with the zip I could put on the ball. In response, my friends looked back at me and told me I was an idiot, which I was. Who was I to think that we should be out running routes with future Hall-of-Famer Jerry Rice? He and I didn't belong on the same field, even if that field was a parking lot.

Allow my trivial example to make an infinitely more important point. God is so holy, so righteous, so full of love and goodness, so absent of anything malicious or self-serving, so pure in every aspect, so high above us in every respect, who are we to imagine we belong in his company? In fact, any one of us, were we to be exposed to the fullness of God's presence and glory, would not survive the encounter. When the prophet Isaiah once encountered God's glory he cried out, "**Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.**" And there is nothing we can do, on our own, to change this. I would have an infinitely easier time making myself into a football player worthy of a spot on an NFL roster than I would making myself into a person worthy to stand in the presence of our Holy God. *That* was the unmistakable point of the temple curtain. Imagine then what it must have been like to face that massive curtain every time you came to worship, a constant reminder

that God's presence is over there and you are not allowed over there.

There is no curtain hanging here in our sanctuary this morning. There's a reason for that which we'll get to in a moment. What I want you to first understand is that just because we haven't hung a curtain up here, it doesn't necessarily mean we're done with curtains. One of the reasons you have curtains over the windows in your home is that sometimes you don't want people on the outside to see what's happening on the inside. I'm sure your neighbors appreciate that sometimes you close your curtains. I'm convinced that lots of us are doing something similar with our lives.

You see, to some extent every one of us showed up here this morning with the curtains drawn. On the outside we all cleanup really well on Sunday morning, but there are things in your life, just as there are things in my life, that are hidden beneath the scrubbed exterior, things we don't want exposed. Things we have done or not done. Thoughts about other people which have not only crossed our minds, but taken root there. True motives and intentions we would never want revealed. We work overtime (social media only accelerates this) to present our best selves to others. But isn't there much in your life you keep behind closed curtains. Likely, you don't even want to bring a lot of that junk before God. And it's the same with me. And in a way that isn't all that different from the Jews in Jesus' day, we're stuck. We simply don't know how to take these curtains down, these curtains that continue to distance us from God and from one another.

If you can admit this is true of yourself, then you may be ready to hear the remarkably good news that we find in these verses. Once again, we read, "**Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh)...**" This is the declaration here, put as simply as I can put it: the blood and the body of Jesus Christ have become for us the way back into the loving presence of God. Let me explain.

Read the Old Testament and you can't miss the fact that God is holy and requires holiness from his people. His people, however, continuously rebel, breaking God's commandments over and over again. That's the story of the Old Testament. That puts people in God's debt because that's what happens when you sin against somebody. If I sin against you I am in your debt. At the very least I *owe* you an apology – that's the language we use. In the Old Testament God required sacrifices to pay this debt of sin. So over and over Israel's priests, on behalf of Israel's people, would offer

sacrifices of animals to make amends for their sin. The problem was that the priests themselves were full of sin. And the animals they sacrificed were never sufficient to atone for the sin. Not even close.

It's the same with us, though the sacrifices we make are quite different. Instead of bringing sheep or goats to the church, we all work to be good people and try to put God in our debt. Go to church. Tell the truth. Help the poor. Read your Bible. Sing the right songs and pray the right prayers. Be nice to others. Give an offering faithfully every week. And let's say, for the sake of argument, that you are the most faithful person in the world; you do these things better than anybody else. Even then, are you then feeling confident about going before God and saying to him, "Lord, you've seen my work. You know I've tried hard. I think I have earned your favor. So now I deserve a place in your presence." Really? God requires us to love him with all our heart, all our strength, all our mind...all our lives! He commands us to love every other person on this planet as much as we love ourselves. Do this, he says, and you will be saved. Have we? Not even close. *Not even close.* No sacrifice we can ever offer earns us access behind the curtain.

But here's the good news. When God came to this world in the person of his Son, Jesus of Nazareth, took on human flesh just like us, and then, though he was without sin, offered his body and his blood on the cross in place of us, the way was then made clear for us to also become holy. He took on our sin that we might take on his righteousness. II Corinthians 5:21 declares, **"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."**

Think carefully here with me. It will be worth it. In the ancient Temple, worshippers could come close to God but were always separated by an impenetrable curtain. They could see and touch and approach the curtain but never go beyond. The writer here is declaring that Jesus' body, his 'flesh', has now *become that curtain, the curtain which we can see and touch and approach.* Because Jesus is God himself, eternal with the Father, we now can come to God through Christ. No human being can gaze at the full glory of God. You and I would still die if we did. But in Christ, God has become present to us in a way we can gaze at him intently and perpetually.

Think about it this way. You cannot stare directly at the sun. Well, you can, but you will do serious and permanent damage to your eyes if you do. Since there are no pain receptors in the retina of the human eye, you won't even know the damage is happening until it's

too late. However, if you go get yourself a sleek pair of specialty No. 14 welder's glasses, available at your local welding stop-n-shop, you can go outside and stare at the sun because those glasses block about 99% of the UV rays that are so harmful to our eyes. You might say that the glasses are a curtain that allows us access to the sight of the sun.

At Christmas we sing these words: "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; Hail the incarnate Deity!"⁹ That captures it so beautifully. Christ is God incarnate, God in the flesh. But Christ is also God veiled so that we can finally stare directly at God, not only to see exactly what God is like, but to come to him because he has come to us. Christ became the veil, the curtain, not to hide God *from us* but to reveal God *to us!*

I know some of you have been thinking about this all along, so let me remind the rest of you that one of the things that happened at the very moment of Jesus' death on the cross was that the Temple curtain was torn in two from top to bottom.¹⁰ That is the recorded testimony of eyewitnesses, a testimony that you would never make public unless it actually happened. If you made the whole thing up you'd be thought a liar, a fool, or lunatic.

Don't miss the point. When God, in the flesh and blood of Jesus, dies on the cross for our sake, we are not only given a way to God but we are shown a picture of God as God truly is. Do you want to know what God is like? Stare at the Son on the cross. Stare at the sinless one suffering and dying for the very ones who are putting him to death. The all-powerful, holy, sovereign God of the universe reveals himself most clearly in that moment. At the heart of God is love - sacrificial, other-centered, unconditional and enduring love that gives up everything for us.

In the arrogance and ignorance of our day we like to talk about how there must be many ways to God. Sure, Jesus is one way, but who are we to say that there is just one way. Lord help us! What other way is there? What other way is there for sinful human beings to approach a sinless God? If you are dying of a terminal illness and somebody gives you some medicine that saves your life, what sort of person would you have to be to complain to that person that they should have given you more than just one option to be saved? The curtain is torn from top to bottom! In Christ, all who would receive him can find their way back to God and to the life that God has always wanted for everybody.

⁹ From *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*

¹⁰ "At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." -Matthew 27:51 (NRSV)

This is the testimony of the gospel. But just because you hear it does not mean it has penetrated into your mind and heart. Not all who hear believe. True, there is no curtain separating any of us from God because God in Christ has become the curtain. Full access is extended to all. But many of us still have plenty of curtains we have hung up ourselves. A.W. Tozer calls these the “self-sins”: “self-righteousness, self-pity, self-confidence, self-sufficiency, self-admiration, self-love.”¹¹ Put simply, we either think too much of ourselves or too little of God’s love and grace. As a result, we keep ourselves in the darkness even though the light is shining all around us.

Lord, take us back to the cross where we can stare at the Son, the love and grace of God on full display. In Hosea 14:4 God declares, **“I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them.”** That’s so good. This is the cross. We did not deserve what Jesus did for us. We never could have earned it. God did not owe us. In Christ God loved us *freely!* He loves *you* freely! If there were any stipulations, any pre-requisites, any single thing needed from us beforehand, than the gift of God would not be free and the gospel would not be good news. There are none. It’s free. You can say to God, “My heart is hard towards you.” In response God says to you, “I love you freely.” “I want nothing to do with you”...“I love you freely.” “I don’t trust you at all”...“I love you freely.” “I don’t need you”...“I love you freely.” We complain to God, deny God, forget God, rebel against God, even kill God, and God says to us in Christ, “I love you freely.” The curtain in the Temple is torn in two. And if God will open your eyes to this marvelous truth, then all the self-hung curtains in your heart will be torn in two as well.

Here’s where all this leaves us, where theology becomes practical. Three things, directly from the text.

First, since this **“new and living way is opened up for us”** we should have **“confidence to enter the sanctuary”** and therefore **“approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith.”** I actually would never go up to Jerry Rice and ask him to play catch. But I bet I know who would. His kids would. He’s got three kids and I bet than when they were little they had no problem saying to Hall-of-Famer Jerry Rice, “Daddy, can we play catch in the backyard”. And assuming he was even a halfway good father, I bet Jerry Rice had no problem saying yes.

Through Christ we have been invited to become beloved sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father,

loved freely by him in spite of ourselves. As his children, of course we can now come to him and be with him though he is so far above us. And as we come we don’t have to pretend. We don’t have to hide. We don’t have to fear or be anxious in his presence. We don’t have to hold on to guilt or shame. Songwriter John Mark McMillian puts it this way: “I don’t have time to maintain these regrets when I think about the way that He loves us.”¹² In Christ there is no time or reason to maintain regrets. They are torn in two!

John Mark Comer is a pastor at Bridgetown Church in Portland. In a recent podcast I heard him encourage this practice. Think about this. You ought to time regularly to sit in your sin and let God love you. In other words, make a practice of holding your sin up before God in your mind’s eye, in prayer. Hold up all of your failure to love him and others. All of the mistakes you have made. All of the things that have come out of your mouth to hurt other people. All the things behind your self-made curtains that you dare not let anybody else see. Everything. No filter. No excuses. No blame-shifting. No victimization. Just hold it all up before God. Remove the human defense mechanism for self-deception. Don’t hide behind curtains. Set all that you are before God, your sin before God, and in that moment stare at Jesus and let God freely love you, which is what he has been doing all along. Let God press love deeply into your heart and life *as you are*, not as you should be or as you wish you were. And let his love for you transform you to the point where you simply have no time to maintain regrets.¹³ Your heart has been sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and your body has been washed with pure water!

With that in mind, the writer here encourages us to then, **“hold fast to [this] confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.”** Even if we can come to trust that God really does love us freely in this way we live in a world that is going to do everything it can to beat this truth out of us. Materialism and consumerism assault us with the message that it is what we possess that satisfies, rather than who it is that possesses us. Hardship will make us question the promises of God. Evil is always whispering in our ear, reminding us of our shortcomings and flaws, suggesting that there is something more we must do to earn God’s favor. Shame and guilt result. So we must find a way to hold fast to this confession of hope, to be continuously

¹² From *How He Loves*.

¹³ I’m stealing generously from John Mark Comer in Bridgetown Church Podcast (*Becoming People of Love*, October 6, 2019). It’s worth a full listen at <https://bridgetown.church/teaching/vision-series-2019/becoming-people-of-love/>

¹¹ A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Christian Publications Inc, 1948).

reminded of God's love and grace towards us that shout down every other false message we are hearing.

How do we do this? That's the final application the writer of Hebrews offers here. We need to be constantly in God's Word so that God can speak this truth to our minds and hearts over and over again, that his voice would rise above the other voices. But we need to be in God's word *together*. In verse 24 we read, **"Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching."**

There is a whole other sermon here which I don't have time for, but let me say at least this. These verses are connected. There's a reason why we are told of how deeply God loves and welcomes us, encouraged to never forget this truth, and then commanded to not give up meeting together regularly to encourage one another. John Wesley once said, "The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion." He's right. C.S. Lewis once wrote, "Christ works on us in all sorts of ways, but above all he works on us through each other." He's also right. We need to find ways to not only take our curtains down before God but to do so with one another in places of community with a few others we trust, places where we can tell the truth about ourselves to one another (that's called confession), so that others, without dismissing or minimizing our sin, can instead extend and declare the grace and love God has for us all in spite of our sin, and then help hold us accountable by encouraging us to live a different way – to spur us on towards love and good deeds!

My guess is that most of us in this room currently have no space in our lives where this is happening, no space where we can be daringly transparent with one another, tearing the curtains down, and allowing Christ to speak grace into our lives through one another. For most of you, nobody really knows what's going on behind the curtains. Sitting in worship is not enough. Sitting in classes or Bible studies is not enough. We desperately need these communities where we can practice approaching the presence of God with confidence and faith. James 5:16 even commands it: **"Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."**

It's been said before that the Christian gospel is nothing more or less than this, that we are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in

Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope.¹⁴ It's not in my power to convince you this is true. Only God in Christ can tear down the veils that blind us from this reality. I pray that he would, that we would keep staring at the Son until he does, so that we would then never forget how much we are loved, and that we would remind one another daily of this reality, to the point that we are set free and changed forever.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Hebrews 10:19-25, paying special attention to things you may never have noticed before. What stands out to you from these verses?
2. What was the purpose of the curtain separating off the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple? What do you think about the statement that the curtain made to Israel about God's inaccessibility?
3. Do you have confidence in approaching God yourself? If not, why not? If so, where does your confidence come from?
4. What does the writer mean by telling us that Jesus' flesh is now the curtain?
5. What 'curtains' have you hung up in your life that hide parts of your life (the parts you don't want exposed) from others and even God? Why do we continue to do this even after the curtain in the Temple was torn in two?
6. What would it mean for you to sit in your sin and let God love you, to remove all filters and sit just as you are before God and let him love you just as you are? Is this a practice you would be willing to try?
7. What do you believe Christ is saying to you through this message?

¹⁴ I know Tim Keller said this, but I don't know where or when he said this.

8. And what is one step you think Jesus is now leading you to take in response to what he has said?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Why does God love us?