Good Friday is a solemn day. On this day, we remember how the Son of God suffered and died for the sins of the world. God's own Lamb was offered on the altar of the cross to take away the world's wickedness and guilt. Our reading refers to an equally solemn day - the Good Friday of the Old Testament - the great Day of Atonement. On that day, the High Priest entered the presence of God in the Most Holy Place to make atonement for sin. So holy and so solemn was the act of entering into the presence of God that when the High Priest entered the Most Holy Place, he did so with a rope tied around one ankle. The reason for the rope around the ankle was that if he died while in the Most Holy Place, his body could be pulled out without anyone else having to risk entering the place of God's presence. May we also approach our God today with similar reverence of faith as once again we are reminded that Jesus our Great High Priest is better than every other high priest. He is better because he entered by a better sanctuary, he offered up a better sacrifice, and he inspires us to better service.

Our reading begins with a strange sounding phrase: When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here. In Old Testament times, God's people were looking for good things to come. They had God's promises, but the fulfillment lay in the future. The good things to come pointed to the time when the Savior would come. When John the Baptist appeared, a delegation from Jerusalem went out and asked him if he was the one to come. He said no, but Jesus was. With Jesus' coming, all the good things that were promised have now come. That includes all that was foreshadowed by the Old Testament priesthood, its sacrifices and offerings, its rites and rituals, and the place where the Old Testament priest served.

The verses prior to our reading contain a bit of a review of the tabernacle and its layout. The tabernacle was just a small portable tent, 15' wide by 45' long and 15' high. It was divided into two rooms that were separated by a curtain. The first room, called the Holy Place, was the larger of two rooms. It contained an altar of incense, a golden lampstand, and a table on which loaves of showbread were placed each day.

The Most Holy Place, which was behind the curtain, was only half the size of the Holy Place. At 15' square, it formed a perfect cube. In it was the Ark of the Covenant - the symbol of God's presence with his people. The Ark had two angels on its cover; the tablets of stone, a bowl of manna, and Aaron's staff inside; and the cloud of the glory of the Lord hovering above it. No ordinary person ever saw that box. First of all, only the priests ever entered the tabernacle. And only the high priest entered the Most Holy Place once a year on the Day of Atonement. On that day, he would push back the curtain at the entrance to the Most Holy Place and enter into the presence of God.

With that ritual in mind, the writer of Hebrews calls to mind the work of Jesus and shows how much greater Jesus is than the Old Testament high priests. We are told that Jesus entered the Most Holy Place, the presence of God in heaven through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. So you can imagine the picture this formed in the minds of the first readers of Hebrews. They are thinking of a man passing through the Holy Place, pushing aside the curtain and coming into the presence of God in the Most Holy Place.

But how did Jesus do that? The writer says it was by a greater and more perfect tabernacle. To understand what he means, we need to remember that the tabernacle was the dwelling place of God - that tent was where God lived. But it was a shadow of good things to come - good things that Christ brought.

Think back to Christmas to a passage we heard from John 1: The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. The word for made his dwelling is the same word used here for tent or tabernacle. John's words could be translated: The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us. That means that what the tabernacle of the Old Testament symbolized - the dwelling of God among his people - was made a reality when Christ came into the
world. Jesus himself confirmed this when, after cleansing the temple, he said: **Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.** Although some misunderstood that at first, John explains that Jesus was referring to his own body. By the power of the Holy Spirit – God himself came to live among us. Paul says the same thing in Colossians: **In Christ all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form.** All the fullness of God lives in the human body of Christ.

Indeed, compared to the Holy Place of the tabernacle through which the Old Testament high priests passed to enter the presence of God, Christ entered God’s presence through a far better sanctuary: the sanctuary of his own body - the body the eternal Son of God assumed in order to serve us as our Savior from sin. It was only in that perfect tabernacle that Jesus could live as one of us under God's law and obey it perfectly. It was in that perfect tabernacle that our Great High Priest died for us under God’s wrath on the cross.

The writer then directs us to the cross and the sacrifice the Great High Priest offered there: **He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the most holy place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.**

Again, think back to the Day of Atonement and to the sacrifice the high priest offered for his own sins and for his family and then for the whole nation of Israel. That festival was repeated every year. That should have told the people of Israel something about the limitations of those sacrifices. They could make it possible for the high priest to enter God’s presence, but only on one day and then he had to leave.

Something like that happened to the people too. Our reading talks about the ashes of a heifer: **The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they're outwardly clean.** The writer is referring to a cleansing ritual performed with the remains of a heifer that had been slaughtered and burned along with some cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet thread. These were all burned to ash. The ashes were mixed with water, and then the mixture was sprinkled on people who had become ceremonially unclean. By that washing, the people could come into the courtyard of the tabernacle and worship there, and by the blood of the bull and goat slaughtered on the Day of Atonement, the high priest came into the presence of God. But the high priest could only stay there for a short time and then he had to leave, and the people were only made clean outwardly and ceremonially. But Jesus is better.

When he offered on the altar of the cross the greater and more perfect tabernacle of his body, he entered into the presence of God once and for all. He did not have to repeat that sacrifice annually. As he died, our Savior: **It is finished.** No further offering needed to be made for sin. He had obtained an eternal redemption. From the first sin of Adam to the last sin that is committed before this present world passes away, every sin was paid for.

The word **redemption** speaks of a ransom, a price paid to free someone held in slavery. That is what Jesus accomplished by his death - he redeemed a world held captive by sin, death, and hell. Peter says exactly what the writer of Hebrews says when he writes: **It was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.**

Because it is the blood of a better sacrifice, it has more power to cleanse. Unlike the blood of animals that made the priest outwardly clean to enter a symbol of God’s presence and the ashes of the heifer mixed with water and then sprinkled on the unclean person that made him clean outwardly, the blood of Jesus cleanses the conscience. The blood of Jesus is the good thing foreshadowed by 14 centuries of animal offerings to God. It truly takes away sin and makes the guilty conscience clean.

The sins Christ carried to the cross are gone. The blood of Christ purifies us from every sin. It is not just an outward cleansing that makes it possible for us to come into this house of God, but a place in God’s heavenly house has been prepared where we one day will live forever. And when we understand that - how much greater Jesus is than every other high priest, how he entered by a
better sanctuary (his body in which the true God lives), how he offered up a better sacrifice (one that cleanses us completely of our sin and guilt) - then we will be inspired to better service to God.

Our author lists another reason that Jesus is the Great High Priest, and it is that Jesus inspires us to better service than every other high priest ever could. He says: How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! Something happened over all those centuries of Old Testament rituals that the high priest performed and it was not good. Instead of inspiring God's people to look forward in faith to the one who was to come and the good things he would bring, the priests and the people began to look at those rituals as an end in themselves. They thought that by doing the work and going through the routine, they were earning God's favor and making selves pleasing to God.

Actually, it was quite the opposite. Later, our writer will state: Without faith it is impossible to please God. God's Old Testament prophets warned against such empty rituals devoid of faith. God said through Isaiah: These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. The sacrifice that pleases God is a broken and contrite heart. Without that, burnt offerings and sacrifices are worthless.

Our writer calls such works acts that lead to death. They are literally dead works. Works done to earn God's favor are inadequate in God's sight. As God refused Cain's sacrifice, he rejects all such dead works.

But Jesus' blood inspires us to better service. The blood that cleanses our consciences from sin - that relieves the soul of its guilt and fear of punishment - is blood that inspires us to serve the living God in a way that pleases him. That means living for God and serving him fr day to day, at work and at play, at home and away, not because I have to, but because a joyful desire makes us want to serve God.

Precious in God's sight are works done out of a thankful heart by people inspired by the love of God. Such were the works of the widow and her mite in the temple, Zacchaeus and the money he returned to his victims, and all those who on the Last Day will hear the King say: I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, thirsty and you gave me something to drink - for whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.

Such service is a good and pleasing sacrifice to God. And more and more we will bring it when we see the glory of Jesus our Great High Priest, who is better than every Old Testament high priest. He is better because he serves in a better sanctuary, because he offers up a better sacrifice of his holy body and precious blood which cleanses us outside and in from every sin and which inspires us to better service of God - the kind of which we sing: To pledge my labor willingly, which shall so sweet a service be that angels well might envy me, Christ I come. Amen.

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