

## **“The Man Behind the Curtain”**

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*Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.*

*Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:12-16)*

After the ancient stories of Genesis and Exodus, the Bible shifts into a long section of what we could call “priestly” material. Chapters from Exodus and Leviticus provide great detail about the form and ritual of Jewish religious practice – everything from how to build the tabernacle and the temple, to what the priests should wear, to what kinds of offerings and sacrifices should be made, when to make them, and how to make them. This cultic language is shrouded in holiness and mystery, and nowhere was more holy, or more mysterious, than the central space of the Temple in Jerusalem known as the Holy of Holies.

Only the high priest was allowed into this space, which housed the Ark of the Covenant, which was considered to be the earthly throne of the presence and glory of God. Even the high priest entered the sacred only once per year. On Yom Kippur or the “Day of Atonement,” the priest would open the heavy curtain that formed the outer wall of the Holy of Holies. Made of fine linen from the most precious yarns, the curtain was embroidered with images of the angelic servants of God, the fiery messengers who guarded the throne. The Hebrews believed that, in a very real sense, God lived behind that curtain. They believed that, except for the high priest, any person who passed through that curtain would surely die. They also believed that, if the high priest passed through that curtain in the wrong way, or at the wrong time, he too would surely die.<sup>1</sup>

Whoever it was who wrote book of Hebrews knew that he was speaking to people who knew this history and theology very well. Because Jewish Christians were well-versed in the rituals of sacrifice and the nuances of covenant law, the reference to Jesus as the “great high priest” would have brought up images of the one man who could go behind the sacred curtain... the one and only person who could stand in the Holy of Holies before the undiluted presence of God and live to tell about it.

Those Jewish Christians would have known those stories from their childhood in much the same way as most of us know “The Wizard of Oz.” Maybe it doesn’t have the punch that it used to, but that movie had legendary impact on our parents, who experienced it as wide-eyed kids seeing Technicolor for the first time. By the time my

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<sup>1</sup> “The Holy of Holies and the Veil,” <https://www.goodseed.com/holy-of-holies-and-the-veil.html>;  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Holy-of-Holies>



generation came along, the movie was still being shown with much fanfare at least once a year around Easter, sometimes again at Thanksgiving, but still revered as a family classic.

Through that movie, we came to know another man behind a very different curtain. You probably remember the scene, as Dorothy and her friends enter the cathedral-like sanctuary of the Great and Powerful Oz. They are huddled together in fear, believing that if they made a wrong step before the Wizard, they too would surely die. But they have completed the task that they had been instructed to do as Dorothy's ticket home to Kansas. They present the broomstick of the Wicked Witch of the West to the Wizard. With a terrifying pyrotechnics show, the Wizard barks at them to come back tomorrow.

Despite her terror, Dorothy protests the injustice. "If you were really great and powerful," she said, "you'd keep your promises."

The challenge only escalates the Wizard's anger, and the fire and brimstone spew forth even more violently. "Do not arouse the wrath of the great and powerful Oz! I said come back tomorrow!"

In that moment, only Toto retains composure. The camera follows the little dog off to the side of the chamber, where he pulls back an unobtrusive green curtain to reveal the real and actual Wizard of Oz -- a man in a humble black suit surrounded by high tech equipment. Knowing his cover has been blown, he still tries to maintain the charade: "***Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!***" But it is too late – the curtain is gone, the secret has spilled out, and the great and powerful Wizard of Oz is revealed to the world as the sham that he was.<sup>2</sup>

These are two very different curtains, and two very different men behind them. But there is one commonality here, and we find it in the first words of our scripture this morning. "*The word of God is living and active,*" it says, "*sharper than any two-edged sword... it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart... And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare.*"

There's an old story about a pastor who went out to visit one of his parishioners. He opened the garden gate and walked through the lovely yard full of blooming azaleas. When he got to the porch, he thought he heard someone rustling around inside, but despite his repeated knocks on the door, no one answered. He finally gave up and took out one of his cards. He wrote a quick scripture reference on the card -- "Revelation 3:20" -- and wedged it between the door and its frame. The next Sunday someone left that same card in one of the offering plates, and an usher brought it to the pastor. The parishioner he visited had brought it back to church, but had also added another biblical citation to the back: "Genesis 3:10." The pastor chuckled, because the two verses together made it all clear. Revelation 3:20, which the pastor had written, reads "*Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking...*" while the response, Genesis 3:10, says, "*I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.*"

It is not a comfortable thing for us to be, as the book of Hebrews says, "naked and laid bare." We are told that, in the beginning, Adam and Eve were "naked and unashamed," but that didn't last long. With the first bite of forbidden fruit, their "eyes were opened," and they no longer felt comfortable being seen. In their shame, they covered themselves with

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<sup>2</sup> All quotes transcribed from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWyCCJ6B2WE&mode=related&search=> on October 7, 2009.

fig leaves, and when God showed up, they hid. What they were feeling, and the feeling they did not like, was **vulnerability**. In the military context, for example, spies would go to inspect the “nakedness” of a land they wanted to conquer. In other words, they went to find the vulnerabilities, the weaknesses, the places where defenses were lowest, where an attack could do the most damage. In the Bible, as in life, when someone or something is “naked and laid bare,” that means it is vulnerable to insult, injury, and ultimately, death.

By definition, we are not comfortable with this kind of vulnerability. We would prefer to be cautious, guarded, and protected. Not just clothed, but actually armored up against life. Many of us are taught at a very young age that vulnerability itself is something to be ashamed of. Toughen up. Keep a stiff upper lip. Do not ever show your weaknesses. In short, we are brought up to live in Oz... to build up the illusion that we have it all together. So we go to great lengths to put a public face on our lives that seems strong, wise, and good.

But as hard as we may try, that barrier we pull around us will never be much more than a thin patch of fabric. What we erect is just a curtain – ephemeral and fickle. We know this in those moments when life strips us bare: a relationship ends... a friend betrays us... the pink slip comes... the doctor gives us the diagnosis we don’t want to hear. Something real happens, something terrible happens, and we know that we are not in Kansas anymore, we know that the curtains we have pulled around us can bear no real weight. Even a slight breeze can ruffle them. Curtains cannot last.

That was true, it seems, even for the mighty curtain in the Holy of Holies. That curtain was much stronger than the thin green one around the Wizard. This one was expensive, heavy, made from the finest fabrics, and embroidered in gold, but it was still just a curtain. On the day of Christ’s crucifixion, you might recall what happened to that curtain in Jerusalem... that in the moment when Jesus cried out from the cross and breathed his last, *“the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook... rocks were split.. tombs were opened... the dead were raised.”* And the Roman centurion who saw it happen proclaimed, *“Truly this man was the Son of God!”*<sup>3</sup>

The message was that God cannot be tucked away in a box, hidden behind a curtain, even though that may be the way we might prefer to think about God – a God who stays safely behind closed doors and doesn’t make much of a fuss in our lives. No, the Biblical story is the story of a God who rips down barriers, breaks down walls, and breaks out wild and on the loose in the world. God was never, is not, and never will be just a man behind the curtain.

And we were not meant to live behind one either. This God who will not be tamed and hidden speaks through a Word that *“is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, [that pierces] until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow.”* Before him, we are told, *“no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.”* By definition, we as human beings are vulnerable before God and before the world.

But here is the irony that turns all of this into good news. We may be vulnerable, we may be laid bare, we may acknowledge that our defenses are ruffled by the slightest breeze and can be pulled back in an instant, but the fact is that this weakness is actually the safest place we can be. And that is the point that Hebrews is really trying to make – we can and

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 27:50-54.

should feel vulnerable standing exposed before God and the world, but the truth is that we are safe there, because we have a great high priest who is not separate and removed, but standing right here. We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has lived them all as we live them. He has felt the blows of humiliation. He has endured the lashes of abuse. He has suffered the pain that we have felt, and even died the death that we all will die. He knows us completely -- the good, the bad, and the ugly -- and he still chooses mercy. He still chooses love. He still chooses life.

So, pay no attention to the man behind the curtain. Pay attention to the one who pulls the curtains back... who tears them down to let the light in. When the pretense falls, when the truth is laid bare, that which is fake... that which is false... that which is broken falls away. Curtains are not meant to last, and though we may feel vulnerable when they fall away, the truth is that we are always safe and secure in the God we know... *“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are.”* That high priest knows us, understands us, sympathizes with us, forgives us, and chooses us.

Thanks be to God for this promise of safety and love. **Amen.**