

Ephesians 2:11-20

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[0 : 0 0] This morning, those of us who are here were able to look at the first half of Ephesians chapter 2, where Paul spells out the nature of conversion in terms of those who are spiritually dead being brought back to life, and so enabled to perform good works in accordance with God's will.

Now we're going to go on to the second half of the chapter, which considers an important consequence of this great event in the lives of Paul's readers. It's bound up with one of the sad facts of the ancient religious world.

The Old Testament story tells us how God chose the Jews to be his special people. That meant, or was meant to mean, two things. The first was that to be God's people, they had to separate themselves from the sins of the other nations who worshipped in other gods.

But in order to separate themselves from their sins, they had to some extent to separate themselves from their life. And so, for example, marriage between Jews and non-Jews was discouraged, because within the closeness of marriage and the family, the temptation to compromise would be particularly strong.

The result of all this was that the Jews became increasingly exclusivist in their outlook. They regarded themselves as separate from other peoples.

[1 : 2 8] And even within Judaism itself, separationist tendencies developed between people like the Pharisees, who thought that they were more righteous and God-fearing than the others and the rest of the people.

So the distinction between Jews and Gentiles became very sharp, and it led, of course, to mutual suspicion and hostility.

So what was intended to be a well-meaning goal led to undesirable results in practice. The other thing about being God's special people was that Israel was intended to be God's servant to bring light and salvation to other people.

This point was not realised all that clearly in Old Testament times, but it is in fact more widely present in the Old Testament than we sometimes realise. It is particularly prominent in the mission of God's servant in Isaiah chapter 49, where the servant is identified as Israel, and the task of Israel, or part of it, you might say, is to not only restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back the wandering people in Israel to God, but also to be a light for the Gentiles that God's salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

Now by New Testament times, there was a bit of effort made by the Jews to act as missionaries, or at least to be open to receiving converts from the Gentiles.

[3 : 0 4] The synagogues were sometimes attended by Gentiles, who were attracted to the Jewish religion for various reasons, and they often expressed their desire to become part of God's people.

But this too tended to emphasise the differences, because the Jews insisted that such Gentiles must be circumcised, and must keep all the law of Moses in detail, if they wanted to be God's people.

So the lines of demarcation became very sharp, between those who followed the law and those who didn't. You couldn't belong to God's people unless you were a Jew or a full convert, and not everybody obviously wanted to follow the Jewish law in every detail.

So the result was this rigid distinction between the two groups. I suppose the closest modern parallel to it is the apartheid that was practised until recently in South Africa, differentiation between peoples on the basis of race, so that they lived separately, and had no real intercourse, love or friendship.

Now the coming of the Gospel has got a profound effect on this kind of situation, be it in the ancient world or the modern. And it's this that Paul is talking about here.

[4 : 25] In verse 11, he begins by describing the situation which the Gentiles were in before they became Christians. And he reminds them how unprivileged that position was.

They were known as Gentiles. That's to say, the nations, which is what the word really means. They were the Gentiles, the nations opposed to the Jews, who thought of themselves not as nation, but as the people of God, and kept that term for themselves.

The Jews referred to them as the uncircumcised. Although Paul hastens to add that this matter of circumcision was really only a matter of an external sign performed in the body.

And Paul would say that ultimately such things don't matter. But for the Jews, it was a sticking point. And because of this kind of demarcation, all the Gentiles were cut off from various privileges.

Paul lists them. First, verse 12, there was Christ. Jesus Christ was a Jew. And if you didn't know any better, you'd think he had come only for the benefit of the race to which he belonged.

[5 : 44] To get to Christ, you'd got to come by way of Judaism. And if you were a Jew, that probably seems so obvious that it didn't require any argument or proof.

Again, the Gentiles were not part of God's people called Israel. So long as the people of God could be identified as a particular nation and race, they simply didn't belong to it.

Unless, of course, they fully embraced the Jewish religion and all that went with it. So it followed, thirdly, that they couldn't lay claim to any of the great promises made by God in the Old Testament and enshrined in the covenants made with his people.

These were for his people, not for everybody. God had promised to be the God of his people and to care for them if they would give him their love and obedience in return. But so long as he remained a Gentile and not a Jew, the way was closed.

Apparently, I say apparently, the promises were made only to Abraham and his physical offspring and not to anybody outside the family.

[6 : 54] The Jews didn't think that God would save other nations. You are or you can be my people. And so it followed, fourthly, that the Gentiles were without hope in the world.

They had no certainty of any providential care in this world and they had no assurance of life with God after death. If things went wrong, who was there to turn to?

And was there any guarantee that things would turn out well? In short, they were cut off from God because there was only one real God and he was the God of the Jews.

You might almost say that God was shut up in a box by the Jews of that time and there was very limited access for anybody else. So here, putting all these points together, we've got an alternative description or a partial description of what it means to be dead and lost.

And it stands alongside the description of those who are dead in sin that we looked at in the first part of the chapter this morning. Paul is now describing the particular feelings that they might begin to have as they saw the Jews proudly boasting of their special relationship to God and realizing that they themselves were excluded.

[8 : 18] But then, for Paul and the first Christians, something happened that created the difference. Jesus came and died on the cross and he opened up a new way to God that rendered the old way of Judaism obsolete.

Paul can say now to his Gentile readers, what I've said used to be true of you, remember that formally, this is what you were, but now, now you've been brought near by the blood of Christ.

When Paul talks about being near and far away, he's picking up an Old Testament phrase that spoke of those near and far which originally referred to the Jews in their own land compared with those overseas.

Then it came to be used of Jews who were near to God but Gentiles who were far away from him outside and beyond the pale. But, says Paul, if people have become Christians, then they are no longer far away from God but have been brought near to him.

And all this happens because Jesus Christ died and shed his blood for them. You who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

[9 : 39] Now, we saw already today how Paul can take a thought and then repeat or develop it in different words so as to make it clear going over and over it so we get the hang of it. And that's what he does here.

So he goes on to describe what being brought near means in terms of saying that Jesus Christ is our peace. He has made the two one and broken down the barrier between them.

What's he talking about? If you haven't had the preparation we've had over the last few minutes one might be tempted to assume that Paul is still talking about peace between mankind and God.

the barrier between the two being broken down and the two being brought together. And that's certainly the great theme of the gospel. But in fact he's extending the concept.

He's talking now about peace between Jews and Gentiles at the same time as he talks about reconciliation to God. for there was a barrier between them.

[10 : 45] A literal one. In the temple in Jerusalem there was a series of concentric courts. The outer one was called the court of the Gentiles and that was as far as the Gentiles were allowed to go.

Within it was the court of Israel and round it was a barrier on which were warning notices forbidding Gentiles to cross it and to go into the temple proper.

For the court of the Gentiles was really nothing more than a sort of public space. So the distinction between Jews and Gentiles was symbolized by this barrier round the part of the temple that really mattered.

It may well be that when Paul talks about the barrier here he's got this picture, this very literal physical picture of separation in mind. You remember of course that earlier in his life Paul got into trouble in Jerusalem for allegedly bringing Gentiles across the barrier into the forbidden area.

See Acts chapter 21. But that solid physical barrier is not the main thing in Paul's mind here. It only symbolized the real barrier which was constituted by the Jewish law with all its rules and regulations.

[12 : 07] All the things that people were supposed to keep if they wanted to belong to God's people. And now Paul says, and it's hard to get across how shocking this must have seemed to Jews of his time, Christ has broken that barrier down.

There is no longer any exclusive part of the temple and there is no longer a law which discriminates those who are Jews and those who are Gentiles. God has made both races into one, one new people.

His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace. I emphasize this. Paul's point is that the effect of the cross, I should perhaps say one effect of the cross because there are others, the effect of the cross is to bring peoples from everywhere together through the death of Christ to become the people of God.

To be saved, converted, resurrected, born again, redeemed, justified, reconciled is negatively to deal with the sinful past and its consequences which get wiped out but positively it all means to have a new relationship with other people and a relationship that's the same as that which is enjoyed by everybody else who comes by the path of faith.

So the purpose of the point of conversion and reconciliation and being brought to new life is not simply to have a positive relationship with God but a positive relationship with his people.

[13 : 46] And for Paul this is self-evident. This needs no argument for him although one point in his life he never believes it at all but he's reached the point where for him it's beyond dispute that all the people who belong to God all those who are saved all those who are related to God in the same kind of way must belong together as his people.

they are his children they are citizens in his kingdom therefore they are all one in Christ Jesus. There's one new humanity in Christ.

Think what tremendous implications flow from this. In another letter written about the same time as this one Paul sends a slave called Onesimus back to Philemon.

Never mind the fact the slave has done wrong he's a slave. He's sent back to his master and Paul says about him welcome him as you would welcome me.

Put the red carpet out for him. Treat him as you would your other fellow believers. Treat him as a brother one who is dear to you both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

[15 : 06] Now this point is so important that Paul repeats it in verse 15 in a slightly different form. He emphasizes that Christ has made the law of no effect.

He has annulled or cancelled it. It no longer applies. Now that's a remarkable thing for a Jew to say. Particularly you remember that the law in question is contained in the Jewish scriptures and has all the authority of God behind it.

But Paul says that it's had its day. God himself has annulled it and he has done so in Jesus. Now don't get him wrong. What's annulled is not the moral aspects of the law but rather those aspects of the law that separated and characterized Jews.

circumcision and other aspects of their ritual their festivals their food regulations and the ritual of the temple. And the result of this he repeats is that now there is one sort of humanity instead of two.

One race not two or more. The death of Jesus has become the one way to God. there aren't two crosses one for Jews one for Gentiles.

[16 : 27] There's only one cross and one way of salvation. And if so it means the difference between Jew and Gentile doesn't matter any longer. It's irrelevant.

And over and over and over again Paul says it so there can be no mistake. God has sent Jesus to reconcile sinners to himself and there's one way of reconciliation for all mankind both Jews and Gentiles.

You'll note incidentally that this implies that Jews need Jesus just as much as Gentiles do. The law is out of date as a way of salvation if indeed it was ever meant to be.

There is only one name whereby we can be saved and that is the name of Jesus as Peter said when he was speaking to Jews. But it also means that the cause of the hostility between Jews and Gentiles is gone.

The reason for the differences is no longer there. There's nothing to quarrel about. It's all gone. And so Paul says that this is how Jesus came with a message of peace with God both for the Jews and for the Gentiles.

[17 : 38] He came and preached peace to you who are far away and peace to those who are near. Or again through the spirit of God both groups can come to the Father. God observes that what we have here is yet another way of describing conversion.

This time it's the picture of two people who have fallen out with one another and hold things against each other. In the case of God he holds our sin against us as acts of rebellion and disobedience.

But in Christ he himself bore those sins and their consequences and now holds out the offer of an amnesty to us. The restoration of right relationships. The willingness to no longer count our sins against us because Christ has taken them upon himself and died for them.

So here is conversion this time as the creation of a new relationship of peace rather than hostility. And the great advantage of this way of looking at it is that Paul can say that this new relationship with God inevitably brings with it a new relationship to all the other people who belong to him.

We find ourselves in the same line as it were coming to the cross with all these people from all over the world no matter what kind of people they are. So all this helps to demonstrate another important truth that we haven't yet brought out fully into the open.

[19 : 06] As we said the important thing about the Jews was that they were the people of God. A community or nation that belonged to him and consequently lived a common life together.

Jews thought of other Jews as their brothers and sisters. If you became a Jew you became a member of a community. But for Paul this is what God now intends for those who come to him by Jesus.

Now they form the people of God and so they must live together as a people. You might say that they formed the new Israel for here and elsewhere Paul takes things said in the Old Testament about Israel and applies them to the church.

But how are we to understand that? In your mind's eye travel through the town to the corner of Great Western Road and Anderson Drive and on the northwest corner there used to stand a building called the Amatola Hotel.

When I first knew it and some of you first knew it also it was simply either a large house or a large hotel I'm not very sure which it was and the front door was in Great Western Road. As the business of the hotel increased they built first one extension at the back and then another round the side and then another round the front and then another round the other side until eventually you couldn't see the original building for all the bits built on round about it unless you were on the top of a bus and could see the top of the old house just over the high bit at the front of the new building surrounded completely by new rooms and the entrance shifted round to the west side instead so you could hardly see any trace of the old building from the outside but it was still there deep within there was continuity between the old and the new but there was a decisive reshaping of the interior as a result now of course it's all been demolished and replaced by luxury flats which apparently is not relevant to my illustration but yes it is because there's an important distinction between an old building which is rebuilt and extended but is still there and a new building which totally replaces the older one let there be no doubt on the matter the church is the continuation of

[21 : 32] Israel not something separate and new that excludes people who formerly were in if they are believers so the church is built as it were in continuity with God's ancient building Israel and it incorporates the past of Israel it doesn't replace Israel we're not talking about what the theologians call supersessionism it stands in continuity with the Old Testament people of God so those covenants of promise that were mentioned earlier in verse 12 now belong to the new people the church can look back and say that's part of my history but the new building has begun and new foundations have been laid and the chief stone which aligns all the rest is Jesus himself and the Christian apostles and prophets are put alongside it and on top of this developed the new building but whereas the old building consisted simply of

Jews and perhaps a few proselytes now it includes all who believe in Jesus whether Jew or Gentile so verse 19 the Gentiles are no longer foreigners and aliens which is what they were with regard to the old people of God or the old building they are now fellow citizens and fellow members of the household of God along with the Jews so we might say that God's total purpose has got two aspects to it one aspect of it is the creation of a building which we now learn has got the function of a temple verse 21 that's to say a building where God can be present on earth formerly people thought that he was present on earth in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem but now he's present by his spirit in the midst of the church wherever his people are gathered together and this building is continuing to grow it's like an airport where they never stop adding fresh bits on no matter how much they built when they first started the building is growing and the parts fit in harmoniously together unlike the airport so it fulfills its purpose more and more there's no physical building such as the temple in

Jerusalem was this is a spiritual building composed of people who are built into it like building blocks that's the one aspect of it to provide a temple for God to be present the other aspect is that the people are fellow citizens in God's people they form a community that must live together as a community if you'll pardon the analogy it's like small children who hitherto had to socialize only with their parents and siblings coming together in a nursery group or play school or infant school or whatever not only to learn things but also to learn how to live alongside other children and become social beings so what first obviously we can't apply this Jew Gentile distinction directly to our situation today except insofar as some Jews may still think of non-Jews and especially

Arabs in the old-fashioned kind of manner but of course it still remains true that the way in which Paul described the Gentiles in verse 11 onwards is true of those who are not Christians it's people without Christ now who have no hope and no access to the promises of God because they're cut off from him where previously people who were outside Judaism were separated from God and salvation now that applies to those who are outside God's church and the Christian faith now this is not the place to take this point further and to raise the question of what happens with other religions and alleged other ways to God it's simply to make the point that we have a responsibility as Christian believers to proclaim the gospel to people the world over who are still without hope and still without God and we are to love them in the same way as our God so loved God's purpose in

Jesus is to form a new people it's often said by way of criticism that there are Christians particularly evangelical Christians such as ourselves who don't take the church seriously and unfortunately the charge is sometimes justified too often we think of our salvation in individualistic terms we think just of ourselves and don't realize that God's purpose was to create a people together who will serve him so if I become a Christian I inevitably become a member of God's church I'm joined to other Christians as my brothers and sisters and that's the basic thought which emerges here as the climax of the whole section salvation is not simply the restoration of a relationship with God it's the restoration of that relationship of love for our fellow human beings that's been broken by sin the third thing to say is that in the ancient world the distinction between

[27:13] Jews and Gentiles was abolished in the church they were now one people they had to learn to live together without hostility and it cannot have been at all easy they had to overcome the habits and the prejudices of centuries the Jews had believed for years that Gentiles were unclean and their food was unclean so you couldn't eat a meal with them and now they had to realize that this was a load of poppycock they thought of themselves as superior beings now they had to realize that we are all the same Gentiles they cherished resentments against this all the time and they had to learn to forgive as I say it wasn't easy and I'm not saying all Christians managed to do it or that the victory was won in a night but won it was and the church became the place of reconciliation between Jews and

Gentiles but not just between Jews and Gentiles elsewhere Paul insists that it's a place of reconciliation between free people and slaves which was an existing social division in his time and that took an awful long time to deal with it's also a place for reconciliation between male and female and this might have applied especially to the Jews where the innermost concentric circle in the temple was for men only and the women were kept halfway between the Gentiles and the male Jews it also applied to Greeks and barbarians to the differences between nations and types of culture and civilization those who have university degrees and those who don't and so on it follows that the church must be the place of reconciliation in the world today and we must examine whether we perpetuate barriers similar to those in the ancient world of course we can easily see from the outside that it applies to the caste system in

India or to the apartheid system that there was in South Africa although it took the people in those countries a long time to realize it it's also relevant to ethnic cleansing in the Balkans or the Middle East it also applies obviously to the racial prejudices that we all suffer from the tendency to think that our race is somehow better than others that other people are inferior or that people ought not to mix but should remain apart have a church as open only to people of one particular race or kind that's surely a contradiction in terms divisions of wealth class or anything else are taboo in God's church it's the reconciling family of God let me develop that briefly in three ways first to say that this does not mean obviously functional distinctions in human life disappear in the sense for example there's no longer the need for employers and employed but it does mean that all will be brothers and sisters as

Christians and will treat one another as people whom Christ loves and that will affect the character of the relationships what did it mean for Philemon to welcome back Onesimus not just as a brother in the Lord but as dear as a fellow man so we need to ask ourselves how we apply the principle of reconciliation in the workplace secondly Paul's teaching is ultimately based on the fact that Christ died for all humankind that means that all people are free to come to God on the same footing and therefore this equality that Paul is talking about applies to the unsaved as well as to the saved to non-Christian and Christian alike so far as the way I treat them is concerned the offer of God in Christ means that distinctions of race and so on don't matter in ordinary life all people made in the image of

God are to be treated as people for whom Christ died now obviously I'm not saying that Christian fellowship in the full and proper sense is possible with people who are not Christians it's only possible between Christians but that does not mean that we are not to treat other people that we are to treat other people outside the church as somehow inferior and not worthy of our love the revolutionary character of Christian teaching comes to expression just here Christ offers peace to all the world and we are the agents of that peace it's our job to express the love of Christ in our daily lives we cannot preach the gospel to people if we are not prepared to be their brothers and sisters and to accept them as our brothers and sisters and thirdly this point surely applies especially to our fellow Christians Christians some of us in the church at large are Baptists some Presbyterian some Episcopal some Methodist some Catholic and goodness knows how many others and Christ's purpose is not fully realized till we truly love our fellow Christians and the barriers that divide us have been broken down now I'm not being a starry eyed ecumenist and I'm not looking to one organic church all united together in a vague sort of mix of things and I shall continue to recognize and speak out about the areas where I think people misunderstand and misrepresent the gospel

[32 : 57] I shall also I hope be open to the criticisms that other people may make about myself or my congregation nevertheless I cannot avoid the challenge of these verses as I contemplate a Christian world divided up into its different groups that so often disagree with one another and cannot work together and we should all be looking at ourselves to see whether we reflect the love of Christ in relation to other Christians both in this church and in others yes I know some of us will say by way of excuse of course there's that church down the road from ours but of course the people who go there aren't really Christians are they they don't speak our language they don't know what being born again or justified means and they've never been truly converted of course there are limits to how far we can go along with them but what are we doing to help them and to learn from them what ventures and fellowship do we make so here is a passage that turns out to be not only a source of comfort and assurance to us as we consider the firm basis of our salvation in God's great act of reconciliation in Christ but it also speaks a challenging word to us about the ways in which we must seek to work out the implications of that reconciliation in regard to our relationships both with

God and with our fellow Christians and with the world at large let us pray oh God we thank you for your plan of reconciliation that embraces people of every tribe and tongue and nation that breaks down the barriers erected by humanity between people of different countries and languages between the rich and the poor between male and female between the educated and the uneducated to create a church where all are one in Christ Jesus forgive us that we have divided your church and failed to treat our fellow believers as our brothers and sisters in Christ yes Lord we know some of them are difficult to live with some of them hold such curious ideas about theology and behavior and the church has certainly suffered from the inroads of heresy and immorality but we pray that while acting appropriately with regard to all these things to preserve the truth of the gospel and the holiness of your people may we nevertheless not be guilty ourselves of the sort of barriers that the people of

Israel put up in the early church or the contempt and bitterness that sprang up in the part of Gentiles as well as Jewish Christians oh Lord forgive us that entrusted as we are with the message of salvation that can break down these barriers we have been so slow to share it with other people the world over forgive us that we can so easily ignore the needs of the world church and bless our endeavors to serve our brothers and sisters in other lands help us also to remember the needs of the world amid all the conflicts and disasters of the present time we pray to you yet again for the political financial and industrial leaders of the nations especially for the G8 leaders that they may keep the promises that they have made to use our planet and its resources wisely to help the poor nations and to bring relief to the war-torn areas of the world and we pray particularly for those countries where there is so much famine and poverty and under development of the economy we pray for countries that don't help themselves through corruption and greed and for places where governments are menaced by terrorism and factional fighting we make these petitions in most general terms that we could put name after name of people and places in their different needs so hear our prayers this evening

O Lord and strengthen your servants to serve you and grant that even those who do not know your name nor worship and serve you may nevertheless be enlightened by your common grace and strive for justice and compassion in the world Lord God of all the earth hear the cry of your people for your world and hear us as we remember one another in our different needs in this congregation we pray for your blessing on this community of your people and its future we pray for all who come within these walls who hear the gospel and respond to it and for all who are being built up in faith we commend one another to you if we know of special needs among us and ask us in your great mercy and love you will show your favour to us and grant us your blessing and all this we ask in the powerful name of your son our saviour Jesus Christ amen thank you thank you to your spirit time tounde