

## Access to God (Ephesians 3:1-13)

Since we live nearly 2,000 years later than Paul, we could easily miss the stupendous significance of his words to the Ephesians ... *“In him (Christ) and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence”* (3:12). This is not news for us because (thankfully) we live with free access to God every day. Our Bibles assure us that he will never leave us or forsake us, and we can call upon him at any time. But that was not the case for the first readers of Paul’s letter. Access to God was an issue! Why? Let’s consider (1) the problems, (2) the solution, and (3) the implications.

### 1. The problems

**First**, there was the massive problem of human depravity. Every descendant of Adam has treated God despicably. God speaks, and we say ‘no’! We all reject the Creator and live for self. Sin is Satanic, contrary to God’s holy nature, and repugnant to him. It cuts off access to God. So Adam and Eve were expelled from God’s place (Eden) to suffer the cursed impacts of sin that have afflicted humanity ever since. Paul has already summarised this devastating reality:

*“You were dead in your transgressions and sins ... when you followed the ways of this world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath”* (Eph 2:1-3). Access to God? No ... we deserve only his wrath.

The **second** factor preventing access to God was the long period of Jewish exclusivism, the Theocratic state of Israel. This theocracy was guarded by an intricate code of laws, which Paul has described as *“the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility ... the law with its commandments and regulations”* (Eph 2:14-15).

It was necessary because of Israel’s constant tendency to adopt the pagan cultures of the gentile nations around them. They worshipped their idols (Baal) and intermarried with them. A barrier was needed to fence Israel **in** and keep paganism **out**, otherwise there would be no covenant people from which Messiah would come ... no clear line from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Israel was the one nation with access to God but even there strict protocols applied. Only one person once a year could enter the place where God symbolically dwelt with them ... the ‘most holy place’. On Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) the High Priest alone would go behind the veil to sprinkle sacrificial blood on the Mercy Seat seeking forgiveness for Israel’s sins.

But the Ephesians, being Gentiles, were outside the barrier ... *“you who are Gentiles by birth ... were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world”* (Eph 2:11-12). There was no way any Gentiles could *“approach God with freedom and confidence”*. Yet Paul tell the Ephesians to do just that. How can he say that?

## (2) The solution

The solution is Jesus. He dealt with both problems ... human sin and the Jewish exclusivism. Regarding sin Jesus the good shepherd laid down his life for his sheep...a countless multitude of Jews and Gentiles from all of history given to him by God the Father. He stood in their guilty place and bore all the wrath they deserved until it was finished. They were freed and reconciled to God. *“But because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus”.* (Eph 2:4-6)

Jesus also dismantled the theocracy, ending the time of Jewish exclusivism. The special arrangement with ethnic Israel has ceased, not only because it had reached its ‘use-by’ date (the promised “seed of the woman” has come) but also because the Jews rejected him ... rejected their own Messiah. So the kingdom was taken away from them. Those once called “my people” are now “not my people”. God’s purpose in Christ was always to do away with that temporary system and to build one church made up of all true believers from every tribe and tongue and nation on earth. So Paul now tells Gentiles:

*“For through him we both (Jews and Gentiles) have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household”* (2:18-19). He labours the point that there is nil difference now between Jews and Gentiles in Christ ...

*“through the gospel the Gentiles are **heirs** together with Israel, **members** together of one body, and **sharers** together in the promise in Christ Jesus”* (Eph 3:6). From now on Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians constitute *“the Israel of God”* (Gal 6:16).

## 3. The implications

The biggest implications focus around one question ... *What should be our attitude to modern (ethnic) Israel?* Many Christians have some changes to make in the light of this NT teaching. There is no place for anti-Semitism, but nor should we be *Zionistic*. But Zionism is the traditional view ... people assume ethnic Israel is still ‘special’. But tradition is not our authority - Scripture alone is! So don’t be upset if something I now say ruffles some feathers ... just check it against the Bible! (I have to be brief but you can read more in *“What the Bible teaches about the Future”* published in 2009 by Evangelical Press ... there I devote five chapters to the status of ethnic Israel). Here are three implications:

**a) About the people.** It is no longer correct to consider ethnic Israel God’s ‘special’ people. All Jews and Gentiles are sinners who need to believe in Jesus Christ for salvation. They are accepted if they do, but not otherwise. Are Jews still the covenant people? No – not even outwardly any more. The covenant people now (i.e. Abraham’s heirs) are Christians, whatever their nationality. *“For there is no difference between Jew*

*and Gentile--the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom10:12-13).*

**b) About the land.** It is no longer accurate to call Palestine ‘the covenant land’ or ‘the Holy Land’ or ‘the Promised Land’. It was an Old Testament type (picture) of the ultimate Promised Land, the ‘new heavens and new earth’. Israel had no security of tenure on the land even in the Old Testament. It was not theirs unconditionally. If the 70 years in Babylon prove anything they prove that God’s covenant blessings always involved the condition of faith. Should we automatically support Israel against the Arabs (Palestinians)? No, why should we? The “Israel of God” today is the church of all nations (including Palestinian Christians). Our promised land flowing with milk and honey is far better than the Middle East. It is the New Heavens and New Earth.

**c) About the church.** Question ... who is being described here: “*you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God*” (1 Pet 2:9)? It is the Christian church of all nations! The rich theocratic language of Israel now applies to the church because the church is the true Israel of God! This is not new ... God always intended a covenant people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. At the beginning of history he changed Abram’s name to underscore that fact, saying:

*“My covenant is with you and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but you shall be called **Abraham** for I will make you the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen. 17:3-5).* Abraham is the most **international** name in the Bible.

I hope you can now sense the stupendous significance of Paul’s words about access to God ... “*In Christ and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence*” (3:12). If you are a Christian, you are a true Israelite, a true child of Abraham, and a true heir of the covenant ... “*if you belong to Christ then you **are** Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise*” (Galatians 3:29). Revel in your gospel status and liberty!