

## STUDY ON THE BOOK OF EPHESIANS

### THE CHURCH

Read Ephesians 2:11-16

#### **Introduction**

We humans struggle with being around people who are different from us -- different languages, different customs, different history, different skin colour. The church, too, had to overcome this kind of problem that threatened to divide the church -- the seeming chasm between the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers.

Paul tackles this perceived division head on, finding his answer in Christ himself. He says that bringing salvation to the Gentiles and making them a full part of the people of God has always been God's plan, a mystery hidden from everyone until God reveals it through the Church. Finally, Paul concludes this section of the letter with a marvellous prayer and doxology. Bring us together, Lord!

#### **Separated from Christ**

*“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—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.” (vv11-12)*

Paul begins by listing the elements of the Gentiles' spiritual condition pre-Christ:

- **Uncircumcised**, lacking that ancient mark of being part of the Covenant Family of God...
- **Without Christ**, utterly cut off from the Messiah...
- **Excluded from citizenship** among the people of God, aliens...
- **Foreigners to the covenants** made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, which tied the people to God with responsibilities and gave them wonderful promises...
- **Without hope** or certainty or promise for the present, or for the future; and
- **Without God** in the world.

Pretty depressing. The phrase "with hope and without God in the world" echoes in my head as describing utter aloneness. Many of our friends and neighbours, co-workers and relatives could be described by these words. Maybe you, too, feel this way. A person who is not united to God through Christ is alone, is lost, is without hope.

We who know Christ have really Good News to share with people who are sometimes acutely aware of their loneliness. For people longing to belong, we offer inclusion into a loving family.

#### **Brought Near through His Blood**

*“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” (v13)*

"Brought near by the blood of Christ" is really a kind of shorthand to describe the process of our redemption. I want to explore this more fully, since the requirements of the Jewish sacrificial system described in the law of Moses fourteen centuries before Christ were fulfilled in this redemption. (You'll find these regulations spelled out in Exodus and Leviticus.)

God is a holy God and requires righteousness and moral holiness in the lives of his people. To teach holiness to his people after their deliverance from Egypt, God had them set up a tabernacle in the

wilderness surrounded by a curtained-off courtyard. The common people could not approach God's dwelling place in a casual manner; they brought with them a sacrifice, confessing their sins while laying their hands on the head of the animal sacrifice. Before their eyes the animal was killed in their stead, for their sins, and its blood sprinkled on the altar where part of the sacrifice was burned (Leviticus 4).

Only the priests could enter the tabernacle to care for the holy things, and only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies, the "throne room" of God where the Ark of the Covenant was placed, and then only once a year on the Day of Atonement for the sins of the people (Leviticus 16).

When Paul wrote that we have been "*brought near by the blood of Christ*," he means that Christ the Messiah has become the sacrifice for our sins, and because of his death on our behalf, we can approach God with our sins forgiven.

Many people suggest different ways to come near to God. Some think you can come by keeping the law or by belonging to a group (such as Israel or even the church). But the only way to be brought near to God is by the blood of Christ. What Jesus did on the cross, suffering as a guilty sinner in the place of guilty sinners, brings us near to God.

### **Jew and Gentile brought together in the Church**

*"For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, 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, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity" (vv14-16)*

In Hebrew the word "shalom" can mean "completion and fulfillment -- of entering into a state of wholeness and unity, a restored relationship." It carries the ideas of peace, wholeness, wholesomeness, reconciliation, blessing, restoration. It is a very wonderful and broad word. Paul says in Ephesians 2:14 that Christ himself is our peace, our Shalom, our healing, and wholeness, and the one who brought an end to the tension between us and God that our sin had created.

But this Shalom was brought about by what we call today a "paradigm shift," a "sea change," a basic alteration in the whole way God was dealing with man. Prior to Christ, the Law was the barrier between Jew and Gentile. The Jews kept it rigorously; the Gentiles disregarded it. It had become a dividing wall between them: a source of pride to the Jews, an object of scorn to the Gentiles. Look at the finality of these words:

*"He ... has broken down the middle wall of separation... having abolished in His flesh... the law of commandments contained in ordinances " (Ephesians 2:14-15)*

Paul uses two powerful verbs in these verses

**Destroyed.** The Greek verb translated "destroyed" (NIV), "broken down" (ESV, NRSV, KJV) here means "to reduce something by violence into its components, destroy."

**Abolished.** The Greek word translated "abolishing, abolished" carries the idea of "to cause something to lose its power or effectiveness, invalidate, make powerless," then "to cause something to come to an end or to be no longer in existence, abolish, wipe out, set aside something ... nullify."

Wow! When Jesus had been accused of abolishing the commandments, he had affirmed in the Sermon on the Mount:

*"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled." (Matthew 5:17-18)*

## **Jesus Fulfils the Law**

There is the Moral, Ceremonial, and Civil Law. One way of looking at the Law in the Old Testament is as three basic components:

- **The moral law**, the enduring principles of righteousness which are timeless, such as the Ten Commandments.
- **The ceremonial law**, pertaining to the tabernacle, temple, priests, and sacrifices.
- **The civil law**, rules concerning property, crime, and punishment.

### **1. Moral Law**

The moral law, of course, is woven into the fabric of the creation. It cannot be done away with any more than righteousness can become obsolete. But it was fulfilled completely in Jesus Christ, the perfect, sinless man who lived the life of God before us in the flesh.

### **2. Ceremonial Law**

As we have seen above, Jesus fulfilled the ceremonial law, which prescribed how sin was to be forgiven, and who should gain admittance to the Holiest of Holy Places, the very Presence of God. Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice for the sins of each of us. In the Old Testament, God permitted a lesser (an animal) to substitute or stand in for the punishment deserved by the greater (a sinful man). In the New Testament, the greater (God's very Son) became the substitute or stand in for the punishment deserved by the lesser (all men). In his own body, with his own blood, for all time, Jesus fulfilled the whole of the ceremonial law. When he died, the veil of the temple, separating people from the holy place of God, was rent in two from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51), signifying that God had opened up the way to his very Presence through the Messiah.

After Jesus, temple sacrifices became superfluous. Every time an animal was sacrificed for sin after the Lamb of God had made the ultimate sacrifice, it was a kind of hollow mockery of what Christ had done. As the writer of Hebrews said, the Old Covenant is now "obsolete" (Hebrews 8:13). Jesus fulfilled the religious, ceremonial law, and by completing it, rendered it obsolete.

### **3. Civil Law**

The civil law, too, had been fulfilled when the Messiah came, and the Old Covenant became obsolete. Its time was past. God had been Israel's King in the Wilderness. When the people had clamoured for a king, God gave them Saul, and then David. But Israel's last king, last "son of David," had been taken into exile in 587 BC. Now in Jesus Christ, the "Son of David," "the Son of God," the ultimate King of the Jews had come. Heralded by angels and sought as King by wise men at his birth, Jesus had finally stood before Pontius Pilate and acknowledged that his Kingship was "not of this world."

## **Jews and Gentiles Reconciled**

*"... and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity." (v16)*

Gentiles and Jews are brought together into one body, the Church, where our unity in Jesus is far greater than our previous differences. We Christians, who have such a tendency toward pride, division,

denominationalism, and separatism from fellow Christians, need to pay special heed. There are two rich words here -- "peace" (Greek eirēnē, Hebrew shalom, which we examined above) and "reconcile." Reconciliation happens when an estrangement is healed, a separation is removed. God has reconciled us to himself through Jesus' death on the cross (2 Corinthians 5:19-21).

### **The Cross**

We see the emphasis Paul places on the work of Jesus on the cross. He repeats the idea several times: brought near by the blood... having abolished in His flesh the enmity... in one body through the cross. This unity didn't just happen, it was the hard-fought accomplishment of Jesus.

Every part of the church should respect this.