

EPH. 2:11 – 3:21

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V. Call to remember God's saving work from a specifically Gentile perspective (2:11-22) – ¹¹Therefore remember that at one time you, the Gentiles in [the] flesh, those called "[the] uncircumcision" by what is called "[the] circumcision" (done by human hands in [the] flesh), ¹²[remember] that at that time you were separate from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus, you who at one time were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he is our peace, the one who made both [groups] one and broke down the dividing wall which is the fence, having set aside in his flesh the hostility, ¹⁵the law of commandments [expressed] in ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross, having put to death in himself the hostility. ¹⁷And having come, he proclaimed peace to you, those [who were] far away and peace to those [who were] near, ¹⁸for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹Accordingly, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, the cornerstone being Christ Jesus himself, ²¹in whom the entire building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, ²²in whom you also are being built together into a place where God dwells in the Spirit.

A. From alienation to privilege (2:11-13)

1. Given that God has graciously saved them in Christ ("Therefore"), Paul calls them to reflect on their prior spiritual condition as Gentiles so that they may have an even greater appreciation of the mighty reversal God had effected on their behalf.

2. He notes that they were "the Gentiles *in the flesh*," which here is a reference to a physical, bodily difference between them and the Jews. Specifically, they were physically uncircumcised in contrast to the Jews who had been physically circumcised. As circumcision was a physical sign of Israel's covenant with God, their uncircumcision was evidence that they were outside of Israel's relationship with God.

3. Paul lists some deficiencies or inadequacies of their pre-Christian past so that they might appreciate more deeply the blessings they received in Christ.

a. They were separate from Christ, the Messiah, in the sense they had no part in Israel's messianic expectation. Israel expected the Messiah, the coming king who would rule on David's throne in fulfillment of God's purposes, because the Scriptures with which they had been entrusted (Rom. 3:2) spoke of this Messiah. The Gentiles were not plugged into that expectation.

b. They were not part of the nation of Israel, God's chosen people, and thus were not party to the various covenants God made with Israel based on his foundational promise of blessings to Abraham. They were outside the line of promise.

c. Being apart from Israel and thus outside the line of promise, they were, prior to their conversion, without hope of participating in the blessings of that promise. So they not only were separate from Christ in the subjective sense of being unaware of or uninterested in the Messiah's promised coming as revealed in Israel's Scriptures (v. 12), they also were without hope in the objective sense of being outside the promises to Israel of messianic salvation.

d. They were without God in the world in the sense they had no relationship with the true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

4. This was their dire state as Gentiles prior to their conversion, but now that they are in Christ they have been brought near by Christ's atoning death. In Christ Jesus, they have come to know Israel's Messiah, to participate in God's promises to Israel, and to have a relationship with the true and living God.

B. Christ's reconciling work (2:14-18)

1. The Gentiles have been brought near *in Christ Jesus* because Jesus is the one who created peace between Jews and Gentiles, the one who unified them. (The same is true of all different groups in the church [Gal. 3:26-28], but Paul's focus here is on Jews and Gentiles.) Lincoln remarks (p. 141), "In accomplishing this, Christ has transcended one of the fundamental divisions of the first-century world."

2. The unification of Jewish and Gentile believers into one body was achieved by the setting aside of the Mosaic law, which was accomplished through Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

a. The law is here referred to as "the dividing wall which is the fence,"¹ "the hostility," and "the law of commandments [expressed] in ordinances."² O'Brien comments (p. 196), "[The law] separated Jews and Gentiles both religiously and sociologically, and caused deep-seated hostility. The enmity which was caused by the Jews' separateness was often accompanied by a sense of superiority on their part."

(1) The law distinguished Israel from the Gentiles in the broad sense that it defined a special relationship between God and Israel; God chose Israel for a special role in his unfolding plan of redemption. But specific commandments also produced separation. God's holy people could not intermarry (Dt. 7:3-4; Ezra 9:1-2; Neh. 13:25-27), and extensive regulations defining uncleanness (e.g., involvement with certain animals, foods, bleeding, corpses, and graves) resulted in separation from unclean (noncomplying) Gentiles (see Gal. 2:12; Leviticus and Numbers).

¹ With most commentators, I take *tou' fragmou'* as a genitive of apposition (see O'Brien, 195, n. 160).

² On the relationship of the clauses, see O'Brien, 196 n. 164.

(2) In the words of the second-century B.C. *Epistle of Aristeas*: "Our lawgiver . . . fenced us about with impenetrable palisades and with walls of iron to the end that we should mingle in no way with any of the other nations . . ." (quoted in O'Brien, 196, n. 165).

b. The Mosaic law is the *set or package* of commands that were part of the Mosaic covenant. The Mosaic covenant included the grandest and most complete expression to that time of God's moral requirements, but moral requirements did not begin at Sinai. Mankind was under moral requirements from creation, a fact to which Noah's flood bears solemn witness.

c. Some of the commands in the Mosaic covenant were peculiarly covenantal, meaning they were not universal moral desires of God. They erected civil and ceremonial or ritualistic ("amoral") distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, probably (at least in part) to keep the people of God untainted by pagan practices in order to help them serve as a witness to their Gentile neighbors of the blessed life that exists under God. A distinction between the commandments of the law is evident in 1 Cor. 7:19 (TNIV): Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts.

d. A new covenant was instituted between God and mankind through the sacrifice of Christ, the effect of which was to render the old covenant, the Mosaic covenant, obsolete or no longer operative (2 Cor. 3:4-18; Gal. 3:15 – 4:7, 4:21-31; Heb. 7:11-22, 8:6-13). And with the fulfillment in Christ of the planned obsolescence of the Mosaic covenant, the *set of commands* that were part of that covenant, the Mosaic law, ceased to be binding.

(1) That the Mosaic law ceased to be binding is clear from texts like Rom. 10:1-4, Gal. 3:23-25, and Heb. 7:11-14 but also from the fact specific regulations that were part of the Mosaic law — such as Sabbath regulations (Col. 2:16-17; Rom. 14:5-6), food laws (Rom. 14:1 – 15:13; 1 Cor. 10:23 – 11:1), and circumcision (1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 2:3-5, 5:2-6, 11-12, 6:12-13; Phil. 3:2) — are said to be no longer binding.

(2) That is why Paul, a Jew, could declare that he was not under the Mosaic law (1 Cor. 9:20).

e. Though the set of commands that constitute the Mosaic law ceased to be binding, many of the individual commands included in that law have an ongoing or renewed applicability, and indeed find their full expression, in the new covenant.

(1) Thus, Paul can turn around in Eph. 6:2 and command children to "honor your father and mother," quoting from the Ten Commandments in Ex. 20:12 and Deut. 5:16.

(2) The fundamental ethical requirement for the Christian is love (Mat. 7:12, 22:37-40; Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14), but some specific conduct is loving and other conduct is not. Love is the center, but there are definite requirements on how it expresses itself. As Paul indicates in Rom. 13:9, the command to love your neighbor as yourself encompasses the commands of the law not to commit adultery, not to murder, not to steal, and not to covet (and other commands he does not specify). Thus, the Christian, though not being under the Mosaic law, the set of commands that are part of Mosaic covenant, upholds the transcendent moral requirements that are included in that law (e.g., Rom. 13:8-10; 1 Cor. 10:14; Eph. 6:2). This ongoing moral law, centered in love, is the "law of Christ" (see 1 Cor. 9:21 and Gal. 6:2 with 5:14).

f. Because the commands of the Mosaic law relating to circumcision, sacrifices, the priesthood, feasts, holy days, ritual purity laws, and food laws are not part of the law of Christ (see Mat. 15:16-20; Mk. 7:18-19, indicating that the rules of ritual contamination are removed), not something Christians are required to obey (other than as an accommodation), Christ's ending of the Mosaic law ended the requirements that created the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. In this way, he created one new man out of the two.

3. Christ not only created one new body out of Jewish and Gentile believers, he also reconciled that one body with God by having atoned for the sin that alienated Jew and Gentile from him. Jesus ended in his crucifixion, in his flesh, not only the horizontal hostility between Jew and Gentile but also the vertical hostility between sinners and God. This reconciling work is an "already" foretaste of the "not yet" universal reconciliation referred to in 1:9-10.

4. Christ proclaimed peace to Jew and Gentile either through the event of his reconciling death as set out in vv. 14-16 (see Lincoln, 148-149) or through the subsequent Spirit-empowered preaching of those he commissioned to spread the gospel (see O'Brien, 207). That the same message of peace was proclaimed or preached to both Jew and Gentile is evident from the fact they both have access to God as sharers of the one Spirit. As put in v. 16, they both have been reconciled with God as one body.

C. Members of God's household (2:19-22)

1. As a result of Christ's mighty reconciling work, these Gentiles who had once been outsiders are now insiders; they are now fellow citizens with all other Christians in the kingdom of God.

2. In more intimate terms, they are members of their heavenly Father's household, a part of his family. O'Brien states (p. 212, quoting Towner), "In the Roman world of the day to be a 'member of a household meant refuge and protection, at least as much as the master was able to provide. It also meant identity and gave the security that comes with a sense of belonging.'"

3. Paul says that they have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,³ meaning "that their membership in God's people rests on the normative teaching that arises from divine revelation" (O'Brien, 216). The apostles and prophets were inspired proclaimers of the gospel, and their message, the message of God, is what these Gentiles had received.

4. The cornerstone⁴ of this building into which these Gentiles have been incorporated is Christ Jesus himself. In ancient times, the cornerstone was not something put into place at the time the completed building was dedicated. It was the first stone laid, and it set the line or standard by which the walls were constructed (see Hoehner, 406-407). O'Brien concludes (p. 217-218):

Paul seems, therefore, to be making the following points: Christ is the vital cornerstone on whom the building is constructed. The foundation and position of all the other stones in the superstructure were determined by him. He is 'the one from which the rest of the foundation is built outwards along the line of the proposed walls'. Accordingly, the temple is built out and up from the revelation given in Christ, with the apostles and prophets elaborating and explaining the mystery, which had been made known to them by the Holy Spirit (3:4-11, esp. v. 5). 'But all is built on Christ, supported by Christ, and the lie or shape of the continuing building is determined by Christ, the cornerstone'.

5. It is in Christ that previously divided people are brought to unity, which Paul here describes as their being fit together into a building, a unified structure. So it is in Christ that this structure, the community of faith, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. God dwells in the church, as he was present in a special way in the temple, but the church is a work in progress. It is growing *as* a holy temple *into* a completed holy temple. These believing Gentiles are among those ("you also") being incorporated into this construction project, having become part of the community in which God dwells in the Spirit.

VI. The divine mystery and Paul's stewardship (3:1-13) – *For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles – ²for surely you heard [of] the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³that by revelation the mystery was made known to me, as I already wrote in brief. ⁴By reading that, you are able to perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵which [mystery] was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: ⁶that is, the Gentiles [are] joint heirs and members of the same body and sharers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, ⁷of which I became a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given to me according to the working of his power.*

⁸To me, the very least of all [the] saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the good news of the unfathomable riches of Christ ⁹and to enlighten everyone [as to] what [is] the plan of the mystery that for ages was hidden in God who created all things,

³ For a critique of the suggestion that the phrase should be understood as "the apostles who are also prophets," see O'Brien, 214-216 and Hoehner, 402.

⁴ See the discussion in O'Brien, 216-218 and Hoehner, 404-406 on the meaning of *ajkrogwniaio*".

¹⁰*in order that the richly diverse wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly realms through the church.* ¹¹*[This was] according to [the] eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord,* ¹²*in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in him.* ¹³*I ask [you], therefore, not to be disheartened by my sufferings on your behalf, which is your glory.*

A. Paul's prayer (3:1)

1. Paul begins to tell them his prayer on their behalf in light of the tremendous blessings God has bestowed on them, the blessings he described in 2:11-22. But he quickly digresses and does not pick back up with the prayer report until 3:14.

2. He says that he is a prisoner on behalf of the Gentiles because it was preaching of the law-free gospel to the Gentiles that led to his arrest in Jerusalem, which led to his imprisonment in Caesarea and ultimately to his imprisonment in Rome (Acts 21 – 28).

B. A steward of the mystery on their behalf (3:2-7)

1. Paul had been given a stewardship of God's grace for the Gentiles' benefit in that he had been entrusted with a commission to proclaim that grace to them in the gospel. He assumes they had heard of that fact, which implies that they were not personally acquainted with him.

2. That stewardship of God's grace was given to him when the mystery was revealed to him. As O'Brien notes (p. 228), in 1:9-10 the mystery "referred to God's all-inclusive purpose which has as its ultimate goal the uniting of all things in heaven and earth in Christ. Here, a more limited dimension to the mystery focuses on Gentiles, along with Jews, being incorporated into the body of Christ and thus participating in divine salvation." That reconciliation is part and parcel of the larger mystery of universal reconciliation.

3. Paul has already mentioned in 1:9-10 and 2:11-22 the revelation of the mystery and the more particular aspect of Jew and Gentile reconciliation. From that they should be able to recognize his insight into the mystery of Christ, the mystery that is disclosed in Christ.

4. That mystery was not revealed to people in prior generations, but it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This same point is made in Rom. 16:25-26 and Col. 1:25-27.

a. What was concealed in prior generations was not the truth that faith was the principle by which God would justify men and women, Gentiles as well as Jews. Elsewhere Paul makes clear that the gospel is not some new teaching but was promised in advance in the Scriptures (Rom. 1:2, 3:21, 15:8-12). He says in Gal. 3:8 that the gospel was proclaimed beforehand to Abraham. God's intention to bring the Gentiles into the blessing of the Jews is all over the O.T. (e.g., Deut. 32:43; Isa. 11:10; Ps. 18:49, 22:27-28, 117:1).

b. The mystery that was newly revealed related to the *manner* in which God's intention to bless the Gentiles with the Jews would come to fruition. It would not be by Gentiles joining Jews as faithful adherents of the Mosaic law. Rather, it would be by the Messiah setting aside the Mosaic law, breaking down that dividing wall, so that Jews and Gentiles would be made into a new unified body, a Spirit-forged entity, a family, of full and equal members. See Bruce, 314; O'Brien, 231-232; Hoehner, 440-441. Christians by the second century would speak of themselves as a "third race" or "new race," neither Jewish nor Gentile (O'Brien, 195).

5. The content of the now-revealed mystery (its more limited dimension) is spelled out in v. 6. By entering into Christ through receiving the gospel, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs with Jewish believers, members with Jewish believers of the one body of Christ, and sharers together with Jewish believers in the promise.

6. Paul had the great honor of becoming a servant of the glorious gospel, a missionary to the Gentiles, as a result of God's gracious commission. That commission was according to God's power in the sense "that Paul received the power appropriate to the ministry to which he was appointed" (Best, 316). God not only graciously called him to such a grand task, he graciously empowered him for it.

C. His call to make the mystery known (3:8-13)

1. Though he was the very least of all the saints because he had violently persecuted the church of God (1 Cor. 15:9), he was given by grace the glorious assignment of preaching to the Gentiles the good news of the unfathomable riches of Christ and to enlighten all people regarding the plan of the mystery that for ages was hidden in God who created all things. O'Brien comments (p. 243-244):

As Paul fulfilled his commission of preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ to the Gentiles, so through this proclamation of the gospel men and women came into a relationship with God through his Son, the Lord Jesus. They were joined with Christ in his death and resurrection, and so became fellow-members, along with Jewish Christians, of the same body. In this way, the previously hidden mystery (described in v. 6) was being implemented in a wonderful manner: God was putting into effect his age-old plan, something that had not been seen or imagined before, and as the apostle to the Gentiles Paul had the great privilege of revealing this magnificent, divine administration to the eyes of human beings on earth, Jew and Gentile alike (*all*). Paul's commission, then, contained this second element, not as something additional or unrelated to the proclamation of the gospel but integral to it.

2. The purpose of Paul's preaching to the Gentiles and consequent enlightening of all people regarding the nature of God's previously unrevealed mystery

was that the richly diverse wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly realms through the church.

a. God discloses his complex, multifaceted wisdom to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms through the very existence of this unified, multiracial and multiethnic community that is the church. The church is an object-lesson even for the heavenly beings, angels and especially demons (Eph. 6:12). It is a foretaste or token of the cosmic reconciliation that now is in process, a sign of the already won victory, and thus it is a display of God's supreme wisdom in the achievement in Christ of his fall-reversing purposes.

b. Implicit in this is the fact the demonic powers have been defeated, which is a comfort during the spiritual warfare that they and we wage while awaiting the final day.

3. The church's role in God's revealing of his wisdom to heavenly beings was part of God's eternal purpose, a purpose accomplished in Jesus Christ.

4. In their union with Christ through faith in him, all Christians have the privilege of confident access to God. They cannot be blocked from God by the spiritual forces of evil.

5. In light of the glory of the ministry God had graciously given to him, Paul ends the paragraph (v. 13) urging them not to be disheartened by his sufferings on their behalf. It is an honor to suffer in service of such a grand cause. Moreover, his imprisonment was their glory in the sense he was there for refusing to compromise the truth of Gentile equality with Jewish believers in the one body of Christ.

VII. Prayer report completed and a doxology (3:14-21) – ¹⁴*For this reason, I bend my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶in order that he may grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner person, ¹⁷that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, ¹⁸that you, having been rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend, with all the saints, what [is] the width, length, height, and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

²⁰*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably beyond all things that we ask or imagine, according to the power that is working in us, ²¹to him [be] glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever, amen.*

A. Prayer for power, love, and maturity (3:14-19)

1. Paul picks back up the prayer report he began in 3:1. "For this reason" relates back to the God's gracious work on their behalf recounted in chapter 2. The fact he kneels signifies his great reverence and submission. He calls God "the Father," "which in the ancient world was not only a term of intimacy but also one that had

overtones of dignity and authority. A father not only sought the good of his family but also ruled the clan or family unit" (O'Brien, 255).

2. God is the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named because, as the creator of all things, he is the source of every order or class of heavenly beings and the ultimate ancestor of every family of humans. They all carry his name in the general sense they all are creatures of God.

3. Paul prays that God, according to his limitless resources, will strengthen them with power in the inner person through his Spirit, or as he puts it differently in the following clause, that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith.⁵

a. The Spirit's transforming empowerment of their inner person is Christ, through the Spirit (Rom. 8:9-10; Gal. 2:20, 4:6), pervading their hearts, extending his occupancy, so to speak, of their inner being. It is Christ who indwells from salvation making himself at home, becoming deeply rooted in their lives, becoming the controlling factor in their attitudes and conduct (Hoehner, 481). As O'Brien remarks (p. 258), "His indwelling is not something additional to the strengthening. To be empowered by the Spirit in the inner person means that Christ himself dwells in their hearts."

b. This indwelling for which he prays is through faith, which means it happens in conjunction with their trust in Christ. It is through ongoing faith that we yield to rather than resist Christ's transforming influence, his making himself at home.

4. The strengthening with power of their inner man, the indwelling of Christ, for which he prays is so that, having been rooted and grounded in love as a result of that transforming empowerment, they may have the power with all the saints to comprehend certain things.⁶ As one is transformed into the image of Christ, love becomes increasingly central to one's life, and as that happens, one's ability to be blessed with insight expands. Being rooted and grounded in love repositions a person so that he now is better able to receive from God the power to comprehend certain things as never before.

5. Paul prays that they may have power with all the saints to comprehend the width, length, height, and depth. He does not identify the object of this width, length, height, and depth, and there is disagreement over to what it refers. I am with those who think it refers to Christ's love for us that is mentioned in the next verse. (The NIV and TNIV add "love of Christ" to the text to make their preference clear.)

6. Paul wants God to enable them to grasp the immensity of Christ's love and with that for them to know in a deep and personal sense that love that is so magnificent it is beyond being known fully. O'Brien states (p. 264): "[T]o speak of

⁵ With most commentators (e.g., Lincoln, 206; Fee, 696; Best, 341; O'Brien, 258), I see the infinitival clause at the beginning of v. 17 ("to dwell") elaborating and explaining the prior infinitival clause of v. 16 ("to be strengthened") rather than spelling out its goal or result.

⁶ For this understanding of the relationship of the clauses, see O'Brien, 259-260.

Christ's love as 'surpassing knowledge' means that it is so great that one can never know it fully. . . . No matter how much we know of the love of Christ, how fully we enter into his love for us, there is always more to know and experience."

7. Paul's prayer for their increasing comprehension and knowledge of Christ's love is to the end that they may be filled with all the fullness of God.

a. As D. A. Carson states in *A Call to Spiritual Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 195, "[t]o be 'filled to the measure of all the fullness of God' is simply a Pauline way of saying 'to be all that God wants you to be,' or 'to be spiritually mature.'" He adds: "We may think we are peculiarly mature Christians because of our theology, our education, our years of experience, our traditions; but Paul knows better. He knows we cannot be as mature as we ought to be until 'we know this love that surpasses knowledge.'"

b. The church in principle "already" is the fullness of Christ (1:23, also Col. 2:10), but in practice it has "not yet" attained the fullness. Lincoln states (p. 214), "The relationship between what the Church is and what the Church is to become . . . reflects ultimately the tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet' . . . In O'Brien's words (p. 265), "They are to become what they already are."

B. Doxology (3:20-21)

1. Having boldly petitioned God on their behalf, he praises God as the one who can do immeasurably beyond all things that we ask or imagine. There is no limit to what he can do! And the power by which he can do all things is in accordance with, in conformity with, the power that is at work within Christians through the Spirit.

2. Paul ascribes glory to God in the church and in Christ Jesus. Bruce writes (p. 331):

God is to be glorified in the church because the church, comprising Jews and Gentiles, is his masterpiece of grace. It is through the church that his wisdom is made known to the spiritual forces of the heavenly realm. "The heavens declare the glory of God" but even greater glory is shown by his handiwork in the community of reconciliation. This community, moreover, consists of human beings who are united in Christ, members of his body, in whom Christ dwells: the glory of God "in the church" cannot be divorced from his glory "in Christ Jesus."

3. This glory will have no end. Throughout all generations, forever and ever, the redeemed in Christ will bear witness to "the surpassing riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (2:7).

4. The "amen" would be said or echoed by the congregation as their endorsement of the doxology when the letter was read aloud.