

In the year 1973, at the age of 16, I heard via the Saginaw News that a legend of professional golf was coming to the Tri-city area. His name was Jack Nicklaus. Man was I excited about the Golden Bear coming to town. I had just taken up the sport of golf a few years earlier after my father had died. I liked to play golf. Mr. Nicklaus had done some of the design work for Bay Valley Golf course in Saginaw, MI and was coming to play a round of golf at Bay Valley. There was fee to be paid, but anyone could buy a ticket and follow Jack around the Bay Valley Course. And that's what I did. I wanted to get close to him and get an autograph, but he was draped with security and thousands of other fans, so it didn't look like I would have access to him. But I was persistent. After Jack finished his round he headed for the clubhouse. I managed to get close, walking right behind the security guards. As Mr. Nicklaus opened the door to enter the clubhouse, a security guard turned around and looked at me. I said, "I am with Mr. Nicklaus." Quickly, Jack turned around and looked at me. I said, Mr. Nicklaus, I know you have been hounded all day for autographs, but if you could just please sign my program, it would make my day." Jack quickly took my program, signed it, and kid Schulz was on cloud 9. I had close access to the biggest golfer in the world, and got his autograph.

But there is someone else in this universe, that is worth seeing more than Jack Nicklaus. To be in His presence is beyond wonderful. However, the security surrounding Him, makes it virtually impossible for me or you on our own to ever get close. Further, the ticket price is beyond our ability to pay to even see him from a distance. But please don't despair. The Triune God has not abandoned us. There is a way to Total Access to God's Presence." Let's discover the way to Total Access with the Triune God.

How do you access God? Let's look at the world's approach. A popular catch phrase in today's Christianity talks about "experiencing God." The way they attempt to do access God revolves around the mood. When Dr. James Dobson recently attended an event in Colorado Springs he said, "The Spirit was definitely present." How did he know? The music was real upbeat. There were a lot of people there. The speakers were very moving. This is the popular way of trying to get access to God in mainline Christianity. I can feel God's presence if the right mood is set.

On the other side of the spectrum of Christianity, is a group of people who are afraid to even try to approach God or get Him to approach them. They are told to pray to the saints - who can then pray for them. Even when they die they do not feel ready to access God - but feel assigned to go to a place called purgatory where they can be properly prepared to meet him.

Outside of Christianity, you'll see people doing really crazy things to try and access God. Remember when that Heaven's Gate cult all ate poisoned Jell-O in the hopes they would catch God who was coming through town on the Hale-Bopp comet? Or think about the whole motivation of the suicidal Muslims - who think that by committing a suicide with a bomb and killing Westerners they will earn a place in heaven with some beautiful women. Their version of access to God means killing themselves.

Others just try and ignore the whole concept of getting access to God. They tell themselves that when they die they'll just become plant food or be recycled into a butterfly. They try and make this life so pleasurable that they won't even think about what will happen in the future. What they ignore is the fact they will have to meet God.

When Jacob had to return to the Promised Land, he knew that he had to face Esau

- his angry brother whom he had cheated of the birthright. So he tried to appease his brother with riches and flattery. When Esther tried to approach the evil but powerful king Xerxes, she did her best to make herself look as good as possible so he would allow her to come into His presence. The holy God cannot be approached this way. You can't give God anything - because He already owns it all. You can't do anything to impress God so that He'll allow you to come near Him. Imagine seeing an eagle flying overhead and screaming to it, "come down! Come down! It doesn't work that way. The eagle speaks a different language - is not attracted to someone waving his arms and screaming. God is holy - and only holiness will attract Him. You can't coerce God into coming to you by trying to provide the right atmosphere or by bringing in Joel Oelsteen, or any other seemingly impressive speaker. Prayer doesn't convince Him to come into your heart. That's not how it works.

So how DO we approach Him? Our holy God has provided a completely different way to access Him. Paul told the Romans - since we have been justified through faith, . . . we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. (Ro 5:1-2) Just as only the right password will give you access to your online bank account, so it's only through Jesus that we have access to God, and full access at that! Having full access to God means that you will never get a computerized menu of options, or an angel who puts you on hold when you want to talk to God. Through faith in Jesus you have direct access in prayer to the CEO of everything. Having full access to God means that you weren't given a spectator's ticket to the concert of God's grace; you have a backstage pass that allows you to get close and personal with God - as demonstrated in Holy Communion where we receive Jesus' body and blood.

Do you see what's so amazing about this rescue God pulled off through his Son, Jesus? He didn't rescue cuddly little puppies but snarling gators that snap at any hand that tries to guide them. It wasn't an easy or cheap rescue either. God didn't just wave a wand and forgive our sins. He sacrificed his own Son. Would you do that? Would you send your son to rescue a child molester if you knew your son would lose his life in the process? That's what God did...and for free. You'll never receive a bill in the mail for what God did to save you from hell fire. Yes, this is the greatest rescue ever not just because of its objective - to save the ungodly, but also because of its scope. Jesus' death on the cross pays for the sins of the whole world. There is not one person here, or driving down Buena Vista or Morse Avenue right now, or doing time in a prison somewhere whose sins have not been forgiven by the blood of Jesus. For "While we were still sinners," assures Paul, "Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8b).

Peace with God is another benefit of God's grace (Romans 5:1b). When an irresponsible skier in Colorado is rescued after knowingly going out of bounds, I'll bet he gets a stern lecture from his rescuers. He may even be banned from skiing that resort again until he can "earn" back their trust somehow. That's not how God operates. Jesus' didn't save us only to turn around and demand that we now prove that we are worthy of his love. No, Jesus' rescue has brought us peace. No matter what foolish thing you did yesterday. No matter what boneheaded thing you said ... this morning. Everything is OK between God and you for Jesus' blood constantly cleanses us from our sins. No, as a Christian you won't take advantage of this love. You won't willingly go out and sin again any more than a rescued skier would take the first chance to ski out of bounds again.

But Jesus' rescue has given us more than peace. It's also given us joy. Paul

wrote: “And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God ” (Romans 5:2b). Someone once said that peace is joy resting, and joy is peace dancing. I think that’s a good description. Jesus’ rescue not only assures that you don’t have to be afraid of God’s punishment, it encourages you to look forward to the glories of heaven. It’s like the parable of the prodigal son. When he returned, his father didn’t put him on probation; he threw him a party! That’s what Jesus has done for us. He’s not only rescued us from a certainty in hell he’s given us the certainty of heaven!

But wait, there’s more. This joy won’t just come once you’ve made it to heaven; it’s yours right now. Paul wrote: “...but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Romans 5:3, 4). The Norwegian polar explorer Amundsen, was said to make regular trips across the snow and ice in Norway as a little boy to toughen him up for future polar explorations. It obviously worked. Amundsen was the first to discover a route through the Northwest Passage and the first to reach the South Pole. Is that why God lets us suffer - to “toughen us up”? No! God allows us to suffer to soften us. By nature we’re hardwired to rely on ourselves. That’s a recipe for disaster. Instead God wants us to despair of ourselves, to admit, “Lord, I can’t do it. I can’t go on. I need your help!” So we go to Him. As a result, these “pressures,” as Paul literally calls them, build character. Just as an athlete puts his muscles under the pressure of dumbbells and barbells so that they will develop, God puts us under the pressures of life so that we grow stronger in him, and enjoy more fully the peace and hope he gives us through faith in Jesus.

Indeed, God is there helping and sustaining us and God’s love does not have skimpy days. Paul wrote: “And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Romans 5:5). God does not grudgingly parcel out his love the way the Domino Pizza guy skimpily scatters cheese on his pizzas. God showers us with his love the way Mom showers her homemade crust with cheese so that every corner is covered. Likewise God’s love has you totally covered. Jesus’ death proves it. Would God abandon you after shedding his Son’s blood to save you? No! Just like you wouldn’t pay top dollar for a big screen TV and then leave it out on the porch to be ruined in a tropical storm.

So go ahead, camp line up at the Savannah Center to get your Willy Nelson tickets. Be a volunteer at THE PLAYERS Championship, in Ponte Vedra Beach, so you can get Jordan Spieth or Rory McIlroy’s autograph. But don’t waste your time trying to get close to God. He’s already come close to you. The death and resurrection of God’s Son gives us full access to God the Father. And now God the Holy Spirit gives us faith so that we will enjoy these blessings of peace and hope. You have a backstage Pass. Total Access to the Triune God. Congrats.