

## Preamble

Before we look at today's passage in **Ephesians 2** I need to rewind a little and explain, or perhaps reiterate, that this Epistle was written by Paul to the church in Ephesus. That church was founded by the Apostle and its membership was mainly made up of Gentiles although there were no doubt some Jewish believers who were also members of the church.

Paul planted the church during his second missionary journey and visited again for three years during his third missionary journey. He did this as part of the ministry to which he had called to take the gospel to the Gentiles. That very special call came after Saul, as he was then known; had been blinded on the Damascus Road during his dramatic conversion experience. Because of Saul's temporary blindness, God asked a disciple by the name of Ananias to look after him. However, since Ananias knew of Saul's reputation as a persecutor of followers of Jesus he strongly objected. God knew what He was doing as He always does and so told Ananias, "*This man in my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel, I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.*" (**Acts 9:15-16**). Having heard that, Ananias willingly obeyed God's request and the rest is history!

## Introduction

As we come to today's passage in **Ephesians 2** I want us to look at **2:11-22**, verses which talk of the problem that existed between Jews and Gentiles and how Christ brought about reconciliation and unity to that seemingly irreconcilable situation. When we went through **2:1-10** we saw Paul discussing the relationship that we as individuals now enjoy with God. Now in the next twelve verses I want to look at the relationship between God and the Gentiles, and the Jews and the Gentiles.

## Part 1 – Gentiles

Paul opens the passage by addressing the Gentile believers by encouraging them and reminding them of where they once stood in relation to God and the Jews. Very briefly, we know from the Old Testament that God had made a Covenant with Israel as His chosen people; they may not have been the biggest nation but God chose them nonetheless. God's Covenant established the Law for the Jews to follow and adhere to although it also erected a barrier between Israel and the Gentiles. In **Deuteronomy 7** we read the words of Moses who said, "*For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.*" (**Deuteronomy 7:6-7**) The prophet Jeremiah reminds us of that in **Jeremiah 31:33** when he records God's words: "*This is the Covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time' declares the Lord. 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.'*"

There is little doubt that there was animosity between the Jews and the Gentiles which is probably why in **2:12** Paul reminds the Gentiles of their plight before they came to faith in Christ. Firstly, they were separate from Christ and had no relationship with God and little prospect of establishing such a relationship. Secondly, they were excluded from God's

people and so couldn't be recipients of any of the spiritual privileges that had been promised to God's chosen people, the Jews. It was possible for Gentiles to become Jews but only after a long period of training followed by circumcision and baptism. Even after all that they would never be fully included with God's chosen people. Next, they didn't partake in the promises God had made to the Jews. They were always regarded as foreigners and therefore weren't seen as citizens of Israel which meant that they had no share in God's promises. Fourthly, The Gentiles were without God; they may have had plenty of gods but didn't know the one true God. Finally, and I feel most importantly, they were without hope. We're not talking here of the kind of hope that many experience but a genuine guarantee from God of what lies ahead. Many people place their hope in their football team winning something, or that they may win the Lottery or afford to live in Salcombe in Devon, the most expensive place to live in the UK. Each of these is a forlorn hope which will never be satisfied. The hope that Christians have and Gentiles don't is a genuine hope, an assurance that they are part of God's family, will spend eternity with Him and will be cared for no matter what happens.

Let me give you an example of the hope that is ours because we know Jesus as our Saviour. In **Acts 27** we read of Paul sailing for Rome on a ship full of prisoners and soldiers. A storm came up and got worse and worse. It lasted for several days and left those on board the ship in great distress. Luke, who was also on board the ship, tells us in **Acts 27:20** that "*When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.*" Even Christians are human and can have the same human failings and feelings of despair. However, later in the passage we read that Paul was visited by an angel who told him "*God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.*" (**Acts 27:24b**) Paul had faith and that faith was rewarded since although they were shipwrecked on an island they were saved. We may occasionally give up hope but God never does and He will always be there to rescue us. Never have the words of a hymn that we occasionally sing seemed so appropriate: "*All my hope on God is founded, all my trust He shall renew*".

Because the Gentiles didn't have faith in Jesus they were without that hope. It is because he did have faith that the writer to the Hebrews was able say, "*We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.*" (**Hebrews 6:19**). The Gentiles' gods couldn't provide hope of any description which meant that they appeared to be totally without hope; or were they? I don't believe that God ever gives up on anyone. If He did then why would He call Paul to take the gospel to Gentiles? And why would Isaiah record God's words in **Isaiah 49:6b** where God talks of Jesus and says: "*I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth*"?

### **Part 2 – God's Intervention**

All those who don't have faith in Christ whether they be Jew or Gentile find it impossible to enter into a relationship with God by anything they do; something major and out of the ordinary is needed. That is why we see those marvellous words "*but now*" at the beginning of **2:13**. Those two words carry as much power as the similar words "*but ... God*" that we've thought about before when we looked at **2:4** and they carry the same powerful meaning. Thankfully God intervened on our behalf through His Son to resolve this seemingly insoluble problem of His relationship with the Gentiles and the subsequent relationship between Jews and Gentiles. In **2:4-5** we learned that God not only intervened on our behalf but He also "*made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions*". Now

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here in **2:13** Paul is anxious to remind us that “*you who were far away were brought near through the blood of Christ*”. Despite the covenant that God made with Abraham and His chosen people, He didn’t totally abandon the Gentiles to their own devices since that we can read God’s words in **Isaiah 57:19b**: “*Peace, peace, to those far and near, ... and I will heal them.*”

We need to understand that the phrase in **2:13** “*you who were far away*” isn’t meant in a geographical sense but in a spiritual sense. The phrase refers to the Gentiles who were not members of God’s original chosen people and so spiritually speaking they were far away from God. Now, thanks to God’s intervention they “*were brought near*” by the sacrifice that Jesus made by dying on the cross. The Gentiles in Ephesus would have understood that from Old Testament times a blood sacrifice of some description was needed to pay for the redemption of sins and yet, despite such sacrifices being made repeatedly by the Jews, they continued to sin. Jesus died and shed His blood on the cross as a once and for all sacrifice so that all who repented and accepted Him as their Saviour were forgiven their sins and accepted into God’s family. It’s important to realise that Jesus died for all not just a few, and the many included the Gentiles. When we expand that thought we can see that Jesus didn’t die for one small group of people but for everyone who comes to faith in Him. I’ll say that again, Christ died for all regardless of race, colour, creed, nationality or orientation. There is the need though to repent of sins and seek God’s forgiveness.

### Part 3 – Peace

Peace between nations is a fragile thing and one of the most difficult things to establish and maintain. History shows that to be true as we see wars of one sort or another continuing around the world even today. In September 1938 Adolf Hitler stated that he intended to invade Czechoslovakia on 1 October 1938. With two days to go to that deadline the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain met with Mr Hitler, Benito Mussolini of Italy and the French premier Edouard Daladier. They reached an agreement whereby Czechoslovakia was ceded to Germany; neither the Czech people nor government were consulted on this! Mr Chamberlain was able to return to London waving a piece of paper that he said guaranteed “*peace for our time*”. This non-aggression pact turned out to be worthless since a year later Adolf Hitler invaded Poland thereby setting the wheels of World War 2 in motion.

The world longs for peace but such a thing is sadly lacking and yet when man makes peace it never lasts since sinful mankind will always ignore any pact or agreement one way or another. The Second World War ended in 1945 and yet as we look at the world today we see numerous wars happening with that between Ukraine and Russia being the most prominent. Man cannot satisfactorily resolve these wars; only God through Christ can bring the real and lasting peace that is so badly needed even though the world refuses to accept Christ as Lord and Saviour.

In **2:13-18** we read of Christ’s actions and the peace and reconciliation that He has brought into the world and into our lives as Christians. Just think for a moment of the individual peace that Christ brings into our lives. Paul wrote to the Philippians and told them that “... *the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus*” (**Philippians 4:7**). This is peace within our hearts and is a special kind of peace that only Jesus can bring. With that in mind consider those first words of Jesus when He met the ten disciples in the Upper Room following His resurrection. The disciples were shocked and more than a little scared which is why the Lord said to them, “*Peace be with*

you” (Matthew 28:36). It is that peace that the world needs today; a peace that only God can bring through His Son Jesus Christ.

In 2:14 Paul refers to the “*dividing wall of hostility*” which existed between the Jews and the Gentiles. There are two ways of looking at this. Firstly the wall may be seen as the physical wall that divided the outer courts from the Temple proper and separated the Temple into different areas. As a result of this wall and the related regulations the Gentiles were not allowed in those inner courts where sacrifices were made and worship was held; only Jews could enter those areas. Secondly, it may be seen metaphorically in terms of the Law given to the Jews that the Gentiles knew of but weren’t obliged to obey. Unfortunately the Law caused great division between them, made the Jews feel superior which only increased the need for reconciliation.

In the Temple there was a curtain that separated the main worship area from the holy of holies. As a symbol of breaking down that wall of hostility at the very moment that Jesus died that curtain was torn asunder as Luke records, “*the curtain of the temple was torn in two.*” (Luke 23:45b).

#### Part 4 - Reconciliation

Whilst there is a great need in the world for peace there is also the need for reconciliation between peoples that only genuine peace can bring. When we look through this passage we can see Paul emphasising that thought. In 2:14 we read that Jesus; “*he himself*”, made “*two one*”. In 2:15 He created “*one new man out of two*”; whilst in 2:16 Paul tells us that having made one new man Christ used this “*one body to reconcile both*” (2:16). As a consequence of this we “*both have access*” (2:18). Later in 2:21 we see that we are “*joined together*” and in 2:22 we are “*built together*”. All of these reflect the reconciliation that Jesus came to bring.

Reconciliation of any sort needs God to be involved and to be at the centre of such situations since He is the One Who provides the much needed foundation for such reconciliation. There are two phrases in this passage that lead us to understand that for real reconciliation Jesus needs to be at the centre. In 2:13 Paul talks of the “*blood of Christ*” whilst in 2:16 he talks of reconciliation coming “*through the cross*”. Jesus brought the Gentiles near to God whilst at the same time bringing about the reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles by shedding His blood on the cross. He did this willingly and sacrificially to pay the price for the sins of all those who accepted Him as their Saviour.

We learn more about this unity in Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians where he was able to say “*... in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*” (Galatians 3:26-28). In Ephesians 4 Paul also talks of the unity in the body of Christ; i.e. the church. He reminds us that “*There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all*” (4:4-6).

As we’ve seen, not only did Jesus bring peace to individuals but He also brought that reconciliation between the Jews and the Gentiles. Many would have thought this to be impossible but they should remember that with God nothing is impossible. In Matthew 19

we read of Jesus talking to a rich young man who had asked how he could be saved. When he learned that he had to give away all his possessions and follow Jesus he walked away sad since he was extremely wealthy. The disciples were astounded when Jesus said to them, *“I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”* (Matthew 19:24); and that led them to ask just who could be saved? Jesus gave this astounding answer, *“With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”* (Matthew 19:26). That comment still applies today!

## Part 5 – Building

When scripture talks of the church it isn't referring to a physical building of any sort but to the true church which is the body of Christ. This particularly applies to today where we have so many denominations with membership that is a mixture of Christians and non-Christians. Regardless of which denomination people attend if they know and love Jesus as their Saviour then they are part of the body of Christ; the true Church. In his letter to the Colossians Paul talks of rejoicing in his suffering for Christ which he regards as being *“the sake of his body, which is the church”* (Colossians 1:24) Later in this Epistle Paul talks of the gifts that God gives and the purpose of such gifts. He told the Ephesians in **Ephesians 4** that they were to *“prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up”*. (4:12); such preparation is needed even more in today's world.

The important point in this passage is that Paul is making it clear to the Gentile believers that they too are now part of this church which is the body of Christ and in **2:21** we read that they are *“joined together”* with others in this body. Continuing the building analogy Paul adds that they have been *“built together”* (2:22). Whilst we know that the church is the body of Christ, when we think of it as being like a building Paul reminds us that this building is *“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone”* (2:20). The Apostle Peter shares Paul's views on the church and also uses the analogy of a building when he says, *“As you come to Him, the living stone – rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to Him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house ...”* (1 Peter 2:4-5a). Whilst the apostles and prophets may have laid the foundation for the church it is important to remember that Jesus is the vital cornerstone; that is, the stone in a building from which all measurements and angles are taken. However, this is the stone which the Psalmist also talks of when he writes, *“The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes.”* (Psalm 118: 22-23).

## Conclusion

When I read the newspapers, listen to the news on the radio and the television I read and hear of conflict in one form or another. I rarely hear of peace of any sort. Even the Good Friday Peace Agreement in Northern Ireland is currently not fully operating. I'm not just thinking of the military wars such as that in Ukraine but also the so-called culture wars, the many strikes which cause disruption to daily lives and the increase in knife and drugs crime with the related gang warfare that they bring.

All of these situations need, in fact demand, peace. Sadly the type of peace needed cannot be brought by man alone. Only God through Jesus can bring the peace that the world, and the individuals living in it, need. Jesus died on the cross of Calvary to bring about the peace

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and reconciliation that was needed between the Jews and the Gentiles and which is so badly needed today.

Jesus is the only One Who can bring about that peace. If you don't know Jesus as Lord and Saviour then give your life to Him now, be overwhelmed by His love and peace and then, like all other believers, you will become one in Christ.