

September 10, 2023

A NEW SOCIETY, TEMPLE, AND FAMILY IN CHRIST

Ephesians 2:11-22

(4 of 16 in a series through Ephesians)

A couple of years ago I started battling a physical ailment that I dealt with daily. I remember pleading with the Lord to take it away, and it was never far from the front of my mind. Then, a couple of weeks ago, I noticed that I'd not been bothered at all with it for a few days, so I stopped and thanked God, making a note to myself not to forget those painful days. But why make yourself remember such an unpleasant time? It's because only by remembering that unpleasant time will I keep myself being appropriately thankful for the good health I've known recently. I think that kind of dynamic is what is at play in Ephesians 2:11-22 as Paul calls these Ephesian believers to remember a much worse time in their past.

If you remember back to 1:15-23, Paul had prayed that God would pour out his Spirit on these Ephesian believers and open the eyes of their hearts so that they might know "the immeasurable greatness of his power toward" them. Then, in order to help them see it, he uses chapter 2 to remind them of who they once were and who they are now. In 2:1-10 he'd talked about the sinful and enslaved condition in which all men find themselves, what God has done to give us life and save us, and how this was all to highlight God's grace in our lives. Now, in 2:11-21 he does something quite similar. He takes the Ephesians back to the time before they were converted, when they didn't know anything about Jesus or their need for salvation, and he reminds them of who they were then, what God has done not only to save them but to end all hostility between Jewish and Gentile believers, and shows them the glorious position they have now. But again, that glorious position they have now can only really be appreciated when they remember who and where they once were. And that's what I want to show us this morning in order that we might appreciate more all that the Lord has done in our lives as well.

I'm going to walk through the text in three sections, and each of the sections is marked off with these phrases: "at one time," "but now," and "so then." I think each of those indicates that Paul is moving to a new emphasis in this text, so we're going to follow these seems. And as we walk through the text, I'm going to provide headings about what Paul says of the Ephesians, but then I also want to apply it to us along the way. So let's start with the "at one time" section nothing their former ignorance, hopelessness, and godlessness.

Former ignorance, hopelessness, and godlessness (vv. 1-2)

Paul begins by calling them to remember who they once were, writing, "Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called 'the uncircumcision' by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands" (v. 11).

Let me give some quick background here to help this make sense. When God called Abraham to himself and told him that he was going to raise up a people from him, he also gave him a sign of

the covenant that he was making with him. That sign was that all the males among his descendants would be circumcised, and so the circumcision of Abraham's male descendants would be a sign to them that they were God's covenant people. After Abraham this command to circumcise one's son was also inscribed in the law of Moses and was (understandably) an important covenant sign to them that set them apart from all other peoples on the earth. Therefore, the Jews began to see all those outside of themselves as non-Jews or Gentiles, and most of these Gentiles were uncircumcised. So, you had the circumcised (Jews) and the non-circumcised (Gentiles). And this is what Paul is pointing out to these Gentile believers. They were not among that nation (the Jews) that God had called to himself through Abraham and revealed himself to in the law. They were thus called "the uncircumcision" by the Jews (who were called the circumcision).

Paul is setting this up to show that these Ephesian believers were outsiders to the many graces that God showed Israel, which we see in the Old Testament Scriptures. However, he's not suggesting that simply being circumcised made one a true child of God. He notes as he refers to Israelites as "the circumcision" that it is "made with hands" (v. 11). Now why would he say that? I mean, of course, circumcision is done using one's hands! The reason is because the circumcision of the flesh was always meant to point to something greater, namely, the circumcision of one's heart (Deut 10:16; 30:6). And if an Israelite never had saving faith and was thus not circumcised in his heart, then he would die in unbelief and face God's wrath, just as any other pagan would do, regardless of being circumcised in the flesh. So, even as Paul is reminding the Gentiles that they were outsiders to those to whom God revealed himself in the Scripture, he's also reminding everyone that being a Jew physically is (and was) never sufficient for salvation.

Nevertheless, back to his point. Paul calls the Ephesians to "remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (v. 12).

This would have been the state of every Gentile before Christ came. They weren't among the nation of Israel and, thus, weren't among those to whom God had revealed himself. A Gentile wouldn't have grown up hearing or reading the OT Scripture. They not only would not have known Jesus is the Christ, they wouldn't even know what the word "Christ" (or "Messiah") meant. They wouldn't have been looking for God's promised king because they were strangers to any covenant promises God had made, such as the one with David where he promised to raise up one of his descendants to reign over the world forever (2 Sam 7). Moreover, though they might have worshiped gods they created (and we know they did—Ephesus was home to a temple dedicated to the goddess Artemis) they didn't know the one true God who'd made himself known to Abraham, Moses, and the like. They were alienated from the people God made himself known to, ignorant of the covenant promises God had made, not looking for the Messiah or hoping in the salvation he would bring, and ignorant of the one true God. That's who they were. They were ignorant, hopeless, and godless.

Paul wants them to remember this. In fact, his call to “remember” in verses 11 and 12 are the only two exhortations in this text. Now, why? Is he just being cruel? No, he’s establishing these categories because he wants to highlight the amazing and wonderful transformation that has occurred with them that they might be tempted to otherwise ignore.

But before we move on to this second point, I want to note that what Paul has noted here applies to us. Sure, some of us grew up in homes where we were taught the Scriptures, brought to church, and taught the gospel. But others of us lived a good portion of our lives ignorant of the things of the Lord altogether, just like the Ephesians. I remember a dear friend of mine who attended a Christmas concert in his twenties, heard the choir sing something about the virgin bearing a son, and said out loud, “No way. That can’t happen.” He’d never heard of the virgin birth. And many of you could tell similar testimonies of your own ignorance of Scriptures before you heard the gospel. The good of reflecting on this is that it highlights how great of a work that Christ has done in saving you. There was nothing in you that made your salvation obvious and expected. And so you praise God for what he’s done.

But I don’t want you to think you’re missing out on this if you were exposed to the Scriptures at an early age and came to faith. After all, remember how Paul noted that the Jews’ circumcision was made with hands? That is, they had the external mark but still needed the miracle of God changing their hearts. Well, there have been all kinds of people who grew up being taught the Scripture, maybe even prayed prayers, even were baptized, but never had the Lord transform their hearts. They went through all the external motions just like an unbelieving Jew. And so if the Lord has saved any of us, we should marvel at the miraculous grace he’s shown us.

That’s what Paul is doing here. He’s showing their desperate situation so that he might highlight the work of God in saving, which brings us to our second point, what Jesus has done to change things.

What Jesus has done to change things (vv. 13-18)

Just as Paul marked off the first two verses with the phrase “at one time,” he marks off this next section with the phrase, “But now,” as he tells us that now Jesus has done something to change all of that. He writes, “But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (v. 13).

Can you feel how the language of verses 11-12 communicates distance? They weren’t among the people bearing God’s covenant sign of circumcision, they were *separated* from Christ, *alienated* from the kingdom of Israel, and *strangers* to the covenant. They were far away, even from the revelation of God himself. Yet now they’ve been brought near and specifically this has happened “by the blood of Christ.” How does this work? Well, in order to see that, let’s press on a bit more in thinking about the separation and distance Paul has spoken of and even the hostility it created.

Paul writes in verses 14-15a, “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances.” Now, it’s not surprising if this is confusing at first glance, but I think it’ll make sense if we just orient ourselves a bit to the function of the law of Moses.

When God called a people to himself through Abraham and gave the Israelites the law through Moses, the law called for all kinds of things that would make Israel a people distinct from all other nations. We’ve already noted that the Jews were to be circumcised when most other peoples in the world would not have been. But that wasn’t the only distinction. The law called for them to eat only certain foods, to keep the Sabbath day holy, to celebrate certain feasts and festivals, not to wear garments with two kinds of material, and the like. Each of these commandments in the law, if obeyed, would set the Jews apart from all other peoples, which was God’s very intention. Ideally their godly behavior should have reflected this distinction as well as they worshiped and obey God and God alone (though we know they rarely did). Moreover, when the temple was constructed, there was a courtyard for Gentiles, but it was a good bit lower geographically from the area where Jews could gather and was marked off by a wall. Again, the distinction and separation of Jews from Gentiles was real.

The Jewish historian Josephus says that after you left the courtyard where the Jews could gather in the temple, you would descend a number of steps and then there would be a wall, after which you would arrive at the courtyard of the Gentiles. But that wall sent a clear message to the Gentiles of their separation. There were messages in Greek and Latin that said, “No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure round the temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.”¹ So there was a literal wall, but it merely represented the greater wall of division that was created by the law of Moses itself, requiring Israel to be a distinct people from those around them (i.e. Gentiles).

And what developed from this was great hostility. The Jews would look down on the Gentiles, calling them the uncircumcision (as Paul notes in v. 11). The Gentiles would respond in kind. The enmity and hostility was great. And yet Paul says that Jesus brought peace into this hostility by breaking down this dividing wall of hostility.

Now Paul doesn’t mean that Jesus came and physically broke down that dividing wall in the temple courtyard. No, he says that he broke down the dividing wall of hostility “by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances” (v. 15a). He dealt with the dividing wall created by the law itself.

Now, it’s perhaps a bit of an unfortunate translation to say he “abolished” the law because it probably calls to mind Matthew 5:17 where Jesus explicitly says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” But these words aren’t the same Greek terms, and our translation should probably reflect that.

¹ Quoted by John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1979), 92.

However, the term translated “abolish” here in v. 15 is the same term that we find in the text we read earlier in the service from 2 Corinthians 3:7-18. In that text, three times Paul mentions that law, which he calls the “letter,” “being brought to an end” (vv. 7, 11, 13).

Here’s what Paul is saying. When God made a covenant with his people with Moses, he prescribed all of these commands which would set Israel apart as distinct from all the other peoples. But Israel never obeyed all the commands perfectly because they simply couldn’t keep them perfectly in their sinful state. This actually was one of the key purposes of that law covenant God made with his people through Moses. That’s why Paul refers to it as having a “ministry of death” and “ministry of condemnation” (2 Cor 3:7, 9). The law’s commands were meant to show Israel their inability to attain righteousness before the Lord. Consequently, it would pronounce them condemned and worthy of death. And the reason this was a ministry is that it should have moved their hearts to say, “I must look beyond my own ability, merit, and works if I am going to stand in righteousness before God,” and cause them to look for the coming of the Christ who would be righteous for them.

And because this law covenant had this ministry, it was always temporary in nature, serving its purpose until Christ came. And when Jesus came into the world he met the law’s demands in two ways. First, he fulfilled everything the law pointed to. He was the great high priest that the priests under the law were only shadows of. He was the ultimate sacrifice for sin that all the bulls and goats pointed to. And he was the one who, in his person, perfectly fulfilled every moral good the law commanded. He obeyed it perfectly. If the law said, “This is what someone should be like,” no one fulfilled that calling until Jesus, who fulfilled it perfectly.

But he also fulfilled the law’s demands in another way. The law called for condemnation and death to all those who disobeyed the law at any one point (James 2:10). Therefore, all were sentenced to condemnation if left to rely on our own merit. However, Jesus comes along and bears the condemnation that the law demands for sinners, bearing that condemnation and punishment on the cross.

Therefore, since Jesus came into the world, perfectly fulfilled the law’s demands (in his obedience and his suffering), that covenant God made with Moses is now completed or fulfilled. It’s “brought to an end,” as Paul says in 2 Cor 3, or “abolished” as we read in verse 15. And in its place the Lord has brought a new covenant where God’s people aren’t required to bear the mark of circumcision, eat only certain foods, wear only certain clothes, or only enter one section of the temple. By satisfying all the law’s demands—in his life and death on the cross—he brings the law covenant (with all of its divisions between Jews and Gentiles) to an end. Therefore, there is no reason for hostility between Jew and Gentile any more.

But that’s not all Jesus did. Paul also mentioned that he broke down this dividing wall of hostility by his life and death in order “that he might create in himself one new man in the place of two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility” (vv. 15b-16).

Notice in verse 16 that Paul says “us both” right in the middle. You see, though Gentiles might have been ignorant of the covenant promises, not even knowing to look for the promised Messiah, both Jew and Gentile had the same problem. All humans were in another hostile relationship that was even more important—that with the Lord. You see, all humans born into this world are born sinners and, as we saw in 2:3, are “by nature children of wrath.” All people everywhere—whether born Jew or Gentile—are under God’s wrath as sinners. We’re enemies of God (Romans 5:10), and as the objects of his just wrath, we are objects of his holy “hostility” as Paul says in verse 16.

But Jesus also addressed this hostility in the cross as well, for both Gentiles and Jews. Jesus killed the hostility by bearing the wrath of God for all who would believe in him. Therefore, if we place our faith in Christ—again, whether Jew or Gentile—there is no longer any hostility between us and our God. We are declared righteous before him so that Paul writes in Romans 5:1, “Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

And as those who place their faith in Christ, not only do we now have peace with God, but we are brought into a whole new group that transcends Jew and Gentile—the church, the people of God who believe, whether Jew or Gentile. So, instead of God’s people belonging to one nation (i.e. Israel), his new people are those who believe from all nations, languages, and tribes on earth. This good news has been proclaimed by Christ through his people as we take the gospel to the ends of the earth and those who believe are indwelt by the Spirit, brought into the church, and can pray to God as their Father (as we see in vv. 17-18).

By his life and death, Jesus has killed the hostility between us and God and between us and our fellow creatures. He fulfilled and thus brought an end to the law covenant. He has satisfied God’s just wrath toward us. And he has made us one new redeemed people of all nations and peoples. There is simply no hostility that should exist among believers, even though our culture might tell us that there should be enmity between different races, cultures, classes, etc. We have all been made one in Christ. And this brings us to our last point. In verses 19-22 Paul begins this last section with the words “so then,” highlighting our new status in Christ.

Our new status in Christ (vv. 19-22)

Paul concludes this text, writing, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in who the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (vv. 18-22).

Now that there is a “new man” (v. 15), a new people of God, then even those who were unbelieving Gentiles—like most of us were—and would have been strangers and aliens among God’s people under the old covenant, are no longer such. We’re fellow citizens with all the saints (i.e. all those who make up Christ’s church) and members of God’s family. Instead of God’s presence dwelling in the temple—a building of stone—he is building a new temple made

up of his redeemed people, to which he is adding all the time, and in whom he dwells. This new, living temple is built on and held together by Christ, founded on the apostles and prophets (who spoke the word of God and wrote the New Testament Scriptures), and indwelt by God's Holy Spirit. Therefore, let us come as God's united, believing people this morning and give thanks to the one who lived, died, and was raised for us so that our hostility before God and one another has been put away. Amen.