

Ephesians 2:11-22: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Ephesians chapter 2 verses 11 to 22. Ephesians chapter 2 verses 11 to 22.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Paul began Ephesians chapter 2 by focusing upon God's work in the lives of his recipients in a more general fashion.

Now, however, he focuses his attention more directly upon what God has done for them as a body of people, especially as Gentiles. Once again, he describes their previous condition. Their condition was one of outsidership and otherness relative to the Jewish people of God.

They were separated from Christ, detached from all of the blessings found in the Messiah. They were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, cut off from the many benefits enjoyed by Israel as the people of God.

[1 : 58] They were strangers to the covenants of promise, foreigners to the promises and to the bond that united God to his people and assured them of future blessings. In many ways, this second half of Ephesians chapter 2 is covering the ground covered by the first half of the chapter, yet on a higher level.

The first time around, our attention was focused upon the deliverance from spiritual death and entrance into new spiritual life, but now we are focusing upon our deliverance from alienation, separation and exclusion, and our entrance into a new body of fellowship.

The previous condition was one in which Jews and Gentiles, the circumcised and the uncircumcised, were divided from each other. Gentiles were cut off from the Messiah, who was the king of the Jews, not their king.

They did not enjoy the blessings enjoyed by Israel, who had the oracles of God entrusted to them, among other things. They were not included in the covenants, and they were without God in the world.

They were not marked out by his name as the Jewish people were. Paul is here describing a state of separation, a state of being excluded that is operating on several interrelated levels.

[3 : 04] New Testament passages such as this can be slightly perplexing to many readers. The close attention that the Apostle Paul gives to addressing categories of circumcised and uncircumcised, Jew and Gentile, can seem quite foreign to us, belonging to a way of ordering the world and its peoples that has long since passed.

Furthermore, why such categories should have any bearing upon or relevance to the operations of God's grace is unclear. After this passage, Paul proceeds to argue that he has been entrusted with the revelation of a great mystery, hidden in ages past, which has since been revealed, the mystery that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.

If this is the great mystery that the world has been waiting for, something about it seems anticlimactic. From our vantage point, the revelation might seem a little like a damp squib.

I suspect that much of our struggle to appreciate the significance of the mystery arises from our failure to recognise the centrality and character of the Church in Paul's understanding of salvation.

For Paul, the formation of the Church, as a concrete historical polity, is not a sideshow in his account of Christ's work. It's a central feature. In verses 11-12, Paul calls upon the Ephesians to remember their former state, that of uncircumcised Gentiles, aliens from the Commonwealth of Israel, etc.

[4 : 26] As Stephen Fowle highlights, the designation Gentile only made sense within Judaism, or in relation to Judaism. Within these verses, Paul is calling upon the heroes of the epistle to reconceive their past, to regard their former identities in a manner that is only possible from an in-Christ vantage point.

The retrospective nature of this characterisation is noteworthy. Few non-Jews would have considered themselves naturally to be having no hope and no God in the world, nor would they have thought of themselves as being alienated.

Fowle writes, This act of remembering their past as a Gentile past has a dual function. First, by recalling their state as Gentiles before God, the Ephesians can come to see themselves in the very particular ways in which God saw them.

It is equally important, however, that by remembering their past as a Gentile past, a past that is thereby in relation, albeit a negative one, to Judaism, Paul can begin to describe more precisely the nature of the reconciliation accomplished in Christ.

In fact, if Christians fail to grasp this, they may end up misperceiving what is involved in reconciliation today. In the process of describing the Ephesians' former identity, Paul also unsettles Jewish categories.

[5 : 40] The word called, preceding both the uncircumcision and the circumcision, suggests that Paul questioned the legitimacy or the significance of these designations, an impression that is bolstered by the clause that follows, which is made in the flesh by hands.

Made by hands is elsewhere used of pagan idols or shrines, Daniel chapter 5 verse 4, Acts chapter 17 verse 24, demonstrating their insufficiency to accommodate or to represent God.

In the New Testament, it is also used in reference to the Jerusalem temple, where it draws attention to the transitory character of the edifice. Likewise, the term flesh in Paul is typically contrasted with the spirit and its efficacy in the New Covenant.

In suggesting his contestation of these Jewish categories, Paul is probably subtly directing the attention of his hearers to a more fundamental circumcision of the heart by the spirit promised in the New Covenant.

Paul declares that the Gentiles who were once alienated are brought near through the blood of Christ in verse 13. Some hearing Paul's argument to this point might be wrong-footed by the expectation that the Gentiles will have been brought near by being made members of Israel.

[6 : 50] They are brought near, however, not by being made members of Israel, but by becoming members of an entirely new polity, the Church. Once again, that which affects our deliverance is the work of Christ.

Here, interestingly though, it is the death of Christ that is more foregrounded, whereas in the earlier section it was the resurrection that was the focus. Paul's point here about what Christ accomplished in his cross is similar to that which he made in Colossians 2, verses 13-14.

And you who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands.

This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. Christ brings about peace, breaking down division. He deals with the law that locks the Jews up and locks the Gentiles out. Christ doesn't just bring peace though.

As Paul puts it here, he himself is our peace. Christ himself holds together in his body God and man, and man and man. Those formerly divided are now united in the single body of the Messiah.

[7 : 54] Some have seen here a reference to the dividing wall between the outer and the inner area of the temple, the latter being restricted to Jews only. This is likely somewhere in the background, especially as he goes on to talk about a new temple being formed.

But Paul's point is more general. This has all occurred in Christ's flesh, and it has occurred through the way that Christ deals with the law. The law stood against both Jews and Gentiles in different ways.

It locked the Jews up under its condemnation, while it locked the Gentiles out. The law is abolished as the law of commandments expressed in ordinances. In Colossians chapter 2 verse 14, a similar expression refers especially to the law as a set of ascetic regulations.

It might be most appropriate to see this as an abolishing of the law as a system of flesh regulation. The law is of course fulfilled, as Paul makes plain in Romans chapter 8 and elsewhere, but its fulfillment is a transformation.

It is no longer the caterpillar of commandments expressed in ordinances, but the butterfly of life in the spirit. The obstacle of the law can be dealt with, of course, because the flesh and the condemnation that lies over it have been dealt with.

[9 : 03] The consequence is the peace of which he is speaking, peace between Jews and Gentiles and among men, and peace with God. Enmity has been removed. Christ's message of peace, the message of the gospel, has been declared to those who were far off, Gentiles, and to those who were near, Jews, and it has been declared to both alike.

It is interesting to observe the way that Paul speaks of Christ himself giving this message. Christ is so involved with and active with and identified with his messengers that when his messengers speak to us, it is as if he himself was speaking directly to us.

The peace that we enjoy is one by which we both alike have access through Christ in the one spirit, the Father. Once again, the underlying Trinitarian grammar of Paul's gospel can be seen here.

We are already here getting an intimation of the argument that he will make in chapter 4 too, where the unity of the church is closely connected to the oneness of God. The death of Christ overcomes not only the condemnation that Israel lies under, but also the division within the human race.

In Christ, the quarantining of Israel from the nations has ended, and one new undivided humanity can be formed of the two. The reconciliation of the divided humanity is accomplished as both Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to God, enjoying access in one spirit to the Father.

[10 : 22] The human race is united as it draws near to God. Paul describes our state following the work of Christ in verses 19-22, no longer strangers and aliens, but full members of the household of God, with all of God's other holy people.

Paul infuses his architectural imagery with organic imagery. We are a structure that is joined together, which is growing into a holy temple for God's dwelling place. Verses 21-22 are parallel to chapter 4 verses 15-16, where Paul writes, Here the accent is upon the organic, rather than the architectural imagery, but the parallel is illuminating.

The notion of a living and growing temple body is not exclusive to Paul, but can be found in other New Testament passages, such as John chapter 2 verses 19-21 and 1 Peter chapter 2 verse 5.

It is also implicit in the imagery of Acts chapter 2 and the day of Pentecost. This temple, this building in which Jew and Gentile are brought together in fellowship with God, is built up in conformity to Christ, through acts of communication, speaking the truth in love, and acts of loving mutual service.

It is this international body of persons that is the temple within which God now dwells. This claim is absolutely integral to Paul's understanding of the Christian message. Essential to the progress of the building project is the establishment of loving communication and service between Jews and Gentiles.

[12 : 07] Even with the wall of division between them removed, the edifice of the new temple would risk being riven in twain by a huge crack, were such bonds between Jews and Gentiles not formed and maintained.

This, of course, is one of the reasons why Paul expresses such passionate concern about the situation in Antioch that he recounts in Galatians chapter 2, where Jews were withdrawing from fellowship with Gentiles.

The eschatological temple is a feat of international relations springing up out of the overflowing grace of the gospel. As contemporary Christians reading these passages, we can fumble for conceptual rationales for the intensity of Paul's concern to hold Jews and Gentiles together.

The principles that most readily present themselves to the consciousness of readers informed by the tradition of Western liberalism are typically those of inclusivity, equality, and non-discrimination. Yet these principles have seldom fuelled quite such an intense impulse towards the concrete outworking of unity between people groups, as Paul displays in these epistles. They can commonly focus our attention primarily upon individuals rather than concrete historical communities of people.

[13 : 15] In focusing upon such categories, we risk missing the character of Paul's concerns and his understanding. Paul's point has less to do with an abstract principle of the equality of individuals and much more to do with the overcoming of divisions between peoples within the arena of history.

The oneness, he declares, is not primarily a rejection of the significance of the differences between Jews and Gentiles, but his insistence that difference no longer presents a division or obstacle. It has been traversed by the grace of Christ's gospel. Likewise, the unity, he proclaims, does not straightforwardly underwrite liberal values of inclusivity and non-discrimination. The inclusion and non-discrimination that Paul proclaims is not founded upon absolute moral principle, but upon a historical achievement.

It is a unity that has been brought forth from a prior situation of divinely established exclusion and discrimination. God had elected Israel and the Gentiles were excluded from that.

The mystery is that God's purpose was that this discrimination and exclusion should one day serve the blessing of all. The difference between Jews and Gentiles established by the Torah is of great importance to Paul, although he presents this difference in terms of its penultimacy to the new covenant order of the church.

[14 : 30] The significance given to the difference between those who were aliens and strangers and those who were citizens and members of the household, between those who were near and those who were far off, is a reminder that the church is a polity forged through God's decisive action with distinct peoples in history.

Differences are not necessarily expunged in this new order. Love and grace are particularising. They address us all in our uniqueness. But the divisions they once established are traversed by the working of God's grace.

As the new organic human temple is built up, it is a light to the world, a pattern of how things really ought to be, a foretaste of the future, where the nations give up the ways of war and join together as one to feast at God's table.

A question to consider. What might it mean that the church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets? A question to consider.