Ephesians

Lesson 4

**Review**

Chapter 1 focuses on the spiritual blessings individual believers possess, and Paul’s prayer for individual believers to deepen their relationship with God the Father. In Ephesians 2:1-10, Paul describes the transformation of individual believers from spiritually dead citizens of the world to spiritually alive and equipped for good works. This transformation occurred by grace through faith in Christ.

**Eph. 2:11-13 Gentiles’ past spiritual exclusion and present inclusion through Christ**

After discussing the spiritual transformation experienced by individual believers—which should inspire believers to undertake the good works God has prepared for them—Paul discusses the spiritual transformation experienced by gentiles as a group. Paul does not say why he takes on this topic. But Acts demonstrates the significant cultural divide between gentiles and Jews. There were probably many reasons for this. Human nature, i.e., the flesh, naturally views cultural differences as fuel for comparison and contempt, and it takes considerable effort to connect with people from a different cultural background. The Old Testament regulations would have made it difficult for Jews and gentiles to socialize in certain ways such as eating together. The church’s goal of establishing communities where gentiles and Jews worshipped and socialized together was a radical and challenging goal. It is therefore not surprising that Paul viewed the topic of gentile and Jewish relationships as an important issue to address in a letter focusing on church life.

It is also not surprising that he would begin by addressing gentiles. By the time Ephesians was written, the church at Ephesus probably had more gentiles than Jewish members, and, the general population in Ephesus would have had many more gentiles than Jews. It would have been easy for gentile believers to see little value in Jewish believers and have little interest in making the effort required to bond with Jewish believers. Romans 11 suggests Paul had a similar concern for the Christian community in Rome.

This may be why Paul begins the discussion by reminding the gentile believers of the past spiritual state of people like them: “Therefore remember that formerly you, the gentiles in the flesh, the ones who are called ‘uncircumcision’ by the so-called ‘circumcision’ which is performed in the flesh by hand.” “Formerly” is a vague term referring to the past. In context, Paul appears to be thinking of the time before the NT era. The phrase “the gentiles in the flesh” refers to the whole class of people groups that were not Jewish. As we discussed last week “flesh” can be neutral or have negative spiritual connotations. In this instance, Paul may be thinking of both meanings. Before the NT era, gentiles were distinct from Jews in the flesh literally because gentiles did not practice circumcision. They were also, however, generally not followers of the Lord and were spiritually in the flesh. During that time period, Jews condescendingly referred to gentiles as “uncircumcision,” a kind of derogatory term based on a physical characteristic similar to “red neck.” Conversely, Jews referred to themselves as those who were circumcised. Paul’s use of “so-called” and “in the flesh by hand” makes clear that, at the time Paul wrote Ephesians, he no longer regarded physical circumcision performed by humans as having spiritual benefit. (Gal. 5:2, 6; 1 Cor. 7:18-19.) Paul is not advocating for groups to be derogatory to each other or commending these past attitudes. To the contrary, he is trying to encourage the gentile believers to avoid this type of arrogance by reminding them what it was like to be on the receiving end of it.

“that you were at that time without Christ, being alienated from the citizenship of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” Before the NT era, however, the gentiles did have some spiritual disadvantages, and Paul lists some of them. (See also Rom. 9:4-5.) “Without Christ” could in this context where Paul is talking about the time period before the NT era simply mean unconnected to the Messiah. When the Messianic promise was made to David circa 1,000 BC, part of the promise is an Israelite king who will protect Israelites from pagan nations, (1 Sam. 7:10), so one would have no reason at that time to see any connection or benefit between gentiles and the Messiah. “Alienated from citizenship of Israel.” Before the NT era, gentile nations by definition were not citizens of Israel. It was possible for gentiles as individuals to join Israel—see Ruth 1:16-17—but doing so meant leaving behind their identification with other people groups. “Strangers to the covenants of promise.” Paul is likely thinking of the Abrahamic (Gen. 17:1-14), Davidic (2 Sam. 7:12-17), and New Covenants (Jer. 31:31-34). Anyone reading those covenants during the OT era would not see any reason to view gentiles—particularly groups of gentiles—as beneficiaries of those promises. Consequently, Paul says that the gentile nations had “no hope and were without God in the world,” meaning that gentiles who had not attached themselves to Israel and the Lord had no real spiritual hope or connection to the only true God—the Lord of Israel. It does not follow that all OT Israelites were believers who had a genuine relationship with the Lord. (Rom. 9:6-9.)

“But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” Paul begins the description of the gentiles current spiritual status with the phrase “but now in Christ Jesus,” thereby emphasizing that the improvement he will subsequently describe is because of their identification with Jesus Christ and his kingdom. In the OT, spatial “far” and “near” were often used to communicate a person’s spiritual status. (Psalm 119:150, 155; Isaiah 46:12-13.) Jesus’ sacrificial death has moved the gentiles from excluded spiritual outsiders to being members of God’s family.

“For he is our peace, who has made the both one and who destroyed the middle wall of partition, the hostility.” Paul pauses to drill down on Jesus bringing gentiles from distant strangers to members of God’s family along with Israelites. He first declares that Jesus is “our peace.” Use of “our” indicates Paul is focused on Jesus as the source of peace between gentiles and Jews. For gentiles to be part of God’s family, it was essential to end the conflict between gentiles and Israelites. To put it negatively, when gentiles were hostile to God and Israel, they needed to stay far away. Paul describes various ways Jesus established peace. “who made the both one” indicates Jesus created an overriding unity between two hostile, separate groups. “who destroyed the middle wall of partition” indicates Jesus destroyed a barrier dividing the groups, but there is much debate as to what barrier Paul had in mind. Candidates include: (1) the temple wall between the court of the gentiles and inner structures; (2) the curtain between the holy of holies and the holy place; (3) a figurative reference to the Mosaic law, or (4) a figurative reference to the enmity between the two groups due to their cultural differences. Given the subsequent discussion of how Jesus rendered the law inoperative for believers, which is not the same as destroying the law, the fourth option seems best. “hostility” is the opposite of peace; the difficulty is figuring out how it fits in with the surrounding words. Hoehner agrees with the NIV that “hostility” is an apposition with the wall of partition, and describes the result created by the wall. It is this hostility/wall between the two groups that Jesus destroys.

“in his flesh, by having rendered inoperative the law consisting of commandments and decrees.” “in his flesh” is parallel with “by the blood of Christ” and is another way of referring to Jesus’s sacrificial death. “having rendered inoperative” could also be translated nullify or make ineffective (Rom 3:3, 31; 4:14; 7:2, 6.) “the law consisting of commandments and decrees” seems like a clear reference to the entire Mosaic code. It is a reach to try to limit it to ceremonial decrees. What does Paul mean when he says Jesus’s death made the Mosaic code inoperative or ineffective? Roman 7 makes clear that Paul views the Mosaic code as holy and good. (Rom. 7:12.) Moreover, his discussion in Romans 7 assumes the law still exists. In Romans 7, the law does not die/get destroyed; rather the law loses its power over the believer because believers are identified with Christ and his death. Believers have spiritually left the law jurisdiction through the portal of Christ’s death. (Rom. 7:4-6; Gal. 2:18 and 3:25.) Ephesians presents the same principle, but from the law’s perspective. From the law’s perspective, Christ’s death rendered it inoperative with regard to believers.

In Ephesians, though, Paul’s emphasis is not on what this means for individual believers; instead, he focuses on what it did to the hostility between gentiles and Israelites. “in order that he might create in himself the two into one new person, so making peace” This clause tells us one purpose of rendering the law inoperative was to unify two hostile groups (gentile people groups and Israelites) into one new “person” or “body.” The term “person” or “body” emphasizes the close unity of this new combined group. The sphere where this happens is “in himself,” meaning in Christ. When gentiles and Jews accept Jesus’ claim to be Lord and Messiah, they acquire a new unity that supersedes any past hostility and allows the groups to live in peace in one body (i.e., this isn’t a mere ceasefire where the groups just agree to stay in their own corners or neighborhoods).

“and that he might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by which the hostility has been killed.” This clause further develops the purposes of Christ’s sacrificial death: reconciling both groups in one body, i.e., the same way (through the cross) with God the Father, thereby killing the hostility between God and both groups. “and coming he preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.”

This clause asserts that, after the cross, Christ appeared and preached peace to the gentiles (the far off) and Jews (the near). There is no evidence Christ’s resurrection appearances were directed toward gentiles. Hoehner argues Paul is asserting Christ preached through his apostles. (Acts 1:8, 9:5, 15-16.) The good news of the gospel is that gentiles who were not parties to the OT covenants and Israelites can both have peace with God and each other through Christ. This clause emphasizes that Jesus Christ did not just provide the means for this to happen through his death, he is the ambassador who delivers the message of peace.

“so that through him we both have the access in one Spirit to the Father.” The result of Christ making and preaching peace is that believers from both groups have access (1) through Christ (2) in one Spirit (3) to God the Father. The phrase “through him” is early in the clause to keep the focus on what Jesus has done for these groups. But the verse is very trinitarian, because Paul also mentions that the Holy Spirit is involved in making the connection, and the connection is to God the Father. The net result is that, once Christ’s death occurred, God revealed that both gentiles and Israelites have a relationship the same way: through Christ’s death by the power of the Holy Spirit with God the Father.

“So then you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God’s household.” Paul recaps the change in status wrought by Christ for gentile people groups. They are no longer “foreigners,” i.e., people who may have permission to travel through a kingdom, but no rights; nor are they even “resident aliens,” i.e., people who may live in a kingdom for a long time, but have limited rights. Instead, gentile believers now are (1) fellow citizens, i.e., full members of Christ’s kingdom and (2) members of God’s household. “Household” is a family term and indicates that Christ’s kingdom is unique—in it, every citizen is also a member of the royal household. This is consistent with earlier verses saying believers are part of God’s family. (Eph. 1:5.) So, for believing gentiles, the spiritual issues identified in Eph. 2:12-13 have been reversed through Christ. There is much debate concerning the meaning of the “holy ones” or “saints” with whom the gentiles ae now fellow citizens and household members. Candidates include (1) all Israelites; (2) Jewish NT believers; or (3) redeemed people from all past ages, including believing Israelites. One problem with the first view is that it includes unbelievers and Paul would not use “holy ones/saints” to refer to unbelieving Israelites. (Rom. 9:6-8.) The second view does not make sense because Paul has not used the term “holy ones/saints” in this passage to distinguish between gentiles and Jews, nor has he suggested that past believers are not part of God’s household. So, 3 seems like the best view, that gentiles have been incorporated into a household and kingdom including all the redeemed from all ages.

But, as we will see, there are distinctions between the OT and NT era. The new unified “person” consisting of believing gentiles and Jews is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone.” With this clause, Paul transitions to the metaphor of a temple to describe NT believers. Jesus is the “cornerstone” of this temple. Despite some who argue for “capstone,” Paul is more likely describing Jesus as the cornerstone, i.e., the first stone placed in an ancient building that had to be carefully shaped and placed because it was used to line up the entire building. (Isa. 28:16.) Because the cornerstone was placed first, this suggests that the apostles and prophets in this verse are the NT era apostles and prophets who spread the good news about Jesus.

“In whom the whole building being fitted together grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” Paul says that, in Jesus Christ, the whole construction project is being fitted together. In the ancient world, many stone buildings did not use mortar or cement. Instead, each stone was laboriously cut and shaped to fit perfectly with the stones around it, and the building relied on weight and perfect fit to hold together. (1 Kings 7:9-10.) This suggests that, in Christ, God is adding new believers/stones and God is shaping each believer into a stone that perfectly fits into this new temple built on the foundation of Christ and the NT apostles and prophets. The NT uses two words for temple. One term (hiron) most often refers to the whole temple complex, including the outer courts. The other (naon) is consistently used to refer to the inner building, including the holy of holies, where the presence of God was manifested. This latter term is used here, emphasizing that this new temple is a holy, sacred building. “in the Lord” again refers to Christ, re-emphasizing the centrality of Jesus Christ to the existence of this community described as a holy temple.

“in whom” again refers to Christ. “you” shifts the focus from God as builder of the temple to the gentile and Jewish believers in the Ephesian church. They are being fitted together perfectly, growing to become a dwelling place where the triune God manifests His presence through the Holy Spirit. This is a huge change from the OT. In the OT, the Lord manifested his presence in a special way in the holy of holies inside the tabernacle and temple. (Ex. 25:8, 26:33-35; 1 Kings 8:18.) As Hebrews explains, the only person who ever entered the Holy of Holies was the high priest, and that was only done once a year and after elaborate sacrifices. (Heb. 9:6-10.) Paul’s metaphor expands God’s dwelling place from one small room in the tabernacle/temple to the entire believing community. Or put another way, the holy of holies has expanded to wherever believers are found. The tearing of the temple veil was one signal this expansion was about to occur. (Matt. 27:51.) The outpouring/in dwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit is another. (Acts 2:1-4, 16-21.) The NT era thus represents an advance in God’s covenant program of re-making the earth into a place where He can dwell in harmony with people.

**Application**

Paul’s message would have required gentiles and Jews to change some of their basic religious assumptions. Adult Jews in 61-62 probably would probably have learned the OT perspective that the Lord, who is not limited by time or space, manifests his presence in a special way in the temple in Jerusalem, and so it is important for believers to take special journeys to Jerusalem to worship God. They also would have considered gentile people groups as enemies of God authorities, and individual gentiles as unclean people who need to become Israelite citizens and follow OT regulations to have even limited access to God. Gentiles in the Roman empire would have shared the assumption that divine beings manifest their presence in particular places such as temple buildings. Gentiles also would have shared the Jewish view that cultural divisions between people groups are cause for hostility.

The NT doctrine that Christ’s death provided the same access to God for both gentiles and Jews, and released both groups from jurisdiction of the OT law, thereby creating a spiritual unity more important than any cultural difference would have challenged the assumptions of both groups. Similarly challenging would be the idea that God now dwells wherever believers in Christ are found. As we will see, Paul calls the Ephesian church to demonstrate these challenging truths by living together in harmony, and trying to care for every member of this new community, even those from another culture.

This teaching continues to present challenges. In America, believers generally have sufficient resources to form enough local congregations where believers can worship with people pretty much like themselves. Language barriers make this somewhat inevitable. But there are often divisions even within the same language group. One of our goals for First Evangelical Free Church as a community should be overcoming human cultural divisions whenever possible.