

One in Jesus Christ

Bible Background • Ephesians 2–3

Printed Text • Ephesians 2:11–22 | Devotional Reading • Ephesians 3:14–21

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will UNDERSTAND Paul’s explanation of Jews and Gentiles becoming one in Christ; EXPRESS pain and sorrow over the divisions within Christ’s church and joy when divisions are broken down; and BECOME acquainted with church- unifying and church-dividing issues in order to devise strategies for addressing them.

In Focus

Marcus and Felicia held such high hopes when they married, but they could never have known that blending two families would be so difficult. Felicia’s children from a previous relationship were crazy about Marcus, but they seemed to resent the things he did for his children during their weekend visits. Felicia felt that Marcus probably was doing too much for them, trying to make up for not being with them all the time. Last weekend was the worst. Marcus and Felicia had to referee what was about to become World War III. Their two daughters were arguing about what to watch on the big-screen television. Felicia’s daughter, Katrina, screamed at Marcus’s daughter,

Akira, “I don’t care what you want! You’re not really a part of this family, anyway. Your daddy lives with me!”

Marcus and Felicia had to explain to their children that, even though Marcus’s children weren’t there all the time, they were both an equal and important part of their family.

Christians often have similar problems with diverse members coming together as one. What are some of the divisions in the Christian church today? In today’s lesson, Paul tackles the problem of division between the Jews and Gentiles in the Ephesian congregation.

Keep In Mind

“In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord” (Ephesians 2:21, KJV)

Words You Should Know

A. Circumcision (Ephesians 2:11) peritome (Gk.) – The ritual removal of the foreskin of the Jewish male.

B. Commonwealth (v. 12) politeia (Gk.) – Citizenship within the community.

Say It Correctly

Circumcision. sir-kuhm-SIZH-uhn

Enmity. EN-mi-tee

KJV

Ephesians 2:11 Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands;
12 That at that time ye 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:
13 But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.
14 For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us;
15 Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace;
16 And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby:
17 And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh.
18 For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father.
19 Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God;
20 And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone;
21 In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord:
22 In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

NLT

Ephesians 2:11 Don't forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders. You were called "uncircumcised heathens" by the Jews, who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts.
12 In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope.
13 But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.
14 For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us.
15 He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups.
16 Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death.
17 He brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles who were far away from him, and peace to the Jews who were near.
18 Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us.
19 So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family.
20 Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself.
21 We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord.
22 Through him you Gentiles are also being made part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit.

The People, Places, and Times

The Temple. The Temple at Jerusalem was made up of many courts. Paul focuses on the outer court, but there were four different ones. The outer court was where the Gentiles had to stay. A lot of money exchanging or selling took place in the outer court. Next, there was the court of the Jewish women. The women could only go as far as this court. Next is the court of the Israelites where the Israelite men would go and offer sacrifices. The inner court is called the “Holy of Holies.” No one could go into that court except the high priest; even he could go in only once a year. Before he could enter, he had to undergo a cleansing ritual. The Holy of Holies is the place where God dwelled, separated from the rest of the temple by a curtain. The Gospels report that when Jesus was crucified, the curtain was torn.

Circumcision. It is the act of removing the foreskin of the male sex organ. In ancient Israel, this act was performed as a ritual on children, natives, servants, and outsiders on the eighth day after birth. In the Jewish faith, it was an external symbol of one’s total and complete allegiance and devotion to Yahweh. Controversy arose in the early church over the circumcision of Gentile converts (Acts 15:13–18). During the A.D. first century, Jews frowned upon non-circumcision among Christians. Apostle Paul played a crucial role in settling the dispute. He determined that physical circumcision was not essential to Christian faith and fellowship. Circumcision of the heart through repentance and faith were the only requirements of the faith for non-Jewish Christians.

Background

Many barriers divided the Jews and the Gentiles in the ancient world. Paul devotes much of his attention in this portion of the letter to the essential oneness of the church. For Jews and Gentiles alike, Paul explained that keeping the law was not a requirement for salvation. Christ is the fulfillment of the law, making it complete. (Salvation cannot be earned through strict adherence to the law or by works. Nevertheless, we are not absolved of our responsibility to do what is right. Salvation by grace through faith does lead to good works; thus, no one had the right to boast about personal goodness.) There was no need for Jews and Gentiles to be divided based on Mosaic Law. Christ became and remains the peace of all believers. Therefore, there is no need for division and discord. By lessening the significance of ethnic and cultural identity, both Jews and Gentiles gained something far better and greater.

At-A-Glance

1. The Gentile’s Status (Ephesians 2:11–13)
2. Jews and Gentiles Together (vv. 14–18)
3. One Church, One Foundation (vv. 19–22)

In Depth

1. The Gentile’s Status (Ephesians 2:11–13)

Paul reminds his readers that before they were converted, they were Gentiles by birth and therefore considered outcasts by the Jews.

The Jews despised them, as indicated by the fact that they were called the Uncircumcision. The Jews regarded their circumcised state with snobbery, as this signified that they were God’s chosen people. They referred to themselves as the Circumcision. Paul corrects their sense of superiority by clearly

stating that their circumcision was by human effort and therefore merely a physical act. What was really important, he told them, was circumcision of the heart.

While the Jews held on to a false sense of superiority about their status as the chosen, the Gentiles were without a savior altogether. The Messiah was promised to the Jews, even though Isaiah foretold that the blessing would flow to all nations. Christ was sent, “unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24). The Gentiles were “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel” (Ephesians 2:12). They did not belong among God’s chosen. They were strangers to His promise considering all of God’s covenants had promised blessings to the Jews. For all practical purposes, the Gentiles stood on the outside looking in without hope. But because of God’s love, the former establishment was done away with. When the Gentiles receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, God places them in Christ and accepts them through Him. Jesus Christ has broken down the barriers that separate all people.

2. Jews and Gentiles Together (vv. 14–18)

In the first part of chapter two, Paul traces the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles. The two groups held different perceptions of what it means to be saved. Here, Paul moves forward to dissolve their nationalistic and cultural biases to affirm unity in Christ and explain the necessity for unity. Through His shed blood, Christ broke down “the middle wall of partition between us” (v. 14). The barriers that divided Jews and Gentiles are now gone. Where there were two, there is now one. There is but one Christ for both the mighty and powerful and the lowly and powerless. For every race and culture, there is only one savior.

Paul describes Christ as our peace. When Christ came to us, He “preached peace” to those near and far (v. 17). In this instance, those who were near were the Jews. They had already received a promise. Those who were afar were the Gentiles, those who had no covenant with God; they held no assurance of His presence or promise. This being the case, it is not difficult to understand why the Jews held a certain snobbery concerning their status as God’s chosen people. Peace was needed to unify two groups that were alienated from each other. As our peace, Christ has created a new people, free from the limitations of imposed human boundaries such as culture, race, gender, education, social, or economic standing. All believers now have access to the presence of God at any time. This was in stark contrast to the Old Testament, when only the High Priest could go into the Holy of Holies, the place where God dwelled.

3. One Church, One Foundation (vv. 19–22)

Paul often uses the words “now therefore” when making a conclusion (see v. 19). He concludes that the Gentiles were in no way inferior to the Jews. Christ did away with all of that. The apostle lists some of the many great benefits available to all believing Gentiles, as they are no longer strangers and foreigners. Never again will they be looked upon as less than others or as outsiders. Now they are fellow citizens and equal heirs to the inheritance. Christians of Jewish ancestries have no advantage over the believing Gentiles. All believers are first-class citizens in the kingdom of heaven.

As they are now a part of the Church, they have become stones, or building blocks, in the construction of a holy temple. This new temple will also have a foundation, with Christ as the “chief corner stone” that bonds the temple together. This new Temple, the Church, is built upon the apostles and prophets of the New Testament. The apostles and prophets are not the foundation; Christ is the foundation. The foundation was laid in what the apostles and prophets taught about the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Christ is more than the foundation of the Church, however; He is also the chief cornerstone, joining the two walls that were once separated: Jews and Gentiles. In this new temple

that Christ has created, everyone will have an equal place. When Jesus created a new covenant between God and humankind, He made a new people of God, one body—the Church.

Search the Scriptures

1. What were the Gentiles called (Ephesians 2:11)?
2. How did the Jews refer to themselves (v. 11)?
3. What barrier did Christ break down (v. 14)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Because it is our responsibility to care for the Church of Christ and to continue to bring new stones, in what ways have we neglected our duties, both to the universal Church and in the local church?

Liberating Lesson

Some believers are determined to create cultural, racial, and ethnic barriers within the church. Many arguments and divisions have arisen over doctrinal issues. Some have attacked others as being unsaved for not adhering to certain standards. All believers should be careful to avoid ostracizing others. We should also be mindful of how what we do based on our preferences creates division. Christ desires that we engage ourselves in activities that draw us closer to Him and to one another.

Application for Activation

Think about who you are to people in your home, in your church, on your job, and in the community. Why is it important that you have good standing in all of these areas? How do you devote yourself equally to maintaining your role as a follower of Christ (not merely a church member)? How do you try to hold yourself responsible to do what Christ desires of you? Think of at least one action or step you can take to show that it is important to you to continue to live as a disciple “in good standing.”

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Ephesians 2:11–22

11 Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands;

Paul, for the first time, identifies those whom he is addressing in verse 11—the Gentiles. He reminds them who they were before they received Christ. He uses different terms to describe their position before their union with Christ. First, they were “Gentiles in the flesh” (Gk. *ethnos*, ETH-nos), non-Jewish nations by birth, which the Jews disrespectfully called the “Uncircumcision.” God had instructed Abraham in Genesis to circumcise every male child in his household, including his servants (Genesis 17:11). This practice became a visible sign of the covenant between the Lord and His people. Any Jewish male who was not circumcised was to be expelled from his people (Genesis 17:14) and regarded as a covenant-breaker (Exodus 4:24–26). The Jewish people took great pride in circumcision, and it became a badge of their spiritual and national superiority. Devout Jews, in recognition of God’s continuing covenant with Israel, faithfully practiced circumcision in the New Testament period. Both John the Baptist (Luke 1:59) and Jesus (Luke 2:21) were circumcised in accordance with Jewish tradition. The practice raised a spirit of exclusivity and resentment between Jews and Gentiles and later brought discord into the early Church (Acts 15:1). An exaggerated importance had been placed on the rite, and each side disparaged the other.

Paul de-emphasized the physical rite, and he said that the Jewish circumcision is only in the flesh and something done by human hands. He says that the true motive behind the circumcision of the flesh is a circumcision of the heart that is spiritual instead of physical. That kind of circumcision is needed and available to both Jews and Gentiles alike (Romans 2:28–29; Colossians 2:11–13). Writing to the Philippian Christians (both Jews and Gentiles), Paul says, “For we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (Philippians 3:3, NASB).

12 That at that time ye 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:

Acknowledging that they’ve been scornfully labeled, Paul calls their attention to spiritual and physical alienation. First, they are to remember that during that time (“in time past,” Ephesians 2:11), they were separated from Christ (“ye were without Christ,” v. 12). The word “Christ” is probably used here in the general sense of Messiah, and means they did not share in the then Jews’ Messianic hope for the future. This Messianic hope is included in the Jews’ privileges that Paul lists in Romans 9:4–5. Because the Gentiles are alienated from the promised Jewish Messiah, they are also distanced from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenant. The word “commonwealth” (Gk. *politeia*, pol-ee-TI-ah) means “citizenship.” Therefore, Gentiles, by birth, are deprived of the privileges of Israel (Romans 9:4–5) and excluded from the participation in their national rights. We know from the Old Testament that this covenant is the very heart of Israel’s relationship with God in which the Father solemnly pledges to be Israel’s God and declares that they be called His people (Leviticus 26:12). To partake in the covenant relationship, one must have been born a Jew and be a circumcised male. Gentiles are excluded from this Old Testament covenant.

Gentiles were separated from the Messianic hope (without Christ), estranged from the commonwealth of Israel, and excluded from the covenant of promise as God’s people. The Gentiles had “no hope, and (were) without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). It is like a chain reaction. The

ultimate result is that they were without God and, as such, hopeless in the world. This describes their position in their unbelief before they became Christians.

13 But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.

14 For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us;

After describing the apparently gloomy and hopeless situation of the Gentiles before they became Christians, Paul now moves to the present positive state brought about by their new relationship in Christ. He says, "You who once were far off have been brought near" (v. 13, NKJV). That means that they are no longer aliens and strangers to the promises and covenant of God. They are no longer regarded as people without God and without hope (v. 12). They now have the same relationship with God, which was formerly reserved for Israel alone. Israel and God are said to be near each other. "Far off" describes how separated the Gentiles were from God compared with His nearness to Israel. The separation or alienation of the Gentiles from God and from Israel is symbolized in the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem. There were partitions between the outer and inner courts. The Gentiles were only allowed entrance to the outer court; hence, its name was Court of the Gentiles. The inner court, which was closer to the court of the priests and the Holy of Holies, was reserved for Jews. Inscriptions on the outer surfaces of the Temple warned that death was the punishment for any non-Jew caught entering the inner court (Holman Bible Dictionary, 1326-1327). Conversely, "Solomon's dedication (of the Temple) made clear that the door was never closed to the foreigner who wished to serve the Lord (1 Kings 8:41-43)," (Holman Bible Dictionary, 542).

This segregation and special understanding of the responsibility given to the Children of Israel figuratively and literally represented the far-off position of the Gentiles. Apart from symbolizing alienation from God and Israel, the partition was also a symbol of hostility between the Jews and the Gentiles. The cross is the uniting force that binds the two sides into one community. Paul makes the unification of the two groups clear in the next verse through a profound declaration: "He is our peace." The use of the pronoun "He" (Gk. autos, ow-TOS) is emphatic, which means "He, Himself" or "He and He alone" is our peace. This echoes the prophecy of Isaiah 9:6, where Christ is given the title "Prince of Peace." Christ is peace personified; only through Him are believers reconciled to God and one another. He has made both one.

15 Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace;

In addition to the separating walls of the temple, the Jews lived distinct and separate lives from their surrounding neighbors in many respects. Traditional Jewish laws separated them from the rest of the world, as did the physical walls in the temple. These were symbols of separation between the two. Christ, through His sacrificial death, abolished the Law of Moses with its rituals, provided a new covenant that is inclusive for both Jews and Gentiles, and made them one. He brings everyone to the same level. This breakdown is demonstrated in the rending from top to bottom of the temple veil. This demonstrates that the way into the Holy of Holies is left open and accessible to all—Jews and Gentiles alike.

The abolition of the law raises some questions. What does Paul mean by abolishing the law in relation to Christ's words in Matthew 5:17? There, Christ teaches that He has come not to abolish but rather to fulfill the law. Is it then a contradiction of Scriptures? In what sense was either used? The difference, as someone has suggested, seems to lie in the two types of laws: the moral law and the ceremonial law. Christ requires from His followers a more radical obedience to the moral law as

compared with the Pharisees' standards (Matthew 5:18). Paul refers to Christ's abolishing of the ceremonial law, which includes the physical ritual of circumcision (Ephesians 2:11), rather than the spiritual circumcision of the heart. This also includes some of the dietary regulations in Colossians 2:11, 16–21. These constitute barriers between the Jews and the Gentiles that Jesus has abolished through His death on the Cross. He has made the two one in Himself and has made peace between them. The unification of all believers in Christ includes the abolition of the gendered, social, and racial distinctions that exist and cause oppression among different groups.

16 And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby:

17 And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh.

Verses 16 and 17 speak to the same theme using different terms. These terms further describe what Christ has done through His blood: He has reconciled both Jews and Gentiles unto God in one body by the Cross. In verse 15, the law that brought about the enmity is "abolished" (Gk. *katargeo*, *kat-arg-EH-o*), or "done away with," "rendered idle," or "destroyed." In verse 16, the enmity caused by the law is "slain" (Gk. *apokteino*, *ap-ok-TI-no*), or "inflicted a mortal death" or "killed." This word denotes total annihilation. In the single act of sacrifice on the cross, Christ abolished the ceremonial law, which separated humanity from itself and from its Creator.

Second, He created a new humanity, slaying the enmity among people and making them equal to one another. Third, by this act of sacrifice, Christ reconciled this new society to the Creator. Paul continued the theme of Christ's activity in bringing near those who were far away and reconciling the two entities, uniting them into "one new man" by abolishing the law. Paul does this by describing this same activity in a different way in verse 17. While in verse 14, Christ "is our peace" personified, here, he preaches "peace to you which were afar off" (the Gentiles, vv. 11–13) as well as "to them that were nigh" (the Jews). "He came and preached peace" refers to Christ's earthly mission and the ministry of the early Church. The word "preached" (Gk. *euaggelizo*, *yoo-ang-ghel-ID-zo*) is the same Greek word translated "preach the good news" in Luke 4:17, where Jesus announced His mission in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (see Isaiah 61:1–2).

18 For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father.

19 Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God;

Verses 18 and 19 tell us the effect of Christ's preaching. Through Him, Jews and Gentiles are now reconciled to one another and both to God. Consequently, by Him they both can approach God the Father in one Spirit. It is noteworthy to recognize a reference to the Trinity here that reveals the distinctions of the three persons in the Godhead (see 1 John 5:7). In Ephesians 2:18, the word "access" (Gk. *prosagoge*, *pros-ag-ogue-AY*) means the freedom we have to approach God as our Father. We can approach Him with boldness and assurance that we are acceptable to Him and that we will not be turned away. In verse 19a, Paul's use of metaphor shifts from membership of a family unit to the metaphor of citizenship. In verse 12, the Gentiles are said to be outside of the family of Israel and strangers without hope and without God. Now, they are no more "strangers and foreigners" (Gk. *paroikos*, *PAR-oy-kos*); both terms are synonymous, meaning "one who lives in a place without the right of citizenship." Here, Paul reminds the Gentiles that through Christ, they have become "fellowcitizens" (Gk. *sumpolites*, *soom-pol-EE-tace*) with Israel in God's Kingdom.

20 And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone;

Paul now moves from speaking of the church as God's family or community, to referring to it as a building (house) whose foundation is laid upon the apostles and prophets. The word "foundation" (Gk. themelios, them-EL-ee-os) refers to the work of the early Christian apostles and prophets who helped to grow the church. He is not only the builder; Christ is also the chief "corner stone" (Gk. akrogoniaios, ak-rog-o-nee-AH-yos). Peter also refers to Christ as the cornerstone (1 Peter 2:6), using the same Greek word. The stability of a house or building depends on its foundation. A house without a solid foundation would not stand the test of time. Christ's parable of the soils (Matthew 13:3-8), and His identification of Peter as the rock on which His Church would develop (16:17-19), emphasize the need for a strong foundation. In Ephesians 2:20, Paul says that Jesus is the "chief (the main) corner stone" that holds together the whole building and keeps the rest of the foundation in place, while the apostles and prophets are part of the foundation.

21 In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord:

22 In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

Paul goes on to elaborate on the makeup of the building and its foundation. The stability of the church is dependent upon the One who is both builder and the chief cornerstone—Christ. A building does not stop at the foundation. It needs fittings and other structures before it can be called a building. Paul refocuses his picture of the whole structure to the individual stones that are used to erect a building. Peter also uses the image of a building or temple to describe the church. In the same imagery where he refers to Christ as the "chief corner stone" (1 Peter 2:6), he describes the individual members as "living stones ... being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood" (1 Peter 2:4-5, NIV). Paul describes the members of the church as the stones, which the master builder meticulously fits together upon the chief foundation into a magnificent edifice.

The phrase in Ephesians 2:22 "whom ye also are builded" refers to the Gentile Christians. The temple, as we know, represents the dwelling place and presence of God. As previously stated, the temple was exclusively reserved for the Jews. Gentiles were forbidden to enter the temple, even though an outside court was reserved for Gentiles. Here, Paul assures them that not only are they now admitted into the temple, having gained access to the Father, but they are also a part of the temple of God. This is based on their union in Christ Jesus, who is the cornerstone. The purpose of the temple in the Old Testament was to be a dwelling place for God. This new temple serves the same purpose, namely for God's "habitation" (Gk. katoiketerion, kat-oy- kay-TAY-ree-on). We know from Scripture that the whole earth cannot contain God—neither Solomon's magnificent temple nor the one rebuilt by Herod. God does not dwell in human-made houses (1 Kings 8:27; Acts 7:48-49; 17:24). He nonetheless manifested His glory and presence in the temple. He also makes His abode in the hearts of His followers.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Reviving the Humble and the Contrite
(Isaiah 57:14-19)

TUESDAY

Building on the True Foundation
(1 Corinthians 3:10-16)

WEDNESDAY

Sharing in the Promise
(Ephesians 3:1-6)

THURSDAY

Making Known the Wisdom of God
(Ephesians 3:7-13)

FRIDAY

Praying for Spiritual Power
(Ephesians 3:14-21)

SATURDAY

Discovering the Gift of Salvation
(Ephesians 2:1-10)

SUNDAY

Discovering Our Oneness in Christ
(Ephesians 2:11-22)