

# Neighbors and Nations

## Week 4 | Ephesians 2:11–22

*For this week's Engage God Daily, we are providing a reprint of a 2017 guide on our central passage, Ephesians 2:11–22. It was written by Barry Applewhite.*

### Day 1: First looks

*Barry Applewhite, author*

This week's passage focuses on unity in Christ. This unity is more than a theological reality: you can feel it in every place where strangers meet and discover that both share faith in Jesus.

#### **Ephesians 2:11–22**

*<sup>11</sup> Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands) –*

*<sup>12</sup> remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

*<sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, <sup>15</sup> by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.*

*<sup>17</sup> He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. <sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*

*<sup>19</sup> Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

What words in verse 12 indicates the former, left-out status of the Gentiles?

What does verse 15 reveal about Christ's unifying strategy?

How do verses 12 and 19 relate to one another in time?

## Outline of this week's passage

- A. Distance from God and his purposes, privileges, and people until made near in Christ (2:11-13).
  - B. Peace with God and his people because Christ has brought peace (2:14-18).
  - C. The people of God as the dwelling of God (2:19-22).<sup>1</sup>
- 

---

<sup>1</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996)

# Day 2: Trapped in exclusion

Barry Applewhite, author

Going to Sunday services at Christ Fellowship is one of my favorite things! Just think about the wonderful people you have met there and look forward to seeing.

What if you came to the doors of Christ Fellowship only to find them blocked by a security barrier and large signs saying, "Jews only! Gentiles forbidden!"

If being excluded from Christ Fellowship is unthinkable, being excluded from God is even worse!

## Ephesians 2:11–13

*<sup>11</sup> Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands) –*

*<sup>12</sup> remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

What has brought the Gentiles near to God?

## Commentary

### A promise

To understand today's passage, we must go back in biblical history to the time of Abraham, when he was 99 years old, still named Abram, and had no male heir (Genesis 17:1). God made a covenant with Abram, promising that he would not only have an heir but would become "the father of many nations" (Genesis

17:4). For that reason, God renamed him Abraham (meaning "father of a multitude"). The required mark of belonging to this covenant with God was circumcision by Abraham and all the males in his household, both at the start and throughout following generations. So, circumcision became the mark of the (male) people belonging to God.

Abraham had no idea how this promise ("the father of many nations") would be fulfilled. He couldn't even imagine how God would give a single natural son to man of 99 years and his wife at age 90. Abraham and Sarah both laughed about that possibility. God told them to name their son Isaac (meaning "he laughs"). How God would fulfill his promise was hidden for long ages.

### A promise fulfilled, in and by Jesus Christ

Recall that we said in the first days of this study that Ephesians is about identity formation. Nowhere is that more plain than in Ephesians 2:11-13. Paul directs the Ephesian believers to remember that by earthly

descent<sup>2</sup> they were born Gentiles, and the physically circumcised Jews called them the “uncircumcised” (verse 11). This backward look is part of the second major contrast Paul makes between what the Ephesians were apart from Christ and what they have become in Christ.

Paul next spells out the spiritual implications of being born as a Gentile (verse 12). The picture is bleak:

- Separated from Christ (the exact opposite of being in Christ).
- Excluded from the citizen-rights of those who were part of Israel.<sup>3</sup>
- Foreigners to the covenants of promise (such as the one with Abraham).
- Not having a hope of their own.
- God-forsaken<sup>4</sup> in the world (despite having many gods!).

Only one nation had been chosen by God (Deuteronomy 10:15) for protection, nurture, instruction, and hope, and the Gentiles had no part in it!

After reflecting on the past, verse 13 begins with words that pull the perspective sharply into the present. Once again, we see that grace happens “in Christ Jesus” in that the Ephesian assembly, even though they are Gentiles, has been brought near to God. This radical change came about by means of “the blood of Jesus,” a figurative reference to his sacrificial death. Snodgrass considers the plight of humanity when summarizing verse 13 and says, “If the plight was estrangement and distance, the solution is nearness and belonging.”<sup>5</sup>

Witherington asks and answers a crucial question: “But how does shed blood overcome alienation and produce reconciliation? The answer has to do with ancient covenant rites, in which treaties are enacted . . . through blood sacrifices.”<sup>6</sup> We may even have an indirect reference here to the new covenant in Jesus’ blood (Luke 22:20). Tomorrow’s lesson will greatly expand on what it means to be brought near in Christ.

So many people are far from God, and only Jesus can bring them near? How can you help them find the way?

---

<sup>2</sup> BDAG-3, *sarx*, earthly descent (meaning 4), q.v.

<sup>3</sup> S. M. Baugh, *Ephesians*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, Washington: Lexham Press, 2016), 184.

<sup>4</sup> Markus Barth, *Ephesians*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1974), 260.

<sup>5</sup> Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, 128.

<sup>6</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 259.

# Day 3: The undiscovered Christ

Barry Applewhite, author

Two of the groups most honored by many in our society are the military and the police, including their veterans. That is as it should be; I am a Navy veteran myself.

Yet the stature of these groups brings forward a question for our society: what do we know about peace?

## Ephesians 2:14–18

*<sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, <sup>15</sup> by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup> and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. <sup>17</sup> He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. <sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*

How do we get access to the Father?

## Commentary

I hope that my readers pay attention to the titles and introductions to these commentaries. They represent my attempt to point at central issues: biblical, cultural, and personal. If you have been a Christian for a long time, then you may wonder what “the undiscovered Christ” could possibly be. He can be found at the beginning of verse 14: “He himself is our peace.” This is a Jesus I need to know better!

The place to begin is with a better understanding of what the Bible means by peace. Snodgrass describes peace as a comprehensive term for salvation and life with God. He adds that “it refers to the way life should be and is the gift of God that is received only in his presence.”<sup>7</sup>

The Hebrew word for peace is shalom. J. I. Durham says that shalom “[describes] a comprehensive kind of fulfillment or completion, indeed of a perfection in life and spirit which quite transcends any success which man alone, even under the best of circumstances, is able to attain.”<sup>8</sup>

Verse 14 is tightly bound to verse 13, whose last word in Greek was Christos (“Christ”), so there is no mystery about the identity of “he himself” in verse 14. Today’s biblical passage explains verse 13 in greater detail to show how God has granted to the Gentiles access to himself through Christ without breaking his covenant with Abraham and his descendants (the Jews).

---

<sup>7</sup> Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, 130.

<sup>8</sup> J. I. Durham, “Shalom and the Presence of God,” in *Proclamation and Presence*, ed. J. I. Durham and J. R. Porter (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox, 1970) 280.

## The Messiah and peace

Paul has drawn these remarkable words (“He himself is our peace”) from Micah 5:5a, which commentator Bruce K. Waltke translates from the Hebrew text as: “This one will be our peace.”<sup>9</sup> The phrase “this one” in Micah has royal overtones and refers to the coming Messiah, who will be born in Bethlehem. By the time Paul writes to the Ephesians, the Messiah (Jesus) has indeed come to fulfill the prophecy.

But the expectation of a Messiah who would bring peace goes back to the prophet Isaiah (8th century B.C.), who called him “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). Isaiah later described this Messianic peacemaker bringing good news, an announcement of deliverance, and the reign of God (Isaiah 52:7). The prophet Zechariah informs us that, when the Messiah returns, he will announce peace to the nations (Zechariah 9:10). So, there was a robust expectation among the Jews that their Messiah would bring shalom in its fullness, even to the point of blessing many nations filled with Gentiles.

To make matters clear from the start, Jesus is our peace in a very specific way: peace with God and peace with all others who share faith in Christ. Snodgrass rules out two other popular forms of peace when he talks about the sense in which Christ is our peace: “This peace cannot be reduced to a feeling of peace within or to peace of mind.”<sup>10</sup> So, when someone says, “God gave me peace about [some decision or course of action],” it has nothing to do with Ephesians 2:14.

How can we be sure of this? Because verses 14 and 15 explain what he means. Paul is speaking only to those Jews who have given their allegiance to Jesus as their Messiah and those Gentiles who have embraced the good news that God has offered them salvation in his Son. The result is that both Jews and Gentiles are in Christ. That could be an explosive combination because of centuries of hostility between the two. The law had set up numerous requirements that prevented Jews from mixing with Gentiles, and the Gentiles resented their rejection. But Jesus dealt with this broken relationship in the same way he did our sins: he took them to the cross.

In your own experience, what examples of anti-Semitism (hatred or rejection expressed toward Jews) have you learned about? Have you personally disavowed any such feelings or actions? Explain.

First, Paul tells the outcome by saying that Jesus “has made the two groups one” (verse 14)! He did so by destroying the barrier that the law given through Moses had established to keep the two groups apart (verse 14). Verse 15 uses the verb *katargeo*, meaning “set aside” (NIV) or “abolish” (ESV)<sup>11</sup> to describe the effect on the law of what Jesus did. Jesus accepts the believing Gentiles without any obligation to keep the law, and he expects believing Jews to do the same. All people have been released from the Mosaic law, as Romans 7:6 teaches.

---

<sup>9</sup>Bruce K. Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007) 286.

<sup>10</sup> Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, 146.

<sup>11</sup> BDAG-3, *katargeo*, set aside, q.v

## A powerful new creation

Though Paul has not finished talking about peace, what he reveals in verse 15b deserves a fresh heading. Jesus did not destroy the wall separating Jews and Gentiles so that they could continue their conflict. “His purpose was to create in himself one new *humanity* out of the two, thus making peace” (NIV, verse 15b). You see that I have italicized one word, representing the Greek noun *anthropos*, which means here “man,”<sup>12</sup> a translation used by NET, ESV, and NASB. The NIV was trying to be gender-inclusive in its translation “humanity” – a cause that we favor – but that choice overcomplicates an already-complicated metaphor.<sup>13</sup>

When the Bible uses the verb “create,” such as Paul does in verse 12b concerning Christ creating “one new man,” then it is time to sit up and take notice! Before I explain this creation further, allow me to explain when and where this creation happened:

- “in his flesh” (verse 15a) – the destruction of the law separating Jew and Gentile
- “in himself” (verse 15b) – the creation of the one new man (reconciling believing Jews and Gentiles)
- “in one body . . . through the cross” (verse 16a) – the unity of believing Jews and Gentiles with Jesus
- “by which” [literally “*in him*”] (verse 16b) – Jesus abolishes the enmity in himself

So, here is the deal: enmity was destroyed within Jesus and the one new man was created in him on the cross!

Snodgrass explains this process by saying, “Not only does Christ take the hostility into himself and destroy it, but also in himself he creates a new being.” You will recall that we have said that believers died with Christ and were resurrected with Christ. Snodgrass says, “When he is raised to new life, a new being comes into existence, one in which people are one with Christ and one with each other in him.”<sup>14</sup> The one new man is Christ himself, and believing Jews and Gentiles are incorporated as his body.

## The result of peace

Verse 17 pictures Jesus announcing good news of peace to Gentiles (“you who were far away”) and Jews (“those who were near”). When Paul says “we both” in verse 18, he is speaking as a Jew-in-Christ to Gentiles-in-Christ. What they both have, as a result of Christ’s amazing act of creation, is “access to the Father by one Spirit” (verse 18).

So, the assembly of all believers is a multiethnic people, united in Christ in one body. No local assembly of believers should ever try to recreate the divisions that Jesus destroyed.

In light of American cultural individualism, how does being united to others in Jesus change the way you see them and see yourself?

---

<sup>12</sup> BDAG-3, *anthropos*, man, q.v.

<sup>13</sup> Barth, *Ephesians*, 309, gives strong reasons for preferring “man” over “humanity” here.

<sup>14</sup> Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, 134.

# Day 4: Joining a new family

Barry Applewhite, author

In these times, citizenship is a big deal. We all want to belong, and having citizenship comforts us by giving us an identity. Becoming part of an extended family does the same thing on a more intimate level. Imagine how much more intense the belonging would be when you become a citizen of God's kingdom and a member of his own household. As those who have committed themselves to Christ, we have been given both forms of belonging. Adjusting our thinking about this belonging takes a bit longer.

## Ephesians 2:19–22

*<sup>19</sup> Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. <sup>21</sup> In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

What part of the building are the apostles and prophets?

## Commentary

In essence, God offered amnesty through Christ, and we accepted it when we gave him our allegiance. But taking that action based on our faith in Christ had far-reaching effects. We may have simply thought that we were joining a church, but trusting in Jesus put us into a new kingdom (verse 19 and Colossians 1:13) where we enjoy the same citizenship as God's people.

## Are you holy? (Are you committed?)

By calling us "God's people" (verse 19), the NIV departs from tradition. The Greek phrase is *oi hagioi*, and it traditionally means "the holy ones" but is usually translated into English as "the saints" (NIV, ESV). The NIV rightly realizes that few Christians are comfortable with being called "holy," and the word "saints" is generally reserved for those few officially named to be saints by the Roman Catholic Church.

Over time, biblical scholarship has made advancements in understanding both Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament). The original understanding of the Hebrew word *qdash*, usually translated "holy," was published in 1878 and was based on etymology. Etymology attempts to determine word meaning by analyzing how the word originated, and such knowledge is often uncertain, as it was here. In the twentieth century, etymology was largely abandoned in biblical research, following the lead of linguistic research.

So, a better analysis of Hebrew *qdash* and Greek *hagios* had to wait until 1986 when Claude B. Costecalde

published his exhaustive research (in French)<sup>15</sup> and determined that these words meant “consecrated” or “devoted” and were used to express “commitment” in a relationship.<sup>16</sup>

So, when I earlier said that *oi hagios* traditionally means “the holy ones,” I spoke according to the old (mistaken) meaning. I could have used the more deeply researched meaning: “the committed ones.” What I believe is that you don’t know what “the holy ones” means. Neither do I. But we both know what “the committed ones” means, because that is what we know and expect in marriage, family, and close friendships.

So, how do you assess your commitment to Christ? Would others say that you are committed to him? Explain.

## A new home for God

Verse 19 ends with the astonishing statement that we are members of God’s household. Starting with the word for household, Paul begins a rhetorical and metaphorical riff using many Greek words that form from the word for house. This kind of wordplay is probably meant to build the expectation of the recipients about how he will end it. They will be surprised!

Suddenly, verse 20 takes us to the metaphor of a building: the indispensable teachings of the apostles and the reliable predictions of the New Testament prophets provide the necessary preparation for the foundation stone, which is “Christ Jesus himself” (verse 20). Yes, I know that the NIV calls Jesus the “chief cornerstone” by translating a Greek noun that is also used in Isaiah 28:16 in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. In Isaiah 28:16, the Greek noun translates the Hebrew noun *pinnah*, which is a foundation stone. It turns out that *pinnah* is borrowed from a nearby people who used it to mean vertebrae, a backbone.<sup>17</sup> Jesus is the backbone of the building. Such stones were the primary load-bearing stones and determined the lines of the building.<sup>18</sup>

We go from a building to a temple in verse 21 as the metaphor begins to take on its full detail. Note carefully that both verses 21 and 22 start with the phrase “in him [Christ]” to show that union with Christ is still central to the metaphor. It is only in Christ that we have access to God. The verbal forms in the two verses add to the metaphor and to the concept of union: in verse 21, *sunarmologeō* (“joined together”) comes from the architectural practice of squaring off stones before joining them<sup>19</sup>; in verse 22, *sunokodomeō* (“being built together”).

While verse 21 makes the refinement of saying the building is a temple, verse 22 names the recipients of the letter as being among the temple’s stones, along with all others in Christ, both Jew and Gentile. They are in Christ by the Spirit to become the dwelling place of God – a Trinitarian closing for chapter 2.

---

<sup>15</sup> Peter J. Gentry, “The Meaning of ‘Holy’ in the Old Testament,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 170 (October-December 2013) 417.

<sup>16</sup> Claude Bernard Costecalde, *Aux origines du sacré biblique* (Paris: Letouzey & Ané, 1986).

<sup>17</sup> HALOT, *pinnah*, cornerstone; drawn from Ugaritic with meaning “vertebrae,” q.v.

<sup>18</sup> Peter J. Gentry, “The Meaning of ‘Holy’ in the Old Testament,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 170 (October-December 2013) 417.

<sup>19</sup> William Larkin, *Ephesians: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, (Waco: Baylor, 2009) 46.

# Day 5: Applying what you have learned

*Barry Applewhite, author*

Christ Fellowship is one of the most highly-regarded churches in our area, so belonging to it conveys a certain type of privilege. In our church, we learn that we have been brought near to God in Jesus Christ.

How could belonging to a highly-regarded church cause you to look down on others who are not Christians or who belong to a smaller assembly? What kind of responsibility do we have to show the love and mercy of God (grace) to all and to uphold the honor of Christ and our assembly?

We all started out alienated from God by our sins, just like those who have still not found peace with God. The barren nature of modern life leads people to entertainment, for distraction from the emptiness, or to substances and sex to numb the pain.

How can we hold out peace with God through Christ to those ruined by a collision with modern life? How can the opportunity to belong to a loving, caring assembly be a bridge for those who need to cross?

Though our society still struggles with anti-Semitism, racial intolerance is an American dividing wall that far too many Christian assemblies still maintain (explicitly or implicitly). Peace with God through Christ cannot accept racial, national, or social barriers within our assembly. All are welcome!

What can you do to ensure that everyone who comes to Christ Fellowship feels welcomed and wanted? What inner barrier is Christ asking you to tear down once and for all?