

WORSHIP AND THE FULL ASSURANCE OF FAITH

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Access denied! Restricted access! Staff access only! No public access! Such notices confront us all over the place, in computers and on documents, on buildings and at mining sites. They remind us that we do not always have access to all places. Access is often a matter of privilege rather than of right.

This applies most of all to people. Only my wife has access to me as her husband; only my children have access to me as their father and to my home; my students have some access to me as their teacher. Access to people is always restricted. In fact, no one ever has the right of open access to another person. It is always a privilege, something granted which can never be taken for granted.

The letter to the Hebrews tells us that we, amazingly, have unrestricted access to God in worship. That word, found in 3:6; 4:16; 10:19, 35, was used secularly in the Greek world for the privilege of free speech in the public assembly of the city state. It also referred to boldness in public speaking and confidence in addressing a public figure. Hebrews, however, uses it theologically for God's gift of unrestricted access to himself and his grace through Jesus in the divine service.

In the Old Testament only the high priest had restricted access to God's veiled presence in the Holy of Holies; in the New Testament all Christians have open access to God's presence in the heavenly sanctuary. This right of access is our inalienable endowment, part of our inheritance from God, a privilege which gives us confidence in our worship. It makes for assurance and certainty in God's presence.

Hebrews 12:18-24 gives us a glimpse of what is involved in this. The inaccessible presence of God in judgment at Mt. Sinai is contrasted with the privilege of open access to God the gracious judge. As we assemble to celebrate the Lord's Supper, we have access to seven wonderful mysteries.

1. We have access to the heavenly realm.

In worship we assemble in two places at one and the same time. We gather together as a congregation in an earthly place of worship. There is nothing very special about the place where we hear the word of God and receive the holy sacrament. Yet as we hear God's word and receive Christ's body and blood, we also come to heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God, which is not located here on earth, even though we have access to it through Christ here on earth.

You may remember that Solomon built his temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. There in the Holy of Holies heaven overlapped with earth. Only the high priest had access to God's heavenly presence there. But we do not gather there. When we go to church, we enter the city of the living God, the place where God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit reside. This

city is in this world, but it does not belong to this world. There we have access to the heavenly presence of God. There we, by faith in Christ and his word, enter the heavenly world, without leaving planet earth. There we join in the performance of the heavenly liturgy.

2. We have access to the angelic choir.

We are not just surrounded by other human beings as we worship; we are surrounded on all sides by thousands and thousands of angels. More than we can count! The angels are God's heavenly servants. The writer of the Hebrews calls them 'liturgising spirits' (1:14). Their main occupation is the performance of the heavenly liturgy. They gather in festal assembly to praise and adore the risen Lord Jesus. They tell us of God's glory and his holiness.

Amazingly, they invite us to join with them in their praises. Since we, like them, are holy, we stand with them singing: 'Glory to God in the highest' and 'Holy, Holy, Holy'. In fact, they act as a kind of spiritual choir for us; they assist us in our praises. They help us to adore and to glorify the Triune God. They share their wonder at the Father's grace and their joy at the Son's gift of peace with us. As we lift up our hearts and our spirits to the Lord, they carry us along and blend our song with their song. We therefore join the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven as we adore and magnify the living God in the Eucharistic liturgy.

3. We have access to the whole church.

In heavenly Jerusalem we are part of a huge assembly, a supernatural, universal congregation which embraces our congregation and every other congregation all over the world, for they all assemble, as we do, in the same place, the presence of the Triune God. So then, we never worship in a small congregation. Whenever and wherever we gather for worship in the name of Jesus, we gather together with all believers everywhere; we worship together with them, no matter how far we may be separated from them in time and space. We join the whole church of God as it assembles in his holy presence. As members of that assembly in heavenly Jerusalem we have special status. On the one hand, we are citizens of heaven. The Triune God is our divine king, and we enjoy all the rights and privileges of citizenship in his royal city. We enjoy the life of heaven already here on earth.

On the other hand, we have the status of God's firstborn son. This is almost too good to be true! In the ancient world the firstborn son inherited the position and property of his father. Since Jesus is the firstborn Son of God, he alone is God's heir. But he has wonderfully and generously shared his position and his status with us in baptism. Each of us, therefore, has the same status as Jesus, and we all stand to inherit everything that belongs to Jesus. But we don't have to wait until we die to enter our inheritance. In fact, we already now, by faith, receive and enjoy our common spiritual inheritance, for, unlike material possessions which can be owned exclusively, spiritual blessings are always shared and held in common.

4. We have access to God the gracious judge.

In heavenly Jerusalem we meet with God the divine judge. And there is no escape from his judgment when we gather for worship. Now that may scare off those of us who have a guilty conscience. We know that we are not as we should be and have not lived as we should have. We therefore fear God's accusation and condemnation more than anything in this life. It's bad enough that we have to face God on judgment day. Who of us would wish to face God long before we had to?

But God is present in our worship as a judge with a difference. He isn't out to disapprove of us, belittle us, and reject us as worthless and useless and ugly. No, he comes to free us from the burden of guilt and to undo the awful aftermath of sin; he comes to pardon us. We therefore have no reason to be afraid of contact with him. We don't have to wait until we die to discover where we stand with God. We can settle our accounts with him now, so that we need no longer fear his judgment and condemnation. We can welcome God's gracious judgment and receive his pardon now! We can receive the assurance of salvation from him. We can be sure of his approval and love for us, now!

5. We have access to the saints who have died.

We are like runners in a relay race. The Christians who have left this life have run in the race before us. They have passed on the baton to us; they now sit in the stadium and urge us on as we run our lap in the race. They wait for us and the people who come after us to finish the race so that they can celebrate together with us once the race is over. They have crossed the line, but we are still running.

Even though they are separated physically from us by death, they are still linked with us spiritually through Jesus. He keeps us in touch with them and them in touch with us. We may, therefore, more properly remember our loved ones at the Lord's Table rather than at the cemetery. They surround us, as Hebrews says, like 'a cloud' (12:1), and support us invisibly, just as all the other people do who worship together with us. Since we are connected with them in the communion of saints, they are involved together with us in the praise of the Triune God.

6. We have access to the risen Lord Jesus.

Heavenly worship centres on the risen Lord Jesus. He is the key to our involvement in it. Without him we remain earthbound and without access to the heavenly realm. He has bridged the great gap between heaven and earth for us by his death and resurrection. He is now our high priest, our mediator in the heavenly sanctuary. There he stands in for us with God the Father even as he stands in for God the Father with us. He links us with all the angels, Christians all over the world, departed believers, and our heavenly Father. Our extraordinary position and status depends on him and his work as our high priest.

Jesus has set up a new covenant for us by the institution of Holy Communion, a new way of worship, in which he gives us his body and blood. In his holy supper he reaches out to us earthlings and joins us inseparably with himself. In the celebration of the divine service which revolves around this sacrament, he acts as our high priest, our chief liturgist. He not only brings the gifts of God the Father to us but also leads us in our prayers and praises. We may therefore approach God the Father through him, audaciously, together with him, standing, as it were, in his shoes.

In the divine service he comes to us, so that we can be with him in the presence of his heavenly Father. He brings heaven down to earth for us and takes us earthlings up into the heavenly sanctuary, so that we stand with him and all the angels in the presence of his heavenly Father. He shares our life so that we can share in his divine life as God's Son already now in this life.

7. We have access to Christ's blood and to all these things through his blood.

What a surprise! The heart of Christian worship is not the presence of the risen Lord Jesus but the gift of his holy precious blood in the sacrament, for only through his blood do we have access to heaven and the angels and the universal church and God the judge and the faithful departed and Jesus.

In the Old Testament only the priests were allowed to approach God and officiate in the divine service of the temple. Before they could officiate they had their bodies sprinkled with blood at their ordination into the priesthood, to cleanse them from impurity and to make them holy. The right ears of the priests were smeared with blood, so that they could hear the holy word of God; the thumbs of their right hands were smeared with blood, so that they could handle the holy things of God; the big toes of their right feet were smeared with blood, so that they could walk on holy ground (Exodus 29:19, 20). And then blood mixed with the holy anointing oil was sprinkled on them and their vestments to consecrate them (Exodus 29:21). In this way God shared his holiness with them. They could approach God only as long as they remained clean and holy.

In heavenly Jerusalem we can do what no priest ever dared to do in the Old Testament. We can approach God the Father in the heavenly sanctuary and serve him there together with Jesus. Jesus has not just sprinkled our bodies with his blood; he sprinkles it on our hearts, our conscience. Amazingly, he gives us his blood to drink in Holy Communion. And that blood speaks something good to us. It doesn't speak of vengeance and banishment, as the blood of Abel did to his brother who had murdered him. No, it speaks of grace and pardon and acceptance. By giving us his life-giving blood to drink, Jesus cleanses us entirely from the sins which we have committed, as well as the sins which have been committed against us. Through his blood he shares his own purity and holiness with us. He makes us as holy as he is holy. His blood consecrates us as holy priests for service with the angels in the heavenly sanctuary. We can therefore approach God the Father boldly and unafraid, because we have been sprinkled with the blood of Jesus. We can bring others and their needs to our heavenly Father, even as we, mysteriously, bring him and his blessing to the people around us as we go about our daily work.

All this should make us hold and confident in our worship. We may, as Hebrews 10:19-22 says, approach God the Father with 'the full assurance of faith'. Jesus is our high priest. He intercedes for us and leads us in our worship. We have had our bodies cleansed by the waters of baptism and our consciences made holy the blood of Jesus. We can therefore enter the heavenly realm through the body and blood of Jesus. We can approach God the Father confidently without any doubts about our reception by him. We can be sure of his grace.