

Good Friday is a solemn day. On this day, we remember how the Son of God suffered and died for the sins of the world. God's own Lamb was offered on the altar of the cross to take away the world's wickedness and guilt.

Our reading refers to an equally solemn day—the Good Friday of the Old Testament—the great Day of Atonement. On that day, the high priest of Israel entered the presence of God in the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle to make atonement for sin. So holy was this day to the Jews and so solemn was the act of entering into the presence of God by the high priest that according to a Jewish website (chabad.org), when the high priest entered the Most Holy Place during the Second Temple period (516 B.C. to A.D. 70), he did so with a rope tied around one ankle.

The reason for the rope around the ankle was that if he was struck dead while in the Most Holy Place, his corpse could be pulled out without anyone else having to risk entering the place of God's presence.

May we also approach our God today with similar reverence of faith as once again we are reminded that **Jesus our Great High Priest is better than every other high priest.** He is better because he entered by a better sanctuary, he offered up a better sacrifice, and he inspires us to better service.

Our reading begins with a strange sounding phrase: ***“When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here.”*** In the days of the Old Testament, God's people were looking for good things to come. They had God's promises, but the fulfillment lay ahead, in the future. The “good things to come” became a description for the age of fulfillment, when the Savior would come.

With Jesus' coming, all the good things that were promised have now come. That includes all that was foreshadowed by the Old Testament priesthood, its sacrifices and offerings, its rites and rituals, and the place where the Old Testament priests served. No ritual more grand and solemn than the Great Day of Atonement.

With that ritual in mind, the writer of Hebrews calls to mind the work of Jesus and shows how much greater Jesus is than the Old Testament high priests. We are told that Jesus entered the Most Holy Place, the presence of God in heaven ***“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.”***

So, you can imagine the picture this formed in the minds of the first readers of Hebrews. They are thinking of a man passing through the Holy Place, pushing aside the curtain and coming into the presence of God in the Most Holy Place. But how did Jesus do that? The writer says it was by a ***“greater and more perfect tabernacle.”***

To understand what he means, we need to remember that the tabernacle or sanctuary was the dwelling place of God; that tent was where God lived. But it was a shadow of good things to come—good things that Christ brought.

What this means is that what the tabernacle of the Old Testament symbolized—the dwelling of God among his people—was made a reality when Christ came into the world. Jesus himself confirmed this when after cleansing the temple in John chapter 2, he challenged his enemies saying, ***“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days”*** (vs. 19).

And when his enemies objected that it had taken Herod 46 years to build that temple, St. John explains that Jesus was referring to his own body. St. Paul says the same thing in Colossians chapter 2 when he says, ***“In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form”*** (vs. 9).

Indeed, compared to the Holy Place of the tabernacle through which the Old Testament high priests passed to enter the presence of God, Christ entered God's presence through a far better sanctuary: the sanctuary of his own body—the body the eternal Son of God assumed in order to serve us as our Savior from sin.

It was only in that perfect tabernacle—the body that housed the Holy One of Israel—that Jesus could live as one of us under God's law and obey it perfectly. It was in that perfect tabernacle that our Great High Priest died for us under God's wrath on the cross. And it is to the cross and the sacrifice the Great High Priest offered there that the writer directs us next when he writes, ***“He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.”***

Again, we have to think back to the ritual God commanded for the Day of Atonement and to the sacrifice the high priest offered for his own sins and for his family and then for the whole nation of Israel.

It was an annual festival, repeated every year. That in itself should have told the people of Israel something about the limitations of those sacrifices. They could make it possible for the high priest to enter God's presence, but only on one day and then he had to leave.

Something like that happened to the people too. Our reading talks about the ashes of a red heifer: ***"The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean."***

The writer is referring to a cleansing ritual performed with the remains of a heifer that had been slaughtered and burned along with some cedar wood, some hyssop, and some scarlet thread. These were all burned to ash. The ashes were mixed with water, and then the mixture was sprinkled on people who had become ceremonially unclean by coming into contact with a dead body.

The writer means to say that by that washing, the people could come into the courtyard of the tabernacle and worship there, and by the blood of the bull and goat slaughtered on the Day of Atonement, the high priest came into the presence of God. But the high priest could only stay there for a short time and then he had to leave, and the people were only made clean outwardly and ceremonially. But Jesus is better.

When he offered on the altar of the cross the greater and more perfect tabernacle of his body, in which the fullness of God's glory lived, he entered into the presence of God once and for all. He didn't have to repeat that sacrifice annually.

As he died, our Savior cried, ***"It is finished."*** No further offering needed to be made for sin. He had obtained an eternal redemption. From the first sin of Adam to the last sin that is committed before this present world passes away, every sin was paid for.

The Greek word for "redemption" speaks of a ransom, a price paid to free someone held in slavery. That is what Jesus accomplished by his death—he redeemed (eternally, forever, once and for all) a world held captive by sin, death, and hell.

Because it is the blood of a better sacrifice, it has more power to cleanse. Unlike the blood of animals that made the priest outwardly clean to enter a symbol of God's presence and the ashes of the red heifer mixed with water and then sprinkled on the unclean person that made him clean outwardly, the blood of Jesus cleanses the conscience.

The blood of Jesus is the good thing foreshadowed by 14 centuries of animal offerings to God. It truly takes away sin and makes the guilty conscience clean. Look at your Lord Jesus: the one who was made to be sin for us, the Lamb on whom God laid the sins of the world is seated at the right hand of God.

A sinful priest couldn't stay in the Most Holy Place—he would have died—but the sins Christ carried to the cross are gone. His blood, the precious blood of Christ, purifies us from every sin. It isn't just an outward cleansing that makes it possible for us to come into this house of God, but a place in God's heavenly house has been prepared where we one day will live forever.

Our author lists a third and final reason that Jesus is the Great High Priest, and it is that Jesus inspires us to better service than every other high priest ever could. He says it this way: ***"How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"***

Our writer calls our works without Christ ***"acts that lead to death"*** (Hebrews 6:1). Literally, he calls them dead works. Those are works that are inadequate in the sight of God. But Jesus' blood inspires us to serve. The blood that cleanses our consciences from sin—that relieves the soul of its guilt and fear of punishment—is blood that inspires us to serve the living God in a way that pleases him.

And that means living for God and serving him from day to day, at work and at play, at home and away, not because a heavy ***"I have to"*** drives us, but because a joyful desire makes us want to serve God. All those good works that are worthless and filthy, stinky rags in God's sight when done without him become precious and approved by God when done out of thankful love by people inspired by the love of God who first and best loved them.

Such service is a good and pleasing sacrifice to God. And more and more we will bring it when we see the glory of Jesus our Great High Priest, who is great also for this reason: he is better than every Old Testament high priest. He is better because he serves in a better sanctuary—the body of the incarnate God—and because he offers up a better sacrifice of his holy body and precious blood which cleanses us outside and in from every sin and which inspires us to better service of God, who went to the cross for you so that this day could be called "GOOD"! Amen.