

Feb. 3/4, 2001

The Truth About Our Life in Christ

A Study in the Book of Ephesians

Let the Walls Come Down

Ephesians 2:11-22

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Years ago I became good friends with a teenage boy who was determined to fit in with a certain crowd at school. But it just seemed like no matter what he did, he didn't fit in, and because of that he had a rough time in junior high and senior high. He was driven by this need to belong, but no matter what he did, it just didn't seem to work. After he graduated from high school, he went on to college, but was really struggling in college. He and I sat down to talk one time, and as we talked about school, I asked him how things were going. "Well, not very good," he said, "mostly C's and D's and a few F's." And so we talked about where his life was headed and what he wanted to do with his life. His dream was to go on to law school and become an attorney. Well, that's pretty hard to do with D's and F's, so I carefully tried to talk to him about whether that really even fit with who he was as a person. Knowing him as I did, I didn't see it as a reasonable ambition. So we chatted, and I finally asked him, "Why do you want to be an attorney?" His answer to me was, "Because someday I want to go back to a class reunion and look those guys in the eyes and tell them I wasn't a loser."

Now that young man was picking his vocation—what he'd do with the rest of his life—in order to somehow get people to accept him. But the reality is, we know he could go back to that class reunion as the President of the United States and it still wouldn't really satisfy. There is something within all of us that drives us to want to belong. Maybe some of you can relate to wanting to be on an athletic team or in a musical group. Whatever it was, there was something you wanted to do or there was some group you wanted to belong to. Maybe for you it was your experience in school or with peers, and you know that feeling of not being able to make the team or just not feeling like you fit in—not feeling like you belonged.

There's a longing within us all to belong, and that longing was put there by God, because it ultimately can only be satisfied with God. But God has also made arrangements on this earth that can address that need, and that is the hope—the joy of what Paul celebrates in the last half of Ephesians chapter 2.

In the first half of Ephesians 2, Paul talked about the fact that we were, at one time, alienated from God. But through Jesus Christ we were then changed, and we have become the very children of God. Therefore, it should result in good works. The pattern in the second half of the chapter is almost identical to that. Paul talks about what we were and now what we are, and then what the results or benefits of that are. The first half of the chapter is really an alienation from God; the second half of the chapter is an alienation from one another. We were a divided people, but through Jesus Christ that has been radically changed.

Ephesians 2:11 opens with the word, "Therefore." And of course, we know that whenever you see the word *therefore*, you stop and see what it's *there for*. It is always referring to something that has preceded it. In this case, you could say it's referring to verse 10, because verse 10 is a summary of verses 1 through 10. So Paul is saying because we are God's masterpiece, we are trophies of His grace. We are His masterpiece in Christ Jesus, that

is, to produce a new level of life, what he calls those *good works*. Therefore, given that truth, he says we need to remember.

Now it would be easy to go right by that word *remember*, thinking it's fairly insignificant. But you might be interested to know that in the first three chapters of Ephesians there is only one imperative—only one command—and that is this word *remember*. So it's definitely not an insignificant word. The command is to remember what we were and to remember how we got from there to where we are, because remembering motivates those good works.

Given verse 10, that we are God's masterpiece, we should be raised to a new level of life that's motivated by remembering. The longer we are Christians, I think the greater the danger of forgetting what we were and forgetting how we got from there to who we are in Christ. Therefore our motivations for service become something different than what they ought to be.

Take, for example, the issue of stewardship. Sometimes people say "all churches ever do is talk about money." Those words come out of the mouth of someone who doesn't remember. For them, giving is something they do out of an obligation. It's something they do out of a sense of guilt, to get God "off their back," and they just don't *remember*. If we really remember who we were and who we are now, and remember what was done in order to get us from there to here—who we are as children of God, seated with Him in the heavenlies—then we give as a celebration of that. We give out of joyful hearts. It's a privilege to give back to God because we remember.

The same would be true of service. Sometimes we serve in the Kingdom of God out of a sense of guilt and obligation, and feeling like we have to "put our time in." So we just do our thing once or twice a week, and we clock in and clock out, and that's about all the more it is. But that's because we don't remember. When we *remember*, we understand what an amazing truth it is that we are part of this Kingdom and what a privilege it is to be called by God to be seated with Christ in the heavenlies. We understand the privilege of serving in that Kingdom and doing what God has called us to do. That's not an obligation; that's a wonderful privilege. Remembering affects our motivation for doing these "good works" that he talked about in verse 10. So don't slip by that word "remember" too quickly—it is very important.

Therefore remember, that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "Uncircumcision" by the so-called "Circumcision," which is performed in the flesh by human hands—

Paul is talking about this division between the Jews and the Gentiles. Now if you're not familiar with the Old Testament, you may find that verse rather bizarre. You think, "What's all this discussion about who is and isn't circumcised?" Well, it actually had to do with the fact that in the Old Testament the Hebrew people were the chosen people of God. Just like there is a lot of mystery in why God chose us, there is a lot of mystery in the Old Testament choosing of Israel as a nation. But God chose them to be His people, and He would pour out His blessings upon them. As they became a privileged people, the nations around them would see the presence and power of God, and they, too, would enter into a relationship with God.

But the problem was that the Jewish people, by and large, didn't see it that way. They were a privileged people, but they tended to use that privilege to create within themselves a self-righteous mindset. As a matter of fact, they kind of became "spiritual snobs," thinking "we're in and you're out," "we belong and you don't..." So it created a significant animosity between the Jews and the Gentiles, and that went on for hundreds and hundreds of years. A Gentile was anyone who wasn't a Jew, which includes probably most of us.

So when he talks about the "Uncircumcised," that was the title which the Jews gave the Gentiles, meaning: "You're not one of the covenant people." God required that the males be circumcised, which was a mark of the covenant—a mark of the promise. So to the Gentiles it would mean: "You are outside the promise." But when he talks about the "so-called circumcised" he is saying that the Jews referred to themselves as the circumcised, but it was merely something done in the flesh, because their hearts weren't circumcised. They really weren't carrying out the purpose God intended, so both terms are derogatory here. He is saying, "The line has been divided—there is this great battle going on, and none of that is pleasing to God."

It would be hard for us to fully understand the tension between the Jews and the Gentiles. It would be fair to say that there is no tension between any race in the United States that even comes close to the degree of hatred that was present between the Jews and the Gentiles. The division was extremely deep. One commentator explains it this way:

The Jew had an immense contempt for the Gentile. The Gentiles, said the Jews, were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell. God, they said, loves only Israel of all the nations that He has made. It was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile mother in her hour of need, for that would simply be to bring another Gentile into the world. Until Christ came, the Gentiles were an object of contempt to the Jews. The barrier between them was absolute. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl or a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, the funeral of that Jewish boy or girl was carried out. Such contact with a Gentile was the equivalent of death.

- from *The Message of Ephesians* by John Stott, p. 91

Well, that is a pretty deep hatred. The feelings were mutual, by the way. When Plato was writing, he would talk about the barbarians. A barbarian was anyone who wasn't a Greek, including the Jews or especially the Jews. He basically declared war on the Barbarians, and he called it a "truceless war," meaning "this is a war we will never give up on—we are enemies to the death." So the feelings were mutual, and it was a very tense battle between the Jews and the Gentiles, and that is what Paul is referring to in verse 11. So for him to come and say what he is about to say would have been absolutely unheard of by both the Jews and the Gentiles. It says in verse 12 then, given that, "remember that you were at that time separate from Christ."

Now even though we don't feel this tension between the Jews and the Gentiles, it is still important to understand that if what Paul is saying were not true, we would have no claim to the Kingdom. So when he talks about the fact that we were separate from Christ, he is talking about the Gentiles (which would include us). The best way to think of that is to think about everything that we have talked about in Ephesians so far. We were chosen, we were adopted, we were redeemed, we have been purchased, we have been sealed, we have been seated with Christ in the heavenlies. All these marvelous truths that we have studied would not be accessible to us—they would not be true of us if what Paul is saying were not true. It would mean that we have no connection to Christ. We could claim none of the promises that we are claiming. "Excluded from the commonwealth of Israel" means that they weren't citizens, and citizenship meant you

had the rights and privileges that go with that. It meant you had no claim to the Kingdom, because you were not citizens of the Kingdom. You were outsiders looking in, strangers to the covenant of promise.

Think about how often we read through the Old Testament Scriptures and we see the wonderful promises of God. Those promises bring us comfort and we claim them and hold on to them. And what Paul is about to say is that we had no claim to those; they didn't apply to us—they weren't ours. They only applied to one nation, and that was the Hebrew people.

“...having no hope and without God in the world.” The first century was a time of extreme despair and hopelessness. The glory days of the Greek people had come and gone. The Romans had now taken over, and the Greeks were on a major decline, and they felt a desperate sense of hopelessness. But even the Roman people felt a real sense of despair and hopelessness. Theognes, a writer in that time period, wrote:

I will try to have a good time while I'm young because I will lie under the earth
for a long time, voiceless as a stone. And I shall leave the sunlight that I loved...
I shall see no more. Have a good time, my soul, while young; soon others
will take my place, and I shall be in black earth in death. No mortal is happy
under the sun.

– from *Ephesians* by R. Kent Hughes, p. 90

Those are cheerful words, aren't they? That basically captured what these people felt in the first century. Paul was saying, “You knew you had no hope and you had no real access to the one solution, which was God Himself.”

One historian wrote that the first century could have been called *The Age of Suicide*, because these people had such despair that suicide was very common. Here we are, 2000 years later, and not a lot has changed. There was an article in *Life* magazine, asking people what their feeling was about life and the meaning of life. Listen to what one taxi cab driver from New York City wrote:

We're here to die—just to live and to die. I live driving a cab. I do some fishing,
take my girl out, pay taxes, do a little reading, then get ready to drop dead. You've
got to be strong about it. Life is a big fake. You're rich or you're poor. You're here;
you're gone. You're like the wind. After you're gone, other people will come. It's
too late to make it better. Everyone's fed up. Can't believe in nothing anymore.
People have no pride, people have no fear. People aren't scared. People only care
about one thing, and that's money. We're gonna destroy ourselves—nothing we can
do about that. The only cure for the world's illness is nuclear war—wipe out
everything, let's start over. We've become like a cornered animal fighting for
survival. Life is nothing.

– from *Can Man Live Without God* by Ravi Zacharias

Those are pretty cheerful words, too, but if you read that article, you find out that the taxi cab driver was expressing what the majority of the people felt. They were feeling this sense of despair and hopelessness, that there really is no ultimate meaning in life.

That's what Paul is talking about. That was the condition of these Gentiles in Ephesus, and certainly would be true of us, included in that. Again, that's why we are so thankful for the words in verses 13 & 14. It's a similar pattern to the passage above it, where he talks about “formerly you were... but now,” {*emphasizing what has changed*}:

But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near

by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall.

Notice at the beginning of verse 14, it says “For He Himself...” We would call that an emphatic in the Greek language, which means the emphasis is on “He Himself.” The solution to this tension, this war, was Jesus Christ Himself, and it is in Christ that peace has been made. When he talks about breaking down the barrier of the dividing wall, he probably has in his mind this imagery from Jerusalem. Because the Temple was such a magnificent structure, it was commonly known to the people of that whole region, and it was understood that in the very center of the Temple was the Holy of Holies. That was the place where God would dwell, and outside of that was the holy place, and outside of that there were various courts. Clear on the outside was what was called the Court of the Women, and that was the court where the women could go to, but go no further. There was one court that was even farther outside of that, and that was the Court of the Gentiles. The Gentiles could come into that court, but they could go no further.

Now, imagine the imagery if you’re a Gentile boy and you’ve grown up understanding that God dwells in there somewhere, but as a Gentile, you can go this far and no further, while you see the Hebrew people being able to access God. That’s this feeling of hopelessness. In the last hundred years archeologists have dug up signs that were on this wall; and basically the signs say that Gentiles are to go no further under penalty of death. So there was an understanding that they could go this far, but if they went any further than that, they would be put to death. There was literally a dividing wall between the Gentiles and God.

Paul is saying that through Jesus Christ that wall has come down. Imagine if you were a Gentile boy growing up in Jerusalem and this wall had always kept you from God. Finally that wall had come down and you now had access directly into the presence of God, what you had been forbidden all your life. That is what he is talking about in verse 14. How did He do that?

Verse 15: “by abolishing *{that word could be translated rendering void}* in his flesh *{meaning his death}* the enmity *{the anger, the hatred}* which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances...”

Now what does he mean by that? It’s interesting to see that in Matthew 5, Jesus said “I didn’t come to abolish the Law; I came to fulfill the Law.” So why does Jesus say, “I came to fulfill the Law,” and now Paul is saying that He abolished the Law? That’s a very good question. Actually, both are true, because when Jesus came He did fulfill the Law. He fulfilled the moral law of God. He lived a perfect life, which was the requirement to be the sacrifice for sin, so the Law was fulfilled, just as He said. But there was also the ceremonial law, which had these ordinances and ceremonies, which included the cleansing and the sacrificial system and everything that went on at the Temple. All of those ceremonies and ordinances were pictures or images of the coming of the Messiah, who would ultimately provide the sacrifice for sin. It was in those ceremonies that the Gentiles were not permitted, but forbidden. So it was a real dividing point between the Hebrew people and the Gentile people. But when Jesus came and fulfilled the Law, it rendered those ceremonial laws void—they were no longer necessary. The picture wasn’t needed anymore, because the fulfillment had come. Therefore, the Temple and all of the ceremonies related to it were void and no longer necessary. So this dividing point had been abolished, and now the Jews and the Gentiles could come together as one people.

In verse 15, when he says “that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace,” he is not saying that the Gentiles became Jews. And he is not saying that the Jews became Gentiles. What he is saying is that the two of them together became one new race, and that new race is the people of God, where there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female. But rather, we come together and are one people in God.

We can’t even imagine how radical those words were in the 1st century. For generations these people had hated one another, and the divisions had been so deep when Paul came along and said that the mystery {*referred to in chapter 1 that was hidden from ages past*} had now been revealed. These two groups {*and, frankly, every person*} and the nations would come together and be one in Christ, thus establishing peace:

“and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. AND HE CAME AND PREACHED PEACE TO YOU WHO WERE FAR AWAY, AND PEACE TO THOSE WHO WERE NEAR; for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father.

Paul talks about this ministry of reconciliation, of bringing these people who were divided together into one race, one body. We understand that to be the Church. Isaiah talked about Jesus being the Prince of Peace, and verse 17 is a quote from Isaiah reminding us that Jesus would be the one who would bring peace. When He was born, the angels said “Peace on Earth,” and Paul is saying that’s exactly what He fulfilled. He pulled the walls down. He broke down the barriers so that these people who were enemies could now be one family together in Christ.

In verse 18 we see the work of the Trinity—all three members here: “for through Him, {*who is Christ the Son*} we both {*meaning both nations*} have our access {*which is a technical term, like access to a King or access into the very presence of God*}. So he is saying, “Through Christ, both of us come through the same gate, which is Jesus Christ, in one Spirit {*that’s God, the Spirit*} to the Father.” So you have Father, Son, and Spirit all together bringing these races into one people.

Verse 19 shows us the result of that, because it starts: “So then...” If you like to mark your Bible, here’s how it would look: In verse 11 you need to circle “formerly you,” which is saying this is what you were. Then in verse 13 circle “but now” which tells what’s changed. And then in verse 19, “So then...” That’s the train of thought: What you were... but now... so then... So then what? So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints.

Now we don’t really understand this idea of citizenship like they did at that time. For them it was a really big deal to be a citizen—it was their identity. It is what gave them rights and privileges. You remember in the New Testament there were occasions when the apostle Paul was arrested and was about to be treated a certain way. But then they would find out he was a Roman citizen and they would back off, because there were certain rights and privileges that were automatically granted to a Roman citizen. So to be a citizen of Ephesus was your identity; it granted you certain rights and privileges. Paul is saying, “You know, at one time you were not a citizen of the Kingdom; you had no claim to the rights and privileges of that. But that is what has changed, so now we are fellow citizens, together as one people in the Kingdom of God.” He goes on to say it gets even more intimate than that: “...and are of God’s household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets,

Christ Jesus Himself, being the corner stone.”(v. 19-20) He is saying that not only are we fellow citizens, but we’re family members. So we are part of God’s household, and we’re part of God’s family. We’re children of God. And Paul says this belief is built on the teaching of the apostles and the prophets.

Now, if it said the “prophets and apostles” we would think that it meant the Old Testament prophets. But it’s not. It’s “apostles and prophets,” which means the New Testament teaching. It is referring to the fact that the apostles and the prophets of the New Testament taught this marvelous truth that we are now one in Christ. The equivalent of that would be the very truth that we are studying here this morning. This idea that we’re all family is built upon this truth: There are no more walls separating us. But it actually even gets a little more intimate than that:

Verse 21: “in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.”

When he talks about a cornerstone, we tend to think in our culture of a small stone like we have out here on the corner of our building, which has a date on it. And that’s really what a cornerstone is, but that’s not what they’re referring to here. A cornerstone was a gigantic stone that was usually about the size of a railroad boxcar, and that was the anchor of the whole building. That stone was put in, and all the weight then came down on that stone. It determined the size and the shape of the building. It was the anchor of that building. And so Jesus Christ became that anchor, and Peter describes us as living stones, meaning we are built up against that cornerstone in order to become the very dwelling place of God. So there is a progression of intimacy from citizens to family members to the very dwelling place of God.

I think it’s interesting that when we talk about the temple of God, we understand that the Bible teaches that each of us, individually, is a temple, and that the Holy Spirit of God dwells within each of us. But the majority of times that the imagery of the temple is used in the New Testament, it isn’t used of believers individually, but it’s used of believers corporately. The predominant New Testament image is that we are a temple *together*, not that we are a temple individually. So the emphasis is that together we are God’s dwelling place and we come together as one people.

Paul is saying that formerly there was this war raging and we, as Gentiles, had no access to the claims of Christ, or to the promises of God. We weren’t citizens of the Kingdom. And frankly, if this truth wasn’t true, we would still be on the outside looking in. But because of Jesus Christ, those walls have come down, and now Jews and Gentiles, {what we would say today is every tongue, every tribe, every nation} come together in this marvelous race called the Body of Christ.

You know, there’s no place like the Church anywhere in the world. The Church is unique in its ability to bring people together on common ground and be family—to love and accept one another in a way that can’t be experienced in the culture. Historically, the Church—and I’m not talking about this church—but *the* Church has not done well with this. The Church has been filled with all kinds of prejudice and conflict. How that must grieve the heart of God because the walls have come down, and what He wants is for the people of the world to come together and be His Church, this unique race, this Body through Jesus Christ.

One of my favorite things whenever I travel is to meet brothers and sisters in Christ who feel like family. No matter where you travel to {for me it was Guyana, Brazil, Thailand, Laos and Mexico} one thing that always impresses me is meeting brothers and sisters in Christ who live in radically different cultures and speak a different language, and yet we're family. And you can feel that. You can sense the fact that we are brothers and sisters, even though we live halfway around the world and our lives are very different. We are family. We are the temple of God in which He dwells. It's a marvelous thing that black, white, Latino, Asians—we all come together to be the Church. The greater the racial tension in the culture, the greater our opportunity to be a life in our culture, because this (the Church) is the one place where it ought to be radically different.

But it's not just about race; it's about old and young. Where else in the culture do the old and the young come together to be family like they do in the Church? The old need to appreciate the young and who they are, and accept them and encourage them. And the young need to appreciate the saints of the faith, who have been believers so long and have persevered and have such wisdom, and appreciate their traditions and what they have to offer. And we come together in a way that is totally unique. It's the same for men and women—the Church ought to be the one place where men and women come together and have a mutual respect for each other that doesn't always exist out in the culture. Old, young, successful, struggling, black, white, Hispanic—we all come together to be the Church—to be a very unique people.

Paul Brand is a medical doctor who has spent most of his life helping leprosy patients, mostly in third world countries. Listen as he tells this story:

John Karmegan came to me in Vellore, India, as a leprosy patient in an advanced state of the disease. We could do little for him surgically since both his feet and hands had already been damaged irreparably. We could, however, offer him a place to stay and employment in the New Life Center.

Because of the one-sided facial paralysis, John could not smile normally. When he tried, the uneven distortion of his features would draw attention to his paralysis. People often responded with a gasp or a gesture of fear, so he learned not to smile. Margaret, my wife, had stitched his eyelids partly closed to protect his sight. John grew more and more paranoid about what others thought of him. He caused terrible problems socially, perhaps in reaction to his marred appearance. He expressed his anger at the world by acting the part of a troublemaker, and I remember many tense scenes in which we had to confront John with some evidence of stealing or dishonesty. He treated fellow patients cruelly, and resisted all authority, going so far as to organize hunger strikes against us. By almost anyone's reckoning, he was beyond rehabilitation.

Perhaps John's very irredeemability attracted my mother to him, for she often latched onto the least desirable specimens of humanity. She took to John, spent time with him, and eventually led him into the Christian faith. He was baptized in a cement tank on the grounds of the leprosy colony. Conversion, however, did not temper John's anger against the world. He gained some friends among the patients, but a lifetime of rejection and mistreatment had permanently embittered him against all nonpatients. One day, almost defiantly, he asked me what would happen if he visited the local church.

I went to the leaders of the church, described John, and assured them that despite his obvious deformities, he had entered a safe phase of the disease and would not endanger the congregation. They agreed he could visit. "Can he take communion?"

I asked, knowing that the church used a common cup. They looked at each other, thought for a moment and agreed that he could also take communion.

Shortly thereafter I took John to the church, which met in a plain, whitewashed brick building with a corrugated iron roof. It was a tense moment for him. Those of us on the outside can hardly imagine the trauma and paranoia inside a leprosy patient who attempts, for the first time, to enter that kind of setting. I stood with him at the back of the church. His paralyzed face showed no reaction, but a trembling gave away his inner turmoil. I prayed silently that the church members would not show the slightest hint of rejection.

As we entered during the singing of the first hymn, an Indian man toward the back half-turned and saw us. We must have made an odd couple: a white person standing next to a leprosy patient with patches of skin in garish disarray. I held my breath.

And then it happened. The man put down his hymnal, smiled broadly, and patted the chair next to him, inviting John to join him. John could not have been more startled. Haltingly, he made shuffling half-steps to the row and took his seat. I breathed a prayer of thanks.

That one incident proved to be the turning point of John's life. Years later I visited Vellore and made a side trip to the factory that had been set up to employ disabled people. The manager wanted to show me a machine that produced tiny screws for typewriter parts. As we walked through the noisy plant, he shouted at me that he would introduce me to his prize employee, a man who had just won the parent corporation's all-India prize for the highest quality work with the fewest rejects. As we arrived at his work station, the employee turned to greet us, and I saw the unmistakably crooked face of John. He wiped the grease off his stumpy hands and grinned with the ugliest...no, the loveliest, most radiant smile I had ever seen. He held out for my inspection a palmful of the small precision screws that had won him the prize.

A simple gesture of acceptance may not seem like much, but for John Karmegan, it proved to be decisive. After a lifetime of being judged on his own physical image, he had finally been welcomed on the basis of another Image. I had seen a replay of Christ's own reconciliation. His Spirit had prompted the Body on earth to adopt a new member, and at last John knew he belonged.

- "Belonging" by Paul Brand & Philip Yancy, *Stories from the Heart*

May that be so of us! May there never be a day when someone walks through these doors and, because of race, or age, or gender, or any deformity, they feel anything other than the pure, loving acceptance of Jesus. Because let's make no mistake—the walls have come down.