

EPHESIANS

blessed to be a blessing

WEEK THREE

Ephesians 2.11-14

This passage urges us to recall the time when we were strangers to God. We were once foreigners living in a far off land and with a people that were not our own – outsiders, if you will. We had no representation and no hope or promise or protection. We were just flailing out there on our own in a desperate state of blindness and confusion and shallow conformity. But (and this is the biggest 'but' in history!) Christ destroyed forever the wall dividing outsider from insider, between Jew and Gentile. In Christ, no longer do the religious observances of circumcision, sacrifices, food laws, and festivals (or any religious observance for that matter) create God's community. Nor can any one Christian church lay claim to be the insider way. But only the acknowledgement of Christ's blood as the one perfect sacrifice for all time and for all people, together with His Spirit, gather His people together as one. His blood and Spirit transcend the church institution and building in favor of unity. This gathering community is meant to reflect togetherness and peace and mark the end of ethnic hostility, or any other hostility that keeps us at odds with each other. 'We' becomes our characteristic description, not 'us' and 'them,' because the King has declared it as such. What we once were (separated) is in the past. We are now a new humanity, and this is all that matters!

It might help to think of someone in Christ's body who you may have a bone to pick with: jealousy, envy, resentment, judgment, prejudice, or God forbid, anger or hatred. Pray today that you would be reconciled in your hearts and released from the grip of any hostility because we are called into one family to be the temple of his residing Holy Spirit. Amen, brothers and sisters!

Ephesians 2.15-18, Part I

If you've seen the movie, Crash (mature audiences only), then you've seen a picture of hostility. It is a disturbing movie, and yet it is probably a fair depiction of the animosity that can exist between groups of people. Sometimes we need modern examples like this one to help us understand what hatred and suspicion could have possibly existed between Jews and Gentiles. Moral purification, which allowed Jews or converts to come clean before a Holy God, was a very elaborate system enacted by God and complicated by man. Because humans were involved, it brought out the worst in us by creating division and ethnic strife. And, even though this system that allayed sin is obsolete from God's standpoint, it is intended that His moral standard is still upheld. We should be enormously grateful that God's standard is not our own, that His intentions are completely right and honorable and flow from His holy nature. Great and lasting peace between God and people and between people and people has always been His end game. And, yet sin must be dealt with. There is no doubt that our sin separates, alienates, and antagonizes. Admit it, our sin causes major problems. Besides the horrific nature of Christ's (Jew) death on a Roman (Gentile) cross, it was also a shameful death because He bore the weight of our sin. And, I'm not going to say here that He was happy to do it (think, Garden of Gethsemane). It was extremely painful on all levels. But...it is finished! The old system is gone; the new system is in place. The new system hinges entirely on Christ's death and resurrection; God took humans out of the equation by providing the one perfect Sacrifice for all time and all people. God obliterated hostility in this single act. No longer is there a wall separating people from God, and all have access to His peace. Will you acknowledge Christ's sacrifice and access His peace today?

Ephesians 2.15-18, Part II

Yesterday, we learned about the huge differences between Jews and Gentiles, biblical apples and oranges, if you will. If you were not a Jew, then you were a Gentile. While there was some mixing of cultures between Jew and Gentile (e.g., education, marriage, a bit of synagogue participation), there remained significant differences in beliefs, cultural and religious practices, and the way God initially purposed these groups. These differences sometimes led to violent uprisings. Most of the differences stemmed from the underlying ritual of cleanliness: non-converted Gentiles were deemed polluted because of their pagan practices. Resistance to Gentile ways and separation mostly characterized the relationship between the two groups then. Additionally, there was no way for Gentiles to become 'clean' except by undergoing the rigorous process of conversion, which, now brace yourself, included circumcision. These Jewish Gentiles (called proselytes) could now participate at nearly all levels of regular Jewish religious life. One of the most significant phrases in today's passage is "making peace." In God, a new integral body is forming, one where there is no longer division or favor – in ethnicity, gender, or otherwise. The grammar in this phrase tells us it is a present, ongoing process. It began in Christ, and it continues to happen now. It has to be ongoing because humans are involved. Admit it, we mess up harmony in relationships, in community, in home life, in friendships, and politically. We absolutely need the power behind the cross, behind the resurrection, and His continuous effort to bring restoration to humanity through His Spirit. This tells us that we must seek and cling to His ways and rely entirely on His power to embrace harmony in any relationship. I want to remember this passage next time I look upon someone with contempt.

Ephesians 2.19-22

It is fascinating to watch the progression of construction of the new east span of the Bay Bridge. It is a feat beyond our comprehension (unless, of course, you are an engineer and can fathom this stuff). It is entirely critical that the supports and marine piles which hold up this ginormous horizontal expansion are solid, integral structures. And, interestingly the rebar and concrete piles do not actually bury down into bedrock. One of the features that increase their stability and integrity to withstand earthquakes and high volume use of the bridge over time is the great depth and angle at which they are submerged into the bay mud. The tower and suspension part of the new bridge, however, is anchored in rock. This is a world-class engineering marvel, and it is this part that serves as the pinnacle of the bridge, the highest point, and the part that gives the entire east span its fullness and integrity.

The writer of our passage today is summarizing his main points and also transitioning into ideas which will be developed further. The 1st Century apostles and prophets serve as the foundation of the Church and are anchored deeply in God's word, the Gospel message. They were the first to faithfully receive and proclaim this message. Christ is the pinnacle of the Church, which is held together and empowered by Him and exists only because of Him. Christ gives the Church its fullness and integrity. The Church, however, is not a fixed body. It is an organism that grows wide and deep and strong as we, too, receive this message of hope and proclaim it to others with our words and actions – just as over 2000 years of Christ-followers have done. In this moment of quiet, pray to receive His strength and power today, and surrender your life's agenda to His. Also pray that God will keep your spiritual eyes open to the progression of the Church in our midst, and be ready to respond with a willing courage when He sends opportunity your way!

Bird's-Eye View of Ephesians 2

Think of a time before you knew and loved Christ. If that is too far back to think or you have not yet personally accepted Jesus Christ into your life, then think of a time when you were not aligned in or empowered by Christ's Spirit in your lifestyle or worldview. This time may be characterized by an internal disarray, habitually making bad or destructive decisions, or an overall dissatisfaction or fruitlessness in your life over an extended period. Not that any one of these can't characterize us temporarily in our life-in-Christ or can't be brought on by external pressures, but what is important to discern is the ongoingness of any one of these. Habit.

Christ's Spirit is now the Lifeblood of the Church, fully available to accomplish and transform us individually and corporately according to God's plan-of-action. For those who are in Christ, fruit is the order-of-the-day! No longer are we imprisoned and left for dead or decay. If you are undergoing a hardship or experiencing a paralyzing apathy or are just plain broken, then cry out to Jesus! A promise for you: "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ." (v13) Ask, seek, knock, cry, pray on bended knee. God is rich in mercy! Those who seek and cling to Christ will be delivered! Read Psalm 34 over the weekend and bask in the richness of mercy that He delivers, and let Him satisfy your spirit deeply!