Near to God by Christ’s blood

Text: Ephesians 2:11-13

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**Scriptures:** Genesis 12:1-3; Ephesians 2:1-13

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 371, 25, 78, 483, ‘The power of the cross’ 432, 313, 310

Series: Ephesians (#10)

Occasion Lord’s Supper

Theme: The Apostle Paul reminds the Gentile Ephesian believers that they used to have no connection with the Living God, but that now they are near to Him in Christ

Proposition: In Christ, we have all the privileges of believing Old Testament Israel, we are brought into close relationship with God through His sacrificial death on the cross

**Introduction**

We all have relationships with other people. Some of our relationships are understandably ‘closer’ than others. Most of us have some ‘close’ friends. Some family members may be closer to you than others, or you may have ‘close’ relationships with them all. We use words like ‘close’, ‘near’ and ‘apart’ to describe the physical distance between people or objects. We also use these words to describe the nature of our relationships with others. When relationships break down completely, people become estranged, they are separated, alienated from one another.

The Bible is a true story about the relationship between God and man. Remember that at one time, in the beginning, God was in ‘close’ relationship with our common ancestors Adam and Eve. He spoke directly to them being present in the garden with them (Gen 3:10). After Adam and Eve rebelled against God, they were no longer close to Him: their relational estrangement was reflected by their expulsion from the garden.

The gospel is about the restoration of the broken relationship between God and man through the person and work of Jesus Christ who is called “Immanuel” meaning ‘God with us’ (Matt 1:23). In Christ, those who were once far from God are brought near to Him as adopted members of His family. This is the main idea of our text today from Ephesians 2:11-13, which we focus on today under two headings: Before Christ and After Christ.

1. **Before Christ**

There is a yellow sign on Cranford Street here in Christchurch which says, “Reformed Church”. It points in the direction of this building. The sign itself is not the church building, but it draws the attention of people to the reality of this place. Similarly, circumcision (the removal of the foreskin from the male reproductive organ) was a **sign** of the covenant between the Living God and the physical descendants of Abraham (Gen 17:9-14). It pointed to the reality of a relationship between God and man.

To be an uncircumcised Jewish male was to be a ‘covenant-breaker’ cut off from God’s people and therefore also from Him (Gen 17.14). For the Jews, the uncircumcision of Gentiles was an expression of their estrangement from God. The visible sign of the covenant was a clear mark of distinction between the Jews and Gentiles.

Whilst circumcision was a sign of the covenant, it was never a guarantee of relationship with God (any more than baptism is now). The inner condition of the heart was, and still is, the key to whether a person is relationally close to God or far from Him. The Old Testament makes this clear when God says to Israel: “*Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn*” (Deut 10:16) – (also Deut 30:6; Jer 4:4)

Most of the Christians to whom Paul writes in this letter were Gentiles, not ethnic Jews. He refers to them as those who are called (by the Jews) “the uncircumcision”. He wants to assure them that their lack this physical sign is not significant because they have been saved by faith in Christ, however he does calls them to ‘*remember that at one time*’ (v11) they were ‘*far off*’ from God. This was the time before they came to faith in the Son of God, for them it was ‘before Christ’.

Paul lists five aspects of their being ‘far off’ from God:

1. They were ‘separated from Christ’
2. They were ‘alienated from the commonwealth of Israel’
3. They were ‘strangers to the covenants of promise’
4. They had ‘no hope’
5. They were ‘without God in the world’

Let’s consider each of these sad circumstances briefly now.

1. To be ‘separated from Christ’ is to be ‘at a distance from Him’. To be separated from Him is to have no connection with the Saviour. The verb form of the Greek word translated ‘separated’ is used in Mark 10:9 to translate the words of Jesus “*What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate*”. To be separated from Christ is to be divorced from Him, to have no relationship with the only mediator between God and man. To be separated from Christ is to be spiritually dead.
2. Before they came to faith the Gentile believers were ‘*alienated from the commonwealth of Israel*’. ‘The commonwealth of Israel’ refers to the Old Testament nation of Israel. The Greek word translated ‘commonwealth’ means to be a citizen of a state. When Paul wrote this letter, Ephesus was the fourth largest city in the world; capital of the Roman province of Asia. The Greek city of Ephesus came under Roman control around 130AD, was reclaimed in 88 when conquering Mithridates ordered the killing of every Roman citizen in the province. Two years later Ephesus came back under Roman rule and a heavy burden of punitive taxes. The Ephesians knew that it was advantageous to be a citizen of the occupying powerful Roman Empire. Not surprisingly this citizenship was highly prized as it encompassed many great privileges and honours, as well as responsibilities. Far greater are the privileges, honours and responsibilities of those who are citizens of God’s Kingdom. Before coming to faith in Christ, these Gentile believers were ‘aliens’ not only to the covenant community of Old Testament Israel, but also to the believing covenant community of the New Israel who are the spiritual descendants of Abraham (Gal 3:29).
3. They were also ‘*strangers to the covenants of promise*’. Many or most of us are familiar with the great promises of God in the Old Testament. We have read the Bible ourselves and have heard Scripture spoken and explained to us. These ‘covenants of promise’ include:
4. God’s promise to Abraham to bless Him and his descendants and through Him to bless ‘*all the families of the earth*’ (Gen 12:1-3).
5. God’s promise to Abraham’s descendants, the Israelites, that He would “*take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD*.' (Exo 6:7-8)
6. God’s promise to Israel that they would “*be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*” (Exo 19:6).

Although the Hebrew Old Testament had been translated into Greek by the first century AD, the majority of Gentiles were unfamiliar with the Scriptures and few of those that had read or heard them would have believe that these promises applied to them. They were ‘*strangers to the covenants of promise*’.

1. They were also had ‘*no hope*’. This does not mean that they had no expectations, aspirations or desires for particular things to happen in the lives in the future. They likely had hope in, and for, many of the same things which people have today, things which the Scriptures warn will ultimately fail us e.g. wealth (Psalm 49:6-12; 52:7; Prov 11:28); houses (Isaiah 32:17-18); human rulers (Psalm 146:3); empires or military forces (Isaiah 31:1-3; 2 Kings 18:19-24). When Paul writes about hope here, he is likely primarily referring to the hope of Israel who expected the Messiah, the anointed ruler from David’s royal line to come (2 Sam 7:14).
2. These Gentiles were also once ‘*without God in the world*’. They had no relationship with the Creator of the universe who is the only source of life everlasting. They had once been ‘far off’ from God, but God had mercifully intervened in their lives! He had sent the Apostle Paul to ‘reason daily’ with the people of Ephesus so that ‘*all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks*’ (Acts 19:10). By means of human ‘instruments’ God was pleased to draw many to saving faith in Christ, both Jews and Gentiles. This means of gathering His chosen people, the ‘New Israel’ has not changed.

What was true of the Gentiles before they came to faith is true of most of the people we come into contact with in the world around us, they are “far off from God”, that is to say that they are:

1. ‘separated from Christ’
2. ‘alienated from the commonwealth of the New Israel’ –they know little or nothing of the covenant community of the church
3. They are ‘strangers to the covenants of promise’
4. They have ‘no hope’
5. They are ‘without God in the world’

Christ calls each one of us to ‘go and make disciples’ as Paul did in Ephesus and wider Asia. Brothers and sisters, do you accept this call of Christ on your life?

Friend, are you separated from Christ today, alienated from His body the church, a stranger to the promises of God, having no lasting hope and without God in this world? If this describes your condition today, then come to Christ whilst you yet have breath!

Brothers and sisters in the Lord, we, like the believers to whom Paul writes were ‘once far off, but have now been brought near (to God) by the blood of Christ, which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **After Christ**

As you likely already know, the letters ‘BC’ stand for ‘Before Christ’, whereas ‘AD’ is an abbreviation of the two Latin words ‘anno domini’ meaning ‘in the year of our Lord’. The system of dates utilising the division between ‘BC’ and ‘AD’ with which we are all familiar with today was initiated by a Scythian monk named Dionysius Exiguus in AD525. The Anno Domini (AD) era is the basis for the Gregorian and Julian calendars.

Just as the coming of Christ was the most important, pivotal time in the history of this world, so likewise, for individual people like you and me, coming to saving faith in the Lord Jesus is the most important, vital moment of our lives. In a sense, we all have our ‘BC’ lives and for those who are in Christ, we all have the ‘AD’ (or perhaps we could say AC - “After Christ’) period of our lives.

When Paul writes to the Gentile believers in particular that they have been ‘brought near by the blood of Christ’ (v13), the word that he uses for ‘brought near’ was the same one used for non-Jews who became ‘proselytes’. A proselyte was a non-Jew who came to believe in the covenant God of Israel and who completed the rituals (including circumcision for males), to become a Jew. People who were attracted to Judaism and who kept the Old Testament Sabbath and food laws were termed ‘God fearers’ or ‘God-worshippers’. Examples in the New Testament include Cornelius (Acts 10:1-2) and Lydia (Acts 16:14). Many ‘God fearers’ went on to become proselytes and were accepted into the community of the Jews.

Paul writes to the Gentile believers to say that they have been brought ‘near’ to God, that is to say that they are in close relationship with Him, no**t** by physical circumcision or any other ceremonial rite, but ‘*by the blood of Christ*’. We know from the historical accounts in Scripture that Jesus Christ bled, both before and during his crucifixion. However, the phase ‘the blood of Christ’ does not refer to his blood itself, but is a New Testament expression which refers to the sacrificial death of Jesus on behalf of sinners, paying the price of death in the place of all of God’s people. The sacrificial death of Jesus is the means by which God’s people are ‘purchased back’ from bondage to sin and death. As Paul has already written in verse 7 of chapter 1: “*In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace*”.

The sacrificial death of Jesus is also the means by which the wrath of God is appeased, and we are brought into peaceful relationship with Him. As Paul will explain in chapter 2, verse 16, Christ reconciles us to God “*in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility*”. It is because of the blood of Christ, his sacrificial death on behalf of those who were once ‘dead in their trespasses and sins’ that the mercy of God comes to people like me who do not deserve His favour. It is because of the blood of Christ that we are made alive together with Him, being joined to our Lord in the power of His resurrection, being destined for certain exaltation in glory when we enter into the New Heavens and New Earth.

We know that in Old Testament times, once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest made an offering of blood on the altar of the temple for the sins of the people. As the writer to the Hebrews confirms “*without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins*” (Heb 9:22). Yet all the blood of all the Old Testament sacrifices could not actually bring peace with God (Heb 10:4), but only pointed forward to the blood of Christ.

The sacrifice of God’s only Son on the cross at Calvary was the ‘once for all’ (Heb 7:27) shedding of blood which alone, by faith, brings those who were once ‘far off’ near to God in the close relationship of a Father and His beloved children. Not only does the blood of Christ rescue all who believe in Him from the deadly consequences of their sin, His blood also ‘purifies our consciences from dead works to serve the living God’. His shed blood frees us from worthless, unproductive, self-righteous works of the flesh by which we might be tempted to try and earn some credit with God.

His shed blood enables us to willingly walk in the works God has prepared for us and thereby serve Him, glorify Him and enjoy Him forever. How precious is the blood of Christ! We remember His death today at the Lord’s Supper table. We remember the words of our Risen Saviour who said: “*This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*” (Matt 26:28). We remember that we who were once ‘far off’ have been brought near.

AMEN.