

Prayer

Come close to me, Lord Jesus, in the majesty of Your presence; I know that I am unworthy, but I seek the graciousness of Your touch, the truth of Your Word, and the guidance of Your call to keep my life steady and secure. Break the stubborn foolishness of my wayward will, release the tensions in my soul, and heal my wounded spirit, so that I might trust You; not just now, but throughout my life and forever: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Health

Pray for universities and manufacturing companies whose investments in people and resources create medicines that save lives. Pray that this work will be done to God's glory.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for Iran a country increasingly divided within itself*
- *Give thanks to God for His presence each hour of the day*
- *Pray about birth control and its effects on people's spiritual life*

Meditation

The things of God are immeasurable and true:

- His love is more precious to us than any gift we may receive;
- His grace is more awesome than any experience we enjoy;
- His faithfulness is more consistent than the seasons of the earth;
- His promises are more secure than the due processes of law;
- His support is more steady than the foundations of a tower block;
- His healing is more complete than the circle of the globe;
- His salvation is more assured than the security of a home;
- His future is more definitive than the timing of an atomic clock;

And if we have problems, then it is we who must change.

Bible Study - Ephesians 2:11-16

¹¹ So keep it in mind that you were once Gentiles by natural descent, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who call themselves 'the circumcision' (a bodily mark made by human hands), ¹² and that in those times you were without the Messiah, excluded from the citizenship of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For He indeed is our peace, who has made both one, and in His own body He has broken down the hostility, the wall of division, ¹⁵ by cancelling the law of commandments in the form of regulations, so that He might by Himself make one new humanity in place of the two, and establish peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, destroying the hostility in Him.

Review

Our theme is the unity of God's people in Christ. In the early days of the church, Paul had the unique task of taking the Gospel 'to the Gentiles' (Acts 18:6), but he did not make a 'breakaway' church. He was guided by God's Spirit to unify all people of faith in 'one church', so it is not surprising that Paul turns to this subject immediately after his prayer of thanksgiving (ch. 1) and his explanation of the Gospel of grace (2:1-10). Over time, God used Paul's ministry to ensure that the Gospel was preached to all people throughout the known world, and for this to be done, the cultural boundaries between Jew and Gentile had to be broken. This powerful work of the Spirit created the foundations of the early church from which all God's churches have grown, whether they appreciate their heritage or not.

In the world of the first century, Judea and Jerusalem were little known, and although the Jewish people were scattered throughout the Roman Empire, they had little contact with others. It may seem remote to us

now, but the divisions between Jew and Gentile were so complete that it was inconceivable that the gulf between them could be bridged; yet God did just this. In Paul's day, as today, many people were content to keep their divisions; Jewish Christians preferred their own ways, and Gentile Christians developed theirs, believing that Christ had removed the rituals of Judaism. Yet Paul would not tolerate divisions, and he preached what Jesus prayed for, that God's people might be 'one' (John 17:11f.). Our readings today and tomorrow give us Paul's teaching on this acutely important matter.

Paul was writing to churches around Ephesus made up of Jews and Gentiles; it was an ideal mix, enabling Gentiles to benefit from the Jewish heritage, and Jews to benefit from new revelations of the Spirit to Gentiles. Yet Paul urged his readers to appreciate the magnitude of God's work, demonstrating the power of the Gospel in the world. He reminded the Gentiles of their past; utterly rejected by God's people as 'uncircumcised' (an unpleasant insult in Greek), and distant from the one true God even though they believed in many gods (2:12). He also reminded the Jews of their past, of ritual and obligation; circumcision, law, and the Old Testament 'covenants' that had proved useless (see yesterday's reading – 2:1-10).

Leaving all this behind, both Jew and Gentile Christians were miraculously united in Christ. Jews were set free from their failed rituals through the 'blood of Christ' (2:13), which fulfilled the laws of atonement for sin (as in Leviticus) and removed all barriers between God and His people (2:15). Gentiles were 'brought near' to God because the Cross was Roman, and His death on it was not just for God's 'chosen people', but the sins of all. Centuries previously, God had chosen Abraham, and promised to bless the whole world through him (Gen. 12:1-3). Ultimately, the blessing came through only one descendant, Jesus Christ. In His body, Jesus represented all the 'chosen' people of Israel in ministering God's promised blessing to the world; 'in His own body He has broken down the hostility, the wall of division ...' (2:14). He did this so that all might receive God's grace without division.

We cannot afford to take this work of God for granted, especially today. Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians still prefer their own ways, and Christians generally have split themselves into thousands of churches, most of which have no contact with each other whatsoever. In a secular world delivering instant communication and contact, we do not even know the names and places of all God's churches! If you read these studies regularly, you will know that I write frequently about the scandal of our divisions; so today, I will leave the last word to another author:

'In some churches, black and white people do not mix freely as members of one community ... in others, Christians ... will not share the communion with Christians of different denominations, thus inflicting hurt and humiliation. This is an apartheid no less offensive to the true spirit of Christ than the early separation of Jew and Gentile within the church ... the Spirit of God will not rest until He has broken down these dividing walls.' (Leslie Mitton, **Ephesians**, New Century Bible, Eerdmans)

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- What is meant by 'citizenship of Israel' and 'covenants of promise' (2:12)?
- How does the blood of Christ break down enmity and make peace (2:13,14)?
- Is the law in the Old Testament relevant for Christians today (2:15)?

Notes on the text and translation

- V11 'Gentiles by natural descent'** The Greek says 'Gentiles in the flesh', where the word 'flesh' means the natural self of someone who is not a Jew. I have added the word 'descent', because it is necessary to give the sentence meaning.
- V12 'and that in those times ...'** Verse 12 is a second clause that follows on from the opening words of verse 11; 'so keep it in mind ...' Both verses 11 and 12 describe the time before a Gentile became a Christian.
- V12 'without the Messiah'** The Greek say exactly this, but the normal way of translating this, as found in most Bibles would be to say 'without Christ' (the word 'Christ' is Greek for 'the Messiah'). The sentence makes more sense if we translate it as I have done (see study).
- V12 'excluded from the citizenship of Israel'** The Greek word here means 'to be alienated from'; this is a strong word, and it represents the complete cultural separation between Jew and Greek. The English word 'excluded' seems best.
- V12 'without God'** The Greek here is simply the word for God with a negative attached to it, and perhaps the best English word to represent this would be 'godless'. However, the passage would read strangely if this word was used, so I have translated it, 'without God', but the phrase still needs some explanation (see study).

- V14** *'for He indeed is our peace ...'* There is a great emphasis on the word 'He' at the beginning of the sentence, and this can be conveyed in a number of ways. Some other translations have this; 'for He, Himself is our peace' for example.
- V15** *'by cancelling the law of commandments in the form of regulations'* This phrase is important, but you will find that the subtlety of it is missed by some translations. Each word is important, because it explains that the Law (the Old Testament 'Torah') consists of commandments and regulations (see study).
- V16** *'destroying the hostility in Him'* Some Bible versions say something different; 'destroying the hostility through it', meaning the Cross. In Greek there is no difference between 'in it' and 'in Him'. Really, there is very little difference between these two in meaning. However, I prefer to say 'in Him', because the emphasis in this passage is very much on the work of Christ.

Going Deeper

What is meant by 'citizenship of Israel' and 'covenants of promise' (2:12)?

It must have seemed extraordinary to early Jewish Christians that people such as Paul so quickly set aside many of the things they held so dear. Some churches were basically Jewish in ethos and had little to do with the Gentile world. However, the authority of such churches, in particular the 'mother' church in Jerusalem, was broken when the Romans sacked Jerusalem in 70AD. Many saw this as a sign that the future lay, as Paul had said, with the united congregations of God's people, and not with the dominance of the Jewish church over the Gentile (see Acts 15). The rise of the church in Rome came in later centuries and is simply not reflected or endorsed within the New Testament.

Nevertheless, the Jewish heritage of faith is largely as Paul declared it here in Ephesians (and also in Romans 9-11). In speaking about the state of Gentiles before receiving Christ (2:11,12), Paul mentioned the 'citizenship of Israel' and the 'covenants of promise' (2:12). What did he mean by saying this?

Here, Paul did something typical of Him; he combined a Gentile word and a Hebrew word to symbolise the unity of which he spoke (just as he combined the Greek greeting 'grace' and the Hebrew greeting 'peace' in the introduction of most of his letters). So, in speaking about the 'citizenship of Israel', he used 'Israel', the name that united all God's chosen people, and added the term 'citizenship', normally used for identifying privilege within the Roman world (Paul claimed Roman citizenship to get out of trouble on a number of his missionary escapades - Acts 21:39, 22:25f.). Using this phrase, Paul said to Gentile Christians that although few of them could aspire to citizenship of Rome (a great privilege), through Christ, all could aspire to the citizenship of Israel, a privilege from which they were previously excluded (2:12). In other words, the church of God was His new 'chosen people', a 'new Israel', open to all through Christ.

Paul told the Gentiles that they had missed out on the 'covenants of promise'; they were of course accessible through Christ, but what did he mean by saying this? In the Old Testament, we do not read about 'covenants' (plural), we only find reference to 'the Covenant' between God and His people. Paul, however, knew his Old Testament very well. He knew that the Covenant had been made many times in the Old Testament, with Noah, firstly (Gen 6:18), and then with Abraham (Gen 15:8f.), and later with Moses (Exodus 24:7f.) and David (2 Samuel 23:5). He also knew that the prophets had declared that God would make a 'new Covenant' with God's people (Is. 61:8, Jer. 31:31-33, Ez. 16:57f.). All these covenants revealed something important about God; in order, His faithfulness (Noah), His promises (Abraham), His moral law (Moses), His saving intent (David), and His power to renew (the prophets).

Although Paul used the words 'new covenant' only rarely to describe the church (1 Cor 11:25, 2 Cor 3:6), it is likely that he perceived this as a covenant of God's grace, built upon all that God had revealed in the Old Testament Covenants. This was available to all people through Christ, and Christ alone.

How does the blood of Christ break down enmity and make peace (2:13,14)?

When Jesus died on the Cross, He did so as the Son of God, doing what had been prophesied beforehand especially by Isaiah (chapter 53f.). By coming as the servant of all humanity, His death on the Cross has completed all the laws of atonement set down in the Old Testament designed to enable impure and imperfect people to have access to the one true God who is pure and holy. When Paul spoke about the 'blood of Christ', he is using specialist language from the Old Testament law to describe Christ's work in this way.

It was important for Paul to state clearly that Jesus had done this because Jewish Christians would have felt, quite rightly, that unless He had, God was not faithful. How could anyone have faith in a God who was not consistent? God had previously said that human sin had to be wiped away by the blood of sacrifice shed at death, and previously, this was performed as a repeated ritual using animals. It meant that the continued sins of God's people were dealt with insofar as the law allowed.

Gentile Christians need to know this same truth for another reason. Throughout history, they were 'without the Messiah' (2:12), and because of the lack of any such heritage, Gentiles had been subject to all manner of pagan religions, mostly claiming access to God in all manner of ways; indeed, people invented elaborate religious systems for attaining this. By pointing to the death of Christ (the blood of Christ) as the only means of access to God, Paul solved their problem. In those days, everyone felt they needed access to God, and without the benefit of God's own revelations over the years that would help them find the right way, they were 'lost'. The Gospel gave them the answer, and by the evidence of the growth of the early church in the first century, it was a 'Good News' that people had been eagerly awaiting to hear.

Is the law in the Old Testament relevant for Christians today (2:15)?

In verse 15, Paul carefully described God's work. He said that Jesus 'cancelled the law of commandments in the form of regulations'. It is easy to imagine that this says Jesus 'cancelled the law', and it seems that Paul's letters generally describe the 'law' as superseded by God's 'grace'. Now, every passage of Paul's writing that mentions this subject should be examined carefully, because the way Paul uses words to convey this reveals a complex message.

In writing this letter, Paul was aware that Jesus said that He had not 'come to abolish the law but to fulfil it (Matt 5:17), and yet he criticised laws about cleanliness and Sabbath regulations frequently in His ministry. Paul was a Biblical scholar before he was a Christian, and so he knew full well that when Jesus criticised these details of the law, the 'regulations' he dismissed were not the moral or practical laws set down in the Old Testament. He would have nothing to do with the thousands of intricate regulations set out by Jewish scholars to interpret what is found in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. This is why Paul says very carefully that Jesus cancelled the law 'of commandments in the form of regulations'; he did not say that Jesus cancelled 'the Law', meaning the moral law of God as found in the revelation of God of the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are regarded as the foundational moral code of God, built into the fabric of the world and humanity.

Secondly, Paul knew that as we have already seen, what Jesus did on the Cross meant that the sacrifice of His death was now sufficient to render the majority of laws in Leviticus concerning sacrifices for atonement, that is, all the sacrifices defined there. Speaking generally, if we remove all the laws relating to sacrifice for atonement from Leviticus, we are left with the great 'moral code' of Leviticus 19, which has as its conclusion 'love your neighbour as yourself'. We are also left with a multiplicity of regulations concerning sex, health and common cleanliness that most people consider as valid for today, even if they need a certain amount of interpretation (such as including the 'foreigner' and looking after the poor).

It is not an accident that today, most Christians remember the law in terms of the Ten Commandments, the holiness laws of Leviticus and the social laws of the same book that can still be interpreted for the world of today. In His person (or as Paul said, 'in His body'), Jesus met all the laws of God for gaining access to Him for all people, and the remaining laws of the Old Testament are a defining statement of God's moral code embedded within His creation. With this discernment, we can interpret God's laws from the Old Testament for today.

Application

This passage of Scripture is an amazing text, describing the unique work of God in Christ to bring unity to His people, a feat thought impossible, yet it was achieved. I often write in these devotions about the unity of God's people because the issue is raised frequently in Scripture. When I speak to people about it, I find that most people will quickly agree that our unity in Christ is important, but they see no possibility of Christian unity today, even in a formula of words or statement of faith. In addition, most newly formed churches see no need to be a part of the existing 'World Council of Churches' which is united as 'a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour' (1961 declaration) because of the way that this organisation is perceived to have made compromises on issues of faith.

All this is sad, but there is little gloom amongst Christians about the lack of visible unity; most believers think it all irrelevant, and this is the problem. Just as in Paul's day, when many Jewish and Gentile Christians could not see how centuries of enmity could be overturned, people today do not perceive that it is possible for there to be any unity amongst God's people. Neither do they recognise their own sin in ignoring Jesus' command that we 'love one another' (John 13:34f.). Our passage today makes it abundantly clear that God's intention is that His people should be one, and it speaks about how God achieved this in the early days of the church. However, I suggest that because we have lost the heart to seek ways of being united as God's people on earth (as a prelude to our unity in heaven), our churches are under judgement because they are not 'in the Lord's will' in this matter. Consequently, our prayers for renewal and blessing are hindered not because of any plan by God to wait for another time, but by our lack of desire to have the heart of the Saviour and be united in Him. We imagine that somehow, we can all do what we think is right and please Christ! In the light of this scripture, we must surely question ourselves.

We should never take for granted the power of this world-changing truth about what Jesus has done for us. Since the earliest days of the church, the love of God has been made available to all people by His Holy Spirit, and as the early disciples and apostles discovered (in the 'Acts of the Apostles'), the Spirit came upon all kinds of people throughout the known world to prove that Jew and Gentile had become one in Jesus (2:14). The Holy Spirit will lead us into God's unity, probably in new ways we have not yet perceived, and by leaders we have not yet known. However, I am certain of one thing, which is that God will indeed unite His people in worship, mission and service, and he will seek to do it in this world because the spread of the Gospel throughout the world depends on our working together in Him.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. How much understanding is there between Jews and Christians today? Do you know of any Messianic Jews where you live?
2. Why does the Bible speak so much about the unity of God's people in Christ, and why is this an important scriptural theme?
3. In what ways can we promote peace between Christians in the midst of our many arguments?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The amazing truth of this passage of scripture is that it records God doing what people thought impossible. This is immensely encouraging for all people of faith, because if God could achieve a unity between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians within the early church, and heal the hostilities between them, then He can do something similar today. The right place for us all to start is to make God's will a priority for our prayers; then He will lead us to take the right action to bring about change. This is how God's will works..

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Make a list of the churches where you live, and do your best to find opportunities to visit them and get to know them better. You may see them at the best or their worst, and remember, anyone visiting your own church will experience the same! At the end of your visits, talk to others in your church about what you have found.*
- *Pray for the unity of God's people, and pray that the Lord will bring to His people a heart to follow the Scriptures and the will of God, that His people might be one.*

Final Prayer

I praise Your holy Name, Lord God, because I can turn to You and find peace. In the midst of my confusion You are my truth, in the midst of my uncertainty You are my rock, and in the midst of my despair You are my Saviour. Give me wisdom to honour You in every circumstances of life, so that all I do may be to Your praise and glory: AMEN
