

# God is Near, Ephesians 2:11-18

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## Introduction

Good morning, my name is Brad and I'm one of the pastors here. We are currently in the midst of a six-month emphasis on one of our five core identities as a church: the identity of family. Perhaps never in our lives has our identity as spiritual family been more important!

And guiding us through this emphasis is a sermon series in the letter of Ephesians, which we have subtitled, "Into the Fullness of Christ". Although it might be a fitting time to pivot into a sermon series addressing the realities of life in a global pandemic, Ephesians already does that. Think about this: when have we ever more desperately needed to grow deeper into the fullness of Christ as a family than right now?

So I invite you to turn in your Bibles with me to Ephesians 2:11-18. The title of today's sermon is "God is Near"—and if there's nothing else you're able to take in from our time today, may it be *that* life-changing truth. The main idea that will rise to the surface from today's passage is this: When God's people remember what he's done, God's people can live as one. Here are the two application points we'll draw out from that main idea:

- 1) Remember You Were Once Far Off - vv. 11-12
- 2) Remember You Have Been Brought Near - vv. 13-18

With that said, if you are able, please stand with me to honor the reading of God's word (and know you are standing in solidarity with your scattered spiritual family, both here in Louisville and across the world). Again, today's passage is Ephesians 2:11-18. Church, hear the word of the Lord:

*<sup>11</sup> Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— <sup>12</sup> remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. <sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility <sup>15</sup> by*

*abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. <sup>17</sup> And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. <sup>18</sup> For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. Ephesians 2:11-18*

The Lord has spoken to us. [Congregation] Thanks be to God! You may be seated.

## **Exposition**

Several years ago I had the privilege of visiting Jerusalem with some friends. As we made our way through the city we began noticing in Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods large signs posted that said, “Groups passing through our neighborhoods severely offend the residents—please stop this...Please do not pass through our neighborhood in immodest clothes...Please do not disturb the sanctity of our neighborhood and our way of life as Jews committed to God and his [law]”. Before nearly walking down one of these streets, our guide quickly redirected us, warning that we could be met not only with cold stares, but even a few rocks. Our reaction: who do these people think they are?! Never had I felt quite so much like a Gentile.

What we were experiencing that day, I think, was a tiny taste of what was once a much more severe global reality for hundreds of years. God, in choosing for himself a covenant people, the Jews, he was also *not choosing* a world of other peoples to be in covenant relationship with. Now of course, the Jews were to be God’s light to the world; they were to welcome the foreign seeker of God; their temple was to be called a “house of prayer for all nations”.<sup>1</sup> But even if they had lived up to that calling—and they didn’t—then those outside the nation (Gentiles) still had to go through a difficult process to convert, and even then they would still be considered a just transplant.<sup>2</sup>

That means the Gentiles to whom Paul was writing in Ephesus, and all of you Gentiles who are listening right now, you come from a long heritage of people who have no access to relationship with God or to his people. How does that make you feel? Well, were you to really think about it, you might find yourself (one) angry at God—“This isn’t fair!”; or two, you might find yourself feeling kind of like we did that day in Jerusalem—“Who do these people think they are?”

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Kings 8:41-43; Isaiah 56:6-7

<sup>2</sup> Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: IVP, 1989), 87-88

The only way we might overcome such a sense of injustice is by *remembering* something: *God* didn't separate us from himself or his people, but *our sins* have separated us from our *God*.<sup>3</sup> This is exactly what Paul has been causing us to remember when he writes earlier in Ephesians 2,

*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins<sup>2</sup> in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—<sup>3</sup> among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. Ephesians 2:1-3*

When we hate people who aren't willing to take the necessary precautions to limit the spread of coronavirus because they know they're probably healthy enough to beat it, *God* leads us to *remember* that we come from the same strain of sinful selfishness. When we blame China for being the cause of all this because they're undeveloped and dirty, *God* leads us to *remember* that we all come from nothing more than dirt. "For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things" (Romans 2:1).

Often lately I hear people say that churches shouldn't preach about sin because people are already aware that they are sinful. Now I acknowledge that the primary spirit of the Christian message shouldn't be guilt and shame—but if we don't *remember* the roots of our sin, we'll never appreciate the fruits of our Savior.

### **1) Remember You Were Once Far Off - vv. 11-12**

This brings us to our first point of application, our first thing to remember: remember you were once far off. Paul writes this in verse 11:

*<sup>11</sup> Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— Ephesians 2:11*

Let's pause there for a moment. Honestly, this is not a pleasant thing to remember. The Jews had developed a derogatory word for the Gentiles—"the uncircumcision"; literally, "the foreskin".<sup>4</sup> In other words, the people missing the mark of *God's* approval. But the Jews had come up with this in pride, and were themselves missing the point that

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 59:2

<sup>4</sup> Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), Loc 3925

circumcision was ultimately a matter of the heart.<sup>5</sup> So in a way that's easy to miss, Paul gets derogatory toward his own people, the Jews, saying that circumcision is "made in the flesh by hands". This is the same language Jews used to describe Gentile idols—"made in the flesh by hands". In other words, the Gentiles might be "the uncircumcision," but the Jews had turned their you-know-what into an idol.<sup>6</sup> As Paul has said elsewhere, "for *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God".<sup>7</sup>

He continues in verse 12,

*<sup>12</sup> remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. Ephesians 2:12*

If it wasn't bad enough for them to remember they had been called names, now Paul tells them to remember the most offensive things he could possibly say about them. It's a list that just builds and builds on itself, each part worse than the next. In order to understand it we need to look to Paul's letter to the Romans, where he writes what was the exact opposite reality for the Jews:

*<sup>4</sup> They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. <sup>5</sup> To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen. Romans 9:4-5*

Statistics have shown that if you ask people whether Jesus Christ was a Jew or a Christian, the majority will answer that he was a Christian. But the reality is, my friends, Jesus was a *Jewish* Messiah. He himself told Gentiles, "salvation is from the Jews" and "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel".<sup>8</sup> If that makes you feel excluded from him in a sense, well, it should—that means you're getting what Paul is saying here.

The Jews had been graciously given everything we read about in the Old Testament. To sum it all up, they got God; along with the promise of a Messiah who would come to save *them*. Gentiles did not get God; nor did they get a promise of a Messiah. In fact, the vast majority of them had never even heard of such a thing as a Messiah; and if

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<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 10:16; Romans 2:28-29

<sup>6</sup> Arnold, Loc 3925

<sup>7</sup> Romans 3:23

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 15:24; John 4:22

they did, they wouldn't have seen a need for one.<sup>9</sup> Truly, they (let's be more clear—we) *had no hope and were without God in the world.*

Now before we start feeling too sorry for ourselves, we need to remember something else: *we chose this.* Even in our ignorance we were hostile toward God.<sup>10</sup> And the Gentiles of the Old Testament were hostile toward God's people. Had it been us, we would have been too—how do I know? Because how do you respond to a clique?

So remember, Paul says, remember how far off you were from God and from his people. For that is the only way you'll ever begin to appreciate what he's about to say next.

## **2) Remember You Have Been Brought Near - vv. 13-18**

This brings us to our second point of application, our second thing to remember: remember you have been brought near. We read this in verse 13:

***13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Ephesians 2:13***

Here's the good news we preach in both peace and pandemic: through Jesus Christ, God is near. As Jeremy described last Sunday, although you were as far off from God as being buried in the depths of the ocean floor, Jesus Christ has made a way for you to be lifted up out of that grave and presented alive to God. What did it cost to offer you this free gift? Paul is very clear: nothing less than the blood of Christ.

This is the only thing that has the power to end the hostility between you and God. "What can wash away my sin?" Say it with me if you know it: "Nothing but the blood of Jesus".<sup>11</sup> But here's where the effect of that blood is put on full display. Not only does it end the hostility between God and Gentiles, but between *Jews* and Gentiles. You see, the cross has a vertical effect that reconciles God and human. But it also has a horizontal effect that reconciles human and human—without the vertical and the horizontal, there's no cross! Paul writes in verse 14,

***14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility <sup>15</sup> by abolishing the law of commandments expressed***

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<sup>9</sup> Arnold, Loc 3946

<sup>10</sup> Colossians 1:22; Arnold, Loc 3967

<sup>11</sup> Robert Lowry, "Nothing But The Blood Of Jesus"

*in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, <sup>16</sup> and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. Ephesians 2:14-16*

You see, we have an incomplete gospel if it stops at just your own personal salvation. “Well, it’s none of your business; this is just between me and God”—except that the blood of Christ was poured out on the cross *so that you would be brought near not only to God but also to God’s people.*

I believe many people will turn to Christ during Covid-19 while sitting in their home listening to a sermon online or talking with a Christian who loves them. So may we not be found preaching a half gospel that says you can be restored to God without also being restored to his family, the church! May we not come out of these days with a tribe of Christians who think it’s biblically acceptable to walk with Jesus but keep the church just an optional online community. Because that’s not why Jesus himself became ***our*** peace. The mystery hidden for ages was that Jesus came not to build a wall, but to tear one down.<sup>12</sup>

Now what exactly does Paul mean by this “wall”? Well, the ancient Jewish historian Josephus tells us that “In Jerusalem, between the [Jewish] temple and the Court of the Gentiles [the only section where they were allowed], there was a stone wall [with this] inscription: ‘No one of another nation to enter within the fence and enclosure round the temple. And whoever is caught will have himself to blame that his death ensues.’”<sup>13</sup> (In my best Chris Treager from Parks and Rec) That, is *literally* a wall of hostility.

But even greater than that wall, was that of the Jewish Torah. This is what Paul describes as “the law of commandments expressed in ordinances”. In other words, the Old Testament rules and regulations that protected the Jews from all the unclean Gentiles.<sup>14</sup> That doesn’t mean that Jesus came along and said that God’s law doesn’t matter anymore. No, instead he said,

***17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. Matthew 5:17***

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<sup>12</sup> Ephesians 3:6

<sup>13</sup> Foulkes, 89

<sup>14</sup> Arnold, Loc 4127

You see, Jesus came as a Jewish man who obeyed the law perfectly, as no Jew ever had. And thus he was a perfect sacrifice in the place of law-breakers.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the wrecking ball that took down the dividing wall of hostility—*was Jesus' broken body*. And then rising from the dead, the Slain One becomes the Slayer<sup>16</sup>, and he has the right to say, "This wall is gone forever!" He completely levels the playing field. So no longer is God's people an ethnic people who follow after his sacrificial law. Now, God's people are a global people who follow after his sacrificial Son.

If you've seen one of the films in the Jurassic Park series, you've kind of seen them all, right? The plot line is pretty simple: fence divides man and dinosaurs—good; fence fails to divide man and dinosaurs—bad (chomp). But in one of the more recent remakes, something different happens. One of the characters somehow tames a pack of velociraptors. So much so that at one climactic moment, man and dinosaur are able to fight alongside one another against a common enemy. It's ridiculous, of course, but it is at least a whole new thing.

When Jesus tears down the wall of hostility, it's a whole new thing. He's not after the same ol' plot line. According to Paul, his aim is to "create in himself one new man in the place of two." It's not just bitter enemies continuing to chomp each other. It's not just two groups tolerating each other. No, it's an entirely new creation, a new society, a new humanity.<sup>17</sup> It's a new chosen people who instead of hating each other actually love each other. How? Because, verse 17,

*17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him [the Son] we both have access in one Spirit to the Father [note the Trinitarian emphasis]. Ephesians 2:17-18*

## Conclusion

Imagine the relevance of this right now in our world. Of course there is no longer a literal dividing wall of hostility. God's people are no longer set apart according to ethnicity. But sometimes it sure feels like we still are. The tendency of so many Christians throughout church history and today has been to live with a Christendom mentality, as though our nation or denomination or designation is God's chosen people. But when God's people haven't been willing to show others he is near, God has used his own means to accomplish it. Things like this:

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<sup>15</sup> Hebrews 5:9

<sup>16</sup> Anderson, Loc 4254

<sup>17</sup> Arnold, Loc 4215

- A great persecution that pushed Christians out of Jerusalem and introduced the Gentile world to Christ
- A vast Barbarian army that conquered Christianized Rome and thus encountered Christ
- A terrible Bubonic Plague that ended the Crusades and showed people how much they needed Christ
- A bloody Protestant Reformation that scattered refugees who proclaimed that salvation is only by faith in Christ<sup>18</sup>

Could it be, then, that right now God is using a global pandemic to:

- 1) Show those outside of Christ that God is near
- 2) and to remind those who are in Christ that we have a glorious, diverse family?

After last Sunday, blogger Tim Challies collected photos of Christians and churches from around the world worshiping together.<sup>19</sup> Normally, this kind of collage would highlight how different we are from one another, but on this unique Sunday in church history, we got a rare glimpse of just how much we have in common. Just how much all these nations and denominations and designations represent a people:

- who were once far off, but have been brought near by the blood of Christ
- who were hopeless without God in the world, but now have Christ himself as our peace
- who were once separated by the dividing wall of hostility, but now have been made one new man in the place of two
- who were once alienated and strangers, but now have access in one Spirit to the Father.

So for those of you who have been brought near, what are the thoughts, words, and deeds that appear like a sign posted over you or your home or our church that says, “People passing through here severely offend the residents—please stop this”? No matter what happens in the days and weeks ahead, may you come out of this season more delighted with God’s diverse family, more eager to spend eternity with it, more

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<sup>18</sup> Ralph D. Winter, “The Kingdom Strikes Back: Ten Epochs of Redemption History,” [http://www.foundationscourse.org/uploads/documents/reader/1\\_kingdom\\_strikes\\_back.pdf](http://www.foundationscourse.org/uploads/documents/reader/1_kingdom_strikes_back.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Tim Challies, “How the World Worshipped on One of the Most Unusual Sundays in Church History,” <https://www.challies.com/articles/how-the-world-worshipped-on-one-of-the-most-unusual-sundays-in-church-history/>



eager to welcome others into it. Let this emphasis on our identity as family apply not just to our small church, but to all of God's new society.

And for those of you who have not yet been brought near, no matter what happens in the days and weeks ahead, may you come out of this season as a new part of God's diverse family. Jesus Christ is preaching peace to you today, the peace that comes from his body broken for you and his blood poured out for you on the cross. From wherever you're listening, hear his resurrected voice from heaven and respond in repentance and faith. Friend, God is near.

Let's pray.

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