



FROM EXCLUSION TO EMBRACE

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Ephesians 2:11-18 ESV (11) *Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— (12) remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. (13) But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (14) For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility (15) by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, (16) and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. (17) And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. (18) For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.*

Introduction

- Our Destiny as the Church – the Body of Christ is to be “...*the fullness with which Christ fills all in all.*” (Ephesians 1:23) (Not an institution, but a living body)
- The key that unlocks the meaning of this destiny is (Ephesians 3:10) which says that “...*the manifold wisdom of God will be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.*”
- In other words, God aims to make the church (the body of Christ) into a showcase of the glory of His perfections. God will fill the universe with the glory of his Son by putting the body of his Son, the church, on display. He will hold up the church and say to heaven and hell: this is the glory of my Son, His bride, His body, His church.
- With Jesus coming into the world, we see **the greatness of God’s power** in three ways:
 1. In the resurrection of Jesus (Ephesians 1:19b-23).
 2. In the spiritual resurrection of unsaved people (Ephesians 2:1-10).
 3. In overcoming the hatred between different sections of the human race (Ephesians 2:11-12).

This is what we are going to have a look at today... seeing God’s great power in overcoming divisions.

- The purpose of God in this ‘Gospel Age’ in which we now live is to bring together all things in Christ – things in heaven and things in earth – in Christ! (Ephesians 1:10)

Ephesians 1:10 NLT *And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth.*

God's plan is to bring His world back together again in unity by putting it under Christ!

- He begins with His people. He creates united people in this world, His bride, the body of Christ, the Church.
- Then He will bring the world under judgement and remove from the world everything that does not submit to His plan.

Ephesians 2:11-22 is the Basis of Christian Unity

- It tells how God has broken down every kind of hostility between groups of people – This is one of the main themes of Ephesians.
- There are so many kinds of divisions among people: Divisions that concern skin colour, tribe, nationality, class, gender, temperament, education, regions where we live, political affiliation, and language.
- Paul begins with the greatest division of all history, the animosity between Jew and Gentile.

The Barrier

- Paul was a Jew. He knew his Old Testament Scriptures well.
- And so, there was a problem with seeing the church as the embodiment and "fullness" of the glory of God and His Son. The problem was that this was Israel's destiny. God had made these promises to Israel.
- Now Paul is saying that the church, made up of Jews and Gentiles, will be God's people, the glory of God's Son and the fullness of the Messiah's glory in the world.

God Had Chosen Israel as His Own Special Possession

- Remember that God had chosen Israel from all the peoples on the earth for his own special possession and had given promises to this people unlike that to any other.
- For example, in Deuteronomy 14:2 Moses reminds the people of Israel, *"You are a people holy to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth."*

God Was Israel's God in a Unique Way

- And not only are they His people, but He is their God in a unique and special way. The heart and essence of the covenant that God made with Israel in Genesis 17:7 is this: *"I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you . . . to be God to you and to your descendants after you."*

- And when he reaffirms it at the Exodus, he says to them, *"I will take you for my people and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God"* (Exodus 6:7).
- Romans 9:4-5 ESV spells out these privileges: *They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. (5) To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen*

The Reason God Chose Israel to Receive Privileges

- The privileges were unspeakably great. And the reason God chose Israel and gave them these privileges is clear from:
 - Isaiah 49:3 *And [God] said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."*
 - Jeremiah 13:11 God says that he chose Israel and made them his own possession *"that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory."*
- God's aim was to fill the universe with His glory and praise through what he did with this people Israel.
- Paul is saying, that is now the destiny of the church, of both Jew and Gentile.

Paul's Answer to the Problem

- So, what is Paul's answer to the problem that God chose Israel to be the fullness of His glory and yet now promises that glory to the church? His answer is that the true Israel has become the church and the church has emerged as the true Israel.
- There had always been a faithful remnant of believing Jews in physical, ethnic Israel. These were the true Israel. Not all Israel was true Israel. But some were. And when Jesus the Messiah came, the proof of whether a Jew was part of the true Israel was whether he confessed Jesus as the Son of God or denied him.
- Romans 9:6-8 NLT *(6) Well then, has God failed to fulfil his promise to Israel? No, for not all who are born into the nation of Israel are truly members of God's people! (7) **Being descendants of Abraham doesn't make them truly Abraham's children. For the Scriptures say, "Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted," though Abraham had other children, too. (8) This means that Abraham's physical descendants are not necessarily children of God. Only the children of the promise are considered to be Abraham's children.***

Jesus is the point in redemptive history where the true Israel becomes the church of Christ, and the church (Jew and Gentile) emerges as the true Israel.

There Are Not Two Ways of Salvation

- There are not two saving covenants. One for the Jews and one for Christians. There are not two saved peoples. And the reason is that there are not two ways of salvation. Verse 16 shows us the unifying foundation of salvation and the people of God. *"[Christ] reconciled them both [Jew and Gentile] in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity."*

- Jews needed the cross and Gentiles needed the cross. After centuries of animal sacrifices that pointed forward to the True Sacrifice, Jews needed to be reconciled to God and Gentiles needed to be reconciled to God. There was enmity not only between Jew and Gentile, but at root there was enmity between Jews and God and Gentiles and God that needed to be overcome by the peace-making work of Christ.
- So, there was one great work of salvation on the cross when Jesus died to remove the enmity between God and Jew and between God and Gentile. And He did this reconciling work not separately but in one body, the church. Jew and Gentile are reconciled to God in Christ. That is why being reconciled to God means being reconciled to each other. That is why there cannot be two peoples and two tracks to heaven. For there is one way to be reconciled to God: Christ reconciles us to God by uniting us to Himself. And that means we become one body, Jew, and Gentile.

Exclusion is horrible

- One of the worst feelings you will ever experience is that of feeling excluded.
- Paul is writing to a church, particularly one that is full of Gentile (non-Jewish) believers in Jesus Christ. The division between Jews and Gentiles in that day was one of the most fundamental divisions in the first century world. These tensions would have been felt as Jews and Gentiles came together in the church as followers of Jesus Christ.

Let me give you a bit of a taste of what the tensions were like between these groups:

- In the Jewish temple, signs were posted at the barrier separating the Court of the Gentiles from the Court of the Israelites. They have found two of these. The signs said: *"No foreigner is allowed to enter within...Whoever is caught will be personally responsible for his ensuing death."* Some believed that Gentiles were made as fuel for the fires of hell, and that it was wrong to help a Gentile woman give birth, because it would bring another heathen into the world.
- Gentiles were also suspicious of the Jewish people. Plato said barbarians (non-Greeks) were his enemies by nature. Closer to the time that Ephesians was written, a Roman historian wrote, *"The Greeks wage a truce-less war against people of other races, against barbarians."* The tensions between the two groups would have been monumental.
- Because these tensions are not part of our world, it is tempting to think this passage has nothing to do with us. But this passage is still about us: most of us are Gentiles, so this is about us, even if we do not feel it. Not only that, but our world is still full of these types of divisions.
- The world is divided into two groups: people who are like us, and people who are not.
- We feel these divisions in society when we are with someone who is from a different group than us. These tensions can spill into the church in all kinds of ways as well when diverse kinds of people come together as followers of Jesus Christ.

So, what do we learn from this passage?

Paul tells us about how significant the differences are...

He writes in verses 11 and 12 of Ephesians Chapter 2:

- (11) Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—*
(12) that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

If you look at this, there are five things that separate those of us who are Gentiles from the covenant God made with Israel:

1. "separate from Christ" - Israel had the expectation of a coming Messiah who would triumph over all their enemies; Gentiles had no such hope.
 2. "excluded from citizenship in Israel" - God had chosen to be known by Israel and no-one else. If you were non-Jewish, you were excluded from all of God's blessings unless you became Jewish.
 3. "foreigners of the covenants of the promise" - God made all kinds of promises in the Old Testament based on his covenants with Israel. The Gentiles - that is us - had no share in these promises.
 4. "without hope" - As bad as things got in Israel, the faithful always had God's promises. They believed in the promised messianic salvation. Gentiles had no such hope.
 5. "without God in the world" - Gentiles had gods, but they did not have the one true God. So, it is like Israel had the one true God and the rest of us had fakes.
- Put this altogether and you have a picture of our exclusion: cut off from the Messiah, cut off from God as King, as well as all His promises; cut off from hope, and from God himself. Paul wants the readers of this letter to feel the significance of their exclusion, not only from Israel but their exclusion from a covenantal relationship with God and all its benefits.
 - One of the major themes of the book of Ephesians is God's eternal purpose to bring all things together under Christ.
 - Most of us are tribal by nature. We divide by class, race, economics, age, music. This is true not only in society, which is very fragmented. It is also true within the church.

But then Paul applies the Gospel to these differences

- You may be thinking, "What does the gospel have to do with any of this?" There is a lot of confusion about the gospel today. We tend to think it is about how someone becomes a Christian. For Paul, though, the gospel is much more comprehensive than that. The gospel is not just about individual souls going to heaven. It is not just that God has reconciled us to Himself; He has also reconciled us to each other.

Read what Paul says in verses 13 to 18:

- (13) But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*
(14) For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation,

(15) *having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace,*
(16) *and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.*
(17) *And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near.*
(18) *For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.*

- Paul is clear: the solution to exclusion and alienation and division is nothing less than Jesus Christ and his work at the cross. Peace is found in a person: Jesus Christ. That is why verse 14 says, *"He is our peace."* He has overcome every division that separates Jews from Gentiles.
- And you cannot miss this. Before, the world was divided into two kinds of people: Jew and Gentile. But Paul says now there are three kinds of people: Jews, Gentiles, and the church. *"His purpose was to create in Himself one new humanity out of the two..."* (Ephesians 2:15). There is a new category of people now.
- God has already begun to bring together people who would otherwise have nothing in common and make them into a new people. In other passages, Paul makes it clear that this obliterates all that separates us and makes us one in Christ Jesus. The Gospel is the good news that God reconciles us to Himself, and to one another.
- This means that whenever we separate in the church according to our distinctives - age, class, culture, economics, music - we are acting contrary to the nature of the gospel. One of the purposes of the church is to show to the world what it is like when God's reconciling power brings people together who would otherwise have nothing to do with each other.
- One of the prime evidences of God's power to our segregated world is a congregation which transcends cultural barriers, including age.
- The Gospel is the good news that God reconciles us to Himself, and to one another. It breaks down all the barriers and makes us into a new humanity in which all the divisions that separate us are destroyed.

Next week we are going to continue with this theme and look at verses 19 to 22 and what this means to the Church.

Discussion questions:

There is nothing wrong with differences among people, but we should never turn a difference into a barrier.

1. **How can we make sure that we don't turn our convictions about God into barriers in our church community?**
2. **God loves the world – What Good News can we tell the world about God's plan and purpose?**
3. **God hates discrimination – How can we make sure that our faith does not alienate us from a world that needs God?**