

Meeting with God in his house **Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25** *Rev Dr Jos M Strengtholt*

Throughout the ages, millions of people have expressed a deep desire to intimately relate to God, the Creator of heaven and earth.

As a deer pants for the flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, o God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? (Psalm 42:1-2)

If there is a God who created us, who upholds us, and who will one day complete this world, then nothing can be better than to know him.

But if I only think of such intimacy, I am overwhelmed by feelings of inadequacy, of incompleteness, of missing the mark. How dare I think of even coming close to a holy God in his house?

Meeting with God in the house of God. These are words we hear echoed in the letter to the Hebrews.

...we have a great priest [that is, Jesus Christ] over the house of God, [so] let us draw near [to God] with a true heart in full assurance of faith.

1. Old Testament sacrifices

We do not know who wrote this letter to the Hebrews; but the writer had found a magnificent secret. It is possible to confidently draw near to God in his house.

What is this house of God, where we can find him, and how can we have confidence that we can actually approach him with assurance?

The term 'house of God' has a double meaning. On the one hand, it means: the house that God owns. On the other hand, it also means: The house where he lives, where he is at home. The place where he is.

When Jesus is called the great priest over the house of God, the writer definitely does not speak of the building of large stones in Jerusalem, the Temple.

Jesus himself made clear that this building would not last much longer; it was destroyed in the year 70 by the Roman armies. When this letter speaks of Jesus being over the house of God, it means something much more magnificent than the Jerusalem Temple.

For God does not live in a house made of stones.

In the Old Testament, the Temple was the best location where people could meet with God – but even then God was never confined to that particular space. As the Creator of all things he is everywhere.

In the Old Testament, we see that Moses was told to build the tabernacle, and for this tent, he had to build an altar for sacrificing animals, and a large golden seven-armed candle, curtains with angels embroidered on them, a water basin for ritual cleansing, and most important, the ark of the covenant, symbolizing the presence of God.

Four hundred years later, king Solomon of Israel replaced the tent with a stone temple, precisely in accordance with the measures of the tabernacle.

Israel was extremely careful to follow that layout – because Moses had built the tabernacle, in accordance with a pattern that God himself had shown. This is what the book of Exodus tells us.

This idea is also picked up by the letter to the Hebrews. It says that *all aspects* of the temple service of Israel were made 'according to the pattern that was shown [Moses] on the mountain'. (Hebrews 8:5)

It is very interesting to look at the description of heaven as given by St John the Apostle, in the last book of the Bible. There, in the heavenly temple, we see the exact same elements that we also saw in the tabernacle and in the temple of Solomon on earth. In the heavenly temple we see an altar, a basin for water, there are angels, a golden lamp-stand, and the ark, that is the throne of God.

God dwells in his heavenly house; and he is surrounded by the same objects and beings in heaven that were also visible in the temple on earth.

The heavenly reality was the pattern for how Moses created an earthly house of God, so that we might understand something of that *eternal heavenly* reality.

Therefore the Temple on earth was called a symbol and a shadow of eternal reality. A symbol because it helps us understand, and a shadow, because it can only help us understand to a certain extent.

Our language about God and his Kingdom is so very limited. Is there a real temple in heaven? What is heaven? Where is it?

The Temple service of Israel was a temporary reflection, a symbol, a shadow, of divine truth. It taught man about the holiness of God, and the sinfulness of man.

The sacrifices that were brought to the altar, day after day, were symbols of our need for forgiveness. And the impact of these sacrifices could not be lasting and effective by themselves,

not be lasting and effective by themselves, precisely because they were just symbols.

Every priest stood day after day at his service in the house of God, offering again and again the same sacrifices that could never take away sins. (Hebrews 10:11)

The number of animals killed in Jerusalem was phenomenal. The first century Jewish historian Josephus records that, on Passover in the year 70, a few months before the temple was destroyed by the Roman armies, the priests offered 256,500 – that is a quarter million – lambs on the altar in the temple. [Scott Hahn, *The Lamb's Supper* (New York 1999), p. 22]

And as part of the renewal of the relationship with God, the faithful Jews would then eat most of that lamb as a family. A quarter million lambs, that is 15 million kilos of meat, and one million liters of blood. All shed in one weekend...

The killing went on and on because the faithful of God hoped for forgiveness of their sins, and for a glimpse of the invisible God. But how ineffective this was, is proven by the fact that they had to come back, again, and again, and again.

Unending bloodshed, innumerable animals, priests who were never ready. For the simple reason that killing an animal does not, cannot change our sinful status before God. Nothing that we bring to God is ever enough to make up for our sinfulness and to give us forgiveness before God.

The priests could never sit down; there were no chairs in the sanctuary of the temple in Israel. They were always working. All this hard and bloody labor in the temple was prefiguring the real sacrifice and the truly effective forgiveness that was to come.

St John saw, in that heavenly temple of God, the presence of a Lamb – a Lamb that looked as though it had been sacrificed. But that lamb in heaven was not on the altar, but in the throne of God: Jesus Christ.

In the book of Revelation, St John mentions the Lamb of God 28 times. He is the central, living, powerful presence in the temple of the universe – in the House of God.

2. Impact

In the letter to the Hebrews we have read the same thing:

When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. (Hebrews 10:12)

The Lord Jesus Christ could sit, because he was the everlasting sacrifice, who had been slaughtered once and for all. As the great priest

he entered into the house of God, and there he offered himself as the perfect sacrifice.

The immediate impact on those who believe in him, is described by the letter to the Hebrews:

I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds. (Hebrews 11:16)

His sacrifice has *changed us*... it has put God's desires in our hearts. And his sacrifice has changed God as well:

I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more. (Hebrews 11:17)

God has forgiven your sins, for good. There is no more need for sacrifices of animals, and no need for Christ to die again.

After Christ died, the sacrificial service in the temple in Jerusalem no longer added anything; the symbols and the shadows had become outdated, because God himself had, through his Son, brought all those symbols to their completion. The eternal sacrifice of the Lamb of God, effective to forgive us and to change our hearts, is the real thing.

No need to pay, to kill, to beat yourself over your shortcomings. Yes, they are plenty – but it is forgiven. Once and for all.

And friends, it is exactly this why you and I are able to know God. Why we can enter into his presence. Our letter says:

We have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus.

We are able to draw near to God. Without hesitation, we can pray to God, speak with God. We have access to the throne. Our conscience no longer needs to tell us that we are imperfect, because yes, so what, we totally agree.

Surely, we are sinners. But the eternal Lamb has been slaughtered, Christ died for our sins and God looks at us with spectacles that have the color of Christ. When God the Father looks at us – Christ eternally says: My Father, look at me. The price has been paid.

3. House of God

We have a great priest over the house of God!

So what is this House of God? We have seen, this is not about the temple in Jerusalem. It is about the eternal house of God, the realm where he rules. The House of God is where He dwells. Where the Holy Trinity eternally lives in divine communion. It is the throne room of the universe.

And what is so immensely deep to consider, is that the apostles also speak of the Church as the House of God.

They then do not speak about the building, the walls, the roof. But the apostles speak of the community of believers as the house of God. That is where God can be found. Listen again to the writer of Hebrews:

Christ is faithful over God's House as a son. And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope. (Hebrew 3:5-6)

We are the house of God. The community of Christians holds a precious secret.

There is one heavenly house of God, the place where he rules. And each and every congregation of Christians is linked directly to that one house of God, by our faith that is an anchor into heaven. Through our faith in God, when we meet as Christians together, we participate in the heavenly worship of the Triune God in the heavenly House of God.

The Greek word for house is *oikos*. That word does not focus on a building in the first place, but on the whole extended family as well. Father, mother, children, cousins, slaves, the chicken, everyone included.

The House of God – it is the community of the angels that worship him, and all believers from all ages and all places, Abraham, and you, Moses, and Ruth, and the one beside you in the bench, and Mary, and the Apostles, and all of us that have come so near to him through our faith.

And central in the House of God is the Triune God in his throne, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, yes faints for the courts of the Lord. [...] Blessed are those who dwell in your house. (Psalm 84:1-2,4)

Conclusion

When we as Christians meet, we together are the House of God – the place where God can be found.

No wonder the writer of the letter to the Hebrews concludes with a very concrete command. Something I like you to consider very seriously as well.

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another. (Hebrews 10:24-25)

This is so important. Come to the meetings, because this is where God lives. Because when we meet for worship, and especially as we eat together at the communion table, we are together and each individually, linked in a very real way, with our Lamb, the Lord Christ.

As we eat from the bread and drink from the wine, with faith in the Lamb who was sacrificed for us, we participate in his eternal sacrifice.

And as we do, all benefits of that sacrifice are ours; our sins are forgiven, our life is renewed, and we can be with our Lord and God eternally. And even now, we can approach him with full assurance.

Praise the Lord!

Amen

