

Ephesians 2:11-22

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[0 : 00] Turn with me to the passage we read in Ephesians chapter 2.

Now, as I preach the sermon this evening, I'm going to be using the pulpit Bible, which is the NIV edition that we used to have as the church Bible.

We have new church Bibles, and there's some slight changes, and really I've got to get used to preparing sermons from the new edition to not get caught out. This morning I got caught out with that first verse of Revelation chapter 1, where instead of what I expected it to say, the revelation of Jesus Christ, it said the revelation from Jesus Christ.

And you might say that's not such a huge difference, but when you're not expecting it, it kind of can throw you. So this evening I'm going to use the pulpit Bible. So sometimes it may be the case, I haven't done the comparison between the two passages or the two editions.

The changes or the differences, if there are any, will be minor, but if you notice that I'm reading a verse and it's slightly different to what you have in front of you, you'll know the reason for that.

[1 : 10] Basically, I'd rather you do the work of working out what's going on rather than me do that. I think we've all heard about Donald John's famous wall.

Who can forget the almost hypnotizing campaign chant, build that wall, build that wall. And as we've been kind of observing from afar, I think sometimes we observe what happens across the pond, maybe with a somewhat superior air.

And yet it is, I suppose, in a way a little bit ironic and maybe just a little chastening that we are the ones now squabbling over hard borders or soft borders or backstops of one kind or another.

What do we make of walls? What do we make of borders? Are they a good thing? Are they a bad thing? Well, to be honest, I guess it depends on circumstances.

Walls can separate and walls can also protect. What is it that they say? Good fences make good neighbors. I don't know if that's true or not, but that's what they say.

[2 : 27] In the passage that we've read just a few moments ago, Paul speaks of a wall that he views as a very bad thing.

He describes it in quite, what shall we say, quite strong language. He speaks of a wall of hostility. We read that in verse 14 of Ephesians chapter 2.

For he himself is our peace who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. And I want to think this evening a little bit about that wall and what God has done to tear it down, to destroy, to use the language of the passage, this barrier, this dividing wall of hostility.

Now, the picture that Paul uses here of a wall in verse 14 serves in the passage to describe the alienation that separates Gentiles and Jews or that separated Gentiles and Jews.

And it's quite possible that the language that Paul uses of a wall, a wall of hostility, isn't just in his mind picture language, though it certainly serves the purpose of symbolizing this separation.

[3 : 52] It's possible that he has in mind, and his readers would have picked up on this, the actual wall that there was in the temple that divided the court of the Gentiles from the temple proper.

So, there was a real wall, a physical wall that divided Jews and Gentiles within the temple. That's why we read just those two or three verses in Acts chapter 21, where there was the occasion where Paul was being accused precisely of ignoring that division and accused, wrongly accused, of having brought into the temple.

The temple, a Gentile who should have remained on the other side of the wall. Indeed, on that wall in the temple complex, inscribed on the wall or on signs very visible on that wall, there were solemn warnings of death for any Gentile transgressors who dared to go beyond the wall and ignore the separation that there was between Jews and Gentiles.

Now, in the first half of the chapter, we didn't read the first half of the chapter, but in the first half of the chapter of chapter 2, Paul had already dealt with another wall or separation of even greater magnitude.

He doesn't use the language of a wall, but he's dealing with a separation of how all Jews and Gentiles are alienated from God and what God has done to remove this alienation or to bring down that particular wall that existed.

[5 : 37] Indeed, in the verses that we've read from verse 11 through to the end of the chapter, Paul also recognizes that there is a wall that separates both Jews and Gentiles from God.

In the passage that we've read, he's particularly dealing with the separation of Jews from Gentiles. That's the wall of hostility. But he also acknowledges that both Jews and Gentiles are equally, in many ways, separate from God and what God has done to bridge that divide.

Notice in verse 15 how he deals with both of these separations or makes reference to them. If you read from verse 14, For he himself is our peace who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of facility.

There, the two that he's referring to are Jews and Gentiles. And then he goes on, But then notice what he says, And in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross.

So he's talking about joining Jews and Gentiles, removing the separation that separated Jews and Gentiles. But then he immediately goes on to mention how, or to reference how, the work of God in Christ has as its purpose to join together both Jews and Gentiles to God, given the separation that existed between God and men and women, Jews and Gentiles alike.

[7 : 20] So both walls, between man and God, between men and women and God, and between Jews and Gentiles, have been destroyed, have been brought down by Jesus.

And in the process, a new society or a new humanity has been formed. Now this wall-destroying, if we want to call it that, this wall-destroying work of God is described in verses 11 to 22 that we've read.

And I think we can present what Paul presents here in the form of three portraits of a reconciled people. And the three portraits that we want to just look at as we make our way through the passage and draw out some of these things, the three portraits can be described in this way.

What we were, what Jesus has done for us, and what we have now become. So it follows a chronological order, I suppose. What we were, what Jesus has done for us, and what we have now become.

So let's begin with the first portrait, a portrait of an alienated humanity, or what we were. And we can notice in verses 11 and 12 what Paul has to say about what we were.

[8 : 34] And I'll just read those verses again. Therefore, remember that formerly, you who are Gentiles by birth and called uncircumcised by those who call themselves the circumcision, that done in the body by the hands of men, remember, and especially what it says in verse 12, remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.

So you have this list of realities that are described that were true of us before. Before we were brought to God, before we were reconciled to God.

These things, all of these things were true of us. And what can we, what is said about us? Well, first of all, we're told that we were separated from Christ.

At that time you were separate from Christ. And this picture of men and women being separate from Christ is in stark contrast to being in Christ, which is at the heart of so much of what Paul has to say in the whole of this letter.

All the blessings that flow from being in Christ, from being united to Christ. And so much of that developed, as I say, throughout the letter, but especially in chapter 1.

[9 : 56] And time and time again, Paul is outlining and detailing all the blessings that come from being in Christ, from being united to Christ. Notice there in chapter 1, in verse 7, In Him we have redemption through His blood.

And it goes on. In verse 11, In Him we were also chosen. And it goes on. In verse 13, in the second half of the verse, Having believed you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.

And so time and time again, all the blessings of being in Christ. And then in chapter 2, when he speaks about what we were, in stark contrast, he says we were separate from Christ.

Not in Him, not united to Him, but separate from Him. So that's part of our condition as part of an alienated humanity.

Separate, but then also that very word, alienated. Alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise. As Gentiles, we did not belong to the people of God and were outwith the covenant privileges enjoyed by God's people.

[11 : 04] All the wonderful promises that God made to His people were not for us because we were alienated from that people. We weren't part of that people. This is what we were.

And then he goes on to say that we were without hope and without God in the world. No hope for time or eternity. No saving knowledge of God or fellowship with Him.

And all of these realities of a people separate from God have been expressed by one writer very starkly, but quite concisely also.

He says that before, outside of Christ, we were Christless, stateless, friendless, hopeless, and godless.

It's not a pretty picture. Or as Paul summarizes it in the language that he uses in verse 13, we were once far away. But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far away have now been brought near.

[12 : 10] This was the condition of Gentiles and remains the condition of unbelievers, Jews or Gentiles today. And Paul, in this passage, on two occasions, uses this verb, remember.

Remember what you were. Verse 11. Verse 12. Remember that at that time. I wonder why this urge, this encouragement to remember. You know, you might almost think, well, that's not something I want to remember.

You know, that past, that dark past. I don't want to remember that. Rather, I want to enjoy all that I now am in Christ. Why remember those former days?

Well, maybe for a couple of reasons. On the one hand, that we would be reminded of all that God has done for us, where he has brought us from, that that would generate in us gratitude to God for what he has done and is doing.

And perhaps also as a spur, an encouragement to evangelism. Because so many round about us are in the condition described here.

[13 : 16] And so we have the opportunity to bring them near those who are far off. So you have in these two verses then a portrait of an alienated humanity or what we were.

But then the passage continues and Paul presents to us what we might call a portrait of the peacemaking Christ. So we were alienated. We were hostile to God.

We were far from God. And now Paul goes on to say, But in Jesus we have one who has made peace. We have one who has broken down the wall, destroyed the wall of hostility, dividing Jews from Gentiles but also humanity from God.

And so in verses 13 to 18 we have this outline of what Jesus has done to break down the wall. Notice how verse 13 begins.

But now in Christ Jesus. So having outlined all that we were, there's this contrast. But now in Christ Jesus. You know we can almost compare it with that very significant but that there is in the first half of the chapter where in verses 1 to 3 there's been this very stark description of our condition.

[14 : 35] We then read in verse 4, But because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy. And it goes on. Well again you have another dramatic but interjected here in verse 13.

Yes, this is what you were. But now in Christ Jesus you have been brought near. Having been far away we have been brought near.

Even the language here of being brought near to God. It kind of echoes the language that is used in Deuteronomy to speak of the great privilege of God's people, of being a people near to God.

Let's just remind ourselves of what it says in Deuteronomy chapter 4 and in verse 7. So Deuteronomy chapter 4 and verse 7 we read as follows.

What other nation? You know this is a discussion of the great privilege that the people of Israel have. And it says, What other nation is so great as to have their God near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to Him?

[15 : 41] And so this in some ways quite a simple reality presented as such a marvelous privilege.

We are a people, God's people are a people who have God near to them. And what Jesus has done is of course bring us who are far away near to God.

How have we been brought near? Well in these verses there are two elements identified as being the means by which we have been brought near. We've been brought near through the blood of Christ.

There in verse 13. You who are far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. And of course there are references to the historic death of Christ and what it has achieved.

And so by that means we have been brought near. But also we've been brought near by being brought to be in a relationship of Christ that is spoken of as being in Christ.

[16 : 44] And there are the references to the experience of the believer. As he's brought to faith and the continuing union to Christ or with Christ that has brought us and maintains us near to God.

But what does this bringing near involve? Or what did the death of Christ achieve? As Paul outlines it in the following verses. We can maybe notice three things that Paul says that the death of Christ achieved as it performed this wall destroying action on our behalf.

Notice in verse 15 it speaks about how it abolished something. So in verse 15a we read, By abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations.

I think here the reference that Paul is making is to the ceremonial law that was abolished is no longer necessary because of the death of Christ. By abolishing in his flesh.

I think this reference to in his flesh is a reference to his physical death. By his death he abolished the need for this ceremonial law. But also possibly the moral law also in its power to condemn the lawbreaker.

[18 : 06] The moral law wasn't abolished. But its capacity to condemn the lawbreaker was removed. That sting was removed from it by the death of Jesus.

Jesus by his death abolished the regulations of the ceremonial law and the condemnation of the moral law. This is one thing that Jesus has done.

Abolished. But then perhaps you might say on the positive side, he has also created in himself one new man. That's what Paul goes on to say in that same verse 15. By abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations, his purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace.

The one new man refers to the Christian community of which we form a part. And this is nothing less than a new human race where all barriers and inequalities are removed.

That which previously separated, no longer separating. And Paul often celebrates this fact that as believers, regardless of our background and of our ethnicity, our gender, we are all one in Christ Jesus.

[19 : 22] That's language that we're familiar with. In Galatians chapter 3 and in verse 28, we read, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

All these barriers that previously divided and separated have been removed in the matter of our being part of this new community that Jesus has established.

So, what did Jesus achieve by his death? Well, he abolished in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. He created in himself one new man. And then it follows on that he did these things in order to reconcile both of them to God, both Jew and Gentile.

In verse 16, And in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. So, here the reconciliation is between men and women, Jews and Gentiles and God.

So, God joins Jews and Gentiles together. It's one wall of hostility that's removed. But then also, he removes the wall that separated all men from himself to reconcile both of them, Jews and Gentiles, to God.

[20 : 47] And just as there was enmity in both directions, in the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, so this was also the case in the relationship between men and God.

A hostility that was in both directions, an enmity that was in both directions. And Jesus removes or puts to death the hostility in both directions.

As one writer has expressed it, but the slain was a slayer too. So, Jesus who was slain, also by being slain, slayed and put to death that hostility.

And of course, with that reconciliation, one of the outcomes, one of the consequences of it, comes access. Access to God. In verse 18, For through Him, we both, Jews and Gentiles, have access to the Father by one Spirit.

And notice how this access to God is expressed in this very Trinitarian language. For through Him, through Jesus, we have access to the Father by one Spirit.

[21 : 56] So, that's the second portrait, a portrait of the peacemaking Christ. First of all, there was the portrait of an alienated humanity, what we were. Then a portrait of this peacemaking, wall-destroying Christ, what Jesus has done.

But then finally, a portrait of God's new society, that we've already touched on, but want to focus in on now just briefly. A portrait of God's new society, or what we have now become.

And that's what we find in what follows, in verses 19 through to 22. And Paul, in order to illustrate the richness of our new status as believer, he employs three pictures for the church, for this new community that has been created in and through the work of Jesus.

He describes it, first of all, as God's kingdom. There in verse 19, Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people.

Fellow citizens of God's kingdom. But then he also describes this new community as a family, or a household, in that same verse.

[23 : 07] Verse 19, Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people, and members of God's household, or of God's family.

That family of which we are now, sons and daughters, and consequently also brothers and sisters with one another, regardless of where we come from or the background that we have.

This is the new society being pictured in these different ways, as the kingdom of God, as the family of God. But then also, thirdly, in this passage, Paul describes it in terms of a temple, or of God's temple, built on the foundations of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And we are part of this temple. We are a living part, to use the language that Peter uses in his letter.

We are living stones of this living temple in which God dwells. This is what God has created in and through Jesus, this new society.

[24 : 19] So we have these three portraits painted in these verses of what we were, of what Jesus has done for us, and of what we have now become.

And so we thank God for Jesus, the one who has broken down the wall of hostility and united us to himself and to one another.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for Jesus. We thank you for who he is, and we thank you for all that he has done and all that he continues to do in favor of us.

We do acknowledge how we have been brought from far away, far away from you and without any prospect of coming near to you by our own efforts.

But we thank you that you are the one who has brought us near to yourself. Help us to have a sense of the great privilege of being a people who are near to their God. We thank you for the manner in which that has been secured by the life and death of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

[25 : 36] We pray that you would help us to live and to reflect who we are and what we are part of, this new society, this new community, this new kingdom, this new family.

Help us to be joyful and obedient members of this new society that you have created where all that which previously would have separated us and alienated us has been dealt with and removed by Jesus.

And we pray these things in his name. Amen.