

Drawing near - Part 1

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[0 : 00] Today we are going to preach one sermon in the course of the day. Now, some may be wondering, are we canceling the evening service, or perhaps having a sermonless evening service?

Well, whether you consider such a prospect attractive or disturbing, let me quickly dispel any confusion. One sermon in two parts.

As I was considering a message for this morning particularly, I was wondering about a passage, a text, a message that would serve as a challenge, as an encouragement, for us to participate in the neighborhood fellowships that have been announced.

And one text came to mind as appropriate, and it's a text that I imagine many of you are familiar with in Hebrews chapter 10.

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another. And the verse continues.

[1 : 15] As I say, the verse in question is in Hebrews chapter 10 and in verse 25. And as I thought about that verse and sought to construct, I suppose, a sermon around the text, I quickly realized that it would be very difficult to do so and to do justice to the text in isolation without considering the preceding verses.

And let's just read the block in question in Hebrews chapter 10 and verses 19 to 25. And as we read these verses, I hope in a measure you'll share my difficulty in trying to consider just the final verse of that block without taking into account the preceding verses, which is what I eventually decided to do.

But let's first read verses 19 to 25 of Hebrews chapter 10. Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened up 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 in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience, and having our bodies washed with pure water.

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds.

[3 : 09] Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another, and all the more as you see the day approaching.

The Word of God. And in these verses, verses 19 to 25, we have three stirring exhortations.

I think I would prefer to call it a threefold exhortation, which we can present as follows. We are exhorted, invited, challenged to draw near to God.

There we read these words in verse 22, Let us draw near to God. We're also challenged to draw near to God's Word.

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess. And we'll be considering this evening how that can be described as drawing near to or clinging to God's Word.

[4 : 13] But we are also encouraged, exhorted to draw near to God's people. Let us consider how we may spur one another towards love and good deeds.

Let us not give up meeting together. Exhorted, challenged, invited to draw near to God's people. To draw near to God, to draw near to God's Word, and to draw near to God's people.

Now, as you can accompany me in my struggle, as I set to preparing this sermon, and recognized that to consider only that element that we find in verse 25, in isolation, would have been not a good way of proceeding.

And as I sought to cover all of what we have here, this threefold exhortation, I soon realized that that was not possible within the remit of the time available at this morning service.

And, maybe mistakenly, I had the sneaking suspicion that you would not appreciate the morning service finishing at 1 p.m. Maybe you would have been quite happy for that.

[5 : 27] I don't know. But I suspected that wouldn't be the case. And so emerged a two-part sermon. This morning, we're going to consider the first exhortation, or the first element of this threefold exhortation, that we would draw near to God.

And this evening, the second and third, draw near to God's Word, and draw near to God's people. Draw near to God. The words are actually framed in the form of a gracious invitation.

The writer to the Hebrews invites his readers, together with him, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and all that follows.

Let us draw near to God. Now, before setting out how we plan to treat what is said with regard to this invitation or exhortation, we do have to just notice briefly the context of the passage.

Now, we've already read chapter 9, which helps us, I think, to understand in a measure the context of this passage. The writer has been reminding his readers of the manner in which God's people could secure the forgiveness of their sins in the Old Testament.

[6 : 52] The way established by God involved, as we have read, the high priest in representation of the people entering the most holy place in the temple once a year to offer the blood of sacrifice for his and for the people's sin.

But, and again, our reading has reminded us of this, the whole system was but a shadow of the reality to come.

The blood of animals, incapable in itself to secure the forgiveness of sins, pointing to the ultimate and perfect sacrifice of Jesus, the Lamb of God.

And we can further read from the beginning of chapter 10. We've read the whole of chapter 9. We then read from verse 19 of chapter 10. But let's just read the beginning of chapter 10 to appreciate the contrast that is being clearly drawn between the old way and the new way that is Jesus.

Let's just read then the first few verses of chapter 10. The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming, not the realities themselves. For this reason, it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship.

[8 : 15] If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said, sacrifice an offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me. With burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased.

Then I said, here I am. It is written about me in the scroll. I have come to do your will, O God. First, he said, sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them, although the law required them to be made.

Then he said, here I am. I have come to do your will. He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all.

And so, without further explanation, as time does not allow, we see these two ways contrasted. And it is in this context of this discussion that we come to our passage from verse 19 through to verse 25, and we can only understand the language of the passage that we will consider in that context.

[9 : 46] So, what does the passage say about how we are to draw near to God? Remember, we've identified a threefold exhortation, to draw near to God, to draw near to God's Word, and to draw near to God's people.

But this morning, we are considering the first element, drawing near to God. What does the passage say about drawing near to God? And I would suggest there are three things.

First of all, it presents to us the way, the way that has been opened for us to draw near to God. We're also told concerning the manner in which we are to draw near to God.

And then finally and briefly, we just note that that then provides us with the opportunity to draw near to God. First of all then, the way.

Somebody may respond to the exhortation, you must draw near to God, or let us draw near to God. And somebody could respond quite legitimately, very well, what is the way to God that I might draw near to Him?

[10 : 56] You tell me that I have to come close to God, to draw near to God, to know God very well. What is the way that I might do so? What is the way that I must travel that I might draw near to God?

Well, verse 20 of our passage speaks of that way. It identifies that way. We'll read from verse 19. Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us.

A new and living way to what is described in the language of the temple, the most holy place to God's presence.

The most holy place representing God's presence. And our passage tells us there is a way. There is a new and a living way. It is new in contrast to the old way of animal sacrifice in the temple and all its many limitations.

And it is living in contrast to the old way that involved static regulations or rituals, while this new way by which we may draw near to God involves a person.

[12 : 12] Hence, it is a living way. And that person is the person of Jesus Christ. We well remember the words of Jesus Himself in this regard.

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father but by me. Jesus Himself designating Himself as the way, the new and the living way by which sinners can draw near to God.

This new and living way that the writer speaks of is Jesus. And as we develop that, we can say that He is a new and living way on the basis of what He has done and on the basis of who He is.

And let's consider those two elements. Jesus is the new and living way. But He is the new and living way on the basis of what He has done and on the basis of who He is.

First of all, what He has done. Now, there are two significant references in that regard in our passage. In verse 19, we are told that we have confidence to enter the most holy place.

[13 : 25] We have confidence to draw near to God, to come into God's presence by the blood of Jesus. That's the first reference that's important as we consider what He has done.

And the second one is in verse 20, where we read, by a new and living way, open for us through the curtain that is His body. These are two references to the blood of Jesus and this reference to through the curtain that is His body.

And both references refer to the death of Jesus. We're thinking what Jesus has done to open up this way. And the two references highlighted by the author refer to His death.

We have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus. Now, again, we've read in chapter 9 of how the blood of bulls and goats was the means appointed by which the priest could enter into the most holy place.

But this new way, this new and living way, has been opened up, we are told, by the blood of Jesus, by the death of Jesus.

[14 : 39] By His dying in the place of sinners. By His taking upon Himself the sins of the world and bearing upon Himself the punishment due for sin.

It is by the blood of Jesus, by the death of Jesus, that there has been opened up this new way whereby we who are sinners can draw near to God, can enter into the most holy place.

So, when we consider what Jesus has done to open up the way, well, He has died on Calvary's tree for us as a payment for sin.

But the second reference also refers to His death. We read there in verse 20, a new and living way opened up for us through the curtain that is His body. Now again, the language harks back or points back to the temple.

The curtain, we've read of it in chapter 9. The curtain referred to here is that curtain that separated the holy place from the most holy place in the temple.

[15 : 57] the curtain that symbolically separated the people from God. The people could not go beyond the curtain. They were not permitted to go beyond the curtain.

They were not permitted to enter into the most holy place. They could not do so. It was forbidden. Just the high priest once a year could make that journey, could go through the curtain.

But what happened to that curtain? What happened to that very curtain when Jesus died? Well, we can read in Matthew chapter 27 to find the answer to that question.

Matthew chapter 27 in verse 50, we read, And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, He gave up His spirit. He died there on the cross. And then we read, At that moment, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

The curtain that separated the people from God was torn asunder at the moment that Jesus was torn asunder, at the moment that Jesus was broken for us.

[17 : 10] So the picture is of the flesh or the body of Jesus torn in order that the curtain be torn and the way opened up for us to draw near to God.

Indeed, the words of Jesus at the institution of the supper come to mind. This is my body. This is my flesh broken for you.

So His flesh, His body torn asunder that the curtain that separated men from God might also be torn asunder and a new and living way be opened up for us.

So, Jesus is the new and living way because of what He has done in offering Himself as a sacrifice for sin, but He is a new and living way also because of who He is.

In verse 21, we read, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near. So, this ability to draw near to God is also a function of who Jesus is now.

[18 : 26] Not only what Jesus has done, not only what He did 2,000 years ago as He handed Himself over to death in our place, but who He is now. We have now a great priest over the house of God, the writer assures us.

So, our access is secured not only by what Jesus did on Calvary, it is secured because Jesus, the great high priest who was both the one who offered the sacrifice and the sacrifice offered, is today at the Father's right hand interceding for us, even now.

He opened the way by His death, and then He entered in to heaven by that way He opened up, and He took His place on the throne as priest and king, and so He is, as we are reminded today, a great priest over the house of God, and so we draw near to God through Him and looking to Him.

We don't just look back on what He has done, but we look to Him. We fix our eyes on Jesus, seated today at the right hand of the Father, and as we look to Him, so we can approach confidently, because there He is, today, seated at the right hand of God, interceding for us as our great high priest.

Notice, just in the passing, time doesn't allow us to develop this, that He is described as the great priest over the house of God. Yes, He is in heaven, but He is not detached from His people here on earth, He is over us who constitute the house of God.

[20 : 11] This is a theme that the writer has already developed in this letter, where the people of God, believers, Christians, are described as the house of God, and we're told that this high priest, this great priest, is over the house of God.

He is over to rule and to exercise authority. He is, as we were sharing with the children, the big boss. He's the gaffer. He's the king.

He's the one who is over the church of Jesus Christ. So, we have presented to us, as we consider this first of a three-fold exhortation, as we consider this exhortation to draw near to God, we have noticed what the writer tells us concerning the way, the way that has been opened up, the new and living way that is Jesus, what he has done and who he is.

But we also want to consider briefly the manner in which we are to draw near to God, because here again the writer very helpfully instructs us the manner in which we are to draw near to God.

And verse 22 speaks of the manner. Now that verse, and we've just read it, it hardly requires repetition, but the verse identifies four features of those who can draw near to God.

[21 : 55] There is to be a sincere heart, there is to be full assurance of faith, there is to be a heart sprinkled, and there is to be a body washed.

I think three words encapsulate in a nutshell what is being said here regarding the manner of our approach. These three words, cleansed confidently and coherently.

How are we to draw near to God? Well, we are to be cleansed, we are to approach confidently, and we are to approach coherently. Let me explain. First of all, our approach is to be as those who are cleansed.

In verse 22, the writer speaks of our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience. Our hearts are cleansed, are sprinkled by the blood of Jesus.

Again, there is this clear contrast between the blood of animals that was sprinkled on the priests in an external fashion, and the blood of Jesus, the efficacy of his death, that is sprinkled on the heart, on the inside, cleansing us from the inside out.

[23 : 16] Not only a superficial, external sprinkling, but a heart sprinkled by Jesus' work and by the efficacy of his death.

And as we think of a heart sprinkled or cleansed, this points to what we might call the application of the saving work of Jesus to the sinner.

Yes, in time and history, the sacrifice was offered. In time and history, the mission of Jesus was fulfilled.

The price was paid. Divine justice was satisfied. The wrath of God dealt with. The way opened. And that happened 2,000 years ago at Calvary.

But that work, that work of which Jesus himself could cry out, it is finished. That work has to be applied to the sinner.

[24 : 17] It has to be applied to each and every one of us, that it would be useful to us. Your heart has to be sprinkled.

Your heart has to be cleansed. The work of Jesus has to be applied to you in your experience. And how does that happen? How is a heart sprinkled that it might be cleansed from guilt?

Well, a heart is cleansed as the sinner, recognizing his condition, recognizing her sin, repents of that sin, and asks Jesus to forgive him, asks Jesus to cleanse him.

And so, even before we go any further, it's worth pausing just for a brief moment and asking the question, is that true of you? Has that great, perfect, complete work of Jesus that cannot be added to, that work that has opened up a new way whereby we may draw near to God, has that work been applied to your life?

Has it been brought to bear on your guilty heart? Has it cleansed your heart of sin? The manner in which we are to draw near to God, well, we are to be cleansed, and a cleansed heart, we can be sure, will be a sincere heart, and we won't deal any further with that language used there at the beginning of verse 22.

[25 : 57] We are to approach as those who are cleansed, but also we are to approach confidently. We read there that we are to approach in full assurance of faith. And then in verse 19, we've also noticed that the exhortation is, therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place, in full assurance of faith, confidently.

And that confidence, as should be, I hope, so evident, that confidence is not a confidence that rests on ourselves. We don't come confidently because we have something to bring to the table.

We don't come confidently because of any merit in ourselves. We come confidently because of what Jesus has done, because of his finished work, and because as we look to heaven, we see him there seated at the right hand of God.

Our mediator is there interceding for us, and for that reason, we can come confidently, and our eyes unwaveringly fixed on Jesus.

It can be no other way. The manner in which we are to draw near, cleanse, confident, but also coherent. Our approach is to be a coherent approach.

[27 : 12] What do I mean by that? Well, there's much debate as to the meaning of the final element of verse 22, where we read, having our bodies washed with pure water.

Now, not surprisingly, many see in this a reference to baptism, and that's understandable, given the language that is used. And, of course, those who see in this a reference to baptism will look beyond the act of baptism to the meaning of the same.

And, again, that's understandable and perhaps legitimate. But it seems to me that the primary purpose that is served by this reference here to our bodies, as the writer would instruct us concerning the manner in which we are to approach God, the primary purpose of a reference to bodies and to washed bodies is to complement the reference to sprinkled hearts.

You see, the sprinkled heart speaks of the interior. It speaks of the soul, if you wish. It speaks of that which cannot be seen. And we are told that our hearts must be cleansed, they must be sprinkled, there must be that work of regeneration in the soul that only the Spirit of God can do.

But, that must be evidence in bodies that are washed. There must be, hence the coherence, there must be a coherence between what we claim to be the state of our heart cleansed by God with the life that we live.

[28 : 46] Our bodies must be washed, washed. Our lives must reflect what is true inside. The lives that we live must be consistent with our profession.

A sprinkled heart must necessarily be accompanied by a washed body, a life that is holy and separate from sin, and again, hence the use of the word coherent.

Christian, the Christian, and I say to you, Christian friend this morning, the Christian is not to complacently and hypocritically waltz into God's presence, naming the name of Jesus while living a life that flirts with and is stained by sin.

It cannot be so. Yes, a new and living way has been opened, and we are invited to walk along that way that is Jesus, and to name the name of Jesus as we would approach God.

But we are to do so in a manner that is fitting. We are to do so in a manner that does justice to who we are. And so, yes, by all means, we must have a cleansed heart, but that cleansed heart, indeed the evidence of the genuineness of a sprinkled heart, must be a washed body.

[30 : 11] So, then, we are to draw near to God. The writer instructs us concerning the way. Jesus is the way, what he has done, and who he is.

We are told concerning the manner in which we are to draw near to God. Cleanse, confident, coherent, but finally, and very briefly, the opportunity.

And by that, I simply mean we do actually have to draw near. Let me just illustrate this with a story that is probably familiar to many of you.

Many of you will have heard of Callum's Road in Razzie. Callum McLeod, the fellow who lived in the north of the island of Razzie, and he single-handedly with a pick and shovel built a road to connect his croft to the nearest road.

And this has been celebrated in song and in book, and it has become quite a well-known story of this great effort that was made by this man to single-handedly prepare this way, this way that it would allow him to get to the south of the island, and I hesitate to use the word civilization, but to get to where he wanted to get to.

[31 : 32] Callum's Road. Now imagine, imagine if Callum had spent ten years with his pick and his shovel building this road, and he never used the road.

All this effort, all this sacrifice, and he just stays in his croft and waits for others maybe to come and visit him, but never uses the road. We can't imagine such an outcome.

It's inconceivable. Well, what about us as Christians? The way has been opened up not, and here illustrations always have their limitations, the way has been opened up not by our sacrifice, not by your sacrifice, not by my sacrifice, not by our effort, but the way to God has been opened up by the sacrifice of Jesus.

And if we are Christians, our hearts have been cleansed, but it remains the case that the way must be traveled. we must draw near to God on the way that has been provided.

And so often, we fail to do so, and this is both foolish and tragic. A way has been opened up, and it is a way that has been opened up at great cost, and yet we hold back and fail to make use of this way that has been provided.

[32 : 54] And so, we close with this exhortation, and we enthusiastically adopt the language of the writer, where the exhortation is framed as a gracious invitation, let us draw near to God.

Let us draw near to God as a congregation, as a community of faith in this place. Let us draw near to God in worship together, in prayer, in the study of the Word of God, in service and fellowship with God's people.

Let us draw near to God. This is the fundamental and primary purpose of the neighborhood fellowships, that they would provide an opportunity to help us draw near to God.

We're not for a moment suggesting that they are the be-all and end-all. We're not for a moment suggesting that they are the only means provided, but they are intended to provide an opportunity to help us together to draw near to God.

As we pray together, as we pray to Him, as we study His Word, as we fellowship with one another, so we draw near to Him.

[34 : 16] The concern of the writer is that all would draw near, that none would be left behind, that none would lose out. And so, again, I say, let us draw near as a congregation, drawing near together to our God as we pray, as we praise, as we study His Word, and as we fellowship one with another, and more of that in the evening.

Let us pray. Let us pray. God bless. Let us pray.

Thank you. Thank you.