

Access to God

by A.W. Pink

A.W. Pink's sermon emphasizes the necessity of understanding the complexities of accessing God through Christ, faith, and the Holy Spirit while addressing the barriers of sin and moral fitness.

Scripture: Psalm 10:1, Psalm 13:1, Isaiah 59:1-2, Matthew 5:23-24, John 14:6, Romans 5:1-2, Ephesians 2:18, Hebrews 10:19-22, Hebrews 11:6, James 4:8

Topics: "Access to God", "The Role of Christ and the Holy Spirit"

Description

A.W. Pink emphasizes the critical nature of our approach to God, highlighting the confusion surrounding access due to sin and the necessity of a mediator, Jesus Christ. He explains that while sin separates us from God, access is granted through Christ's sacrifice and the work of the Holy Spirit. Pink stresses the importance of moral fitness, sincere faith, and the need for believers to maintain a pure heart and conscience to enjoy communion with God. He warns against presumption in prayer and underscores that true access requires both legal right and spiritual enablement. Ultimately, Pink calls for a balanced understanding of the requirements for approaching the Holy One, urging believers to draw near with sincerity and faith.

Transcript

The matter of our approach into the presence of God is one of vital importance, yet it is one (like so many others these days) upon which much confusion and misconception exists. We will not now attempt to canvass the principal errors pertaining thereto, for there would be little profit for either writer or reader in prosecuting such a task. Rather do we wish to call attention unto the various aspects of the subject, for it is failure to perceive these and hold their due balance which has resulted in the fostering of false impressions in quarters which some regard as being the most orthodox sections of Christendom. If one essential aspect of this subject be ignored, or if another one be emphasized to the virtual exclusion of everything else, then the most misleading and dangerous ideas must result therefrom.

Let us begin by asking the question, Is it possible for a depraved and defiled creature to obtain access unto the thrice Holy One? If there is one thing taught more plainly in the Scriptures than another it is that sin separates the sinner and God. This fearful fact is impressively set forth in Genesis 3:24: that flaming sword was the symbol of a sin-hating God, barring approach unto the emblem of His presence. When Jehovah appeared on Sinai, amid the most solemn manifestations of His awful presence, even the favoured Hebrews were commanded under pain of death to keep their distance from Him. An Israelite who

became ceremonially unclean was rigidly excluded from the Camp. Even when the tabernacle and the temple were erected, the common people were not allowed to enter the holy places. In how many different ways did God make it evident that sin obstructed any access to Himself!

But not only does God debar the sinner from access, the sinner himself has no desire to approach unto Him--rather does he wish to flee as far as possible from His presence. A sense of sin and the guilt of it upon the conscience drives the sinner from the Lord. This fact was also solemnly exemplified at the dawn of human history--just as long as our first parents remained in dutiful subjection to their Maker, walking in obedience to His commandments, they enjoyed blissful communion with Him; but as soon as they became self-willed and rebellious, all was radically altered. After they had eaten of the forbidden fruit and they heard the voice of the Lord God in the Garden, they fled in terror, seeking to hide from Him. And thus it has been ever since.

Is there, then, no access to God for the fallen creature? If there were not we should not be engaged in writing this article. Access to God is possible--possible for the chief of sinners--but only via the appointed Mediator. As the Lord Jesus so emphatically declared, "No man cometh unto the Father but by Me" (John 14:6). It is through the Lord Jesus Christ, and by Him alone--not through priest or pope, Mary or the angels, good works or tears--that we may obtain access to God. "We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also we have access" (Rom. 5:1, 2). In pointing this out we are covering ground which is thoroughly familiar to all our readers, truth which is still proclaimed in many places. Yet it is by no means the whole of the truth on this subject, though it is all that is presented thereon in certain quarters. It is those neglected aspects which we now desire to particularly stress.

Once again we would point out that unless we differentiate between things that differ there is bound to be confusion and error. So here. We must distinguish between the way of access which Christ has opened for sinners into the presence of God, the qualifications which are required from those entering that way, and the exercise of those qualifications so that the way is actually used. But the moment we mention "qualification" and the necessity for "exercising" the same, some will demur, insisting that we are thereby sounding a legalistic note and destroying the simplicity of the Gospel. Then let us ask- such objectors, Are hypocrites entitled to use that way of access which Christ has opened? Do "Christians" who exercise no faith, but simply offer cold and mechanical prayers, enter into God's presence? If the objector answers No--as honesty compels him to do--then he has granted our contention, whether or not he agrees with us in detail.

How many professing Christians do really obtain personal access to and enjoy conscious communion with the Holy One? What percentage of real Christians are actually accustomed to do so? Alas, what multitudes have been deceived by Satan into supposing that all they have to do is get down on their knees, plead the name of Christ, and automatically they obtain audience with the Most High. Not so. It still holds good that, "Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened that it cannot save, neither His ear heavy that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear" (Isa. 59:1, 2). The principles of the Divine government know no alteration, and allowed and unconfessed sins act as an impassable barrier between the soul and God as truly today as they did under the Old Testament economy. No change of dispensation modifies the requirements of God's holiness or reduces the enormity of sin.

Three things are absolutely necessary if any is to have access to God. First, he must have the legal right or title to do so. Second, he must possess the necessary moral fitness. Third, he must be spiritually and

experimentally empowered. Our legal right to approach unto God is found alone in the merits of Christ: His sacrificial work and the present exercise of His Priesthood give me title to draw near unto the Throne of Grace. But does that cover the whole matter? Is nothing more than a legal title required? Ah, the real saint knows otherwise from painful experience. How often has he entered his closet, sought audience with the Divine Majesty, pleaded the blood of Christ, yet without any conscious access. So far from any conscious approach to Him, God seems far off, and all is darkness and deadness in the soul. Like the Spouse in the Canticles, he seeks his Beloved, but finds Him not.

"Behold I go forward, but He is not there: and backward, but I cannot perceive Him. On the left hand, where He doth work, but I cannot behold Him: He hideth Himself on the right hand, that I cannot see Him" (Job 23:8, 9). Has that painful experience of Job's never been duplicated in your own? Was his case altogether exceptional? Far from it, as the recorded lamentations of others of God's children clearly show. "Why standest Thou afar off, O LORD? why hidest Thou Thyself in times of trouble?" (Psa. 10:1). Yes, even the sweet Psalmist of Israel knew what it was to feel God's distance from him and to be denied conscious access to Him. "How long wilt Thou forget me, O LORD, forever? how long wilt Thou hide Thy face from me?" (Psa. 13:1). Again and again this was his agonizing experience. And there are seasons in the history of all believers when such language is just as suitable to express their experience as Psalm 46 or Psalm 150 is suited to their cases on other occasions.

"For through Him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father" (Eph. 2:18). The words we have placed in italics present another vital aspect of our subject, showing as they do the Christian's dependence upon the agency of the Holy Spirit. Herein each person of the blessed Trinity is accorded His own distinctive place in the economy of redemption: access is unto the Father, it is through Christ, but it is by the Spirit. The sinful believer can no more approach unto the Father without the gracious operations of the Spirit than he could without the mediation of the Lord Jesus. One has procured for us the legal right; the Other supplies the experimental enablement. The exercise of faith, as we shall yet see, is another essential prerequisite for drawing near to God, but the actings of faith lie not within our own unaided power--He who first imparted this heavenly gift must quicken and energize it if it is to function properly.

"For through Him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father." What place is given to this part of the Truth in most sections of Christendom today? None at all. And even where the third Person of the Godhead is duly owned and honoured, how feebly do the saints apprehend their imperative need of the Spirit's daily working within them. His operations are essential if our leaden hearts are to be raised above the things of time and sense, if our affections are to flow forth unto their rightful Object, if faith is to be duly acted upon Him, if a sense of His presence is to be communicated unto the soul. But will the Spirit perform these gracious operations if we are indifferent as to whether or not our conduct grieves Him? If a Christian has spent his evening at the card-table or the theatre, and before retiring to rest bows his knees, will the Holy Spirit, at that time, draw out the heart of such an one and grant him conscious access to the Father?

What has just been raised brings us to still another aspect of our subject--there must be a moral fitness if the suppliant is to obtain access to God. Alas, that so little is heard about this in the ministry of the day. Yet the reason for this omission is not far to seek: where the dominant object is the pleasing of the hearer, little will be said in condemnation of a carnal walk, and still less of the serious consequences thereof. But though the pulpit has become so unfaithful, God abides faithful, and He will not wink at evil doing. No, not in His own children, nor will He allow the sacred name of Christ to be used as a passport into His presence by the workers of iniquity. Is it not written, "With the pure Thou wilt show Thyself pure; and with the obstinate Thou wilt show Thyself obstinate" (Psa. 18:26); that means what it says, and says what it

means.

Loose walking severs communion with God, and then will He act distantly toward us. An earthly parent (who is prudent) will not conduct himself with the same familiarity and cordiality toward a disobedient child as he will unto a dutiful one. Our folly must be repented of and humbly acknowledged before fellowship can be restored with God. Yea, even if our fault be only against a fellow-creature it must be righted before God will accept our worship: "If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath aught against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift" (Matt. 5:23, 24)--how many are unable to obtain conscious access to God through failure at this very point! "Turn ye unto Me, saith the LORD of hosts, and I will turn unto you" (Zech. 1:3): if we would have God turn unto us in mercy we must turn unto Him in obedience.

"Therefore being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also we have access by faith into this grace" (Rom. 5:1, 2). This brings before us still another aspect of our subject: the necessity for the exercise of faith in order to approach God. The same truth is presented again in, "In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of Him" (Eph. 3:12). Faith is the appointed means of access, for it is the hand which receives every blessing from God. Faith in God's willingness to grant us an audience, faith in the sufficiency of Christ's atoning sacrifice to provide us with the title of approach: faith in the Divine promises that if we contritely confess our sins He will cleanse us therefrom. At first a small degree of faith enables the Christian to approach unto God, but as he advances in the knowledge of his own heart and of God's hatred of sin, stronger faith needs to be exercised if we are to draw near the heavenly Throne with confidence. Yet we must be very careful not to mistake blatant presumption for holy assurance.

"Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which He hath consecrated for us through the veil (that is to say, His flesh); and having a High Priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:19-22). This is what may be termed the classic passage on our present theme, gathering up as it does into one comprehensive statement the essential features thereof. But what a solemn example it affords of the lack of proportion which now so generally prevails: we are probably safe in saying that for every once verse 22 is quoted, verse 19 is cited 20 times. It is this disproportion which has distorted the Truth and led to the error mentioned by us in the earlier paragraphs. Let us now carefully examine these verses.

The passage opens by announcing that Christians have "liberty" (margin) or a "freedom with confidence" to approach unto God, this language presenting a designed contrast from the case of national Israel under the old economy. This liberty to draw near unto the heavenly Mercy-seat is "by the blood of Jesus." The foundation of all confidence in our access to God and the title to approach unto Him lies in the infinitely meritorious sacrifice which Christ offered unto God on our behalf, and this we must ever plead before Him. Our encouragement so to do lies in the office which our Saviour now exercises on behalf of His people, namely, "High Priest over the house of God." This is most blessedly brought before us in, "for we have not a High Priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin: let us therefore come boldly (freely) unto the Throne of Grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:15, 16).

In what next follows in our passage we are shown the way or manner in which we are to make use of the unspeakable privilege described in verses 19-21. In other words, we are required to meet the terms of

verse 22 if we are to enjoy conscious access unto the thrice holy God. First, let us draw near with "a true heart." This is the principal qualification. A "true heart" is one that beats true unto God. It denotes sincerity in contrast from hypocrisy. It is not the reverent posture of the body or the language of the lips with which God is chiefly concerned, but rather with the heart--the seat of our affections. They who worship Him, "must worship Him in spirit and in truth," or their performance is utterly futile. The mere outward performance of religious duties, no matter how scrupulously undertaken, is not sufficient--it is with the sincerity of our hearts God has chief regard to in all our approaches unto Him. God will bear with infirmities, but not with hypocrisy.

"Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith." This makes known the principle which is to be exercised in our approaches unto God, for, "without faith it is impossible to please Him: for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a Rewarder of them that diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6). None but a genuine believer can obtain access unto God: all others are rigidly excluded. There must be the actual exercise of faith in every spiritual work: "by faith Abel offered unto God" etc. (Heb. 11:4). The "full assurance of faith" does not here signify a firm knowledge of our sonship, but an implicit confidence in the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice and priesthood. Many Hebrews who had received in general the faith of the Gospel were wavering in their minds about the Person and office of Christ and the glorious things predicated of Him by the Apostle, and therefore he stresses the fact there must be a firm conviction of the reality and efficacy of the Atonement if we are to draw near unto God.

"Having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water." Here is the twofold preparation prescribed unto us for the right performance of this duty. In these expressions there is an obvious allusion unto the necessary preparations for Divine worship made by Israel under Judaism. As there were various ways in which the Jews became ceremonially and legally defiled, so there were various means appointed for their purification (Heb. 9:13). Those institutions the Apostle now applies spiritually: "our hearts" and "our bodies" signify the inward and the outward man. "Bodies washed with pure water" has no reference to baptism, but is to be understood of our members being preserved from evil and used for God. Rightly did John Owen say at the close of his exposition of these verses, "Universal sanctification upon our whole persons and the mortification in an especial manner of outward sins are required of us in our drawing nigh unto God."

"Having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience" has reference to an efficacious application of the blood of Christ unto sanctification or internal purification, so that the burden of guilt is removed. This is accomplished originally in the communication of regenerating grace at the new birth, and is repeated whenever the Spirit grants a fresh renewal and experience of the virtues of the Atonement. That a good conscience is an indispensable qualification for access to God is seen from, "How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit, offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (Heb. 9:14), where "serve" signifies communion and worship. When the conscience is unpurged, the weight of condemnation lies so heavily upon it that we are then at a loss in approaching the Holy One.

Now to sum up. It is one thing to know theoretically the legal way and right of approach unto God, but it is quite another to enjoy conscious access to Him. For that, the aid of the Spirit is imperative, but He will not perform His gracious operations within us if He be grieved. If we have spent the night in ransacking the newspapers, in worldly conversation, or in backbiting the servants and saints of God, think you that the Holy Spirit will draw out your heart unto the Father when you perform your evening devotions? Not so, unless you penitently confess those sins, and sincerely determine there shall be no repetition of them.

"Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you" (James 4:8). What has been before us was strikingly foreshadowed of old in connection with the approach of Israel's priests unto God: first the blood was applied to their persons, then the oil (emblem of the Spirit), and then they washed at the laver.

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