

BROUGHT NEAR TO GOD

Ephesians 2:13

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But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:13).

As we study the Bible, we occasionally want to ask not only what the Scripture is saying but also why. This is especially true when it comes to a writer like the apostle Paul, the premier missionary and theologian of the apostolic church, and to a book like Ephesians, described by many as the crown of his writings. Surely the pastoral logic displayed here is significant for all believers.

The pastoral wisdom revealed by the apostle is different from the wisdom common in our day. If we were to ask people today, “What do believers need to hear in order to grow spiritually and to avoid the dangers of life?” most answers would be very different from those given by Paul. Most answers today would have to do with techniques or behaviors that we as believers should do. Paul, in contrast, thinks we most need to know about God and what he has done for us and to us in Christ. Paul’s primary concern is always with theology: he believed that right theology produces clear thinking, which in turn leads to fruitful living.

The tragedy today is that so few Christians are interested in theology, which is another way of saying they are not interested in God. What people want to hear about is themselves, as well as about the personal life of the man in the pulpit. But notice how little attention the apostle

pays to these things. He was God-centered in his thinking and his living, and he wants his readers to be God-centered as well.

A GREAT CONTRAST

This is what Paul is concerned with in making his first exhortation of Ephesians. “Remember!” he exhorts us. “Remember what God has done for you. Remember what you were apart from Christ and what you now are and have in Christ.” Ephesians 2:11-12 gives the negative side of this equation, what they were apart from Christ: aliens to God’s people, strangers to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world. In verse 13 he turns to the positive: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” Realize, he says, what you were saved from, what you are saved to, and what it is that saves you.

Why does Paul want us to focus on these things? Because this is, explains Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “the only way whereby we can ever understand the greatness of this salvation; and as we do so it will lead to joy and rejoicing, to praise and thanksgiving to an assurance and a confidence in Christ which nothing can shake. But in order to come to that we have to realize two things. We have got to see what we were without Christ. Then we have to realize what is now true of us in the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹

In this passage Paul is making use of the illustration provided by the Israelite temple in Jerusalem. The temple consisted of a series of areas in which there was increasingly restricted access. In the center was the inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies. Only the high priest could enter this room, and only one day of the year. Outside the veil that separated this room was the Holy Place, where the priests served daily by keeping the candles lit, the incense burning, and the table of showbread fresh. Outside the temple was the priests’ court, where the altar for the burnt sacrifices was kept fired. Here, also, only the priests could enter.

Around this was a succession of courts. First was the Court of the Israelites, separated from the priestly area only by a low stone barrier.

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God’s Way of Reconciliation: An Exposition of Ephesians 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 187.

Ritually clean Israelite men could congregate here. Next, to the east, was the Women's Court, where Israelite women were free to come. Beyond this was the outer layer, the Court of the Gentiles, separated by a higher wall on which was posted a warning in both Greek and Latin forbidding any Gentile to pass, on pain of death. It seems likely that this is what Paul is referring to in verse 14 when he speaks about the dividing wall between the Jews and the Gentiles.

This tells us a couple of things. First, the Gentiles' real problem was not their separation from the Israelites, but their separation from God. That is what the wall of division showed. This is also the problem with people outside of Christianity today. Like the Gentiles of Paul's day, they are alienated from the true and living God. They do not know him or his promises and they are not part of his people. This is why they have no solid basis for hope and no power to contend with sin and death. The best the Greeks could attain, like secular people today, was either a stoicism that embraced hopelessness or a hedonism that tried simply to avoid it. Paul's point to the Gentile Christians was that before they came to Christ they were godless in the true sense of the word, and so it is for unbelievers today. The answers to life's questions are found only in God; the solution to life's problems comes only from God; the purpose that gives value to life is the blessing and glory of God – to these things they are ignorant and blind, and so were we before coming to God in Christ.

This illustration of the temple and its courts also tells us that there is an absolute difference between believers and non-believers. The Jews and Gentiles were alike in many ways, but there was this crucial, defining difference – the Gentiles were separated from God whereas the Jews were brought near. Some Jews may have been closer to God than others, but they all had access to God as his people. Some Gentiles may have been farther from God than others, but none of them could come into his presence. Here, then, is the difference that defines what Christianity is, and it is an absolute, objective difference. Christianity brings people past the barrier, indeed, in terms of the temple illustration we are brought through every barrier, even within the veil of the most holy place, to dwell in the light of God's presence and favor. All others are outside, beyond the wall that is God's law,

far from God, aliens from God’s commonwealth, strangers to the covenants of promise.

The key difference is not that Christians are better people or have improved themselves. This is an eventual by-product of Christianity, but not its defining reality. Many Christians are not better people, although God is working in them for righteousness. The difference is that union with Jesus Christ through faith changes the status of those who were “far from God” and makes them those “brought near”.

We might say that the whole purpose of the Book of Ephesians is to make this point. Paul tells us in 2:12 what people apart from Christ lack, but elsewhere in the book he speaks of the corresponding blessings for all those in Christ. First, Paul says the Gentiles were “separated from Christ”. But what of us? He says in Ephesians 1:13 that having “heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him,” we now are “in Christ”. 2:12 adds that the Gentiles were “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel.” But 2:19 says that we now “are no longer strangers and aliens, but are fellow citizens with the saints.” We were “strangers to the covenants of promise,” he said. But in Ephesians 3:6 Paul writes that now, “the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

The contrast continues, with those apart from Christ described as “without hope”. Paul says the Jews “were the first to hope in Christ” but now the Gentiles, having also believed, “were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance” (Eph. 1:12-14). Likewise, the Gentiles were “without God”. But, Paul adds in 2:19, we are now “members of the household of God.”

This is what Christianity is about! There are ultimately two kinds of people – and in the contrast we see just how great is the blessing that God is offering to all the world through Jesus Christ, and how great is the salvation we who have believed have received by God’s grace. Remember this, Paul says, and it will change the way you live.

BROUGHT NEAR

This contrast is designed to make us grateful to God, but also to instill in us the confidence we need. In two key words, *brought*

near, Paul tells us the great privileges we now possess in Christ.

According to this definition, salvation is foremost reconciliation to God. We were alienated from God but now we enter his household, becoming his children. A father is not responsible for every child in the world, but only for his own. He works to provide for all their needs, to provide them a home, to put food on the table, to clothe them and educate them. If you are a Christian, this is how things stand between you and God. You have been brought into his household, and God accepts a responsibility to care for your soul. This does not mean that nothing bad will ever happen to you, but rather that you will find God a ready provider in every situation. He will certainly discipline you, for he is also responsible for that. But he will not let neglect those things you need, and he will secure your future, your growth, and your protection. People glibly talk about God being the Father of everyone, but the Bible flatly denies it. John 1:12 says that it “those who received [Jesus], who believed on his name, to them he gave the right to be called children of God.”

Paul’s main idea here is access to God. Children have access to their father, and Christians have open access to heaven’s throne. Even the Old Testament priests were separated from direct contact with God’s presence by the veil that separated the Holy of Holies. But the simplest Christian has greater access than they, because the veil is removed in Jesus Christ. In Christ we have permanent and open access to God in prayer, certain of his gracious reception because we who were far off have been brought near through the superior priesthood of Christ.

Best of all, having been brought near to God in Christ, we begin a relationship with God. We come to know God – who he is and what he is like. We learn not merely things about him, but we grow in a personal relationship with him. This is the chief of God’s covenant promises: “I will be their God and they will be my people... They will all know me” (Heb. 8:10-11). We now only realize this in part, but Revelation 21:3-4 displays the fullness of this blessing as it will unfold in eternity:

He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their

eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

BY HIS BLOOD

Most importantly, Paul tells us what has produced this great change, enabling us who were far from God to be brought near and into such blessing. He says, “Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

Reconciliation is needed when there has been a breach between two parties. The breach between us and God is our sin. God has a cause for offense with us; there is an issue that must be resolved before we can be restored to his fellowship and blessing. God is holy, and the reality of our sin stands between us and him. Even in human relationships, if there is a real and deep-seated problem between two people, they will not be able to get together – not really, not wholeheartedly, not permanently – until the matter is resolved. One writer therefore says, “If God and man are to be reconciled, it cannot be by the simple expedient of ignoring sin, but only by overcoming it.”²

How, then, did God resolve the problem of our sin and thus reconcile us to himself? Paul answers, “by the blood of Christ.” There has been an atonement. A sacrifice for sin has been offered that is acceptable to God; indeed, it was the sacrifice of God’s own appointing, for which he sent his Son into the world. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:19 that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” He explains, “[God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Therefore, he says, “We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20-21).

Matthew 27:51 says that when Jesus died on the cross, the veil in the temple was torn from top to bottom. That was the most holy of all barriers, the one that kept even the priests from direct contact with God. Its falling declares that now all may come to God through faith in the blood of Christ, that is, in Christ’s death for our sin.

² H. Maldwyn Hughes, cf. Philip G. Ryken: *The Heart of the Cross* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), 148.

This is the good news for everyone, regardless of who and what you are. By his blood, Christ has opened wide the way to God. But notice that this is the one and only way by which you may come to God. Paul does not say we may come to God simply by virtue of being made in his image, for mankind is marred and shamed by sin. He does not say that you may come to God by being a good person. This is what people mainly think today and it is a fatal tragedy. In God's eyes you are not a good person, and it is only our self-serving, sin-stained perspective that allows us to think this about ourselves. "There is no one good," God says, "No, not one." (Rom. 3:12). Paul does not say you may draw near to God through religion, by being a devout person, by partaking in rituals or by the sacraments alone. No mystical experience, however spiritual it may make you feel, will overcome the barrier of your sin. Only the blood of Christ can reconcile you to God and bring you near. Jesus reconciles us to God and brings us near to him not by good intentions, not simply by telling us that God is love and not by preaching the Sermon on the Mount, but by dying in our place as an atonement for our sin.

In one of his greatest parables, Jesus made this vividly clear. Two men came to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, the religious elite of Judaism, and the other was a tax collector, the spiritual scum of the nation. Jesus tells us the Pharisee stood before God, saying, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." Having boasted about who he was he proceeded to boast about what he did: "I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get." He was confident that because of his pedigree, his morality, and his religion, God was certain to receive him. The tax collector's approach to God was altogether different. "But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'" (Lk. 18:10-13). The expression "be merciful" has explicit reference to the sacrifices offered in the temple; literally, it is, "be mercy-seated to me", the mercy-seat being the place where the atoning blood was offered to God.

In whose shoes would you rather be? Who do you think was more likely of being received by God? Was it the moral and religious man, the man from the good family and the right connections, who came

forward on the basis of these? Or was it the man who admitted he was a failure, who could only beat his breast and ask God to forgive his sins through atoning blood? Jesus concluded: “I tell you, this man” – the tax collector – “went home justified rather than the other.” The reason for this is that, being sinners, we are brought near only “by the blood of Christ.”

This is the great reality that applies to everyone, as Paul explained in Romans 3:23-25:

There is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

Jesus died as a propitiation, by his own blood turning away God’s wrath from all who trust in him. People believe in many things but only one saves us; only one brings us near to God and restores us to his love. That is faith in Christ’s blood, in his atoning death for our forgiveness and reconciliation to God. If you believe that, if you trust only in the death of God’s Son to bring you to the Father, then you who were far away, without hope and without God, are now one of God’s beloved children. You may not be the person you should be and you may be weighed down with your sense of unworthiness. But in Christ, God’s blessing and love are yours and will remain yours not because you earned them but because Christ earned them for you. They were purchased in advance, as the apostle Peter wrote, “not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet. 1:18-19). Therefore, you may stop trying to win your place in God’s favor, and stop fretting about your salvation but rest secure, knowing that though you were far away, and deservedly so, Christ’s blood has reconciled you to God.

THROUGH THE GATES OF SPLENDOR

Paul’s teaching in this verse begs a question, and nothing else matters compared to it. Are you separated from Christ in unbelief or are you in Christ and with Christ through faith in his blood? It is literally a life or death matter, with everlasting consequences. With or without Christ is what makes all the difference eternally.

I often think of the scene at Jesus' death, his cross standing between that of two other men. The two men crucified with Jesus represent all of humanity, and like all of us they had one thing in common. They were guilty men ripe for just condemnation. "There is no difference," Paul says, "for all have sinned." But there was one difference between them, a difference that divides humanity in its two basic groups: one of the criminals cried out to Jesus for salvation. He was not a good person, and he was unable to do any good works or earn salvation in any way. He was already affixed to a cross. But by faith alone he cried out to Jesus. Jesus told him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk. 23:43). Likewise, today, every sinner who calls in faith to the sin-bearing Savior gains immediate forgiveness and is reconciled to God. The other thief rejected Jesus, mocked him, and perished in his sins, to receive on his own soul the eternal punishment which he and all those like him deserve. Those are the two kinds of people in this world. Which kind are you?

This is the contrast Paul speaks of. If you are a Christian, it does not mean all your troubles are gone and everything will be rosy from now on. But it does mean you are no longer far from God: condemned, estranged, and barred from his blessings. You have been brought near in Christ. Now, in your weakness, though you are prone to failure and sin, you may rely on Christ's blood for your relationship with God. And through Christ's blood you have access to God's grace so that you will grow stronger as you walk in faith, you will gain power against sin as you turn to God in prayer, as your mind is transformed by God's Word, and as you worship together with God's people.

Paul reminds these Gentile Christians of the wall that once separated them from God. The Bible ends with a picture of the heavenly city to come, and it, too, is surrounded by a wall. The apostle John writes in Revelation:

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb (Rev. 21:22-23).

This is the destination of all those now brought near to God in Christ. Of these things we may now partake spiritually through God's Word, prayer, and through our worship of God together.

But, as I said, it is a city with a wall. So how do you get in? How do you come to God? The Bible's last chapter tells us: "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates" (Rev. 22:14). Only those, but all of those, washed clean in the blood of Christ may enter, drawing near to God and his blessings forever.

I mentioned that the walls around Israel's temple were marked with warnings for the Gentiles to stay out on pain of death. But the walls of this city, the city in which shines the light of Jesus Christ forever, are marked not with a warning but with an invitation for all to come by faith in his gospel. Jesus himself, who died to bring us near by his blood, gives the invitation to all. "Come," he says. "Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life" (Rev. 22:17).

Jesus invites you now to come near to God through faith in his blood, though you have been far away in sin and unbelief. If you will come, you will be reconciled to God, forgiven of your sins, and received with love as God's precious child, to live forever with him.