

# ACCESS TO THE FATHER

## Ephesians 2:17-18

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And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father (Eph. 2:17-18).

**A**ll through Ephesians, Paul addresses a question that is at the heart of his message: “What makes someone a Christian?” How does this happen? And in what does it result?

The first and most basic answer came in Ephesians 1:1, where Paul says a Christian is a “saint”, that is a “holy one”, through faith in Christ Jesus. By the time chapter 1 concluded, we learned that a Christian is one who is beloved of God the Father (1:5), forgiven through the blood of Christ (1:7), and indwelt by the Holy Spirit (1:13). In chapter 2, Paul adds that a Christian is a sinner saved by grace, through faith, for the display of God’s glory. Now, as we continue in chapter 2, we find another answer to the question, “What is a Christian?” Here, we find that a Christian is a person who has peace with God through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ, and experiences the peace of God that Jesus works into our hearts. For, as Paul exclaims, “he himself is our peace” (Eph. 2:14).

### HE PREACHED PEACE

**A**s Paul explains it, the peace that believers have with and from God, results from the saving work of Christ. Starting in verse 13, Paul explained that Jesus died in our place to give us peace with God through the forgiveness of our sins. He then rose from the grave

and ascended into heaven to pour his peace into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Now, in verse 17, he notes one more thing Jesus has done to give us peace: “He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.”

This is a remarkable statement, especially when we consider it in the order where Paul puts it. We might think that when Paul speaks of Jesus preaching peace he is referring to Jesus’ earthly ministry, when he went about teaching and healing. But it is clear from the placement in Paul’s teaching that he does not mean this. Jesus first died, then rose from the grave, and then preached peace. Also, we note that Jesus preached peace to those who both far off and near, meaning to both Gentiles and Jews. The Gospels reveal that this did not happen during the three years of his earthly ministry.

Paul is therefore speaking of the time of the apostles, when the gospel went out to the Gentiles, when the Holy Spirit inspired the writing of the New Testament books, and when men like Paul went about preaching good news. This was, Paul says, the continued work of Jesus Christ as he proclaimed peace through his apostles.

This comes across clearly in Acts 1:8, where Jesus spoke to his disciples just before he ascended into heaven. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you,” he said, “and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” This means that when the apostles preached, Jesus was preaching through them. When they wrote the New Testament, Jesus was writing to us through them. This is true even today, when a minister faithfully preaches Christ’s gospel or when a faithful Christian shares the good news from God’s Word. It is Jesus himself who is preaching, offering peace to sinners who are alienated from God, peace to the broken-hearted and fearful, and peace from God to a world gripped in conflict and sorrow.

It is with the same love that bore our sins on the cross that Jesus speaks today through his Word. The love in his heart for the lost and the needy has not burned out one bit. No less than when he cleansed the leper or forgave the woman caught in adultery, no less than when he multiplied the few pieces of fish and bread to feed the hungry crowds, Jesus looks upon you now with compassion, mercy, and the

great love of God. He preaches good news of peace to you: peace with God, peace in your own heart, and peace on earth through the gospel of his grace. It is a peace he can offer because he purchased it with his own blood; a peace he can truly give because of the Holy Spirit he sends to all who believe; and a peace he preaches to you because of the mercy and grace that still beats within his heart as he reigns in heaven and prepares his return.

## ACCESS TO THE FATHER

A second thing that stands out in these two verses is the clear evidence that Paul wants Christians to understand salvation and our relationship to God in terms of the doctrine of the Trinity. This is something that is distinctive to Christians: we do not relate merely to God in the abstract but to the three Persons of the Godhead. When we speak of having a “personal relationship with God” it is because of what the Bible reveals about the Persons of the Trinity. Few passages in the New Testament present this as clearly as verse 18. Paul writes, “For through him [that is, Christ] we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.”

The doctrine of the Trinity is not just something for scholars to wrack their brains on. Trinity is who God is. So if we are to know God and relate to God, we must think about God as Trinity. We are living in a time when the Trinity is forgotten by many Christians. Some Christians think about Jesus only. Their worship is directed only to God the Son, and their salvation is founded only on what he does and gives. That is not what even Jesus intends. Other Christians focus all their attention on the Spirit and his power. But the New Testament emphasizes our relationship to the whole Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This is obviously important to Paul. In Ephesians 1:3-14, he worked out the blessings of salvation in terms of the Trinity. If we want to know and have all the blessings Christianity offers, then we must know all three Persons of the Trinity. Now in Ephesians 2:18 he applies this to our relationship to God. Our salvation involves and depends upon all three members of the Trinity.

In this way, Paul wraps up his teaching on the peace made available to us through Jesus Christ. First, he makes the great statement that through Christ “we have access to the Father.” This means that Jesus came into this world and died on the cross, not merely to bring us into relationship with himself, but most specifically to bring us into a relationship of love with God the Father.

This comes through in many places, but perhaps best in Jesus’ prayer to the Father on the night of his arrest. In John 17:4, Jesus prays, “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.” As Jesus goes on to say, that work was to reveal the Father and bring his people into a saving relationship with the Father. Similarly, when Jesus said in John 14:6, “I am the way, the truth and the life,” it was in answer to Thomas’ question about how they could know God the Father and enter into his blessing.

Therefore, Christianity’s aim is that people who have been separated from God’s love would now come to the Heavenly Father and enter into the light of his presence as beloved children. We are adopted into the family of God the Father, through the saving work of God the Son, by the ministry of God the Holy Spirit.

This makes an important point that is of vast importance to our lives. So many people, even Christians, feel good about Jesus but think of God as a threatening, disapproving, and hostile force lurking in the background. The result is that they never enjoy the peace that Jesus came to give. God – God the Father – is seen as an angry judge, and you know that you really haven’t lived up to his demands. God the Father is holy and perfect, and you aren’t holy and perfect. You don’t pray like you should. You haven’t broken away from your sins the way you should. So you feel distant from God. You wonder if the promises of the Bible are really for you, because you really don’t measure up.

If you feel this way, the gospel Christ preaches has two things to say to you. The first is that Jesus does not cajole a reluctant, grumpy, or unwilling Father to look on you in love. Rather, it was the Father who sent Jesus into the world because of his love for you. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” Paul said in Ephesians 1:5, “In love [God] predestined us for adoption through

Jesus Christ.” If you trust in Christ, you can know that the heavenly Father loved you before you were even born, before the worlds came into existence. He knew you by name and wanted your heart to know his love. This is why Jesus came into the world – not to persuade a reluctant, angry God about you, but to serve a God of love by taking away your sin and making you a child of the Father.

But what about your unworthiness? What about the truth that you don’t pray like you should, that you forget about God much of the time, and that you don’t measure up to him? How can a holy God love you? The answer is the gospel Jesus came and preached. The gospel says that everything that needs to happen to open the way for the holy Father to pour his love on you was accomplished by Jesus Christ. You need to be righteous to stand in God’s presence, and Jesus fulfilled the Law for you and grants to you by faith an imputed righteousness that is perfect in God’s sight (see 2 Cor. 5:21).

But, you say, “My sin and guilt makes me unclean before God and I feel nervous thinking about him.” The gospel replies that Jesus shed his blood to cleanse you once and for all before God. Ephesians 2:13 says, “Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” The apostle John adds, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:9).

But you don’t know where your heart will be tomorrow. Who knows if you will remain faithful to God? But the Book of Hebrews reminds you that Jesus now lives and reigns in heaven, praying for you, ensuring the Holy Spirit’s ministry in your life. Hebrews 7:25 explains, “Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”

Understanding Christ’s work for you to achieve God the Father’s own purpose of love will change your life. It will cast away darkness with light. Martyn Lloyd-Jones described it:

I am no longer filled with a craven fear of God. He is no longer to me some tyrant waiting to pounce on me and to damn me and to hurl me to hell. He is my loving Father who loved me with an everlasting love, with such a love

as to send His only Son to die on the Cross for me. And the moment I realize that, I am at peace with Him.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore what Jesus wants, the reason he died and the cause for which he presently reigns, is for us to draw near to God the Father through him. He wants us to know the Father's love, which fulfills the deepest needs of our hearts. What do we gain from a father? We gain our identity, our name, from our father. This is what God will do for you. He will take you as his own child. We gain acceptance from our earthly fathers, and God wants to give his acceptance to you. Fathers grant provision and protection and security, and God the Father wants to give you a destiny and an inheritance in glory. He will take care of you. These are the things that a father gives, and God the Father will give them to you through Jesus Christ.

Not a few people have a hard time turning to God as Father because of the painful experiences they have had with their earthly fathers. They were not accepted but were rejected. They received not care but abuse. Their father's discipline tore them down instead of building them up. But if you were let down by your earthly father in those ways or others, do not turn away from God the Father. Turn to him. He is the good and perfect Father. All that you ever longed for, and which earthly fathers sometimes fail to give, God the Father wants to give for the blessing of your heart.

Paul says that through Jesus all Christians, both Jews and Gentiles, have "access to the Father." The idea is more than that God is available to us, but that God invites us into his love. God delights to see his children because we are forgiven in Christ and clothed in his perfect righteousness. We should never fear to draw near to God, because through Jesus Christ we have access.

I recently read an article about old-fashioned courting practices that reminded me of this. Back in the days when young men came to call at young ladies' homes, and the courting took place in the parlor, it was the women who initiated the relationship. Without an invitation it was considered rude for the man to show up at her home or to initiate

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<sup>1</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Kingdom of God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1992), 82.

personal contact. Without an invitation he would be turned away at the door if he came.

That is the way it is with God. If you show up at heaven without an invitation, you will be turned away. God is holy and his heaven is holy, and those stained by sin – even “respectable” sins – will certainly be turned away. So God sent his Son into the world to grant an invitation – to give access – to those who believe in him. And if you are in Christ then you have a permanent invitation into God’s affections. He sees you clothed in perfect white, with all your stains removed by Christ’s precious blood, and you are welcome with him.

Jesus wants you to have this relationship with the Father, and the Spirit’s work is to empower you for this. We have “access by one Spirit with the Father”. This is what makes us one in Christ, that we all have equal access by the same Spirit. The Spirit does not want us focusing on himself. “He will glorify me,” Jesus said (Jn. 16:14), and Jesus is glorified when sinners come to the Father in faith.

Thus our salvation is woven tightly in the combined work of the three divine Persons of the Trinity. You are saved because God the Father loves you, because God the Son gained your access by the cross, and because God the Spirit is working in your heart to bring you to God. This is the pattern and structure of our whole salvation: we are saved to the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit.

## PRAYING TO THE FATHER

I want to apply this Trinitarian pattern directly to the matter of prayer. Ephesians 2:18 is one of the most important verses in the Bible when it comes to prayer. It tells us how prayer “works”.

Most of us struggle with prayer because we do not understand what Paul teaches here. Our approach is what I like to call *The Wizard of Oz* model of prayer. That is the story of a girl from Kansas named Dorothy who is transported into the magical land of Oz. She wants to go home and is told to seek out the great and powerful Wizard of Oz, who lives in the Emerald City. As she travels there she is joined by the scarecrow, who wants a brain, the tin woodsman, who needs a heart, and the cowardly lion, who is shamed by his lack of courage.

After some adventures the little band arrives at the Emerald City and asks to see the wizard. They are told what many of us expect to be told about God: he is too busy for puny people like them; they have no right to intrude upon the great and powerful Oz. But, with daring and resourcefulness, Dorothy manages to get into the chamber to see the wizard. He is ominous and scary; his face is wreathed in flames and smoke. Fearfully, she makes her requests, but the wizard refuses to grant them. She must first complete a quest to prove her worth. It is only after she succeeds and returns with the broomstick of the Wicked Witch of the West, that the wizard is willing to help, after which we learn that he is not really so great and powerful after all.

That is how many of us think about prayer. God is too busy and our prayers are a bother. If we get his attention, we face a daunting, unwilling deity. If God does answer our prayers, it is only because we have first done something for him or otherwise won his favor, so that we are pretty much on our own. With all that, why bother to pray?

But what Paul writes here totally changes our view of God and of prayer. It is true that God is great and powerful, but he also knows and loves you. He did not wait in his distant chamber for you to come, but sent his Son into your world. It is true that your sins stand against you and that the devil opposes you, the way the wicked witch tried to stop Dorothy. But God's Son removed your sin and defeated the devil on the cross. He presents his own achievement for you to the Father, who is glad to receive you and happy to care for you, who responds to your prayers with his love and grants you his peace (Phil. 4:7, 19). The scarecrow wanted a brain, and God will give you a right mind and a knowledge of truth; the tin woodsman wanted a heart, and God will plant a new heart within you, one that longs to do his will; the cowardly lion wanted courage, and God will strengthen you against fear. Dorothy wanted to go home, and God has prepared a home for you and will strengthen you as you journey through this life.

Returning to verse 18, we ask, "Why will God answer our prayers?" The answer is because we have "access to the Father." Jesus is in heaven, hand-delivering all our prayers with hands that were pierced by nails for you. This is why we pray, "In Jesus' name"; that is what we mean when we end our prayers that way. We are asking Jesus to



be the mailman who delivers our prayers to God, and we are thereby certain that they will arrive and be received with loving care.

How can people like us actually pray and talk to God in a right way? Paul says it is “by the Spirit”. In Romans 8:26, Paul says of prayer, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness.” He enters into our prayers and sorts them out before God. Paul adds, “The Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom. 8:27).

It makes a tremendous difference to understand how the three Persons of the Trinity work together to enable us to pray. But most importantly, Paul reminds us that we have a Heavenly Father who invites us to pray. Philip Ryken says, “A real father is a man who has a passionate love for his family. Because of the warmth of his affection... his children have confidence to ask him for what they need.”<sup>2</sup> Surely that is why when his disciples asked, Jesus told them to come to God in prayer, saying, “Our Father, who art in heaven.”

## HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THE FEET

**L**et me conclude with three observations. The first is for those who have never trusted in Christ. This is what you are missing if your heart is closed to Jesus. The good news that Paul writes of in this chapter is the best you possibly could hear. It is good news for your eternal destiny and for your life on this earth, if you will believe. Jesus came to bring sinners near to God through his blood (Eph. 2:13). He came to be our peace (Eph. 2:14). He gives us access into the love of the Heavenly Father through his blood and by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Why will you stand far off from that? Paul says in verse 17 that even as you read this, it is Jesus himself, with all the love of God in his heart, who preaches good news of peace to you. As Paul elsewhere said, “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:19-20). You can call upon God right now through faith in Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.

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<sup>2</sup> Philip G. Ryken, *The Prayer of Our Lord* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2002), 21-21.

Secondly, if you have believed in Christ, then realize all that he has achieved for you according to God's own plan. You have access to God the Father, a permanent invitation into his love and a place in his heart forever. If that is true, then live in the light of God's love. Do not let feelings of guilt or inadequacy keep you from God, but let them remind you how precious is the blood of Christ and how amazing is the grace that draws you near. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote:

The moment you see that you are made righteous by Christ and clothed in His righteousness, you can go to God with confidence. He is your Father, He is waiting to receive you and you can pray as you have never prayed before. The way is clear, it is a new and a living way that has been opened. You are at peace with God and at peace within; you have found rest for your soul.<sup>3</sup>

Lastly, if we believe this and know it in our lives, then surely we will tell others. Paul says that Jesus came and preached good news of peace; we know from the Great Commission that he wants us to go and do the same (Mt. 28:18-20). Once you know the reality of God's love for you, he will give you love for others and cause you to preach good news of peace so that they, too, might have access to the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit. And then what Isaiah said about our Lord Jesus will be true of you as well: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace" (Isa. 52:7).

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<sup>3</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *The Kingdom of God*, 82.