

THE BEST INSURANCE POLICY IN THE WORLD

The presence of God in the Old Testament was so magnificent you couldn't even look at it. A thick veil had to be hung in the temple to protect the lives of the priests. And only once a year was the High Priest permitted to step beyond the veil.

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But what would happen if God actually stepped outside the veil and walked around among us? Well, this actually happened, and we'll discover what this means to each of us today.

The children of Israel had been slaves in Babylon for seventy years. The city of Jerusalem, with its magnificent temple, had been demolished. The whole identity of the nation had been devastated, and there was little hope that things were going to get any better. History tells us the Israelites had pretty much given up hope, and most of them had simply settled into a Babylonian lifestyle.

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Then the Persian army, led by Cyrus, surrounded the city of Babylon. Word quickly rippled through the homes of the captives—at least through the homes of those who still cared: “Could it be? Is our seventy-year-long humiliation finally over?”

Well, to look at the Babylonian king, you wouldn’t think so. He wasn’t worried. In fact, when the Persian armies arrived, he decided to throw a party. After all, what in the world did he have to worry about? The walls of Babylon were so high that no army could scale them, and they were so wide that nobody could dig their way through.

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The Babylonians weren't worried. They had enough food to last them for years, and the Euphrates River ran right through the middle of the city, so they had all the water they needed. Some recorded accounts reveal that the Babylonians were so confident they actually threw food from the city walls to taunt the Persian army.

So, the evidence didn't offer much hope to the Jewish captives. When everything was taken into account, the Persians were doomed to failure—except for one thing. King Nebuchadnezzar, grandfather of the current king, once had a vivid dream where he was specifically told that Babylon would fall to an inferior army.

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The prophet Daniel had also been told that the Persians would overthrow the city of Babylon. And Jeremiah, the prophet who predicted Israel's captivity, said that it would last for seventy years. All the visible evidence revealed that Babylon would never fall, but the Word of God said it would.

Man's opinion was pitted against the Word of God.

Sometimes there seems to be more evidence to support man's opinion. For example, take a modern example: the debate over creation and evolution. Some people in the scientific field believe that the evidence buried in the ground points

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to millions of years of evolution. Now, that's not all scientists, but some of them. The Bible, on the other hand, tells a completely different story. It suggests that the fossil record came about through a huge cataclysmic disaster. Now, in every single historical instance where man's opinion has contradicted God's Word, God's Word has always come out on top.

Let's return to Belshazzar, the king of Babylon. He just couldn't bring himself to believe that the Persians had the ability to conquer his city. In an effort to reassure his people that nothing could possibly go wrong, he threw a party. The Bible tells us about it in Daniel chapter 5:

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Belshazzar the king made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before the thousand. Belshazzar, while he tasted the wine, commanded to bring the golden and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem; that the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, might drink therein (Daniel 5:1,2).

The sacred vessels looted from the temple in Jerusalem were put on display as proof that the gods of Babylon were greater than any other god. If Jehovah was greater than Babylon, they said, then why did they still have the temple vessels in their possession?

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Well, what they failed to realise is that the nation of Babylon was great only because God *allowed it*. He was using the Babylonians to teach the nation of Israel a valuable lesson. But the sight of the ruined temple not only broke the hearts of the Jewish captives, it also broke the heart of God, because His greatest desire is to dwell among His people.

The Persian army was God's method of bringing His people back to their country. The prophet Isaiah called Cyrus "God's anointed,"¹ because he was the one who allowed Israel to

¹ See Isaiah 44:27-45:1 for a prophecy of the fall of Babylon given more than 100 years before Cyrus' birth.

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return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.

As Belshazzar and his men became more and more drunk, Cyrus was laying plans. He drained the Euphrates River, and created a virtual highway under the city wall. Babylon was indeed defeated.

THE DESIRE OF ALL NATIONS SHALL COME

The people of God went back to Jerusalem, and they began to rebuild the city and the temple. As the temple was being rebuilt, there was one major problem. Nobody knew where the Ark of the Covenant was. Without the Ark, which represented the throne of God, there could be no Shekinah

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glory - or presence of God - in the Most Holy Place.

You know, to this day, nobody knows where the Ark of the Covenant is. Some people say it's hidden on Mount Nebo on the east bank of the Jordan River. Others say it's on the West Bank, near the Dead Sea. And still others say that it's buried under Mount Calvary or in a system of tunnels under the temple mount.

The point is that the Israelites didn't have an Ark when they rebuilt the temple.

Try to put yourself in their shoes and imagine the kind of heartache this must have caused them. When

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Solomon first built the Temple, the presence of God filled the Most Holy Place:

Now when Solomon had made an end of praying, the fire came down from heaven, and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices; and the glory of the Lord filled the house. And the priests could not enter into the house of the Lord, because the glory of the Lord had filled the Lord's house (2 Chronicles 7:1,2).

Everyone knew that the glory of God was supposed to fill the temple, but when the second temple was built, after the Babylonian captivity, it didn't happen. The records show us that when the temple was finished the

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Israelites dedicated it, but no fire fell from heaven. The presence of God did not fill the Most Holy Place.

In the minds of some critics, it was absolute proof that the new temple was completely inferior to the old one. “I told you,” they would have said to their friends, “it will never be like it used to be.” But then, in the depths of disappointment, God sent a new prophet by the name of Haggai to give them hope. In the second chapter of the book of Haggai, there’s a remarkable prophecy that says the new temple was going to be more glorious than the first one. Here’s what it says:

The glory of this latter house shall be

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greater than of the former, saith the Lord of hosts: and in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of hosts (Haggai 2:9).

Well, that must have been hard for most people to accept. If the new Temple was going to be more glorious, why didn't they have the Ark of the Covenant? Why didn't God reveal His presence at the dedication service? All the evidence seemed to say Haggai was wrong, but in verse 7 of the same chapter, Haggai explains himself:

And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of hosts.

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How was the new temple going to be more glorious? Haggai said that somebody was coming. A man called the “desire of all nations”, would fill the house with the glory of God.

So, who was this “desire of nations?” It was the same Person who created Adam and Eve and met them in the cool of the evening. It was the same Person who gave the Promised Land to Abraham and his descendants, who led the children of Israel across the desert in a pillar of fire. That Person, of course, was Jesus Christ.

The difference is that when Jesus came to the new temple, He didn’t come as a fiery presence, He came as a *human being*. In the book of

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Isaiah, you can read a prediction about Jesus:

Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign: Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14).

That name is very important, because it means “God with us.”² You see, the birth of Christ is the ultimate expression of God’s desire to be with us. In the new temple, He didn’t take up residence on the other side of the veil, above the Ark of the Covenant, where we couldn’t see Him. Instead, He came outside, like us – a real, flesh and blood human being.

² See Matthew 1:23

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While He walked this earth, He often taught in the temple. Because we couldn't pass through the veil to visit God in the Most Holy Place, God passed through the veil to come to us. When He did *that*, we could see His face, and listen to His voice. That made the new temple a much more special place than the old one, because we were suddenly able to reach out and actually touch God.

The great Christian writer, C. S. Lewis, describes the marvel of Christ's incarnation like this:

"Imagine, for the moment, that your dog and every dog is in deep distress. Some of us love dogs very much. If it would help all the dogs in the world

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to become like men, would you be willing to become a dog? Would you put down your human nature, leave your loved ones, your job, hobbies, your art and literature and music, and choose instead of the intimate communion with your beloved, the poor substitute of looking into the beloved's face and wagging your tail, unable to smile or speak?"³

When Jesus became human, He took a step so far down that you and I will never be able to comprehend it. Imagine leaving the courts of heaven for this world. Imagine giving up

³ C.S. Lewis, posted at
<http://www.sermonillustrations.com>.

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streets of gold for a pair of sandals and long, hot dusty highways. Imagine giving up millions of adoring angels who loved to perform His every wish for a group of self-satisfied sinners who used His own words against Him.

The book of Philippians says that Jesus ... made Himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men (Philippians 2:7). The truly amazing thing is that Jesus' transformation is permanent. He will always be in human form. How do I know? The Bible makes it clear. After the resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples, and He encouraged them to touch the wounds in His

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hands and feet, so they would know that He was real. And when Jesus ascended into heaven—with a real, physical human body—the angels told the disciples that the very same Jesus would come back.

Now, that can only mean one thing. Jesus has taken on human nature for all time. He has chosen to identify Himself with us permanently. And even though the Bible clearly identifies Him as the Creator, He has chosen to become a part of the Creation.

Just think about what that says about God's desire to be with us. He was willing to make permanent sacrifices to make it happen. It was so important to Him that He was willing

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to do whatever it took. And now, even though He is still fully God, He is also one of us.

The story is told of an ancient Persian king who loved His people very much. Looking out across his empire at the people who paid him allegiance, he found himself wanting to be one of them. He wanted to know what it was like, and he wanted to know all about the hardships they faced. So, once in a while, he would put on a poor man's clothes and visit their homes. Of course, nobody recognised him, and he was able to get a good feel for what life was like for the average man.

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One day, he happened to visit a very poor man who lived in a cellar. They shared a meal together, and the king ate food that would never be allowed on the royal banquet table. He tried his best to encourage the beggar and give him hope, and at the end of the day, he left.

But later on, he went back and revealed his secret identity. "I'm not who you think I am," he said, as he pulled off his old ragged coat, "I'm actually your king!"

That's when a very unusual thing happened. The king thought the beggar would probably ask for money, but it didn't happen. Instead, tears came to the beggar's eyes. "You left

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your palace to visit me in this dark place,” he said, “and you ate the same lousy food I ate. That gives me a lot of joy. You’ve given money and gifts to other people, but you gave me something better. You’ve given me yourself!”

And that’s exactly what God has done. But when Jesus came, most of us didn’t get it. Here’s what the apostle John said happened:

In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not (John 1:4,5).

A little further on, John says this:

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He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not (John 1:10,11).

Just imagine: when we could no longer step into the presence of God, He did everything possible to put His presence among us. In the Old Testament, He camped among His people so that we could be near Him; and then in the New Testament, He became one of us. We were given the chance to stand in the presence of God, but we refused it. Instead, we found Him offensive and nailed Him to a cross.

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Now here's a really interesting idea that Christians have quoted for generations: God can work all things together for good. It's important to realise that God doesn't say that everything is good; He simply says that He can work all things together for good.

When I was a kid, I discovered a can of cocoa powder in Mum's kitchen. Because I knew that cocoa was a key ingredient in some of my favourite recipes, I decided to give it a try. I actually filled a tablespoon and put it in my mouth, expecting something wonderful. I don't know if you've ever tasted cocoa powder, but it was absolutely disgusting. My mouth puckered up and I couldn't spit that

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stuff out fast enough. But when my mother took that same powder and mixed it with other ingredients, she could come up with some delicious food.

INVITATION TO DWELL IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Not everything in life is good. If the crucifixion doesn't prove that, nothing will. That's the moment we sink to our absolute lowest. We took a loving God, who could have destroyed humanity when we first rebelled, and we gave Him the most shameful treatment possible. We treated Him as someone not even worthy of contempt.

Even then, He didn't call a billion

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angels to come and deal with us. He didn't ask His Father to destroy us. Instead, He felt pity for us, and He asked His Father to forgive us. Then He willingly went through crucifixion. He made something good of it, because at the Cross, He made it possible for His presence to be with us forever.

As Jesus died on the Cross, He became the sacrificial lamb of the Old Testament sanctuary service. The cross became the Altar of Sacrifice in the outer courtyard. And His blood, which He carried back to heaven, became the blood that the Old Testament priests carried into the Holy Place to present before the presence of God.

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In short, the death of Christ became the solution for humanity's rejection of Him. At that moment, He bought back this world from the clutches of the devil. He made it possible for you to step into the very presence of God Himself. Jesus has become our great High Priest, standing in heaven's sanctuary, pleading His blood in your behalf:

For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us (Hebrews 9:24).

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In 1830, a man by the name of George Wilson killed a government employee who caught him robbing the US mail. It wasn't long before Wilson was caught, and he went to court, where he was condemned to die by hanging.

For some reason, President Andrew Jackson heard about the case and decided to give Wilson a full pardon. Most people sitting on death row would be greatly relieved to get a presidential pardon, but Wilson did a very strange thing. He refused to accept it. He didn't want to be forgiven.

Nobody had ever heard of someone turning down a presidential pardon,

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so they weren't quite sure what to do. The case was referred to the U.S. Supreme Court, and they came to a precedent-setting decision, delivered by Chief Justice Marshall, who said this:

“A pardon is a slip of paper, the value of which is determined by the acceptance of the person to be pardoned. If it is refused, it is no pardon. George Wilson must be hanged.”

It's unbelievable. And yet millions of people do the same thing every day. God moved heaven and earth to be among us, and even after we crucified Him, He turned it around and offered us a pardon.

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God says, "I really miss your company. I'll do anything to tear down the veil that hangs between you and My presence. I've done everything I can, except force you into the kingdom of heaven, and I'm not going to do that, because I love you and I want this to be your choice. I've made My intentions perfectly clear, and now it's your turn."

So, let me ask you: What are your intentions? Would you really turn down an invitation to dwell in the presence of God? There is a future temple that will be even more glorious than the temple Jesus taught in. It will be more glorious and wonderful because we will live in His actual presence without suffering, sin or

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tears. So, what good reason could you possibly give to turn down a God that gave it all for you?

I know that some people feel as if God doesn't care, that He's distant, and only concerned about the really big things. But the Bible says the opposite: that His deepest desire is to be with you, and to have you in His company for all eternity.

That's probably one of the most important lessons we can gather from the Old Testament sanctuary. That offer still stands today.

Would you like to step through the veil and meet Him face to face? Would you like to know, beyond a shadow

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of a doubt, that all of your mistakes have been completely forgiven and forgotten? Would you like to know that, when Jesus comes, you will be able to walk through an earth made new with Him?