



SESSION 3



He Chose to Invite Us into His Presence

We are completely free to enter the Most Holy Place without fear because of the blood of Jesus' death. We can enter through a new and living way that Jesus opened for us. It leads through the curtain—Christ's body.

Hebrews 10:19–20 NCV

The cross of Jesus tears apart that veil and lets us see inside the Holy of Holies, the heart of God. And what do we see there? Unfathomable love, unfathomable forgiveness, a compassion and tenderness beyond understanding.

*Ronald Rolheiser, "The Cross as
Revealing God's Unconditional Love"*

VIDEO: *HE CHOSE TO INVITE US INTO HIS PRESENCE* (15 MINUTES)

Play the video segment for session 3. As you watch, use the outline provided to follow along or to take additional notes on anything that stands out to you.

Notes

Morally, how we “dress” ourselves—the ethics and convictions we embrace—shapes our attitude, choices, and behavior. It indicates to others who we really are . . . on the inside.

As we prepare to live out the part God wants us to play, it might be a good idea to look in the mirror and ask the question, “What clothes am I wearing?”

Jesus not only offered us his own robe but also invited us into his Father’s presence. . . . What once separated us from his presence has been removed. Nothing remains between us and God but an open door (see Hebrews 10:19–20 NCV).

GROUP DISCUSSION: CHECKING IN (8 MINUTES)

A key part of getting to know God better is sharing your journey with others. Before watching the video, briefly check in with one another about your experiences since the last session. As time permits, discuss one or more of the following questions:

- Briefly share your experience of the session 2 practice, “Making Peace with God.” The focus of this practice was confession. What was it like to reflect on your life, to practice confession, and to receive God’s forgiveness?
- In what ways, if any, did practicing confession and receiving forgiveness help you to experience God’s grace as “more precious, electrifying, and amazing”?
- What was the most meaningful or helpful watchword you identified in your daily Scripture reading? How did God use it to challenge, encourage, or comfort you?
- What similarities or differences do you notice among the watchwords each of you identified this week?

Jesus hasn't left us with an unapproachable God. Yes, God is holy. Yes, we are sinful. But Jesus is our mediator. He was the curtain between us and God, and his flesh was torn for you and me. "When Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (Matthew 27:50-51).

Though there is no curtain in a temple, there is a curtain in the heart. Our guilty conscience becomes a curtain that separates us from God. As a result, we hide from our Master.

Somewhere, sometime, somehow, you got tangled up in garbage, and you've been avoiding God. You've allowed a veil of guilt to come between you and your Father.

You came to the cross dressed in sin, but you leave dressed in the "coat of his strong love" (Isaiah 59:17 NCV), girded with a belt of "goodness and fairness" (Isaiah 11:5 NCV), and clothed in "garments of salvation" (Isaiah 61:10). Indeed, you leave dressed in Christ himself!

GROUP DISCUSSION (35 MINUTES)

Take a few minutes to talk about what you just watched.

1. What part of the teaching had the most impact on you?

Receiving the Gift of God's Presence

2. Imagine you have been offered the opportunity to spend an hour with someone you admire and respect but have never met. It might be a favorite musician, author, leader, scholar, artist, athlete, entrepreneur, or an expert in a given field.
 - Briefly describe who your admired person is and how you would most enjoy spending your time with him or her. What would you like to do together? What would you most like to talk about?
 - Now imagine that when you arrive for your appointment, you are told that although you will indeed be spending an hour with your admired person, there will be a curtain between the two of you the entire time. How would it change the way you had hoped to spend your time together? To what degree would the curtain

diminish your ability to enjoy the visit? A little, a lot, or somewhere between?

3. Max used the image of Jesus' robe to describe what Jesus did for us on the cross: in exchange for our garments of sin he gave us his robe of seamless perfection, a symbol of the righteousness that gives us access to God's presence. For the Jews of Jesus' day, God's presence resided solely in the temple—specifically, the innermost room of the temple called the Holy of Holies or the Most Holy Place. Because God was holy and his people were not, thick curtains provided a separation barrier between them.* Here is how the writer of Hebrews describes this innermost part of the temple:

In its first room were the lampstand and the table with its consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place. . . . The priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself

* "A symbol of God's unapproachability, this curtain was made of blue, purple, scarlet, and fine twisted linen embroidered with figures of cherubim (Exodus 26:31–37; 36:35). It was hung with golden hooks upon four pillars of acacia wood overlaid with gold which were set in sockets or bases of silver. It is likely that the curtain was quite thick to correspond with its great size." "Curtain," in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney, revised by Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987, 2011), 323.

and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance (Hebrews 9:2–3, 6–7).

One of the most vivid images we have of Jesus breaking down the sin barrier that separated us from God happened in this innermost part of the temple at the very moment of his death: "And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (Matthew 27:50–51). With the temple curtain torn, there was no longer a separation barrier between the people and God's presence in the Most Holy Place. The writer of Hebrews uses the image of the torn curtain to explain how Christ's death on the cross gives us access to God's presence:

Christ did not go into the Most Holy Place made by humans, which is only a copy of the real one. He went into heaven itself and is there now before God to help us. The high priest enters the Most Holy Place once every year with blood that is not his own. But Christ did not offer himself many times. Then he would have had to suffer many times since the world was made. But Christ came only once and for all time at just the right time to take away all sin by sacrificing himself. . . . We are completely free to enter the Most Holy Place without fear because of the blood of Jesus' death. We can enter through a new and living way that Jesus opened for us. It leads through the curtain—Christ's body (Hebrews 9:24–26; 10:19–20 NCV).

- For the Jews of Jesus' day, it would have been unthinkable that God's presence could reside outside the temple or that anyone other than a priest would have access to it. In what ways do you recognize remnants of this mindset among people today? For example, what kinds of things—places, people, events, or activities—are thought to be holier and closer to God than others?

- Overall, would you say that this mindset tends to be more prevalent or less prevalent among Christians? Share the reasons for your response.

- How does the parallel between the temple curtain and Christ's body help you understand what Christ's death on the cross really accomplished? What might have been less clear or harder to understand if the temple curtain had not been torn?

- What, if anything, appeals to you or intrigues you about the ancient Most Holy Place—of having a fixed physical location for God's presence?

- What comes to mind when you imagine yourself stepping into the Most Holy Place in the temple? In what ways, if any, does imagining yourself there physically shift your perspective on what it means to access God's presence in your everyday life?
4. Because direct access to God's presence is a foundational and familiar teaching of the Christian faith, there are times when we might take it for granted, or struggle to grasp its significance. Author and pastor Eugene Peterson elaborates on what direct access to God's presence really means for us:

The "Holy of Holies" [was] the place where the focused action between God and humans took place. . . . No one was permitted into the Holy of Holies except the High Priest, and then only once a year. The holy and the profane were strictly separated. . . . And so the shock is nothing less than seismic to be told that the first thing that happened when Jesus died on the cross was that "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom."

What happened? The Holy Place is now Every Place. The Holy One of God is contemporary With Us. His time is our time. There is no more separation between there and here, then and now, sacred and secular . . . the death of Jesus on the cross open[s] up "a new and living way" by which we can live an integrated life.¹¹

- Because Christ's sacrifice gives us access to God's presence, we can live what Peterson describes as "an integrated life." To *integrate* something is to create a unified whole from once separate things. It means in part that every place can be a holy place—no place is off limits and no moment is too small for God's presence. What comes to mind when you consider what this truth might mean for you *right now*—in this very place, at this very moment?

- The good news is that we can live an integrated life. The challenge is that we sometimes default to a dis-integrated or compartmentalized life with God instead. Perhaps without even realizing it, we live as if . . .

God is in holy places but not in every place.

God was at work in that time but not in our time.

God is present over there but not right here.

God could show up then but not now.

God is present in sacred things but not in secular things.

Which of these statements represents a compartmentalization you are most likely to default to?

How would you describe the purpose of the "curtain" or separation barrier this compartmentalization represents? What integration or wholeness might you be shielding yourself from?

5. Max pointed out that guilt is a curtain of the heart we sometimes use to shield ourselves from God's presence. Just as Max's guilty dog avoided him after foraging through the trash, a guilty conscience can separate us from God.

- Which of the following statements comes closest to describing what you tend to shield yourself from when guilt comes between you and God? Share the reasons for your response.

When I put up guilt as a curtain . . .

I am shielding myself from my expectation of God's anger or disapproval.

I am shielding myself from facing God until I can get my act together.

I am shielding myself from my own shame.

I am shielding myself from confessing my failure.

I am shielding myself from making restitution to others.

I am shielding myself from making necessary changes.

Other:

- “God isn’t angry with you,” Max said. “He’s already dealt with your mistake. The door is open and God invites you in.” As you consider the statement you identified with above, how would you describe God’s invitation to you when you use guilt as a shield? At those times, what might choosing an integrated life—dropping the curtain—require of you?

Walking Together through Lent

6. Take a few moments to reflect on what you’ve learned and experienced together in this study so far.
 - How has learning more about the gifts of the cross impacted you or your relationship with God?
 - Since the first session, what shifts have you noticed in yourself in terms of how you relate to the group? For example, do you feel more or less guarded, understood, challenged, encouraged, connected?

- What adjustments, if any, would you like to make to the session 1 chart that would help other members of the group know how to be a good friend to you?

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY: WHAT I WANT TO REMEMBER (2 MINUTES)

Complete this activity on your own.

1. Briefly review the outline and any notes you took.
2. In the space below, write down the most significant thing you gained in this session—from the teaching, activities, or discussions.

What I want to remember from this session . . .