

Impenetrable ceilings

When our prayers seem to rebound off the ceiling and fall uselessly to the floor, the good news is, God has fixed this problem:

Have you ever had times when God seems remote and there's no feeling of relationship or communication with him, or that the ceiling seems to transform itself into a "prayer-proof" substance?!

Well, God has fixed this problem! But first we have to face the fact that in our present earthly condition, we cannot have a direct, personal audience with the Father. He will not endure the presence of our sin and we could not bear his holiness, **Hebrews 12:28-29**. We would most likely be incinerated in the same way Aaron's sons were when they undervalued God's holiness, too (**Leviticus 10:1-2**).

We cannot enter God's presence directly, then, but we learn from the liturgy of the Atonement given to Israel how God solved this problem for us. We learn, for instance, that the Temple was symbolic of God's presence in Israel, and at the heart of the Temple was the Holy of Holies, where God's glory dwelt. The Israelites, including the priests (**1 Kings 8:6-11**) could not enter the Holy of Holies, and if they did they'd be consumed by God's glory and holiness. But one man was allowed to enter, just once a year, on the Day of Atonement. And that man was the High Priest.

Leviticus 16 explains what happened.

First of all, the High Priest, Aaron, had to prepare himself before coming into the divine presence. Then he had to sacrifice a bull as a sin offering for himself and his household. Two goats were then selected; one was killed and sacrificed as an offering to purify from sin, and the other was sent into the wilderness bearing all the sins of the people that they'd committed in the previous year. Before this, Aaron had entered the Holy of Holies with the blood of the sacrifice, having burnt incense already to hide the mercy seat from his view unless he saw it and died! Then the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled on the mercy seat to purge the Holy of Holies and make atonement for the people. After this the entire sanctuary was cleansed so that the Holy God could remain present in Israel for another year, at the end of which the whole procedure would be repeated.

The point we get from this is that since the people could not be in the presence of the Holy God and his glory, God himself provided a substitute for them, a High Priest or "Mediator." The Mediator would be accepted into God's presence as a substitute for, and on behalf of, the people.

It was all a shadow, of course, of the sacrifice of Jesus, who himself became our atonement and High Priest (**Hebrews 9:22-26**). The two goats shadowed the astounding reality of God, first of all, offering his beloved Son as a sin offering, sacrificed to purify the Creation from sin, thereby destroying all that separated humans from God; and, secondly, of Jesus taking upon himself the sin and sinful nature of humanity, bearing it away into the wilderness (**Isaiah 53:2-10** and **Matthew 3:13 to 4:1**).

What we see, then, in the spiritual reality of the physical shadow, is God providing *himself* as the substitute, in the person of Jesus Christ. As previously stated, we cannot enter the holy, heavenly presence of the Father in our present sinful condition, just as the Israelites were not permitted to enter his earthly presence, either. So Jesus substitutes for us and enters into the heavenly presence of the Father on our behalf. He enters the "Holy of Holies," so to speak, just like Aaron did, except that the Holy of Holies Jesus enters is "not a part of this creation (**Hebrews 9:11**)," it's the very presence of God.

And in that, the solution to the "impenetrable ceiling" becomes clear!

Jesus stands in our place when we go to the Father in prayer and worship. He is our High Priest and Mediator. Through his incarnation and resurrection, Jesus stepped into the love relationship that God is forming with each of us and he now becomes our response to God.

We cannot pray to the Father in any way that is remotely worthy of him, but Jesus, taking our place, gathers up our stumbling prayers and worship into his and presents them to the Father within his own acceptable worship.

When the Father receives us “in Christ” - and there is no other way that he will - he sees no distinction between our offering and Jesus’ offering for they are, in God’s sight, one and the same, wholly Christ’s and wholly ours. That’s because, when God looks at us, he sees his beloved Son with whom we are hidden. This is where our real lives are now, “hidden with Christ in God (**Colossians 3:3**),” so when we pray and worship through, in and with Jesus Christ to the Father, we can be sure that our prayer will not bounce off the ceiling and fall to the ground, but will be lovingly gathered up in Christ and presented to the Father as incense and holy. Our human understanding and our human words and prayers are taken up, purified, sanctified and addressed to the Father as fully acceptable.

Through the mediation and humanity of Jesus Christ, there’s more too, because we also have his Spirit dwelling in us, and since the Spirit knows our mind and the mind of God, he intercedes on our behalf with prayers that we could never come up with on our own (**Romans 8:26**). Through Jesus and his Spirit, then, the ceiling is completely defeated, and its defences fully penetrated.

We can rest assured, therefore, that as we pray in Christ’s name to the Father, we are caught up with all of our failures and weaknesses within the intercession of the eternal Spirit and accepted, in Christ, as God’s beloved and adopted children.