

Prayer

We praise You, Lord God; You have never let us down even though we have often failed You, and You have loved us faithfully when we have returned after wandering away from You. You have a plan for each of us, and it unfolds throughout the turmoil of life, because You have chosen us for glory despite our unworthiness. We praise You for the blessings You give us so generously, and ask to be made worthy of our call. AMEN!

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Health

Pray about the manner in which your country assists the poorest people to access health care. Pray for integrity in government as it administers the country for the benefit of all.

On-going prayers

- *Pray about the issue of 'renewable' energy and its possible benefits*
- *Pray for Iran a country increasingly divided within itself*
- *Give thanks to God for His presence each hour of the day*

Meditation

Jesus, speak to me and guide me;
I seek to hear Your voice, to listen to Your Word,
and accept the powerful truth of what You've done for me.

Jesus, speak to me and guide me;
I seek to know Your will, to see Your work world-wide,
and face the crucial issues You have brought to my attention:

Jesus, speak to me and guide me;
I seek to honour the Church, to love my fellow believers,
and worship You 'in Spirit and truth' according to Your Word:

Jesus, speak to me and guide me;
I seek to give my time to You, to put in effort for Your Kingdom,
and not lose sight of justice and mercy for all who call on Your name.

Jesus, speak to me and guide me;
I seek to show real honesty, to demonstrate good faith,
and never fail to love my friends and even those who hate me:

Jesus, speak to me and guide me, and I will follow You.

Bible Study - Ephesians 2:17-22

¹⁷ Christ came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near.

¹⁸ For through Him all have access to the Father by one Spirit. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and outsiders, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's family, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone ²¹ in whom the entire structure is held together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, ²² and in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit.

Review

Yesterday, we read about the great work of Christ in brining unity to His people in the days of the early church. This unity between Gentile and Jewish Christians was a major contributory factor to the success of the early church, because it proclaimed one message for all, that of Jesus Christ, declared by His united people. Without the immense distractions and misunderstandings about Christian faith created by a divided church, as is the case today, the early church grew rapidly. Its unity was God's work, based on the sacrifice of Christ for the love of all people, which is where we pick up Paul's letter in today's reading. Our passage does not appeal to the reader to understand 'unity in Christ' either philosophically or theologically, rather, it

glories in God's work; all may draw near without distinction (2:17,18), no one need be an outsider to God's 'family' (2:19), and all may be built into one 'dwelling place for God' (2:19-22).

If any of us were attempting to bring together two disparate warring factions within one establishment, we might naturally ask each to desist from antagonism. We would preach 'peace' by attempting arbitration, and appeal to each side to see the merits of the other for the good of all. However, this is not what Paul means by Christ preaching 'peace' in verse 17. Paul spoke about peace just as he did in Romans 5:

'Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God' (Rom. 5:1)

The phrase 'Christ ... preached peace' is shorthand for Paul's explanation to Jew and Gentile alike that in His earthly life, Jesus preached the 'Good News' of God's salvation, wonderfully captured by Luke in his Gospel, where He said:

'the Spirit of the Lord is upon me ... to bring good news to the poor ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Luke 4:18,19).

Some have argued that Jesus did not preach this message to both Jews and Gentiles as is claimed in our reading (2:17), largely on the basis of Jesus' oft quoted remark 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel', taken from the story of the Canaanite woman's faith (Matthew 15:24). However, this is a misunderstanding of what Jesus said both there and elsewhere and His motives for saying it. Jesus ministered to Jews and Gentiles in Galilee, a cosmopolitan region when Jesus was alive (we will look at this further in 'going deeper').

Paul concluded his thoughts about the unity of Jew and Gentile within the family of God by using two examples, firstly by speaking of the 'family' of God's people (2:19). Many Bible versions avoid the notion of family and translate the phrase as 'members of the household of God' (2:19 see translation notes below), even though the Greek phrase clearly refers to the closeness of belonging. Unfortunately, the phrase 'members of the household of God' sounds like an excuse for the fact that most of God's people today do different things for Him without ever having much to do with each other; it is possible to be a servant in a household and not communicate! However, God wants all His people to be 'family', and His heart is broken if we will not speak to each other.

The last illustration is that of a building, used of the church here and also in Romans 15:20 and 1 Corinthians 3:10f. (see also 1 Tim 6:19 and 2 Tim 2:19). The emphasis is on connectedness and integrated building that produces real growth in God's Kingdom (2:21), and in saying this, Paul connected the language of building and agriculture! We can hardly miss the point, however, because in the Old Testament, great effort went into creating an earthly dwelling place for God; this was the Temple. God's people have now replaced this, and Paul used the illustration to make a strong point not directly, but clearly by implication: the Lord does not live in two houses; He lives in one!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper into the following:

- How did Christ preach to those 'far' and 'near' to give access to God (2:17,18)?
- What does Paul mean by being a 'member' of God's family (2:19)?
- What does the illustration of the building tell us about the unity of God's people (2:20-22)?

Notes on the text and translation

V18 'through Him all have access' *You will find that many Bible versions have 'through Him both have access', meaning both those near and those far, as in the last verse. The Greek word 'amphoterōi' does indeed mean both, but in the sense of including both options, this means 'all', hence my translation.*

V19 'strangers and outsiders' *I have used the term 'outsiders here because the Greek word means something like 'beyond the tent', which is close to our term 'outsider'.*

V19 'members of God's family' *You will find that most Bible versions have 'members of the household of God'. However, the work used refers to family members; relatives that is, and not servants or maids. This is how the word is translated in 1 Tim 5:8, and the passage here benefits from this idea of a close sense of family belonging.*

V20f. 'as the cornerstone ...' *The 'cornerstone is not simply a stone on a corner, it is the first stone of a building to be laid, the setting of which determines the rest of the structure and its stability.*

Going Deeper

How did Christ preach to those 'far' and 'near' to give access to God (2:17,18)?

When Paul said, 'He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near', those who were 'far off' can be identified as the Gentiles and those who were 'near', the Jews; but when did Jesus 'preach' to Gentiles? The answers are not straightforward. We immediately think that Paul meant Jesus was the one preaching, but the rest needs some thought, because there are several options.

The first suggestion commonly made is that the preaching in verse 17 means the preaching of the evangelists of the early church. These evangelists spoke 'in the name of Jesus', and so it is just possible that in saying these words, Paul was referring to Christ's speaking through the evangelists of his own time. This suggestion is reasonable, but the passage hardly leads us to think this is the right way of reading it, and it is far easier to keep with Jesus Himself being the one who preaches.

If you read what other authors say about this passage, you will find that many are dismissive of the suggestion that Jesus preached during his life to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. They say Jesus preference to keep within Jewish regions of Galilee (see above), and was preoccupied with being the Messiah of the people of Israel (see Matt 16:16 etc.).

Because of this, some link this passage with the text in Matthew's Gospel which says that between Jesus' death and His resurrection, Jesus was seen together with the raised 'bodies of the saints' (Matthew 27:52f.), and the tradition that Jesus preached to those in the Jewish 'place of the dead', called 'sheol'. However, there is nothing in Scripture to can tell us that Jesus preached to Gentiles at such a time, and even 'sheol' is a Jewish concept, and certainly not Gentile.

We are left with what Paul said, which is that Jesus preached to Gentiles as well as Jews in His lifetime. But where can we find this in the Gospels? In order to answer this, we must dismantle the preconception that Jesus' ministry was entirely focussed on the Jews. There is no doubt that Jesus spent His time with Jewish communities and came as the Messiah of the Jewish people, but as a consequence He open the Kingdom of heaven to all believers. However, we can hardly turn a page of the Gospels without finding Jesus interacting with Gentiles. Many of those he healed or spoke to were Gentiles; the Centurion's servant (Matt 8:5), the Canaanite woman's daughter (Matt 15:21f.), and the woman at the well (John 4:1f.). Indeed, when Jesus returned from Tyre and Sidon, he went to the Decapolis, the Gentile region of Galilee (Mark 7:31f.), and the feeding of the four thousand was done for an astonished Gentile crowd (Mark 8:1), not the Jewish crowd who had witnessed the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6:33). Jesus had more contact with Gentile people in the few years of His ministry than most Jews had in a lifetime!

In the light of this, it hardly seems necessary to challenge the plain meaning of our reading. By the standards of the day, Jesus had already broken down barriers between Jew and Gentile by word and deed.

What does Paul mean by being a 'member' of God's family (2:19)?

I have already made comments (above and in the translation notes) about the translation of the word 'family' in verse 19, and the fact that Paul spoke about a sense of belonging within God's family. Verse 19 says more than that, however. It says that the Gospel for the Gentiles is a transformation from exclusion to inclusion, a complete change of identity from being outside of the heritage of God's people to become one of the 'chosen' people of God. It is a dramatic change reflected to this day in the amazing stories we hear of the conversion of people who have heard the Gospel and find their lives changed from 'darkness to light'.

There are two markers for belonging mentioned by Paul. Firstly, he mentioned citizenship. We saw in yesterday's passage (2:12) that Paul hinted at the privilege of a free 'citizenship' of Israel, a generous offer from God to all who responded to Christ by faith. Here, Paul reinforces this offer to all Gentiles, using the language of equality; 'you are fellow citizens with the saints'; in other words, they become not merely people with special privileges, but they will have the status of 'saints', the only status of all those who have accepted Christ by faith. It is tragic that in Christian history we have reserved the word 'saints' for those who have attained a special status of holiness in human eyes rather than in God eyes, because this completely defeats the scriptural intention for the use of this word. Over and over again the New Testament says that all God's people are saints, without qualification except that of the love of God and faith in Christ Jesus as His Son.

As soon as we explain 'sainthood' in these terms, it is obvious that there can be no 'true' division amongst God's own people. We are all part of God's 'family', and if there are defects within it which mean that some of us do not speak to each other, then this is a blight on us and the way we see ourselves and organise our fellowship while on this earth. It needs to be said loud and clear, and repeatedly; the way we structure our church life does not reflect the truth of God's Kingdom or the reality of the body of Christ. Neither does it bears any resemblance to the building described next in this passage as the 'dwelling place of God'.

What does the illustration of the building tells us about the unity of God's people (2:20-22)?

The second half of our reading is the description of the church as a building. This is one of the most comprehensive of such descriptions found in the New Testament (for the others, see above), because it

mentions all the basic building elements; 'cornerstone', 'foundations', 'structure', and the final completed building, here described as a 'temple' (2:21) as the dwelling place of God 'in the Spirit'. Christ is the cornerstone, the first stone laid from which defines the positioning of all the remaining stones in a building. The foundations are the 'apostles and prophets', a carefully constructed phrase found only in Ephesians (also in 3:5), which ties together the historic tradition of the prophetic ministry of delivering God's Word, with the emerging role of God's apostles, sent out into the world to preach the Gospel to Jew and Gentile alike. The structure is the assembled people of God in churches throughout the world; and in the days of Paul, there would typically be 'one church' to one city, even if the people within that church outgrew the numbers who could meet in one home. The result was a 'holy Temple in the Lord', and a dwelling place for God. The passage also indicates that Paul saw this building as something in process; the 'entire structure' (2:21) was dynamic, it was a growing thing, and it was 'being built together' (2:22).

We have no problem understanding this passage today, only relating to it! The picture combines the idea of unity with an underlying sense of diversity, and the entire structure is be 'held together' (2:21) by Christ, and the dynamic of the construction indicates that He is constantly working on His building. We can relate to this, because we can easily perceive that the church of God is not a perfect thing, but growing and becoming what God wants it to be.

However, this illustration challenges us to ensure that what we do is built from the cornerstone of Christ. What does this mean? The cornerstone was not just an object at the bottom of a building to which we must be connected if we want to a part of the church. The function of the cornerstone in the building was to align the structure and set its defining properties; its size and shape was related to the structure to be built, and it was always set in place by the one in oversight of the building. In our illustration, this is God Himself. To have Christ as the cornerstone means the He alone sets our place in His Kingdom and gives us our roles and our tasks. We do not decide these things for ourselves. He gives them to us.

The second defining feature is the foundation of the prophets and the apostles. We forget too easily that the New Testament urges us to be founded on these as well as being 'set' in Christ. The prophets of scriptural times interpret the Old Testament as Scripture, and without them, our view of God's word is incomplete. People often say that we understand the Old Testament through the New; however, what the New Testament says is that if we want to understand the Old Testament, we must go to the prophets; Samuel, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the rest. They enable us to understand the history of God's covenant people, the laws of God, and God's intent to guide His people. In addition to this, we are founded on the work of the apostles, the Gospel of the twelve disciples, changed by the Spirit from working men in Galilee to God's agents sent into the world with a unique message to convey (Matthew 28:19).

All these are our reference points as God's people; not the world, not our wills, not our own history, nor our understanding of the future, but the Word of God conveyed through Christ and through prophets and apostles.

Application

The best way for us to respond to Paul's vision in this passage is to take hold of what it says and welcome it. The church may not be where it ought to be, but as God's people, we can always move to where God wants us to be; all we need to do is follow the guidelines set before us. Most of God's people understand that the church is made up of both a unity and a diversity of people. We are not all the same, but we are called to be united as members of God's family. This means that although we can list hundreds of institutions, denominations, organisations, churches, associations and fellowships under the heading of 'diversity', we need to honour God's call to us to head towards finding more ways to demonstrate our unity! In most places I have been, the number of institutions, organisations etc. that come under this heading of 'unity' or 'unified' is either very small or nonexistent! Surely, our task under God is to rectify this!

When I have said this, some have objected, pointing out that this passage says that the building in this scripture is a dwelling place for God 'in the Spirit'. By this, they suggest that an unseen 'spiritual' unity of God's people is possible that cannot be demonstrated in the world, and this is sufficient for God. I disagree. Unfortunately, this is a misperception of what the word 'spiritual' means. Scripture never uses the word 'spirit', or 'spiritual' to refer to things that are not seen; the Spirit of God can be felt and seen (tongues of fire, the 'spiritual gifts'); and God, who is Spirit, came to earth in visible earthly form as a baby, in order to show Himself to the world. Without this, we would have no 'salvation'! I would also add that if 'spiritual healing' were to have no effect in the world, neither seen nor felt nor experienced, then it is not the ministry of healing that Christ evidently performed in the world! In other words, I suggest that there is no such thing as a purely 'spiritual' unity of God's people that we should not seek to make 'real' and demonstrate in the life of God's people.

Our job is to show the unity of God within this world by doing things together with other Christians and breaking down barriers. Paul would not have written this letter to the Ephesians in this way unless God had

created a church in the first century that actually demonstrated to the world that the division between Jew and Gentile could be broken down. He did it, and because He did, God's people were able to preach and witness effectively in their own age. We should aim to do the same.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What are the essential characteristics of the church to which you belong, and how do they reflect the ministry of Christ?
2. Is it possible represent our membership of the whole body of Christ in some way within our churches?
3. To what extent is it valuable to talk about the church today as a 'Temple', which is holy to the Lord?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

I find this part of Ephesians 2 uplifting. Its talk of access to the Father, the membership of God's family and being built into the building that is God's temple is all inspiring, and we can surely encourage each other to speak about these things and put them into action. Each of us has a duty to do what the Lord sets before us to do, to build up the entire 'body of Christ'. God's Word speaks the truth to us, and in this case, the truth about the unity of God's people is something we find hard to accept; but maybe this is where the drive to bring God's people together must start?

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *The church at its best is a glorious thing, the very centre of the life of God's people, and a place where the Lord God loves to be with His people. Does this describe your own church? What would be needed for your church to be a place where people feel the presence of Christ?*
- *Pray for God's people to be built up into a building that gives Him a dwelling place on earth and give Him glory within the world.*

Final Prayer

When we are unsure of ourselves, Lord God, encourage us by Your presence. May we see Your compassion in the deeds of others, hear Your words in their speech, and feel Your love through their care. May we then find hope in others, in ourselves, and in You. AMEN
