

DRAWING NEAR

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Ephesians 2:13 *Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.*

Brought Near

Nearness to God is not spacial, because He is omnipresent —everywhere at one and the same time. You don't have to move your body to become closer to or farther from God, because it's not a physical distance that separates you, but a spiritual difference, as described by Isaiah:

Isaiah 59:1 *Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. ² But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.*

³ For your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt. Your lips have spoken lies, and your tongue mutters wicked things. ⁴ No one calls for justice; no one pleads his case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments and speak lies.

When a person lives with such self-centered indifference, God might as well be a million miles away, because He will not hear and He will not help. This is the distance that is bridged by the blood of Christ. This is the gap that is closed by the Gospel.

What is this *Gospel*? The word is a contraction of the Old English *god spel*, or as we might say today, "It was a good spiel" or "good story." It translates the Greek New Testament word, *euangelion*, from which we derive the word *evangel*, which means "good news." So, what is this good news?

Four Words

The Good News can be summed up in just four words: God, Man, Christ, and Response.

God is love and His compassion never comes to an end.

Psalms 145:8 *The Lord is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. ⁹ The Lord is good to everyone. He showers compassion on all his creation. ¹⁰ All of your works will thank you, Lord, and your faithful followers will praise you.*

But at the same time, God is holy and just and will not put up with sin. I know... that sounds like *bad* news, doesn't it? And it gets worse before it gets better.

Man is a sinner and cannot save himself. From the time our first parents, Adam and Eve, imagined that God didn't really love them and determined to do things their way, until this present day... we continue to imagine that our way is best and put God in the back seat (or worse). This only deepens our separation from Him and further warps our perception and taints our intellect. Because of this inner twistedness, nothing that we do can earn or deserve God's favor.

Yet, God has shown us favor by coming into our world in human form, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. And Christ, the Messiah, grew up as a human, and was tempted in every way that we are, but He

did not sin, not even once. This unique sinlessness qualified Him to do something that no one else could possibly do: He offered His own righteous life as a substitute for our sinful lives — *“the Just for the unjust.”*

In this way, He paid the penalty for sin that we owed; He took our place, He took our judgment. He died and was buried. But once the debt had been paid, God raised Him from the dead to live forevermore. Forgiveness was His gift of love to us.

All that remained was for us to respond, for a gift is not a gift until it is received. The response God is looking for is twofold: repentance and faith. Repentance is the awareness that we have offended God by our self-will, and the choice to change, to yield to His will and pursue His purpose.

But no matter how much we determine to change, we will fail, as long as we rely upon ourselves. Faith is that shift to relying on God. Trusting in His mercy to forgive our sins, and trusting in His power to free us from sin’s grip. When we do this, our past record is wiped clean and our future hope is restored.

Now, that’s good news!

Brought Near

In this way, God has bridged the gulf created by our sin. He has reached out to us in love. When we reach back to Him in faith, the gap is closed and we are reunited with our Creator. God and man in harmony again.

This is what we celebrate and renew every time we receive holy communion. The bread and the cup represent the body and blood of Jesus that were offered for us in His death. Here is how Apostle Paul described it:

1 Corinthians 11:23 I pass on to you what I received from the Lord himself. On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread²⁴ and gave thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and said, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this to remember me.”²⁵ In the same way, he took the cup of wine after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood. Do this to remember me as often as you drink it.”²⁶ For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing (the fact of) the Lord’s death until he comes again.

Holy Communion is vital, by virtue of its origin. It is one of only two ceremonial rules that Jesus laid down for His church (the other is baptism in water). If we are followers of Jesus Christ, we ought certainly to follow Him faithfully in this ordinance.

Holy Communion is also vital in view of its effect. This opportunity for careful reflection renews our confidence in God’s loving nearness and refreshes our ability to act in love.

A Thoughtful Approach

Therefore, it should be approached thoughtfully.

First of all, we should consider our faith-relationship with the Lord Jesus. Are we really walking in the path of faith? Does it show? Do others know?

Second, we should consider our love-relationship with other Christians. Are we keeping short accounts and clean consciences? Do others know we are Christians because of our love?

Here is the warning that Paul left for us:

1 Corinthians 11:27 So anyone who eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily is guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ That is why you should examine yourself before eating the bread and drinking the cup. ²⁹ For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honoring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God's judgment upon yourself. ³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and sick and some have even died.

³¹ But if we would examine ourselves, we would not be judged by God in this way. ³² Yet when we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned along with the world.

The “unworthy manner” to which Paul referred does not have to do with our original sin, which has been forgiven, nor even our many sins, which have also been forgiven in the death of Jesus. It is the manner in which we receive Holy Communion that is at issue. We must do so in a manner that honors the Lord and His body, the Church.

In other words, we should receive Holy Communion with thankfulness for Christ's mercies given to us, and with generous mercy toward others. It is your opportunity to receive fresh forgiveness, and to grant forgiveness freely also.

Paul equates many cases of weakness, sickness, and some deaths to disciplinary judgment from the Lord for holding on to ingratitude and unforgiveness in our hearts. Nothing in medical science can make up for that!

Let it go! Say before God today, “I forgive.” “Thank You for forgiving me.”

You haven't come to church today simply by routine or by accident. God had a purpose and a plan to meet you here.

It's no fun to be left or kept on the outside. God wants you on the inside. The door is open through Jesus Christ. Enter for the first time today, or enter again. You are always welcome.

By His Grace

I conclude today with these marvelous words from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians:

Ephesians 2:8 God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. ⁹ Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. ¹⁰ For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

¹¹ Don't forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders. You were called “uncircumcised heathens” by the Jews, who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts. ¹² In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope. ¹³ But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.

¹⁴ For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. ¹⁵ He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups. ¹⁶ Together as one body, Christ reconciled

both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death.

¹⁷ He brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles who were far away from him, and peace to the Jews who were near. ¹⁸ Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us.

Do you want to enter this life of forgiveness and hope through Jesus Christ today? Then, pray in this way:

- Thank God for His gracious love
- Repent to God for your self-will and disobedience
- Put your trust in Jesus Christ for eternal salvation
- Receive God's forgiveness for your every sin
- Receive God's power to follow Jesus faithfully and love one another persistently