

A GOD NEAR OR FAR AWAY?

(Jesus has opened the door.)

Bible Lesson on the Rent Veil in the Temple

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1. In the beginning, God was near to us. He walked in friendship and in fellowship with the people He had created.

- In the beginning, God made people for the purpose of having fellowship with them.
- Therefore, God made man and woman in His own image (Genesis 1:26-27).
- God blessed the first people (Genesis 1:28).
- God made people good, without sin (Genesis 1:31).
- God walked in fellowship with the man and the woman in the garden (Genesis 2:8).

2. This fellowship was broken when our first parents sinned, choosing to follow their own reasoning rather than submitting to God by obeying His rule (Genesis 3).

- Because of their disobedience, God chased them from the garden, separating them from Himself. (Genesis 3:24).
- The separation was so serious in God's sight, that He placed Cherubim (high-ranking angels) at the gate to block our first parents from ever entering the garden again (Genesis 3:24).
- Daily fellowship with God was broken. No longer could they walk together in the garden. No longer could they enter the presence of God.

3. Following that time, many of Adam and Eve's children left the way of God totally, becoming pagans.

- Of Adam's first two sons, one was wicked (Cain) and one was good (Abel). But Cain killed Abel. All of Cain's family followed him in rejecting God (Genesis 4:8).
- Genesis 4:26 says that it was not until Adam's grandson Enos was born that people began to call on the name of the Lord.

- They knew God, but they deliberately turned away from Him (Romans 1:21-25). They knew there was a Creator God, but He seemed far away.

4. Some of our ancient ancestors did try to follow God, but even to them, God seemed very far away.

- After our first parents sinned, God allowed our ancestors to approach Him only through the blood sacrifice of certain sacrificial animals (Hebrews 9:22).
- God Himself gave the first blood sacrifice when He killed a lamb to make coats of skins to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:21).
- God promised that He would send a Savior
 - > that would be the seed of the woman only (not the man and woman together as in normal birth)
 - > that would experience pain (His heel would be bruised)
 - > that would win the victory over Satan like a person stepping on and crushing the head of a deadly snake (Genesis 3:15).
 Our ancestors knew that a Savior would come someday, but that seemed far away, and in the meantime, the deadly snake Satan was running loose.
- God loved us, and a few of our ancestors did come to God by offering the sacrifices God had prescribed. Yet they still sensed a great barrier between themselves and the holy, perfect God. They were closer than the pagans, but everyone still felt far from God because of their sin.

5. God could not be in close fellowship with humanity, because the offerings of the blood of animals could only COVER our sin temporarily, but it was not strong enough to REMOVE our sin entirely (Hebrews 10:4).

- We can understand the problem like this. If you have something stinky and rotten in the house—maybe vomit or a dead rat—if you cover it with a cloth, will this solve the problem?
- No, of course not. It will only put the mess out of your sight, but you will know it is there, because you will SMELL it. It can still spread disease and infection.
- If you do not like to go near such a nasty item even though it is covered, you can understand how a holy, perfect God cannot come near people who are reeking with sin.

6. When God gave His people His laws through Moses, He showed us again how far removed we were from Him because of our sin.

- Before they could even WAIT to receive His laws, they had to prepare themselves for two whole days and wash all their clothes (Exodus 19:10).
- Even then, God forbade that anyone come up on the mountain to Him except Moses, and God spoke to Him from out of a thick cloud (Exodus 19:9).
- Even then, God required that a line be drawn around the mountain which neither the people nor the animals could cross or even touch under penalty of death (Exodus 19:12).
- It was so important that God warned them a second time not to touch it, even though they were soon to become a nation of priests to the Lord (Exodus 19:21-22-24).

7. In the laws God gave them, God emphasized over and over again humanity's separation and distance from Himself because of our sin.

- He chose one family or clan to serve as priests, the family of Levi (Exodus 27:21, 28:1, 29:44). But even God's chosen priests could not come directly to Him.
- God did not permit even His chosen people to come directly to Him. Because of their sin, they had to approach Him through the priests He had chosen. These priests acted like mediators between God and man. (These were not idol priests or shrine priests, but priests of the true, living God. They were to serve God only in the ways He approved.)
- God told them to build a place in which to worship Him. He showed them exactly how to make it. However, in this place, people could not enter. There was only one door, and they could only come up to the door, and even then only with a blood sacrifice (Leviticus 1:3).
- God showed them how to make three main parts to the place of worship. There was an outer court, but only the priests could enter there, to give blood sacrifices.
- There was the Holy Place,
- There was the Most Holy Place or Holy of Holies.
 - > This was a place where the presence of God dwelt.
 - > Only the High Priest was permitted to enter there (Exodus 25:8).
 - > Even he was permitted to enter only once a year on a special day, The Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:28-30).
 - > Even he was required to come with sacrificial blood.

> Even with all this, he still came before God in fear, because he was a sinner and may be killed in the presence of the Holy God.

>>Bells were attached to his clothes to assure those outside that he was still alive.

>>A rope was tied around his ankle to provide a way of removing his corpse in case he died inside the Holy of Holies.

(Exodus 28:33-35)

>>In the Holy of Holies, like at the entrance to the Garden of Eden, two cherubim guarded the presence of God (Exodus 25:18-22).

Why all the fear?

>>>He was also a sinner.

>>>The blood of the sacrificial animals only covered sin so as to keep God's anger away temporarily, but it could not remove the sin or make anyone truly right with God.

>>In the Holy of Holies was also found the Ark of God where His presence dwelt. No one was ever permitted to touch the Ark. God instructed them to build it with rings along the side and poles that inserted into the rings so that it could be carried without touching it. Anyone, even a priest, who touched it, must die! (Exodus 21:12-13).

>>Over the entrance to the Holy of Holies was a strong curtain that acted as a barrier against unauthorized entrance. It was made of ten layers of skins, five skins sewn together in two very thick, tough layers (Exodus 26:1-3).

>>On the outside of the curtain, God instructed them to embroider cherubim, as if to remind and warn them that cherubim were always guarding the presence of God.

>>The top was guarded as well. It was covered with 11 layers of skins, 5 sewn together and then 6 sewn together (Exodus 26:7-9).

>>Plus, there was another red-colored skin over the entrance, perhaps to remind them again that no one could enter without sacrificial blood.

>>A heavy curtain covered not only the entrance to the Holy of Holies, but also to the Holy Place. It was like a double barrier even to the priests.

Think! These rules did not apply to pagans who did not know God. They applied to the people God had chosen to bring the Savior into the world, and to give His Word the Scriptures to the world.

If even God's people were far away from Him like this, what can we say about our ancestors from the other nations?

In the beginning, our first ancestors knew God.

But we are sorry to say that we have become far away from God because of our sin.

The ancestors of African nations understood this very well. They all understood and believed that Almighty God existed. They left us witnesses like Gye Nyame, showing that they understood that God was the Almighty One on whom we depend for everything.

However, they felt keenly the distance, the barrier, the enmity that has come between us and God because of our sin.

Because God seemed (and was) distant, they began to worship other spirits—spirits of nature and spirits of deceased ancestors. They felt that these spirits were intermediaries that could bridge the gap between them and God. They did not understand that these spirits were really evil spirits or demonic beings (1 Corinthians 10:20).

Far away! Distant! A great barrier had come between us and God, and we felt it deeply. How sad! How deep and dark the darkness had grown! Our ancestors started in fellowship with God, worshipping and serving God, enjoying His presence. Life was good. We chose our own way instead of God's way, and we ended up so very far away from God, serving evil spirits that were really out to destroy us.

THE STORY IS THE SAME IN EVERY CULTURE OF THE WORLD.
SIN.

SADNESS.

DISTANCE FROM GOD.

BARRIERS.

ENMITY.

DESTRUCTION.

EVIL.

CONFUSION.

SEEING GOD AS FAR, FAR AWAY.

UNTIL---JESUS CHRIST CAME.

As Jesus was dying on the cross, momentous things happened. The sky suddenly became as dark as midnight—at noon! (Luke 23:44-45) There was a great earthquake. Rocks broke in two. Graves were opened. When it was time for Jesus to give up His life, He

cried out, “It is finished!” Of course, he meant not only that His life was finished, but that God’s plan of salvation, God’s plan to bring Him back to Himself was finished. Anticipating the work of the Messiah, the Psalmist declared long ago, “As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:12).

To show that this was true, at the very instant that Jesus Christ died, something happened in the Temple of God—something that had never happened before—something that was humanly impossible.

The heavy coverings that blocked the way to enter God’s presence were suddenly opened, and not by human hands. The heavy veil was torn in two, beginning at the top, clear to the bottom (Matthew 28:51). The way into God’s presence was opened—by God Himself!

What did this mean?

- People no longer have to stop at the door and give their offering to a priest while they remained outside.
- We are now able to enter directly into the very presence of God.
- We no longer need to bring blood or animal sacrifices. The perfect sacrifice had been made, the debt of all our sin, and God had accepted it. Now our sin could be not just covered, but removed. Our sinful hearts could be cleansed.
- The blood of Jesus was sufficient to pay for all our sins. We now owe no more debt to God because of sin!
- Now it is not only just the priests of the family of Levi that can enter God’s presence. God has now made all of us who believe in Jesus to become priests of the Most High God. All who believe in Jesus can enter God’s presence freely!
- Is your heart full of joy? Jesus has opened the way for you to return to God! He need no longer be a God far away, a God little known. You can now have intimate fellowship with Him. Halleluya!
- The enmity, the wall that separated us from God has been removed. Jesus took it away when He shed His precious blood. Now every person can come to God in Jesus Christ.
- While Jesus was still on earth with us, He promised that when He returned to His Father, He would send the Spirit of God as our counselor. He is Himself God, like Jesus is God—God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. He is not a human being like Jesus was when He took on human flesh to become our Savior. He can help all Christians everywhere all at the same time, and He can be with all of us at the

same time, because He is Spirit. He is not limited by a human body.

- Jesus returned to His Father in heaven. His work on earth had been accomplished. He left behind for us AN OPEN DOOR to the Father. In Jesus, God becomes near to us once again.
- When we trust in Jesus, the Holy Spirit of God comes into our hearts. God Himself is so near that HE ACTUALLY LIVES WITHIN US who are believers! (Romans 8:9)
- God who was so far away, so inaccessible, has now come near to us. Today He is LIVINING INSIDE OF US who believe in Him. How much closer can you get than that?

Therefore, since these things are true,

- Let us serve God with courage and confidence.
- Let us fellowship with Him and talk to Him in prayer as we go through our days.

He Himself has promised us:

- Matthew 28:20
- **Ephesians 2:13**
- Hebrews 9:12, 26 & 10:19

Here are some other things this means:

- We must come to God only through Jesus (John 14:6, Acts 4:12). Only He opened the way for us. No one else could do it. When we try to come to God in any other way, it is like disgracing or considering of no account the blood that He shed for us (1 Timothy 2:5).

>Specifically, this means we cannot come to God through the saints, through any of the great leaders of the past, through the ancestors, through angels or spirits or any other way whatsoever.

- There is no more sacrifice for sin. The blood of Jesus is sufficient!

>Specifically, this means we can no longer bring animal sacrifices. It also means that even the Lord's Supper, which reminds us of Jesus' blood, is not to be considered a sacrifice. The sacrifice is complete.

- There is no more special priesthood as intermediaries between God and the people. All Christians are now priests unto God having direct access to His throne.

>Specifically, this means that pastors are not priests except in the sense that all believers are priests. They are shepherds, teachers, but not priests. (I Peter 2:9-10)

- Jesus is with us by His Holy Spirit.

>Specifically, this means He does not come to us physically in communion but is with us at all times by His Spirit. I once read a book instructing communicants of a certain church that after communion they should stay in the church in an attitude of worship until their Lord was no longer with them (until the communion wafer was digested). Jesus is always with us by His Spirit!

- Jesus has won over Satan. He has given to us believers His own authority.

>Specifically, we need not fear Satan or any of his hosts. Believers have the authority of Jesus to command and evict evil spirits. We need not fear any occult curses.

- We must pray with courage and live with courage. We must serve God with courage and confidence. We must not allow fear to drive us to the shrines or into occult practices.
- We must come freely to God in prayer, asking all that He lays on our hearts as we commune daily with Him.
- We must witness and work to bring the good news of Jesus to others so that they can be freed from their chains and their darkness (Ephesians 2:1-6). It is a great sorrow and shame that although Jesus died and opened the way for us, many are still living far away from Him. The door is open for them. Let us point them to Jesus who has opened the door.