8-19-18

Ephesians 2:11-22

You may have noticed that this passage is somewhat parallel to the first 10 verses of this chapter. It begins by pointing out the problems the readers faced and then goes on to show how God made a way out of all these problems through Jesus Christ. The primary differences are that in the first 10 verses, Paul was speaking to both the Jews and the Gentiles; now he is speaking to the Gentiles alone. The first half of the chapter focused on mankind’s separation from God. This half focuses on the Gentile’s separation from God’s chosen people, the Jews. The fact that the Gentiles were separated from the Israelites also separated them from God. They had two separations to deal with, or rather, God did.

The good news is, of course, that God did make a way for the Gentiles to come to Him; that had been His plan all along. Remember what God promised to Abraham.

Genesis 12:2-3

And I will make you a great nation,  
And I will bless you,  
And make your name great;  
And so you shall be a blessing;

And I will bless those who bless you,  
And the one who curses you I will curse.  
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.

God promised to bring a great nation from Abraham, and He did that in the nation of Israel. They are God’s chosen people and God will not go back on that promise. But the last line is what I was referring to: *And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed*. We know that this promise was fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus was a descendent of Abraham and through Him, salvation is available to anyone who will believe on Him; Jew or Gentile.

Keep in mind that we are Gentiles, so everything Paul writes applies to us also. He points out where they were, and where they are now because of the power of God through Jesus. Being reminded of these things ought to give us reason to thank God. We needn’t dwell on these things but we should never forget them. We had no chance and God saved us. We owe Him our lives, our eternity, everything. To remember these things helps us to come before Him in wonder and gratefulness.

At the time Paul was writing, the Jews held all other people groups (Gentiles) in contempt. This was an attitude that developed over thousands of years and was certainly complex in its development. There are two primary reasons that we can consider.

First, the problem on the side of the people of Israel. They were God’s chosen people. That was and is a fact. They unfortunately let this go to their heads. This is human nature; they had something better than everyone else, and so, began to see themselves as better than everyone else. It was easy to forget that God wanted them to spread the knowledge of Himself to other nations; easier to keep God for themselves and let the rest perish. Before we point fingers, I’m sure we have all at least been tempted to feel superior to someone else because of what we might have that they don’t; and very likely we’ve fallen into that temptation.

Secondly, the problem on the side of the Gentiles. Every nation around attacked Israel. Many subdued Israel and forced them into slavery. Some made pretty good attempts to exterminate them. True, these attacks were usually judgement sent by God for Israel’s disobedience, but God also promised vengeance on these nations and Israel wanted to see it.

What we end up with is a tremendous barrier between the Jews and the Gentiles. The Jews held that God created Gentiles simply to be fuel for the fires of hell. It was unlawful to help a Gentile woman who was giving birth because that was bringing another Gentile into the world. If an Israelite married a Gentile, the family held a funeral for the Jew. At the temple, there was a court of the Gentiles where those who had come to believe in the true God could come and worship. But even these were not allowed into the temple area. There was a dividing wall between the court of the Gentiles and the court of the women. Posted along this wall were signs that read: “*No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure round the temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death*.”

I do not bring up all these things to put down the Jewish people. Their attitudes are really no different from any other fallen human-being. I bring this up to give an idea of what the Jewish Christians had to overcome within themselves; and what God had to overcome to bring the Gentiles to Himself in Christ. But, of course, God is the God of the impossible and He has managed to remove the dividing wall.

In verse 11, Paul begins to make a statement and then goes off a little to make some clarifications. He returns to his original statement in verse 12. Paul reminds the Gentiles of the separation they had from the nation of Israel. His digression mentions that they had been referred to as “Uncircumcision” by the Jews, who proudly referred to themselves as “Circumcision”. This is in reference to the physical sign that God had required of Abraham and all his descendants back in Genesis 17:10.

While this sign was important, Israel tended to miss the point. As Paul points out in verse 11, this rite was performed in the flesh by human hands. As with many of the things that God commanded the Jews in the flesh and in the world, circumcision was supposed to be a foreshadowing of the spiritual.

Deuteronomy 30:6

Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.

See how the true circumcision was of the very essence of the person, not just a part of the body. It would change the heart of mankind, removing the enmity that existed between God and man. Importantly, it was also done by God and not by any human-being. Paul talks about this in his letter to the Romans.

Romans 2:29

But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

Notice how Paul is saying that being a true Jew, in the eyes of God, doesn’t mean being of the nation of Israel. It means believing in Jesus for salvation so that the Holy Spirit does His work of giving spiritual life. Thus, we become citizens of the spiritual nation of Israel; or citizens of heaven.

Almighty God made a way for us Gentiles to become spiritual children of Abraham. Kind of makes you think of what John the Baptist said, “*I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham*.” Were we not stones? Dead in spirit, separate from God, and from His chosen people?

Paul returns to his original thought in verse 12. Our separation from Israel was a significant thing. Because of this separation, the Gentiles (us) suffered five consequences. First off, we were separate from Christ. Now Christ didn’t make His appearance as Saviour in the Old Testament, but He was there. First off, He was there in prophecy. The Jews knew that the Messiah was coming; He was mentioned throughout the Law, Psalms, and the Prophets. One from Isaiah 9:6-7 reads,

For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;  
And the government will rest on His shoulders;  
And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.  
There will be no end to the increase of *His* government or of peace

The Jews knew He was coming and they always had that hope. Additionally, Jesus did show up occasionally in the Old Testament Scriptures; in person. This is called a “pre-incarnate appearance”; it was before His incarnation as a man. He is described in these appearances as “the angel of the LORD”. Any time you read these words in the Old Testament, there’s a good chance it’s Jesus. You have to check the context to find out. Sometimes, an individual referred to as “the angel of the LORD” will accept worship or claim divine rights. This is how we can tell it’s Jesus.

One example is the story of Gideon that begins in Judges 6. The angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon and told him what he must do. Gideon asked permission to make an offering to the Angel, which the Angel accepted as a burnt offering. No created angel of God would have accepted this offering because they were to be offered to God alone. This angel was Jesus Christ.

Secondly, back in Ephesians verse 12, the Gentiles were excluded from the commonwealth of Israel. This was a serious problem, because God had chosen Israel; these were the people whom He took to be His own: He wanted to be their God and He wanted them to be His people. God picked them over every other nation and peoples in the world. These were the people He made promises to and protected.

Along with this, but thirdly, they were strangers to the covenants of promise. Because of the separation from the commonwealth of Israel, the promises God made to Abraham, Moses, and the Israelite people did not apply. God did make provision for Gentiles who wanted to worship Yahweh, but the vast majority had no chance or desire to join the nation of Israel. Being outside of God’s covenants means no chance for communion or fellowship with God. Again, we should be tremendously grateful to be offered the covenant of grace that comes through Jesus.

The fourth consequence Paul lists shows how bad life really was for the Gentile; they were without hope. Obviously, the Gentiles had hope in things. Many hoped for good fortune from the many false gods they worshiped. Many hoped in their own minds, believing they could find a complete existence without their bodies and being pure thought. They hoped that things would turn out well in the end. The problem was that this was all false hope. It was based on nothing that could deliver what was hoped for. The people of Israel had a true hope, based on God Himself. This is the sure hope we have as Christians.

Lastly, they were without God in the world. We as Christians can grasp the tragedy of living life without God. We realize that this life is absolutely pointless without Him. If death is the end, any reality of accomplishment is gone; anything not done for the LORD is a waste. Only those things done through Jesus Christ will last. Yes, they had their own gods; but they were unpredictable. One never knew if he might have done something to anger his god or perhaps he could be in a bad mood. There was no assurance. We have assurance in Christ Jesus.

Verse 13 almost shouts the good news. *But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ*. Notice how the beginning of this verse, *But now in Christ Jesus*, reminds us of the beginning of verse 4, *But God*. The sacrifice of Jesus, the Son of God, has changed all these consequences of being a Gentile. The separation from Israel and all its blessings from God are now shared with us.

We are no longer separate, we have become part of the spiritual Israel. God has done the work to bring us together with Him and His people. Once again, we see God at work, accomplishing His will: The summing up of all things in Christ. His will be done.

Prayer

You are sovereign LORD, and it was by Your grace that You chose a people to save and call Your own. And now, LORD, You have poured out Your grace even more by offering salvation to the entire human race. May You be glorified.

We offer You thanksgiving. We were without You in this world and without hope. There was no purpose in our lives. But now, we can serve You. You have granted us salvation and a sure hope for eternity, how can we do other than offer ourselves to You?

Use us, LORD, we pray. Use us to bring about Your will. Use us to further Your Kingdom. Use us to bring souls to salvation in Jesus our Lord. Use us for Your glory.

It is in the name of Jesus our Saviour we pray these things.

Amen