

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND
THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL:
A STUDY OF EPHESIANS
(LESSON TWENTY-SIX)
“BUT NOW IN CHRIST JESUS”

EPHESIANS 2:11-22 (NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

11 Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh — who are called “uncircumcision” by the so-called “circumcision” that is performed on the body by human hands —

12 that you were at that time without the Messiah, alienated from the citizenship 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 used to be far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

14 For he is our peace, the one who made both groups into one and who destroyed the middle wall of partition, the hostility,

15 when he nullified in his flesh the law of commandments in decrees. He did this to create in himself one new man out of two, thus making peace,

16 and to reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by which the hostility has been killed.

17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near,

18 so that through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

19 So then you are no longer foreigners and noncitizens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God’s household,

20 because you have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

21 In him the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord,

22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

In the second half of **Ephesians 2** (verses **11-22**), the Apostle Paul focuses on the work of Christ for the Gentiles in particular, and on the reconciliation of Gentiles and Jews in their union with Christ. He explains to the believers in Ephesus, that those who have been saved by the grace of God, whether they are Jews or Gentiles, have become part of one body, or one family.

Paul knew that if Christianity was to impact the world in any significant way, it would be critical for the Jews and the Gentiles who had accepted Christ, to live together in love and unity in one body — the Church.

In verses **11-22**, Paul seeks to give a personal, ethical application of what he had written in verses **1-10**. In those verses, he had explained the wonderfully gracious manner in which God had worked effectively in the lives of the Ephesians in order to bring them to salvation in Christ Jesus. In light of the fact that the majority of the members of the Ephesian church were Gentiles, Paul addresses them in particular, in this section of his letter.

In verses **11-12**, he writes, *“Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh — who are called ‘uncircumcision’ by the so-called ‘circumcision’ that is performed on the body by human hands —that you were at that time without the Messiah, alienated from the citizenship of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”*

Paul emphasizes the wretchedness of their previous situation in order to magnify the wonder of God’s grace. Their past is recalled in order to draw attention to Christ’s mighty work on their behalf, to encourage in them an attitude of profound thankfulness to God, and to urge them to accept all that is involved in being God’s new creation in Christ. One of the things involved in being God’s new creation in Christ, is the recognition that Jewish and Gentile believers, having been reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ, have also been reconciled **to each other**. Paul wants to witness in the Ephesian church, the practical living-out of this reality.

The exhortation in verse **11** to *“remember”*, does not necessarily mean that they have actually forgotten who and what they were prior to their conversion. But Paul wants to call these matters to their attention so that they will have a greater understanding and appreciation of the past and the mighty reversal that God has effected in Christ, on their behalf. The privileges which they now enjoy will be appreciated all the more if they reflect carefully upon the awful spiritual condition from which they had been rescued.

In these verses, Paul lists five things that were true of these uncircumcised Gentiles before the grace of God intervened in their lives. The word that best describes their pre-conversion state is the word “without.” They had been without Christ, without citizenship, without covenants, without hope, and without God. In other words, they had been Christless, stateless, friendless, hopeless, and Godless!

Out of the darkness and despair, out of the helplessness and hopelessness of their pre-conversion condition, the Gentiles in Ephesus have emerged directly into the splendour and rapture of salvation. They are now *“in Christ.”* This great change is described in verse **13**: *“But now in Christ Jesus you who used to be far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”*

The *“but now”* in this verse, is a parallel to the *“but God”* in verse **4**. Both *“buts”* speak of the gracious intervention of God on behalf of lost sinners.

In verses **11** and **12**, Paul uses the words *“formerly”* and *“at that time”* in speaking of the state of the Gentile Christians before they were saved. The words *“but now”* in verse **13** are in direct contrast with these words.

“*But now*” indicates that a wonderful change has occurred in the lives of these Gentiles that has drastically altered the scenario that existed “*formerly, at that time.*” “*But now*” points out that the present situation is different.

*Definitely changed, my life belongs to Jesus
I'm not the one I was, I've been rearranged.
The story of my life, has gone from rags to riches,
I never understood, why before was not this good,
I'm definitely changed.*

*Definitely changed, my life has found new meaning,
I have been renewed, delivered from sin's stains.
Distinctively transformed, by the precious blood of Calvary,
I'm not all I want to be, but, I know, I've been set free,
I'm definitely changed.*

The Gentiles who “*used to be far away have been brought near.*” This expression has an Old Testament background. In the Old Testament dispensation, there was a sense in which God dwelt in the temple in Jerusalem. Israel, therefore, was “*nearby.*” On the other hand, the Gentiles were “*far away.*” Not only was this true geographically, but it was even truer in a spiritual sense, for they generally lacked a knowledge of the one, true and living God.

It was never God’s intention, however, for this estrangement of the Gentiles to be permanent. In **Isaiah 57:19** we read, “*I am the one who gives them reason to celebrate. Complete prosperity is available both to those who are **far away** and those who are nearby,’ says the LORD, ‘and I will heal them.’”*

In **Acts 2:39**, Peter told the crowd that had assembled on the day of Pentecost, “*For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are **far away**, as many as the Lord our God will call to himself.*”

The Gentiles who were far away have now been brought near. They have been brought near “*by the blood of Christ.*” This expression is pregnant with meaning, and signifies that Christ’s violent death on the cross as a sacrifice, is the means by which the Gentiles have been brought near. At the cross, both the Jews and the Gentiles were reconciled to God and to each other.

Verse **13** serves as a bridge between the description of Gentile life apart from God and the celebration of Christ’s work of peace. Whereas, verses **11–12** describe what was **once** true for the Gentile readers of this letter, Christ has **now** changed all that. **You** — Gentiles, the **far away** excluded outsiders — have been brought **near**.

In verses **14-15**, Paul continues, “*For he is our peace, the one who made both groups into one and who destroyed the middle wall of partition, the hostility, when he nullified in his flesh the law of commandments in decrees. He did this to create in himself one new man out of two, thus making peace.*”

The intensive use of the pronoun “*he*” in the Greek text gives us, “For He Himself is our peace, or He alone is our peace.” He, Himself is our peace in that what the Law with all its ordinances and sacrifices could not do, He alone in His own person, has done for He is the very embodiment of peace. In his capacity as the Prince of Peace (**Isaiah 9:6**) He has brought about peace by means of His voluntary sacrifice. It is not only that the peace was made by Christ, but peace is so identified with Him that if He were not continually present, it would fail. Peace is so dependent on Him that apart from Him, we cannot have it.

In **John 16:33**, our Lord said to His disciples, “*I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In the world you have trouble and suffering, but take courage — I have conquered the world.*” The “*peace*” of which our Lord speaks here, can be enjoyed only by communion with Himself. In Him and in Him alone is peace to be found. The meaning of “*in me*” is “in union with me” or “in fellowship with me.”

The “*trouble and suffering,*” is not to be limited to the hostility of the ungodly. It is a general term for distress of any kind. Structurally, the phrase “*in the world*” is in contrast with the phrase “*in me.*” Since “*the world*” refers to the world of evil in its opposition to God, it is the world that is the source of the trouble and suffering that the disciples will experience.

The word “*peace*” is a translation of the Greek word **eiréné (i-ray'-nay)**, which speaks to “the joining together of the essential parts to make a whole.” To make peace, therefore, means “to join together that which is separated.” The Jews and the Gentiles had been separated by God’s act of selecting the Jewish nation to be the channel through which He would bring salvation to the lost. Now, in the blood of Christ they have been joined together in one body — the Church. The Lord Jesus Christ is our peace both in terms of our relation to God and in terms of our relations one to another.

As we noted in our previous **Lesson**, there had long been a great obstacle, a hatred-barrier or “*middle wall of partition*” between the Jews and the Gentiles. When Paul speaks about this “*middle wall of partition,*” there may be an allusion to the barricade which, in Jerusalem, separated the court of the Gentiles from the temple proper

in Jerusalem. On this barricade, there was an inscription threatening death to any non-Jew who tried to pass it. It read as follows: “**No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the sanctuary and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.**”

But the allusion to that literal barricade is only by way of illustration. What the apostle was actually speaking of was something far more serious and dreadful than a barricade. What Paul was really referring to was the chronic, deep-seated hostility that existed between the two groups. Humanly speaking, the wall of hatred and contempt that divided the Jews and the Gentiles had been strengthened by centuries of mutual condemnation and defamation. And yet amazingly, Jesus Christ, the Peace-maker, had broken down this “*middle wall of partition.*” Believing Jews and believing Gentiles were now dwelling together in unity in the midst of a world full of confusion, bitterness and trauma. How had this been accomplished? Jesus Christ had broken down the wall of hostility.

How did He do it? He did it by nullifying or ending *“in his flesh the law of commandments in decrees.”* Our Lord destroyed the middle wall of partition when He abolished the Law by His death on the Cross. The Law was the strength of the dividing wall because it made a definite distinction between Jews and Gentiles. The divine ordinances given by God to Israel, stood as a wall between the Jews and the other nations. In order for peace to be established between the Jews and the Gentiles, the Law had to be abolished. *“In His flesh,”* that is, in His crucified body, Christ abolished the Law. Paul emphasizes this point in **Colossians 2:13-15**: *“And even though you were dead in your transgressions and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, he nevertheless made you alive with him, having forgiven all your transgressions. He has destroyed what was against us, a certificate of indebtedness expressed in decrees opposed to us. He has taken it away by nailing it to the cross. Disarming the rulers and authorities, he has made a public disgrace of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”*

The cost of destroying the *“middle wall of partition”* was the blood of Christ. When He died, the veil in the temple was literally torn in two, and figuratively, the wall of separation was torn down. By fulfilling the demands of the Law in His righteous life, and by bearing the curse of the Law in His sacrificial death, Jesus removed the legal barrier that separated the Jews from the Gentiles. For centuries, there was a difference between them. In **Romans 10:12–13**, Paul wrote: *“For there is no distinction between the Jew and the Greek, for the same Lord is Lord of all, who richly blesses all who call on him. For **everyone** who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

The Law no longer holds sway over either the Jews or the Gentiles, since, in Christ, believers are not under Law but under grace. The righteousness of the Law, revealing God’s holiness, is still God’s standard. But this is fulfilled in the believer by the Holy Spirit according to **Romans 8:1-4**:

1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

2 For the law of the life-giving Spirit in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death.

3 For God achieved what the law could not do because it was weakened through the flesh. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and concerning sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,

4 so that the righteous requirement of the law may be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Paul informs us that our Lord *“did this to create in himself one new man out of two, thus making peace.”* Christ has not simply made one man where formerly there were two, but He has made one **new** man. Something entirely new has been created. The old distinctions between Jew and Gentile have been lost in a new man — the *“in Christ”* man. The Greek word translated *“new”* does not refer to that which is new in the sense of time, but rather to that which is new in quality.

It took the early church a long time to get accustomed to the fact that *“there is no distinction!”* In fact, some religious groups have not learned the lesson yet, for they are trying to get Christians back under Law. Paul warns believers against this in **Galatians 4:8-12**:

8 Before you Gentiles knew God, you were slaves to so-called gods that do not even exist.

9 So now that you know God (or should I say, now that God knows you), why do you want to go back again and become slaves once more to the weak and useless spiritual principles of this world?

10 You are trying to earn favor with God by observing certain days or months or seasons or years.

11 I fear for you. Perhaps all my hard work with you was for nothing.

12 Dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to live as I do in freedom from these things, for I have become like you Gentiles — free from those laws.

(New Living Translation)

He does the same in **Colossians 2:16-23**:

16 So don't let anyone condemn you for what you eat or drink, or for not celebrating certain holy days or new moon ceremonies or Sabbaths.

17 For these rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. And Christ himself is that reality.

18 Don't let anyone condemn you by insisting on pious self-denial or the worship of angels, saying they have had visions about these things. Their sinful minds have made them proud,

19 and they are not connected to Christ, the head of the body. For he holds the whole body together with its joints and ligaments, and it grows as God nourishes it.

20 You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world. So why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as,

21 "Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!"?

22 Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them.

23 These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires.

(New Living Translation)

I earnestly pray and hope that it will not take as long for us at the Grace Workshop Ministries to get accustomed to the fact that "*there is no distinction,*" and that we will live out that reality to the glory of God and the benefit of each other!