

# EPISTLE READING FOR JULY 19, 2015

**START WITH SCRIPTURE:** Ephesians 2:11-22

## **OBSERVE:**

Paul is tackling one of the toughest issues of his time — the division between Jews and Gentiles. He does not deny the unique place that the Jews had in the “salvation history.” They were “*the circumcision*,” and according to the holy scriptures they were the heirs to *the covenants of the promise*.

Paul never denies the validity of the promises to Israel, or the Law. In fact, in this passage he begins with “bad news” for the Gentiles, rather than good news: they were once *without hope and without God in the world*.

But the twist in this plot is that Jesus is the ‘game-changer.’ *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

Paul uses a brilliant image to illustrate what Jesus has done. Gentiles were separated from the presence of God, and from the people of God, by a dividing wall. Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, has broken down this dividing wall, and united Jews and Gentiles! He has done this *by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations*. His very death on the cross fulfills and sets aside the law so that the provision of grace mentioned earlier has been fulfilled: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).*

It isn’t necessary here to explore the vital doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Suffice it to say that this passage presupposes that the Ephesians are familiar with the notion that their salvation rests not on what they do but on what Christ has done for them.

Paul’s main concern in this passage is to tell his own people — the *we* he has been referring to, i.e., the Jewish Christians — and the Gentiles — the *you* he’s also been referring to, i.e., the Gentile Christian — that they are no longer two distinct races. They are one because Christ has united them by reconciling all of them to God through his cross. Both Jews and Gentiles have access to God through the same means — the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Paul’s understanding is uniquely Trinitarian: *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*. Access to the Father is through the Son by the One Spirit. And those who *were far away* were the Gentiles; *those who were near* were the Jews. And now they are both in the same place — in the presence of God!

One quick note — when Paul says Jesus *preached peace*, I wonder if he doesn’t have in mind that wonderful Hebrew concept of *shalom*, which implies more than just quiet and absence of conflict. It implies fulfillment, abundance, prosperity, and reconciliation.

Then Paul returns in verses 19-22 to a wonderful image. If Jesus has destroyed the dividing wall of separation in his own flesh, he is also the carpenter and builder who will build a whole *newholy temple*.

He begins this section by announcing that the Gentiles *are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household*. This is a new “nationality,” if you will; no longer Jew or Gentile, they are God’s people.

And they themselves are the building of God, the temple in which God dwells — Jesus himself is the cornerstone, and the foundation is the apostles and prophets . And Jesus is building this new temple out of these new believers!

The temple is not the building built by Solomon in the tenth century B.C., or the temple rebuilt by the returning exiles in the sixth century B.C., or the temple under renovation by Herod in Jesus' time. No, the true temple is the people of God, assembled and constructed by Jesus: *And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

The temple is not a place; it is the Presence of God!

### **APPLY:**

There are two very significant applications of this passage to us.

First, we are reminded that in modern America, as it has been said, “Eleven o’clock on Sunday morning is the most segregated time of the week.” Christians of different races worship the same God, read from the same Bible, and yet worship in our separate church buildings.

The controversies about divisions between Jew and Gentile from the early church are just as relevant today as they were nearly two thousand years ago! Jesus' work of breaking down the dividing wall that separates believers and reconciling us with one another continues even today.

The second application of this passage is for us to be reminded that we are the temple of God. Just as David discovered when he wanted to build a temple for God, we must also realize — we don't build the temple, Jesus does.

And as one of the modern affirmations declares, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is the one true Church, apostolic and universal.” And this temple only rises when it is firmly established on Jesus as the cornerstone, with the teaching of the apostles and the prophets as the foundation.

### **RESPOND:**

We keep on building barriers and dividing walls that partition ourselves into denominations: liberals or conservatives; traditionalists or progressives. I am guilty of this.

What if we step aside and let Jesus take a sledge hammer to the dividing wall, and we let him build us back up through his grace into the church that he wants us to be, *a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit?*

*Our Lord, break down the walls that divide us, and unite us in Christ. May we be a dwelling in which you live by your Spirit. Amen.*

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