

"UNLOCKING OUR SPIRITUAL BANK ACCOUNT"
PART 5: EPHESIANS 2:11-22

In Paul's day, in the early days of the church, the single biggest issue that threatened the church – this may surprise you – was how to handle the ever-increasing number of Gentile converts. Why was that an issue? Well, remember that the earliest Christians all came from a Jewish background. Jesus Himself was a Jew. All of the original disciples were Jews. The church in Jerusalem that was birthed at Pentecost was Jewish. So, here is the problem: there was a centuries-long animosity that existed between Jews and Gentiles. To say that these two groups did not like each other would be an understatement. To put their strong feelings of disdain for each other into context for us today (I am going to explain it in terms that you will understand), think about the discord that exists today in America between Republicans and Democrats. What they say to and about each other is downright ugly. They cannot agree on anything! Well, multiply those feelings by several times and you will have some understanding of how Jews and Gentiles in Paul's day felt about each other.

Now, it went both ways. It was not just one-sided. The Gentiles looked down on Jews. They viewed them as inferior, second-class citizens. Even today, antisemitism is rampant in the United States and worldwide. We see that, don't we? But the Jews' hatred of the Gentiles and those half-breed Samaritans to the north was just as strong. The Jews viewed themselves as God's chosen people. They were special. They were holy. They were better morally and spiritually than the Gentiles. For centuries the Jewish people had isolated themselves from the pagan Gentile nations that surrounded them on their borders. All around them were these pagans.

The Jews in Israel became a distinct people group. They had their own nation identity. They had their own ceremonial laws, religious practices, dietary restrictions, customs, and language. They even claimed to have their own land. They said that God had given this land to them. And for

years the Israelite nation possessed all of this knowledge about the one true and living God. [Their] prophets through the centuries had revealed all these things about God, that we have in our Old Testament, right? But they had little or nothing to do with the Gentiles. So, that knowledge (about God) was kept to themselves. They were not at all evangelistic. There was this limited interaction between Jews and Gentiles. Their hatred for each other ran deep.

That was NOT the way God intended things to be. Yes, the Jews were, in fact, God's covenant people. And yes, they were called to be a distinct people, holy and set apart. But that does not mean that God ever intended for them to completely separate themselves (in isolation). In fact, God told them through their prophets, that they were to be "a light to the nations"; that God's salvation "may reach to the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6). This goes back to what God had told Abraham, that through his offspring "all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). And all the families of the earth included the Gentile nations, the whole world. So, the nation of Israel, the Jewish people, were called to be God's channel of blessing to the rest of the world, which included the Gentiles, the vast majority of the world.

The prophet Isaiah announced God's plans in Isaiah 66. He said, "The time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and shall see My glory [he is taking about going to Jerusalem], and I will set a sign among them. And from them I will send survivors to the nations, [then Isaiah lists several of the Gentile nations of his day], to the coastlands far away, that have not heard My fame or seen My glory. And they [the Israelites, God's covenant people] shall declare My glory among the nations" (Isaiah 66:18-19). Of course, Isaiah is talking about the worldwide response to the coming of the Messiah, the light of the world, Jesus, right? But instead of telling other nations about their great God and this coming Messiah, the Jews got all wrapped up in the trappings of their own religious practices. They neglected their calling to be a light to the nations. They began to view all non-Jews automatically as enemies of God

and, therefore, they avoided them altogether. So, that was the problem that existed.

As the Gentiles began to respond to the gospel and come to Christ, there was this debate that arose as to what to do with all of them. What do we do? How do we respond to this? We are not used to this. Do these Gentile Christians need to convert to Judaism? Do they need to become Jewish proselytes, in essence, before they can be saved? This was actually the debate. The Jerusalem Council convened [to settle this issue] in Acts 15. They reached the conclusion that, first, Jewish Christians would not require Gentile converts to become Jewish. There is a second part to this, the Gentile Christians (who came mostly from pagan backgrounds) would abstain from idolatry and from sexual immorality. So, for the sake of unity, both groups, Jews and Gentiles, needed to give just a little bit.

So, as Paul writes this letter to predominantly Gentiles in Ephesus, there exists a long-standing history of prejudice between Gentiles and Jews. This class barrier threatens the unity of the early church. And this is what Paul addresses. We are going to pick it up here in Ephesians Chapter 2 and v 11...

READ Ephesians 2:11-12

V 11 speaks about this social divide that existed. Now, Paul could have used any number of examples to demonstrate the "uniqueness" of the Jews. He just picked the practice of circumcision as his example. We know today that circumcision is more commonly practiced. We see the benefits of it. But back then, the Gentiles did not do this. It was primarily a Jewish practice. So, Paul points to this as how they were different from other people groups.

But not only was there this social divide between Jews and Gentiles, there was a spiritual divide as well. Paul says that we Gentiles, v 12, were "separated from Christ." We were "alienated from" the people of Israel. We were "strangers to the covenants of promise." Under the old covenant, we had no relationship with the one true living God and, therefore, we were

without hope. We had no Savior, no Messiah to deliver us. That was all given to the Jews. We enjoyed no national blessings. We had no protection from God's wrath. We had no promise given to us for the future and no eternal life. We were separated from Christ! The Gentile nations historically (I mentioned this before) were pagan idol worshippers. They worshipped many gods (Romans and Greeks, for example) and not the one true living God, Yahweh.

[Someone in class pointed out that there were a handful of Gentile proselytes who did worship the God of Israel in the Jewish temple and local synagogues. While that is true, these Gentiles were the exception].

So, Paul here in this statement to these Ephesian Christians (who are Gentiles) is painting a pretty bleak picture of the Gentile condition, our condition, before Christ. But all that is in the past. Look at v 13...

READ Ephesians 2:13

"But now in Christ Jesus..." Something has changed. There is good news for us Gentiles! That social and spiritual barrier wall that existed between Jews and Gentiles, has been removed. We who were "far off," we Gentiles, were brought near to God through Jesus's death on the cross. Now, this idea of "far off" and "brought near" is more just than an analogy. It is more than that. I think Paul (being a Jew himself) has in mind this dividing wall in the Temple, which was more like a large curtain, where the Gentile proselytes, that did want to worship the one true God of Israel, those who followed the God of Israel, were allowed to worship. But they had to remain in what was called the outer court, the Court of the Gentiles. Between this outer court and the inner court where the Jews went was this curtain (this divider, this barrier). Jesus removed this. We who were [once] in the outer court, "far off," have now in a spiritual sense been allowed to enter the inner court.

What is it that spiritually separates a person from God? What is it that hinders our ability to have fellowship with a holy God? SIN. We are all sinners, Jews and Gentiles alike, right? We are all sinners. So, Jesus's

death on the cross removed our sin. Not just the Jews' sin. Our sin too! He cleansed us. He forgave us. He washed away all my sins. We sing songs about that. And this provided the way for sinners like you and me to have a relationship with a holy God. That is good news, right?

READ Ephesians 2:14-16

There is a lot to unpack here. Jesus's death on the cross, v 14, "broke down the dividing wall of hostility." It removed that barrier between Jews and Gentiles. We humans have built up these physical and national identities that make us different. They come in all forms – socially, politically, economically, nationally and racially. And then sexually, male and female. That is where it starts. We are different in that way. Despite what people out there want to say, there are two sexes. Americans and non-Americans (foreigners), Caucasian, Hispanic, Black, Asian, Republican and Democrat and Independents, and so forth and on we could go. All these things that separate us and make us different. We even have various family identities and ancestral ties. That is all well and good. I am not saying anything bad about them. Paul is not either. It is OK for us to be proud of our heritage. But here is the thing you need to understand – in Christ, we Christians lose all those human identities and we become ONE in Christ. That is our identity.

In v 15 Paul tells us that Jesus abolished something. He did away with something – "the law of commandments expressed in ordinances." Jesus did away with the requirements of the Mosaic Law (Old Testament Law). This included the Jewish religious ordinances, traditions, ceremonies, and practices. The Sabbath ended. Judaism ended. The sacrificial system ended. Jesus's death on the cross changed everything.

V 14 and 15 mention Jesus being "our peace" and "making peace." Paul says that what Jesus did on the cross allowed us to have peace with God AND with each other. The word Paul uses in v 16 is "reconciled." Jesus's work on the cross – His finished work – restored a friendly relationship between us and God. People from both Jewish and Gentile

backgrounds were reconciled to God and, in doing so, we became one body, the church. This reconciliation, this restoration, in effect, “killed” the hostility that existed between Jews and Gentiles (that had existed for centuries). It put an end to it. We are no longer enemies with each other or with God because of what Christ did. What He did on the cross made a way for us to have peace with God.

READ Ephesians 2:17

During Jesus’s earthly ministry, He preached peace; in other words, how we could have peace with God. This message was given to the Gentiles, not just the Jews. Did you all know that when Jesus came, although His ministry was primarily focused on the people of Israel and their redemption, He did not neglect ministering to Gentiles? Unlike His Jewish brothers, His predecessors, Jesus did NOT isolate Himself away from and ignore Gentiles.

Let’s start off with John Chapter 4 with the woman at the well. She was a Samaritan. She was not a full-blooded Gentile but she is a “half-breed.” In some ways the Jews looked at that as worse. But Jesus went to the Samaritans and He spoke to this woman at the well at some length. As a result of that, the whole village got saved. She got saved as did the people in that town, Sychar. Then you have that Roman centurion, certainly a Gentile. He had a servant who was ill and Jesus healed the servant. A demon-possessed man in the Gentile region of the Gerasenes [approached Jesus] and Jesus threw the demon out. That man became a missionary in that region. He wanted to follow Jesus but Jesus said, “No. You go witness to your neighbors.” You have a Syrophoenician woman (part Syrian, part Phoenician), Gentile woman. It was her daughter (who had a demon) that Jesus healed. Then you had a deaf, mute man in the Decapolis that Jesus healed. That was another Gentile region. Then Jesus teaches and feeds a crowd of 4000 in Gentile territory. The feeding of the 5000 was mostly Jews. The feeding of the 4000 was mostly Gentiles. So, He came preaching to both groups, primarily to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles.

READ Ephesians 2:18

We have direct access to God by the same Holy Spirit. We all know about the Holy Spirit coming at Pentecost there in Jerusalem in Acts Chapter 2. It was [to] predominately Jewish believers that the Holy Spirit fell on, right? Well, later on in Acts Chapter 10, Peter witnessed the coming of the Holy Spirit at Cornelius's house. [It was] predominately Gentiles there. The same way. The Holy Spirit came and fell on them. So, the same Holy Spirit at Pentecost that came upon the Jewish believers would later come upon the Gentile believers. So then, there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile. Both groups have access to God through the same Holy Spirit.

Now, in the last several verses, Paul is going to use two metaphors to show us how we are all one in Christ. The first one is found in v 19...

READ Ephesians 2:19

Gentiles are no longer outcasts, foreigners standing on the outside looking in. We have been brought into the family of God. [We are] one big happy family.

READ Ephesians 2:20-21

The second metaphor is that of a building structure, specifically, a holy temple. The foundation, the doctrine, was laid by the apostles and the prophets. Jesus Himself is the cornerstone of this building. What about the building itself? That is us! We are the structure that makes up the temple.

Paul talks about us being "joined together." Those two words "joined together" comes from a Greek word meaning "to fit snug." You and I are the building materials. Peter puts it this way: "we then are living stones of the holy temple to God perfectly joined together and growing together" (1 Peter 2:5). So, Peter uses the same analogy about being living stones of this structure, this holy temple.

And then, the building, this structure that we are, this temple, God Himself lives in us. He lives IN this structure that we call God's holy temple, the church.

READ Ephesians 2:22

So, we are His dwelling. In Ephesians Chapter 3 Paul prays to God the Father. He prays, "from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named" (Ephesians 3:14). So, we like an adopted child, we take on the family name! We are Christians. Whether you are Jewish or Gentile and you are saved, you are a Christian.

Now, I just want to make a comment. I have Messianic Jewish friends. I have a friend of mine who worships in Dallas. I have no problem with them, but I will say this – they are Christians. They may call themselves "Messianic Jews," but if they are saved and they follow Christ (Yeshua), they are Christians. If they want to preserve all those [Jewish traditions], that is their business. But I am here to tell you, Jesus did away with all that. But it is OK if they want to do that because there are a lot of pictures in a lot of the [Jewish traditions] that they practice. There were a lot of pictures in the Old Testament and they recognize this. [They all] point to Jesus. It was really interesting to worship with them because you can see a lot of these things. But I do not view them as Jews. I view them as Christians.

Romans 10:12 says, "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek..." If you are saved, there is no distinction anymore between Jews and Gentiles. "...For the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing His riches on all who call on Him." It is an amazing thing to realize that God has broken down this barrier wall that existed for centuries and previously separated us and He has made us one in Christ.

You all know I like John MacArthur. And what I like about him is that he has a different way of looking at things and bringing it into new light. I like what he says here about church unity. That is what this quote is about. With this we will close: "Every biblical metaphor of the church basically

focuses on its unity The church, for example, is one bride with one husband. The church is one flock with one shepherd. The church is one set of branches with one vine. It is one kingdom with one King, one family with one Father, one building with one foundation, one body with one head. There are no classes. There are no ethnic distinctions. There is no hierarchy. There are no blue-ribbon sheep. We are all one."