

“The Household of God”

The Fifth in a Series of Sermons on Ephesians

Texts: Ephesians 2:11-22; Isaiah 49:1-7

One of the most important issues facing Christians in the apostolic era was the racial divide between Jew and Gentile. When a Gentile came to believe that Jesus was the Son of God, many Jews expected that Gentile to now live as a Jew. This meant undergoing circumcision and keeping a Kosher diet—no small thing. Jesus was, after all, Israel’s Messiah and his coming marked the dawn of the messianic age, a period which many Jews thought would be characterized by zealous obedience to the law of God. Most Gentiles had been raised to believe in the pantheon of pagan gods, and so when they became Christians, they soon learned that much of their previously acceptable behavior was not only offensive to Jews, but was also in direct violation of the law of God. This difference in perspective created a huge divide between Jew and Gentile and provoked much conflict in the early church. When Paul writes his circular letter to the churches in Asia Minor (that letter we know as the letter of Paul to the Ephesians), at some point the Apostle must address the role of Jew and Gentile in God’s redemptive purposes so as to make sure that both his Jewish and Gentile readers clearly understand how the coming of Jesus Christ was intended to remove these divisions over race and culture which arise from human sinfulness.

We return to our series on Ephesians, and we take up the second half of Ephesians chapter two (vv. 11-22). Recall that Paul composed this epistle in about A.D. 62 while imprisoned in Rome. As we have noted, it is likely that the Book of Ephesians was originally composed as a circular letter which was intended to be read in a number of churches. But the letter eventually became identified with the predominantly Gentile church in the city of Ephesus (in Western Asia Minor). Paul’s letter has two main sections. In the first section (1:1-3:21), Paul describes the work of Christ in relation to God’s eternal purposes. The Apostle explains how God’s purposes are worked out in redemptive history “in Christ.” In the second part of the letter (4:1-6:24), Paul discusses Christ’s formation of his church and our collective role in that new society formed by the Savior himself. Paul speaks in some detail of the church, and the gifts given it by the Holy Spirit. Paul will describe what it means to walk in love, and he will speak about transformed relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, slaves and masters, before describing the spiritual weapons the Lord has given us which enable us to endure the trials as well as resist the temptations of this present evil age.

In the opening chapter, Paul sets out what we’ve been calling the panorama of redemption—the box top of the puzzle, if you will. The Apostle takes us from eternity past (when God decreed to save his elect in Christ) all the way until the redemption of our bodies—the day the Lord Jesus returns to raise the dead, judge the world, and make all things new. Paul speaks in overtly Trinitarian terms of how the Father chose to save his elect in Christ, how he sent his son Jesus to provide for the redemption of those whom the Father had chosen, and then how the Holy Spirit calls all those to faith all those whom the Father has chosen, for whom the Son has died. This is the grand pattern of redemption—redemption decreed, redemption accomplished, and redemption applied.

We have also seen how Paul’s emphasis upon the big picture of God’s eternal plan enables him to offer hope to God’s people, no matter how difficult their current circumstances. Since God has decreed to save elect sinners in Christ, God will bring each of those whom he has chosen to that goal which he has decreed for them. Paul reminds his hearers that it was God’s love which moved him to save sinners “in

Christ”—people who neither deserved, nor could earn their salvation. Paul has made the case that it is Jesus’ resurrection which demonstrates that God has the power to make good on his promises. Because of these two facts (God is love, and God has power even over death and the grave), Paul directs us to the present rule of Christ, who not only rules over this age (which is destined to perish) but also over the age to come (things eternal). Simply put, because God has decreed in eternity past to save his people, the Savior himself is directing all of human history to bring this to pass.

In the first ten verses of Ephesians 2, Paul calls our attention to the fact that the human predicament is such that there is no one worthy of salvation. Despite human sinfulness and inability, God chose to save us in Christ even while we were still dead in sin, and both unable and unwilling to do anything about our predicament. In fact, Paul reminds us that we were by nature children of wrath (we deserve God’s judgment since we are fallen in Adam), and at one time we all lived our lives for the sole purpose of gratifying our sinful desires (what Paul calls the flesh). Paul reminds us yet again that because God is rich in mercy, in love God chose to save us “in Christ.” This is the basis for Paul’s remarkable assertion that “it is by grace that we have been saved through faith, not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Paul grounds his earlier prayer that God’s people might live in hope upon the fact that God already sees those who have been chosen as raised and seated in heavenly places with Christ who has saved them. Therefore, we need not worry that God will be gracious to us for a time, and then suddenly lose interest in us, or become disgusted with us, and then cast us away. No, Paul’s point is that God will complete that work he has already begun in us. Our salvation is firmly grounded in God’s love, grace, and mercy, and not in anything we may do. Those whom God saves by his grace through faith now become his workmanship, “created in Christ,” as Paul puts it, “to do good works.” While we are not in any sense saved by good works, we will not be saved apart from them. The same faith which justifies us, also begins the process of sanctification.

This brings us to our text, Ephesians 2:11-22, one of the most significant but overlooked sections in this epistle, if not in all the Bible.

I grew up as a dispensationalist and believed with every fiber of my being that God had two distinct plans for the human race. God’s primary plan centered around the salvation of national Israel and the Jewish people. This, I thought, was God’s main purpose and everything else (including the salvation of the Gentiles) was kind of a sideshow. The other plan (“plan B” as some dispensational writers spoke of it) was a temporary period (the church age) wherein God decided to deal with the Gentiles only because Israel had rejected their Messiah (Jesus) when he came to save them. In this scheme, God will continue to deal primarily with Gentiles until the time of the Rapture when God removes Gentile believers from the earth, and then returns to his original plan which is to save Israel from the antichrist and the nations of the revived Roman empire at the battle of Armageddon. I believed this with everything in me, until I read carefully Ephesians 2:11-22 and discovered that God’s purpose was to make the two peoples (Jew and Gentile) one in Christ. Paul was crystal clear—God doesn’t have two distinct redemptive plans for Jew and Gentile, rather he had one plan which included both Jew and Gentile. And the scope of that one plan is to save both people by the same savior, through the same means, which completely contradicts the dispensationalist’s notion that God has two distinct purposes for Jew and Gentile.

The second half of Ephesians 2 is also significant in that Paul again addresses the historical outworking of God’s purpose in choosing to save his elect in Christ, in sending his son to secure their salvation, and in having his Spirit call and seal those whom the Father has chosen and for whom the Son has died. This time Paul focuses on the fact that from this chosen and redeemed humanity, God will create a new

society, his church. This means that Christianity transcends culture and race, and cannot be identified with either. The foundation of God's church (the household of God) will be none other than Jesus Christ himself and the doctrines he taught his apostles. While this church will become the place where God's Spirit dwells with his people during this age (not in an earthly temple), Paul reminds his Gentile readers that while they were once strangers and foreigners, because of the redemptive work of Jesus, they have been brought into the household of God (his family, or new society), and together, with the Jews made into one people. Paul cannot talk about the course of redemptive history without at some point addressing the fact that Jesus came to make reconciliation between these two peoples (Jew and Gentile) and unite them into one, so that as Christ's church they become the temple of the living God.

Although Paul has already addressed the human condition earlier in chapter two—(we are “dead in sin” and by nature “children of wrath,”) he begins this discussion by directly focusing upon the spiritual condition of the Gentiles. In Paul's day, most Jews were fully aware of all the blessings God had give to Israel. In fact, the main source of the problem between Jew and Gentile was that Jews were so proud of their role in redemptive history, that they would often lord their advantages over recent Gentile converts to Christianity. It was commonplace for a pious Jew to give thanks that they were not born a Gentile, and this ethnic pride carried over into the early church.¹ But since Paul is writing to a predominantly Gentile church, it is imperative that he remind of them of their fate if God had left them on their own. While the Jews were certainly wrong to boast about these advantages, nevertheless, the advantages were real.

And so in verses 11-12, Paul writes, *“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—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.”* Circumcision was the sign and seal of the Abrahamic covenant (the covenant of grace), and there is a fair bit of irony regarding the usage of the term in Paul's day. Because Gentiles did not bear in their flesh the sign of God's favor, Jews regarded them as “unclean” and therefore as possessing none of the benefits which Israel possessed because the nation was chosen by God and given the sign and seal of the covenant. For a Jew of Paul's day, the term “uncircumcision” was the derogatory term applied to any Gentile. To come into a right relationship with YHWH, Jews fully expected a Gentile convert to be circumcised. That, of course, opened the door for the Judaizing heresy which plagued the churches in Galatia. The Judaizers were teaching that circumcision was required in order for a Gentile to be justified, an error which Paul calls another gospel and soundly refutes.

On the other hand, the Gentiles of Paul's day viewed circumcision as some sort of weird religious ceremony which marked the Jews off from the rest of the civilized world. Jews were often viewed with disdain by Gentiles because they worshiped only one God (not the pantheon of “gods”), and that the Jewish God required very strange things of those who followed him—circumcision and dietary laws, for example. Sadly, because this sign of religious identification was so visible in a world of public bathing, it became a constant stumbling block to both Jew and Gentile. Jews had forgotten that true circumcision was a circumcision of the heart not the skin, while Gentiles thought the whole thing just plain weird, and regarded Jews as outsiders, lurking on the fringes of society.

So, here in the second half of Ephesians, Paul's point is that Gentiles must consider what true circumcision means. God chose Israel as his own people. Gentiles did not have a covenant relationship

¹ Bruce, Ephesians, 292.

with YHWH, and knew nothing of the sign of the covenant (circumcision)—to their own shame. Paul’s Gentile readers need to carefully consider the fact that they were completely separated from the covenant of grace of which Jesus Christ was the mediator. Nor were they a part of God’s people and citizens of God’s holy nation (or “commonwealth”) through that covenant which was established at Mount Sinai. Gentiles were strangers to God’s covenant and all of its promises. To put it bluntly, without such a covenant relationship with YHWH, Gentiles had no hope. Gentiles were without God in the world. They were lost and Israel had all the advantages.

But the coming of Jesus changed everything. Not only did God manifest his love and grace and mercy in the person of his Son, but in Jesus Christ’s redemptive work on behalf of his people, God brought all of his elect, both Gentile (who were strangers to the covenants of promise and without God and hope in this world) and Jew (who had all the advantages up until now) near to himself through the sacrifice of Jesus upon the cross. As Paul states in verse 13, *“but now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”* Without the shedding of Jesus’ blood, there is no covenant, there is no hope, there is no promise. But in the death of Jesus for us, all of those whom God has chosen (Jew and Gentile) are brought near to God. Jesus’ death upon the cross turned aside God’s wrath which we all (Jew and Gentile) deserve. It is Jesus’ death which effects reconciliation between God and sinners, which is why Paul can state in the opening phrase of verse 14, *“for he himself [Jesus] is our peace.”*

Because Jesus took in his own flesh the punishment for sin that I so rightly deserve, the ground (or basis) of God’s anger toward me (namely my sin) is no longer an issue. Jesus has died for all of our sins—past, present, and future. This means that in Jesus Christ, God is now gracious towards us and can draw near to us in love, when formerly we were objects of his wrath. And because I no longer relate to God as my judge, but as my Savior and friend, I can draw near to him. This is one reason why the Reformed do not believe that Jesus died for each and every person who has lived in each and every age. If he did, on what basis could God now judge them, since the guilt of their sin (the reason why they were strangers and aliens in the first place) would be removed, and they would be reconciled to God? No, Jesus died for all those chosen by the Father, but only those chosen by the Father .

Paul raises this point about the death of Christ (i.e., the gospel) being the basis of our peace with God, so as to make a very important point about the church. Not only is Jesus our peace with God, he is the basis of that peace to be enjoyed between Jew and Gentile in God’s new society (the church). As Paul puts it in the latter part of verse 14, [Jesus] *“has made us both one [Jew and Gentile] and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility.”* While Gentiles may not have caught Paul’s reference to the dividing wall of hostility, his Jewish readers would certainly get his point. The outer-court of the Jerusalem temple had a tall barrier which prevented Gentiles from entering the inner-court and which created a separate area in the outer-court called the “court of the Gentiles.” This was intended to be that place where the Gentiles could come and worship YHWH under the old covenant. Sadly, it was that place where the money-changers set up their wares, provoking the righteous anger of Jesus, who stated that this part of the temple had become a den of thieves instead of serving as a “house of prayer.”

The coming of Jesus ended the religious division between believing Jew and Gentile. The New Testament allows for Jews to still live as Jews (in terms of culture and diet), but makes no such requirement of Gentiles. The ceremonial aspects of the law are now fulfilled by Christ. All Gentiles need do is abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and food cooked in blood (so as not to offend Jews), and abstain from sexual immorality (because the law of God requires it). No longer are God’s people to be divided along racial, ceremonial, and cultural lines. Jesus destroyed all such divisions. In fact, it was his purpose to unite believing Jew and Gentile into one—a new society, God’s household, the church. And so

when Paul speaks of Jesus tearing down the dividing wall in his own flesh (a reference to Jesus' perfect obedience and suffering upon the cross), Jews would have understood his words to mean that in Jesus Christ, God totally destroyed that which formerly had divided Jew from Gentile. In the new temple (a topic which Paul is about to address) there is no longer a wall dividing Jew from Gentile, and which prevents Gentiles from full access into the inner court and the holy of holies. In the new temple of God (the church), all racial, cultural, and national barriers must pass away. "In Christ," Jews and Gentiles are now one people, God's household.

In verses 15-16, Paul is also clear that Jesus did this "*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, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.*" Since Jesus fulfilled all righteousness in his perfect obedience to the commandments of God, the ceremonial aspects of the law ("the law of commandments in ordinances") are no longer binding upon a Christian. Paul is not referring to the moral law (the Ten Commandments) which remains in force and binding upon a Christian (cf. Romans 3:31). Rather, Paul is here referring to the ceremonies and civil aspects of the Sinaitic covenant which have been done away with by Jesus. And if Jesus has done away with them, these things should no longer divide those whom the Father has chosen and for whom the son has died.

It was Jesus' purpose then to create one new man in Christ, who, in terms of the "new man's" standing before God, is neither Jew nor Gentile. Where there were two men before (Jew and Gentile), now only one stands, a justified sinner, at peace with God through the death of Christ. This "new man" is also at peace with all those for whom Christ has died who hail from every race and culture. When Jesus died on the cross, God made peace with us. In turn, God is no longer our judge but our friend, and we, who once were alienated from each other because of all kinds of sinful reasons (pride, racism, self-righteousness, etc.), are now to be reconciled to each other. Through the death of Jesus, God ended his hostility toward us, our hostility toward him, and our hostility toward each other.

Because it was God's purpose to unite Jew and Gentile, Christ's messianic mission was universal in scope. Although Jesus came to Israel, he preached to Gentiles on occasion in fulfillment of a number of messianic prophecies such as Isaiah 49:1-7 (our Old Testament lesson) in which the prophet foretold of a time when the gospel would be preached to distant coastlands, to people who were far off as well as near, and when Israel's Messiah would be a light to the Gentile nations. There can be no question that Paul's sees this prophecy (as well as others like it, such as Isaiah 52:7 and 57:19) as fulfilled in Jesus' messianic mission, and through his own office as apostle to the Gentiles. This is clear in verse 17 when Paul says of Jesus, "*he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.*" Therefore, it was the purpose of God from the beginning to save his elect (Jew and Gentile) through the person and work of his son as announced in the gospel, which was to be preached to the ends of the earth. This flies directly in the face of the dispensationalist notion that God has two people with two distinct plans of redemption. There is no sense here that the church "replaces" Israel (so-called "replacement theology"). Rather, God adds a gazillion believing (and elect) Gentiles along with Jewish believers to his spiritual household. It is better to see this as expansion theology, rather than as replacement theology!

Paul's point is that Jesus Christ removed all sinful human divisions. As Paul puts it in verse 18, "*for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.*" No longer can the Jew who is "in Christ" look down on the Gentile as religiously inferior. No longer can the Jew entertain a self-righteous sense of superiority when comparing themselves to a Gentile. And no longer can a Gentile view a believing Jew as some sort of religious zealot who deforms his body, and who thinks his kosher diet and religious feasts keeps him above human sin. Jew and Gentile alike are fallen in Adam. It is our common lot to be

sinner, guilty before God. We have no basis to judge one another—we are both guilty before God, despite Israel’s great advantages. But now elect Jews and Gentiles are made one in Christ, and should no longer be divided by diet, custom, or culture. Jesus died to do away such things, so therefore, Christians must see themselves as part of something greater than their ethnicity and culture. We are new men and women, reconciled to God and to each other by the blood of Christ. Together, we are members of a new society, God’s household

Paul makes this point quite explicitly in verses 19-22. *“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.”*

There are a number of important points in the closing verses of chapter two. We Gentiles have been brought near to God through the work of Christ, so that we are no longer strangers and aliens, outside the covenant and cut-off from its blessings. No, through Jesus’ death upon the cross, we have become fellow citizens in the household of God (his church), composed of the saints (those justified by the merits of Jesus Christ). This household is the church and has no national or racial identity. God’s household is his family, and we are his adopted children. This means that we are brothers and sisters in Christ, and have a deep bond, which, in many ways transcends all other earthly bonds, even that of family (in a certain sense) as well as race, social standing, wealth (or lack thereof), education, and anything else which divides people in a fallen world. This also means that after the coming of Jesus, there is no Christian nation, or Christian culture anywhere on the earth. There is Christ’s church, and wherever that church grows and flourishes, so does that nation flourish where members of that church act as salt and light.

Notice too that the household of God is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets—a reference to those twelve disciples whom God has called to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to summon both Jew and Gentile alike to trust in the Savior proclaimed in that gospel. That Savior is none other than Jesus Christ, who is the cornerstone (that stone upon which the temple’s foundation itself is set and centered). Paul is no doubt referring to Isaiah 28:16, which declares of the coming Messiah, *“therefore thus says the Lord God, ‘Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: ‘Whoever believes will not be in haste.’”* Not only is Jesus that one predicted by Isaiah, he is that one proclaimed to Jew and Gentile alike, who will now become living stones in that spiritual temple (the body of Jesus) built upon that very foundation which has for its cornerstone, the person and work of Christ (i.e., the gospel).

What should we take with us from this passage?

As both elect Jews and Gentiles hear the gospel and come to faith in Jesus Christ, together we are being added to this glorious spiritual temple (Christ’s church) in which the Spirit of the living God dwells in glory. And in this new temple there is no longer Jew or Gentile, but one new man (a “Christian”), who is saved by the blood of Jesus and indwelt by his Holy Spirit. This is what the Old Testament predicted and what Jesus accomplished. And he is the cornerstone of this glorious new household of God, made up of believing Jews and Gentiles, and indwelt by his blessed Holy Spirit.

If you trust in Jesus Christ, you are a full member of God’s household, indwelt by the blessed Holy Spirit. Those around you are your brothers and sisters in Christ. And this great privilege is ours only because our Savior Jesus shed his blood for us, and he is our peace. In God’s household, we are one.