

Session #4: Ephesians Chapter 2:11-22

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Have you ever been left out of a group, team or community? One that you really wanted to belong to? And then over time, for whatever reason you were invited to belong? In this next section of chapter two St. Paul shares the remarkable reversal of fortune of the Gentiles. From the beginning of the faith story they have been outsiders, separated from God and His chosen people, lacking the hope and belief in the Messiah (2:11-12). St. Paul then goes on to explain (2:13-18) that it is through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross that all the barriers have been broken and Gentiles and Jews alike have been reconciled to God and to one another. And now Gentiles are invited into an astonishing close relationship with God as members of his household and together with Christ as the capstone, and with the Jewish Christians all become God's temple here on earth (2:19-22).

We will see in this section a movement from God to Christ as the primary actor. There is also such an air of optimism as St. Paul writes about the blending of Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians that if this was the only document read you could believe there was not turmoil in unifying these two groups, and that St. Paul was not under constant threat by sects within the Jewish Christian community (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16; 2 Corinthians 11:24; Romans 9:1-3; 10:1).

2:11 the uncircumcised

In this verse St. Paul is juxtaposing the past (before Christ) and the present (after Christ). "Uncircumcised" is what the Jews called the Gentiles meaning it in a hostile and insulting way. They called themselves **the circumcised** taking pride in the fact. In the flesh this is how they distinguished one from the other. God had called the Jews to circumcision (Genesis 17:9-14) as a sign in the flesh of their commitment to the covenants that God created. As we read in Genesis 17:14: *Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people.* Therefore, there has been an unreconcilable alienation between these two groups.

done in flesh by hand

But this distinction (circumcised/uncircumcised) is not a divine action since it is done by human hand. This small phrase is important to hold onto because St. Paul will make the distinction that the bond of covenant for centuries was made by the hand of the people. Now that covenant is made by the blood of Jesus Christ on the cross.

In verse 2:12 St. Paul lists five rights that the Jews enjoy before Christ that the Gentiles could not:

1. Without Christ, hope for the Messiah
2. Alienated from the Jews
3. Strangers to the covenants
4. Without hope
5. Without God in the world

2:12 without Christ

The title Christ is the Greek word for Messiah or Anointed One. The Gentiles, because they were not within the community of Israel (the Jews) while they may have known there was a Messiah to come, without fellowship in the Jewish nation they could not receive the promises of the Messiah; or so they all thought

alienated from the community of Israel To be alienated means to be isolated or estranged. The Gentiles because they were **strangers to the covenants of promise** they were outsiders. God had chosen Israel (the Jews) as His chosen people in hopes that they would be a living witness to the world of God's love and mercy and the world would come to believe in the one true God. But the Israelites (the Jews) closed ranks and separated themselves from the rest of the world. Their belief was that which had been given to them was only meant for them. The promises through the covenants were only meant for the nation of Israel (the Jews) and only they would receive the promises (Old Testament) and only they had to abide by them. (For list of Covenants see Handout *Yahweh's Eight Covenants*.)

without Christ...without hope Why were they without hope? Because being outside of the covenant they had no right nor expectation, no hope of salvation. As I said above, there has been an unreconcilable alienation. But, as we read in Galatians 3:28, through Christ all peoples become one. *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*

without God in the world It would be better stated "without God in *your* world. Because the Gentiles were outside of the covenant they had not access to a relationship with God.

2:13 once far off have become near by the blood of Christ Through the gift of Jesus dying on the cross God has opened the gates of heaven to all who believe. Gentiles are no longer alienated but one in the community of believers. In this verse St. Paul is contrasting the Gentiles' previous condition (*far off*, distant from God) to their present condition (*near by*). In Temple ceremony for one who was converting to Judaism, these words of *far off* and *near by* were common concepts used in the ritual of conversion. Now St. Paul uses the same ritual language to explain the Gentiles' relationship to the Christian community.

2:14-16 In this next section St. Paul will explain how the death of Jesus eradicates what has caused the division between Jew and Gentile; and through Jesus, not the law, makes them one group. In case you are not aware, in the first century there was a common division between those Jews who came to Christ and the Gentile Christians. The Jewish Christians believed and therefore lobbied that Gentiles should be taught to live by Mosaic Law, recognizing the covenants and be circumcised BEFORE they are welcomed into the community of Christian believers. As you can understand this created quite a division in any community that had both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. St. Paul held throughout his public ministry that belief in Jesus as the Christ is the only requirement to belong to the faith community. St. Paul, in this argument offers us two beautiful images as he describes the action of Jesus dying on the cross. He is our peace (through his actions he calls all to reconciliation), through His power Jesus breaks down the wall that divides people.

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2:14 *he is our peace*

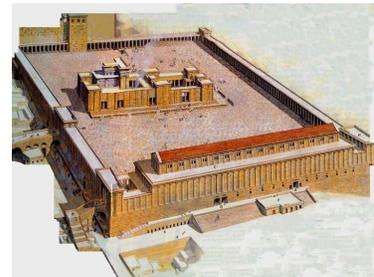
This peace that Jesus brought into the world, while it will have outward manifestations felt in the world, is a spiritual experience rooted in our belief, relationship and reconciliation with God, the Father. (John 14:27; Romans 5:1) The richer word to use here is the Hebrew word *shalom* which means *wholeness, well-being, fullness of blessing*. St. Paul is saying that Jesus Christ is our shalom bringing with him wholeness, well-being and fullness of blessing. What did he do? Jesus has:

- ***made both one*** Through the blood of the cross Jesus eliminated the spiritual differences between Gentile and Jew.
- ***dividing wall*** Scholars believe the wall that St. Paul is speaking of the wall in the Temple that established the inner courtyard. There was an outside to divide the world from this holy place but more specifically there was a wall that separated the court of the Gentiles who did come to worship the one true God (they were called God-fearers), and the inner court where only the Jews could go. Anyone and everyone could enter into the outer courtyard, but there were Temple guards who stood at the gate to the inner court and guarding making sure that only Jews entered. It was on pain of death if any Gentile passed through into this inner court. In 1871, one a stone table was excavated as archeologist dug to uncover this holy site. Scholars believe this was one of several “signs” that hug warning Gentiles to stay out. It said:

Let no one of any other nation come within the fence and barrier around the Holy Place.

Whosoever will be taken doing so will himself be responsible for the fact that his death will ensue.

In St. Paul’s mind this separation by the wall was a mirror image of the Old Testament when by God’s command (Leviticus 20:26) and the Mosaic Law the Nation of Israel



(the Jews) were to insulate themselves from the immorality and idolatry of the outside world. Jews were forbidden to intermarry or even eat with Gentiles.

The legally enshrined practice of separation “often led Jews to have a contempt for Gentiles which could regard Gentiles as less than human. In response, Gentiles would often regard Jews with great suspicion, considering them inhospitable and hateful to non-Jews, and indulge in anti-Jewish prejudice.” Taken from Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture which was quoting Word Biblical Commentary

And how did Jesus break this wall down?

through his flesh

Of course St. Paul would be speaking of the death of Christ on the cross. But, one must put themselves in the shoes of the 1st century believer. This letter was most probably read aloud when the community gathered. And when did the community gather regularly? At their Eucharistic celebration. Just like today at Mass we hear from the scriptures, the early community used this common moment to share such important letters as well as share their stories of Jesus and faith. As they are hearing these words *through his flesh* it would make them

mindful of the bread and wine, the body of blood of Christ they are about to receive. An important connection we all should make when we are participating in the Mass.

2:15 abolishing the law

The word *abolishing* would be better translated to nullifying or vacating, meaning the power of the law is no longer there by means of Christ's death. The covenant relationship that God means to have with us is a covenant through Jesus Christ, not the law. We must be careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water. Scholars believe that St. Paul isn't saying that the Ten Commandments and all 614 Mosaic Laws that come from those commandments are to be ignored. What he is saying is that no one can be saved by these laws and commandments. They are there as guidelines and directions but salvation only comes through the Cross of Jesus Christ. As one scholar put it we must be careful to distinguish between the moral requirements that to this day continue to reveal God's will, and the ritual requirements (the ritual washing of hands, of animal sacrifice, the ritual requirements of clothing) that through the blood of Christ are no longer binding.

2:16 reconcile both...in one body

The reconciliation that St. Paul speaks of is the unification to the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians, and while we could understand the "one body" as the body of Christ scholarship suggest that St. Paul is speaking here of the body of the Church. As stated before the idea of the integration of all souls into one unit is something St. Paul has written about in other letters. *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.* (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). With Jesus' death on the cross now all have access to God.

2:17-22 As we bring this section, and this chapter to a close we hear of how all this hostility and animosity between Jews and Gentiles has been destroyed by Jesus Christ; and for at least Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, because they have been reconciled with God, they (we) should be one in our praises to God.

2:17 far off...were near

St. Paul is speaking here of spiritual distance. St. Paul is drawing on the words of Isaiah in verse 19 of chapter 57. At this point Isaiah been proclaiming the truths of God to any and all who would listen – those who were near to God in faith and those whose belief in God was little or far off...*says the Lord, I will heal them.*

2:18 access

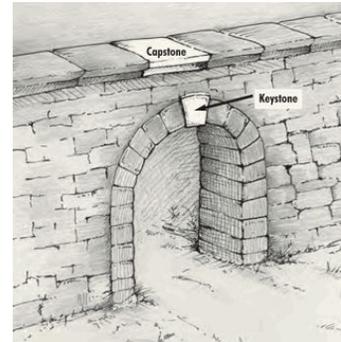
Once again St. Paul is drawing on the image of the Temple. Within the court of the Jews there was the Holy of Holies. In this large room was several religious items. One of those items was the Ark of the Covenant that was veiled from view by a large curtain which resembled more of a thick carpet. Only the priests of the Temple had access to this room and only one priest each year was selected to go past the carpet to the Ark to offer the sacrifice of Atonement. When Jesus died on the cross that curtain/carpet was split in two from the top to the bottom (Matthew 27:51) symbolizing that, through the sacrifice of Jesus, all peoples are given access to God.

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2:19 members of the household of God The Greek word used here refers to the family and other close relationships one has as a household. We are not slaves of God but His adopted sons and daughters. (Ephesians 1:5)

2:20 apostles and prophets St. Paul shifts his metaphors from the image of family relationships to speaking about the house itself, or the Temple. The foundational stones that were set to create this human temple, this church made not of stone are the twelve apostles and those prophets of the Old Testament who foretold of the coming of the Messiah.

with Christ himself as the capstone There is a difference between a keystone, cornerstone and a capstone. (See picture to the right). The keystone holds the entire arch in place. Without it the structure collapses. The capstone finishes off the wall, the structure. The cornerstone is the first stone place in the foundation that the other stones are built around and lines up the walls of the building. Jesus is all. He is the key that holds the entire structure of faith together here on earth in place (1 Peter 2:6) and is the crowning pieces that finish off the temple here on earth, and Jesus is the foundation upon which the Church here on earth builds its faith. Some scholars argue that St. Paul intended to use the image of cornerstone given that he is talking about the foundation of the Church.



He

2:21 grows into a holy temple In summery St. Paul is saying that the Church, those people gathered (not the building) is a place of spiritual haven and shelter. With Christ as the corner stone and the apostles and prophets as the foundational stones, you and I are added as the individual stones put together to build the wall. Every race and nation is included and together we create the dwelling place of God.

Moving into Chapter 3:1-13

As a teacher there have been many times that, in preparing a class I assume those attending know more, are further along in their studies that what is the reality. In midstream, just the looks on their faces tells me I need to stop my train of thought and go back to inform and educate them on missing information before I can complete my lesson. In Chapter three we find St. Paul digressing as he provides some history. Scholars suggest that St. Paul realized that there would be those in his audience who had come to Christ since his last visit to the communities. So, in this section He takes a step back and explains

1. Why he is in prison
2. That his message has to do with a divine plan that God has now revealed and entrusted to St. Paul and others.
3. All of this is the work of God's eternal purpose.

Reflection Questions:

1. As we have been studying we can see that St. Paul is struggling to unite (Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians) the Church. In your opinion do you think the Catholic Church is one body, a united front? Explain your answer. Is there anything you and I can do about it?
2. St. Paul uses the image of a building to speak of Jesus' presence in the world, but places can be sacred to. Is there a dwelling or building that is your go to when you need to find God? What makes this place holy to you?
3. How would you describe your relationship with the Catholic Church? Do you see yourself as a part of the process of being in the world or as an outsider?

Catechism of the Catholic Church

Peace: 2302-2306

The Church is Apostolic: 857

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