

Prayers

Opening 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!

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: BUILDING

1. For yourself

Pray in those moments when there is a break between the things you are doing; pray for what comes next, just a prayer placing what you are doing in God's hands, or whatever comes to you

2. For your friends and family

Using the moments of the day again, pray for the members of your family and your friends; you can get through quite a few in the course of a day!

3. For the church and its work

Pray for the churches of your neighbourhood, and seek God's blessing on the work that they do

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for those whose work is to gather taxes. Remember that Jesus blessed a tax collector, and seek to do the same. At this time of economic uncertainty, we need the tax systems of our countries to collect everything that is legally due, for the good of governments as well as the whole world.

Meditation

God has called His people to act with courage
And in His name, to address the world's needs

To identify corruption and greed in society
And in His name, refute it and expose it

To perceive that everyone on earth can be fed
And in His name, make governments do it

To have a heart for those who have little
And in His name, share our wealth with others

To understand that the world is God's
And in His name, safeguard our planet

To have the bravery to confront the world's bullies
And in His name, demonstrate the way of love

To have the passion to believe in justice
And in His name, seek just jurisprudence for all

To have the vision to grasp the future
And in His name, stop Satan from claiming it

God has called His people to act with courage
And in His name, proclaim the Kingdom of God

Bible Study

Bible passage – 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

Here, Paul drums home the message about Christian unity, with two great illustrations. Firstly, it is like a family with many members, and secondly, it is like a building built on the foundations of Christ and apostolic teaching. But what do we really think about Christian unity?

In yesterday's passage, we read about the unity of God's people in Christ. Paul wrote to the Gentile Ephesians to explain to them that Jesus had broken down the barriers between Jew and Gentile (2:14f.); He proclaimed one message of salvation for all, without exception. If we find it difficult to relate to first century divisions between Jew and Gentile, Paul's message is the equivalent today of proclaiming that Catholic and Protestant are saved by Christ alone, and there is but one Gospel for all. This may be controversial, but I am convinced that Paul would not flinch from this. Here in today's passage, he continues to urge those who believe to accept their unity in Christ; he describes God's people as, 'fellow citizens' (2:19), 'members of God's family' (2:19), 'a holy temple ... built together' (2:22), 'held together' (2:21), 'with Christ Himself as the cornerstone' (2:20). Nearly every sentence contains phrases that illustrate or stress the unity of God's people in Christ.

Of course, one of the reasons for the growth of the early church was that it was united; it was not one church for Jew and another for Gentile, or come to that, one for the followers of Paul and another for other parties (see 1 Corinthians 1,2). As far as Paul was concerned, God's people were to be united not in principle, but in practice, so that without the distractions and misunderstandings created by a divided church, the Gospel message would be distinct and undivided. Our passage today does not ask God's people to understand their 'unity in Christ' either philosophically or theologically, rather, it glories in God's work and in its inclusiveness. It says that all may draw near (2:17,18), no one need be an outsider (2:19), and all who have faith in Christ are to be built into one 'dwelling place for God' (2:19-22).

Now at the beginning of our passage, Paul says that Christ came and preached 'peace'. But what does this mean given that Jesus Himself said, '*do you think that I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division*' (Luke 12:51). Jesus also said '*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*' (Matthew 15:24f.) implying that His message was for some and not others. On this basis, some have argued that Jesus was a divisive figure and we should not expect the church to be united. Unfortunately, this is to misunderstand Scripture, and we must sort this out. When Jesus said that He would bring division on earth, He spoke about the division between those who believed in Him and those who did not. Invariably, Jesus referred to His followers as one united group, and as we have seen elsewhere in our studies (see the study for 2:1-10), His last and most passionate prayer was that all His disciples might be 'one' (John 17:11f.).

In addition, if we study the Gospels we will find that although Jesus travelled mainly in Galilee and Judea, and at times worked exclusively through His own disciples (who were Jews), some of the most intriguing and challenging stories about faith within the Gospels come from Jesus' interaction with Gentiles. Examples of this are the faith of the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:26f.), of the Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5f.), and of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1f.). Jesus certainly preached first to Jews, but there is no doubt that He also spoke to others (Mark 11:17, Luke 2:10), so that all might be saved (John 3:16f.), and as Paul says in Romans, that all might have 'peace with God' (Romans 5:1).

Our passage today adds to Scriptural pictures of God's purpose to unite His people. Paul describes the unity of Jew and Gentile as like being in God's 'family' (2:19). Some Bible versions avoid the word 'family' here and instead say 'members of the household of God' (2:19 see notes below). But the Greek here means family, no more, no less. Is it that the phrase 'members of the household of God' is an excuse for Christians today who are estranged from each other, and they dare not use the word 'family' because it suggests a

deeper commitment than many would want to have. But God wants all His people to be His 'family', and His heart is broken when His children have nothing to do with each other.

Paul's last illustration of Christian unity is that of a building. He uses it here and also in Romans 15:20, 1 Corinthians 3:10f, 1 Tim 6:19, and 2 Tim 2:19. He describes the church's foundations in the governing 'cornerstone' of Christ and also the apostles' teaching (2:20). He then describes the church as built on that foundation into a 'holy Temple', that is, a dwelling place for God Himself! So when God's people are built together in Christ and the apostolic faith, God dwells in them (2:22)! And God does not dwell in multiple houses, He dwells in one!

There is no mistaking the challenge of these Scriptures, which explain the Gospel and tell us that God wants His children to respect His wishes and be united in Him. Why should we not do all in our power to please Him?

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- 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 tells us about the unity of God's people (2:20-22)?

Notes on the translation of the passage

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.

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.

Discipleship

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 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 challenges

- *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.*
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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
