

# GOD WITH US

## Part 10: EARLY LETTERS

### Message 22 – Ephesians

#### The Gospel of Reconciliation

#### Ephesians 2&3

#### Introduction

Chapter 1 of Ephesians ended with an apostolic prayer (1:19-23). Paul prayed that believers would comprehend “the power” of God in their lives . . . *the same power that God the Father exerted when He raised Christ from the dead and ascended Him to His rightful place of authority - at the Father’s right hand - far above ALL rule and ALL authority, power and dominion, and EVERY title given. ALL things were placed under Christ’s feet, and HE was appointed as “head over everything for the church, which is His body...”* We see two reasons for this emphasis on the power, authority and lofty position of Christ. 1) In chapter 2, Paul teaches that as believers, “*God raised us up WITH CHRIST and seated us WITH HIM IN THE HEAVENLY REALMS IN CHRIST JESUS...*” (2:6). The lofty position of Christ is now *our* position. 2) In chapter 6, Paul exhorts believers to take up their ‘spiritual armor’ including ‘war-fare prayers’ to defeat the spiritual forces in the heavenly realms, which Christ has already defeated at the cross. The authority and power of Christ are ours also. Ephesians stresses how believers are *united with Christ* in His death, burial, resurrection *and exaltation*.

In Ephesians chapter 2, Paul takes a step backwards, explaining *how we became children of God*. In what may be his clearest argument in any of his letters, he explains the two sides of “the gospel of reconciliation,” first emphasizing our individual reconciliation with God, second, our reconciliation with other human beings. According to the N.T., the two great commandments – love God, love your neighbor – should always be seen as two sides of the same coin.

In chapter 3 Paul speaks of the great privilege it was for him to be God’s chosen messenger for this gospel, to the Gentile world, to proclaim the revealed “mystery” *that both Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) are now “co-heirs, one body and sharing together in the promises ‘in Christ Jesus.’”* He concludes with a 2<sup>nd</sup> prayer, that

believers might come to know experientially, the “unknowable depths” of God’s great love for them.

### **Reconciled to God: 2:1-10**

#### **- Our past condition as individuals before God.**

*“And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest” (2:1-3).*

This passage contains important (and surprising) truth about the human condition, *apart from the saving work of Christ*. As a result of sin, we are spiritually dead. This does not mean that we are incapable of being “spiritual” or of “doing good.” Rather, it means that we are disconnected from God, lacking a life-giving relationship with His Spirit. Yes, we still have a conscience that reminds us of “good and bad.” And, yes, we still bear the “image of God” which has great capacity for good, although marred by sin. Yet, we are lacking the spiritual connection with God that allows us to be forgiven, renewed, and indwelt by His Spirit, so that we might live and move in relationship to God, and in a way that pleases God. Further, by nature (natural birth) we are children of wrath (i.e., destined to meet God’s judgment). The “wrath” of God is essentially His righteous displeasure over sin. This truth is very important. It means that apart from an encounter with the atoning work of Christ on the cross (where He provided forgiveness for sin), we were headed for an encounter with God’s judgment against sin.

There is a wide-spread belief that when babies are born, they are all “children of God”. Perhaps you believe that. Yet now in God’s Word, we learn that babies are born *‘spiritually dead to God, and under His judgment (wrath)’* until each individual becomes aware of their sin and need of a Savior. This sounds harsh, but our Holy Triune God has taken the sin upon His Son, and because of His great love, HE has brought all judgment on Him, so that we who believe can stand in His vast LOVE, FORGIVENESS and GRACE and become His redeemed child. (Note: There is the assurance in

Scripture that infants that die are, by God's grace, taken to be with God. See 2Samuel 12:22,23.)

**- Made alive through Christ.**

*“But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (2:4-7).*

This passage starts *with God*, not with us. *Everything* God has done for us is based on *His love, mercy, grace and kindness*. We, being “dead,” were unable to “make ourselves alive.” Thus, through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, God offers *new life* to those who say “Yes” to the saving work of Christ. By an act of His grace (unmerited favor) we are raised up to new life with Christ, seated with Christ in the heavenly throne room, and destined to be united with Christ in glory forever.

**- How we receive the gift of new life from God.**

*“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them” (2:8-10).*

If God's grace is the *source* of our salvation, then *faith* is the means by which we reach out to receive salvation from God. We can never receive salvation by earning it (*not as a result of works*). The fact that we are God's “workmanship” means that we have been fashioned and recreated by Him. The word for “workmanship” is the Greek word *poiema*, which means “work of art.” As those who have been made alive to God, we are His “work of art” created to now walk in the good works that God has planned for our lives. Salvation does not come *through* good works; but salvation should always result *in* good works.

*Did you know that God had already prepared ahead of time a series of “good works” that He wants to accomplish 1<sup>st</sup>, within you and 2<sup>nd</sup> in the world with you? This means that you do not have to question the ‘whys’ of the circumstances in your life. God is using people and circumstances to shape you, and then He will walk with you to fulfill those good works. You don’t have to “figure out” what to do for God; rather, you have to walk in step with His Spirit Who indwells you, allowing Him to “lead you” in the steps He has prepared for you. Living out God’s will is not a matter of figuring things out; it is a matter of staying connected to Jesus. He Himself said: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Apart from Me, you can do nothing. But if you stay connected to Me, you will bear much fruit.” (Paraphrasing John 15:1-5). Keep your daily relationship with God strong, by cultivating fellowship with Him. As you do this, keep inviting Him to 1<sup>st</sup> draw you to know Him more deeply, and transform you on the inside; and 2<sup>nd</sup> lead you in the steps He has prepared ahead of time for you to take.*

### **Reconciled to One Another: 2:11-22**

“Reconcile” means *“to bring together again.”* Relationally we understand the longing to reconcile with someone we care about when there has been a breach and a breakdown between us. In the same way, God has a longing to have us be reconciled to Him. When an individual has truly been reconciled to God, this will always play out in the human realm as we reconcile with others whom we are alienated from. In Paul’s day, his emphasis was on the reconciliation that was happening between Jews and Gentiles, as a result of their faith in Christ. Remember, Jews and Gentiles had been enemies for centuries before Paul’s time. They literally hated one another and would have no relationships across ethnic lines.

#### **- The Past Condition of Gentiles, as a group**

*“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)— 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” (2:11,12).*

As a group, the Gentiles had previously been *separated, excluded, foreigners, without hope and “without God”* in terms of the special

covenant relationship that God had granted to the people of Israel. The Gentiles, as a group, did not have “direct access” to God. Before Christ came, individual Gentiles who wanted to become “right with God” had to become “proselytes” (converts to Judaism). They had to accept and submit to the covenant stipulations (Mosaic laws) given to the Jews by God. They would undergo the rite of circumcision and begin submitting to all the laws that Jews followed in everyday life. *As a group, the Gentiles could not access God directly. They had to individually go through the door of Judaism in order to be reconciled with God.* But, as Paul goes on to show, Christ has drastically changed the situation for Gentiles *as a group.*

### **- Gentiles now brought near through Christ**

***“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, Who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 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, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through Him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” (2:13-18).***

The focus of Paul’s entire ministry was letting the Gentile world know that they now had *direct access to God* through the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. They no longer needed to first become “Jewish” in order to be reconciled to God. They could turn directly to Jesus, in faith, and become “children of God.” (This was the focus of the great debate at the first church council meeting, as recorded in Acts 15. It was actually difficult for the first Jewish Christians to embrace the new reality that Gentiles could come to God directly, without first becoming Jewish, as evidenced by Peter’s questions when this truth was first made known to him by God. God targeted foods that He had made ‘unclean’ for Jews, telling Peter to ‘rise and eat,’ and then God targeted the important step of Peter going to a Gentile’s home to experience both of them believing in the same Savior and having fellowship together – see Acts 10.)

But Paul’s point here is bigger than the idea of individual Gentiles having direct access to God. He wants *Gentiles as a group, and*

*Jews as a group, to know that the barriers between their respective groups have been removed by God. The “church” (the body of Christ) is “one new humanity,” “one new body.” Thus, there should no longer be hostility between the two groups since the cross of Christ has removed all grounds for hostility. The cross of Christ tore down two things: 1<sup>st</sup> - It tore down the curtain in the Holy of Holies, a curtain that separated humanity from God (Matthew 27:51). And, 2<sup>nd</sup> - It tore down the wall of division between Jews and Gentiles (or between any other ethnically divided groups). The cross of Christ brought us reconciliation with God, AND reconciliation with one another.*

Thus, in the church, there should never be the positioning of one group as superior to another group. All people, whether Jewish or Gentile, *have access to the Father by one Spirit.* Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians needed to live out this new reality – they were ONE new group before God, not TWO separate groups.

*It remains a sad fact that in America, “Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour of the week.” We have white churches and black churches, Spanish churches and Korean churches, Indian churches and Japanese churches. In terms of relationships between blacks and whites in “church,” the separation can be traced back to a time when blacks were not allowed to integrate on equal terms with whites in predominantly white churches. Forced to sit in separate sections, and unable to become “fully active members,” blacks pulled away and formed their own churches. In 1819, the African Methodist Episcopal denomination was formed by Richard Allen, becoming one of the first formal expressions of “the black church” in America. Over the past 200 years, the African-American church has expanded widely, encompassing many of its own branches and denominations. To this day, the “black church” stands as an essentially separate expression of Christianity over against the “white church” in America. To speak in terms of a “black church” and “white church” is entirely true to the reality of the situation; but it is entirely untrue to the biblical portrait of “the church” as outlined by Paul in Ephesians 2 & 3. This is one reason why the church must continue to vigorously pursue racial reconciliation. The “gospel of reconciliation” will never be clear to a watching world as long as Sunday morning remains “the most segregated hour of the week.”*

## - Grow together as one new community

*“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of His household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone. In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit” (2:19-22).*

Ancient buildings were built with a notable ‘cornerstone’ to set the right-angle, and then with a strong foundation. This analogy is used to explain the ‘spiritual building,’ the Church – the living temple, with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone, and the teaching of the apostles and prophets as the foundation. The walls of the building are made of ‘living stones’ (1Peter 2:4-7), those who have believed in Christ who are from every tribe, race and nation.

What, then, are we to do? 1) We must realize that we are all equal members of God’s household. 2) We must acknowledge that we are all building on the same foundation of the teachings of the apostles and prophets. 3) We must admit that Christ is the chief cornerstone of this new temple, the church. 4) We must allow ourselves to grow together as we learn to walk in step with His Spirit, and with one another. Finally, 5) we must dismiss any ideas or practices that continue to violate this “one new body” principle that Jesus has given to His body, the church. This *UNITY* principle is a crucial part of our witness to the world, as Jesus made clear (John 17:20-23). The church must embody both halves of the gospel of reconciliation – helping people to be reconciled to God *and* to one another.

### **Paul Summarizes the Purpose of His Ministry: 3:1-13**

The structure of 3:1 gives the impression that Paul was about to begin his prayer (3:14-21). Yet, the very mention of the word “Gentiles” caused him to pause and to reflect on the immensity of the gift that had been given to him – the gift of being God’s chosen messenger to take the good news of Christ to the Gentile world (a privilege he always admitted he did not deserve, as he had previously been one of the foremost persecutors of believers). As Paul digresses to speak of this great privilege, he points to the centrality of his message:

***“This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (3:6).***

This may seem like old news to us, today; but in Paul’s day, this was a revolutionary idea, especially to Jews who had for centuries seen themselves “set apart” as the special, covenant people of God.

Paul continues to explain another great “mystery” in 3:10,11, that God’s eternal plan was that *“through the church the manifold wisdom of God (reconciling humanity to Himself and to one another), should be on display to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.”* Paul was referring to angelic beings both good and evil. The main point is that the **CHURCH** in its unity is not only being a witness to humanity, but also to celestial beings.

At the end of this digression, Paul hints at another reason for the digression itself: He does not want his Gentile audience to be discouraged or troubled by his imprisonment. Paul wanted them to know that as far as he was concerned, it was an immense *privilege* to be God’s messenger to the Gentile world, and even more so if he had to *suffer for their sake*. Paul often referred to himself as *“a prisoner of Christ Jesus”* (eg. Eph 3:1). He looked beyond the human players, and saw the greater One who held him as a prisoner, allowing him to suffer.

***“I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory” (3:12,13).***

Much of life is a “mystery” and it takes wisdom and insight to understand what is going on at a deeper level. Certain mysteries will never be understood about ‘God and His ways’, and the ‘whys’ of our lives. Yet, Paul encourages us to get to know God and His love in a much deeper way, so that we can trust Him and walk with Him without doubting His love and goodness. Maybe the mysteries will unfold, and maybe not. Hebrews ch. 11 reminds us in a brief summary of those who suffered and yet were faithful, fulfilling God’s purposes in their lives. They walked in the good works that God had prepared beforehand for them, living out chapters in God’s Divine Story, without knowing how the later chapters would be lived out. Our responsibility is to have faith in a God who is full of ‘mystery’, knowing that He is fulfilling His grand purposes. The more we grow in our knowledge of God and His love for us, the more we will be able to trust Him in the ‘mystery’.



### **Paul's Prayer that we might Deeply Know God's Love: 3:14-19**

*“For this reason, I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”*

Two observations about this prayer:

1) Why would Paul pray that the Spirit would give them strength *“so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith”* when he knew that Christ Jesus already lived in their hearts, in the Person of the Holy Spirit? The word “dwell” here has the idea of “settling down and being at home.” He is praying that Christ might be *fully at home, enthroned, in their hearts*. Jesus “lives in the heart” of every believer from the moment of spiritual rebirth. Yet, there are differing degrees to which believers submit to the Lordship of Jesus in their hearts. Paul is essentially praying that the Spirit would empower these believers to more fully submit to Jesus as Lord and King of their lives.

2) He goes on to pray that they would be granted power in order to *fully comprehend the incomprehensible love of God*. He prays that they might be *filled to the measure of all the fullness of God*. He is asking that they be granted the power to bask in the full depth of God's love for them. This is the essence of the Christian life – the LOVE OF GOD. Paul had been raised in a religious system that emphasize the fear of God and the laws of God. This kind of religious environment typically prevents us from understanding the love of God, as we are always in “performance mode,” trying to win the pleasure of God. But Paul came to realize that he could never do enough to win God's pleasure. Instead, the love of God was an immense ocean that overcame his failures, past, present and future. It was in this unfathomable ocean of divine love and mercy that Paul had learned to bask. He was praying that these believers in Ephesus

(and in all of Asia Minor) might come to that same place of living in and enjoying the amazing love of their God.

*Do you live and bask in God's love today? Or are you living in fear and 'performance mode?' God wants us to be motivated by His love, not by His judgment, His standards, or His displeasure. Learning to live and bask in God's love is a huge paradigm shift for most of us who have grown up in 'performance environments.' Can you ask God to help you grasp His love more profoundly, so that you can enjoy Him more fully?*

### **Paul's grand benediction of praise: 3:20,21**

***"Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen."***

Paul concludes the incredible truths of these first 3 chapters with a great anthem of praise, focusing on God's immense power that lives within each believer – a power that far surpasses the power of the deities in Ephesus and the Roman world. To God be all glory in the CHURCH and in CHRIST JESUS.

Paul will go on to urge the Ephesian believers (and us), in the next 3 chapters that in light of all that God has done for us, to live lives worthy of our great privileges, thereby bringing the light of Christ to one another, and to a watching world.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Reconciliation with God (2:1-10). Did you see anything here that was new to you, anything that jumped out as especially important?
2. Reconciliation with others (2:11-22). How do you see this section being played out (applied) in your life today? In our life as a church family? Where do you see this principle *not* being embodied?
3. Paul's prayer (3:14-21). Why is it so important for us to be growing in our understanding of God's amazing, immense love? How have you been growing in your grasp of God's love? Conversely, how has it been difficult for you to grasp God's love?