

I first believed in Christ in my 20s—and what a transformation that was! Then, I had been a Christian for a couple of years before I much more fully realized the true depth of what Jesus's death and resurrection can and should mean *every minute of every day* to the serious follower of Christ.

I mean that in a very practical way, because how we understand, apprehend, and approach our relationship to God directly impacts how we understand, apprehend, and approach our relationship to everyone else we engage every day. And Jesus changes it all! Yes, fully comprehending and embracing the New Covenant radically changes both relationship with God and relationships with everyone else!

Let's get some context. As you know from the Old Testament, Israel's King Solomon built the first Temple. It was later destroyed, and then the temple was rebuilt (see the books of Ezra and Nehemiah for that) and was in place at the time of Christ. Temple life was central to devout Jewish practices, and nothing was more key to that than the annual sin offering by the High Priest made on behalf of the Jewish people.

Here was the process. The High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum of the Temple. No one else was allowed in there—indeed, the room was completely off-limits to everyone except the High Priest. In fact, the Holy of Holies was so sacred, the story is that a rope was tied to the High Priest's leg to pull him out of the Holy of Holies if something went wrong during the sin offering. The entire Jewish population waited with bated breath to see if the annual sin offering would be accepted by God.

Imagine, say, during the exact time of Jesus's earthly ministry that *you* are a young Jewish worshipper of God, hearing the stories about Jesus, a supposed would-be prophet who had accumulated a ragtag band of followers. But you're a person who takes the traditions of your fathers seriously, a person who works faithfully to fulfill the 613 points of Mosaic law—in short, you are diligently working to be approved by God. But...talk about *anxiety*! Imagine your deep-rooted unease as the day for the annual sacrifice approaches. Will God find the Jewish High Priest's sacrifice for sin acceptable? As a serious follower of Yahweh, you spend the entire year very focused on God's rendering of judgment coming on that day.

Imagine your profound relief when it seems all is well! The High Priest emerges unscathed from the Holy of Holies! The gathering of Jews rejoices, and you are thrilled! ...But then, immediately, you sin! The anxiety instantly returns. And that means 364 more days of life until the next annual sin offering with the judgment of God approaching relentlessly...that's 364 more days with both real and imagined sins occupying your head. You're striving to be found an approved follower of God, and the annual sin offering is a significant, dominating dimension of a Jewish life pursuing God. For generations.

But lately that carpenter, the man they call Jesus of Nazareth, has caught just a bit of your attention. You can't deny the miracles, the signs, the teaching—in fact, all of that has been more than a bit entrancing! But your Jewish elders—the Pharisees—know that Jesus is effective at leading people like you astray. The elders work to confront this Jesus guy, and then the authorities finally find a way to stop this intrusive troublemaker. And you've heard that today's the day: yeah, this very day, Jesus will be crucified—and his itty-bitty, forgettable chapter in the long flow of Jewish history will be ended. Yes, you acknowledge that the Jewish elders were surely right all along—you must return to the fullest trust in their wisdom, their traditions. And you must focus on Temple life, including the annual sin offering by the High Priest.

So, about the ninth hour of that very day, you're nearing the Temple, the center of Jewish life that you treasure. You decide to go enter the outer courts of the Temple. And you picture in your mind's eye the amazing veil that separates all the devout Jews except the High Priest from the Holy of Holies. My goodness, every report about that veil is awe-inspiring...it's formidable...dozens of feet in height...inches thick...intricately woven in a beautiful tapestry design that's utterly unique. But it's the barrier function that's always been the thing—what's always been most important is that the veil is effective at keeping everyone except the High Priest from the presence of God in the Holy of Holies! You're reflecting on all this when...

Suddenly the earth begins to shake, and rocks split. And you are astounded to hear that massive veil in the temple being torn in two, from top to bottom. This seemingly indestructible curtain is loudly torn as casually as a bit of cloth might be in human hands. Here's that very event as recorded in Matthew 27:50-51 in the ESV: "And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split."

You are stunned! You're in the outer part of the temple at a critical moment in Temple history—the tearing of the veil changes the very structure of the Holy of Holies. All that you hold sacred has seemed to be torn in two. How in the world will the Jewish faithful now be able to atone for their sins? You stumble out of the temple and return home, distraught. You are confused about what will come next for the crucial ritual for the all-important annual atonement in the Temple. But you certainly think this Jesus's story is over...

However, it turns out, Jesus's place in history was *not* over—eyewitness testimonials of Jesus's resurrection come from the mouths of trusted witnesses just days later. And, in this particular story, perhaps you were one of those eyewitnesses! But maybe not. Nevertheless—in the months that come, after much thinking and many a conversation, you respond to the Gospel of the Kingdom of God—you accept God's grace by faith...you believe in Christ!

Listen. Whether you find yourself imagining this new life in Christ as if you lived *then* or you are simply pondering your actual life in Christ *now*, God changed key foundations for all humanity in that series of events. For the seriously observant Jew of Jesus's time, there was opportunity for a giant conversion *from* the *highly inaccessible, uncertain-outcome, anxiety-inducing* structure of the annual sin offering made in the Holy of Holies by a merely human High Priest *to* the *highly accessible, anchoring-outcome, peace-inducing* finished-work of the new High Priest, Jesus. Whoa, such a converted (or "completed") Jew like the one in our story went from very strict limitations to freedom in Christ—the freedom that gives liberty for believers to minister joyfully to their families, their neighbors, and their workplaces! Here are a few of the several ways that the New Covenant structure does that.

First, *when you're a believer, God dwells in you*. 1 Corinthians 3:16 says, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" Hey, God's temple changed locations: no special place like the Holy of Holies in the Temple is required. You carry God everywhere. *That's complete accessibility!*

Second, *your sins are forgiven the moment you confess them to the Lord*. 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." No special mediating human priest is required. It's just you and the Lord. *No anxiety. Anchored outcomes...real-time.*

Third, because of these two things—God dwelling in you and your sins being forgiven—you can now have *confidence* to interact directly with the living God! That's right, confidence to draw near! Yes, previously, the High Priest approached God on your behalf. But now, we can approach God directly through our new High Priest, Jesus—without fear! Here's Hebrews 4, verses 14 and 16: "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession...Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Wow, no more standing at a distance...the Bible says we draw near to the throne of grace with confidence! *This changes everything!* We can look at God and ourselves differently. We can look at every neighbor, every coworker, every family member, even every enemy differently. We can look at our day-to-day work differently.

So then, this is a glorious bedrock for what it means to be a new creature in Christ: we're liberated, we're confident *vertically* with God...so we easily minister *horizontally* to others! Rather than being insecure about our standing in God, straining to discern what a sin offering in the Holy of Holies might bring, we testify to God's love that undergirds His unique New Covenant! So, all that theology-talk about Holy of Holies, the Temple and High Priests actually points the way to the powerful twining of God and you! This. Changes. Everything.

A&A: Application & Action

1. Have you ever been quite debilitated by a sin that you have confessed to the Lord but can't seem to truly shake? What was the tactic that ultimately worked to a breakthrough?
2. Are you deeply rooted in what the new High Priest Jesus did for you at the Cross, are you brimming with confidence, ministering effectively in your daily relationships? Give specifics.
3. Do you really believe you are participating in a better covenant in Christ and that the old covenant is actually obsolete (as the writer to the Hebrews says), with the effect of you effectively leaving the old covenant behind? Where did you learn how to do that? From whom? Give specifics.