

Ephesians 2:11-18 A Redemption Story

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[0 : 0 0] Turn then please to Ephesians chapter 2, Ephesians chapter 2, and we're going to read from verse 11 down to the end of the chapter, verse 11 down to verse 22.

Tonight we're only considering verses 11 through 18, it's not the whole of the rest of the chapter, but we'll read it all just to get the flow of what Paul's saying. Ephesians chapter 2, I'm beginning to read to verse 11.

Ephesians chapter 2, I'm beginning to read at verse 11, this is the word of God.

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.

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise.

[1 : 0 3] Having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 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. And might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father.

So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.

[2 : 1 3] In whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Amen. This is a reading of God's inspired and inerrant word. Let's turn in our Bibles please to Genesis. Genesis, the first book of the Bible in chapter 17.

As we read Ephesians chapter 2, we're reminded that one of the dividing walls, we're reminded that one of the dividing lines that the Jews drew were those who were circumcised and those who were uncircumcised.

The Jews took great pride and pleasure in their circumcision. But as Paul reminds them, it was circumcision done merely by hands. As we come to Genesis 17 here, we're reading of the institution of the covenant of circumcision with Abraham, between Abraham and God.

Genesis 17, and we'll read the whole of the chapter together. Genesis 17, this is the word of God. When Abraham was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to Abraham and said to him, I am God Almighty.

[3 : 27] Walk before me and be blameless that I may make my covenant between me and you and may multiply you greatly. Then Abraham fell on his face and God said to him, Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.

No longer shall your name be called Abraham, but your name shall be called Abraham. For I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you.

And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God. And God said to Abraham, As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.

This is my covenant which you shall keep between me and you and your offspring after you. Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.

[4 : 41] He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised.

So shall my covenant be in your flesh, an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people. He has broken my covenant.

And God said to Abraham, As for Sarai, your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her. And moreover, I will give you a son by her.

I will bless her and she shall become nations. Kings of peoples shall come from her. Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old?

Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child? And Abraham said to God, O that Ishmael might live before you. God said, No, but Sarah, your wife, shall bear you a son and you shall call his name Isaac.

[5 : 46] I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him. I will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly.

He shall father twelve princes and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year. When he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all those born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day as God had said to him.

Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, and Ishmael, his son, was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

That very day, Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised, and all the men of his house, those born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.

[6 : 47] Amen. Amen. This is a reading of God's inspired and inerrant word. Well, please have your Bibles open. Ephesians chapter 2.

Ephesians chapter 2 and verses 11 through 18 is the passage before us this evening. Ephesians chapter 2 and verses 11 through 18.

One of the things that the kids were most looking forward to over the festive period, over the Christmas period, was watching the BBC adaptation of Julia Donaldson's book, Stickman.

For those of you who aren't familiar with Stickman, it follows the journey of a stick as he goes out one morning for a jog, as hard as that might be to believe. Eventually he gets thrown for a dog to chase, eventually he gets washed out to sea, he gets thrown in the river as a poo stick, he gets put in the nest of a swan, until finally he lies in the grate of a fire, waiting for the fire to be lit.

Now what we have to remember is that every story has a purpose, every story has a meaning behind it. And at heart, Stickman is a story of redemption. Julia Donaldson, who wrote the book, may not use those terms, but that's what it is.

[8 : 00] It's a story of redemption. You see, eventually, Stickman is rescued by Santa, let's suspend disbelief for a moment, but eventually Stickman is rescued by Santa, and returned to his wife and his stick children three.

The one who is lost has been found. The one who was far off has been brought near. The one who was cut off from his family has been reunited with those he loves.

And as we come to Ephesians 2 this evening, it's exactly that. It's the story of redemption. It's a message of redemption.

It's a message that those who were far off have been brought near. A message that those who were lost have been found. It's a message of hope, of profound hope.

It's, of course, far better than the message of a stick being reunited with his family. It's about people being reconciled to one another and to God.

[9 : 03] It's fundamentally a story of redemption. We want to see three things this evening and draw three things that the passage itself draws out for us.

Firstly, we want to remind ourselves that we are aliens. That we are strangers to the grace of God. Secondly, we remind ourselves that we are aliens until Christ comes.

Until Christ appears and draws us together and draws us to himself. And then thirdly and finally, we want to remind ourselves that we have this wonderful access to God.

We have access to one in one spirit to the Father, as verse 18 puts it. We have access to God. So firstly, then, we want to remind ourselves that we are aliens.

We are aliens. We see that in verses 11 and 12. Verses 11 and 12. We thought a little bit last week about the distinction that Paul drew between the Jews and the Gentiles, between the circumcised and the uncircumcised, as he puts it here.

[10 : 13] We reminded ourselves that the Gentiles at one time followed the prince of the power of the air, as did some of the Jews. We saw how this was overturned in verse 4 with that great phrase, but God, that at one time they were alienated, at one time they were strangers, but they couldn't help themselves.

They were dead in sins and trespasses, verse 1. But God acted, verse 4, God acted to bring them together. While they were alienated, while they were sinners, God acted.

And it's this distinction, this division that Paul returns to tonight in verse 11, isn't it? Remember, Paul says, you Gentiles in the flesh.

Now what does Paul mean by that? What's he getting at with that by saying you Gentiles in the flesh? Well quite simply, anyone who wasn't a Jew was a Gentile.

What was the distinguishing mark of belonging to the Jewish community? It was what we read about Genesis 17, wasn't it? Every male in your house, God says to Abraham, every male in your house shall be circumcised.

[11 : 23] That was the distinguishing feature of being a Jew, if you like, of belonging to the Jewish community. It's dovetailed in quite nicely, it hasn't been prepared by me, but it's dovetailed in quite nicely, remember?

Luke chapter 2, what happens to John the Baptist, what happens to him on the eighth day? Circumcised. What happens to Jesus Christ on the eighth day? Circumcised. What is it Paul boasts about in Philippians?

That he was circumcised on the eighth day. So this clearly then is one of the defining marks of being a Jew. It's one of the characteristics of being a Jew.

This is what marks the Jews out as God's special people, this covenant sign that's placed upon them. And notice the argument that Paul's making here.

Remember you Gentiles in the flesh, he says, called the uncircumcision. Those who don't have the mark of belonging to God's special people. Those who are outside God's special people, if you like.

[12 : 26] But it was only those who were circumcised who called them that. It would be very odd for a Gentile to turn around to another Gentile and call them uncircumcised because he himself would have been uncircumcised.

But notice the slight rebuke that Paul delivers. What does he say? Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by the Jews, by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands.

There's a slight hint of rebuke in that statement, isn't there? There's a slight hint of criticism in that statement. It's almost like Paul saying, well look, this is what they call you. This is what they say about you.

They call you the uncircumcision without remembering that their circumcision is really outward. That they have no thought for the things of God. That their circumcision is superficial.

It is only skin deep. They call you that, but without justification. Paul was proud of his Jewish heritage and his Jewish ancestry.

[13 : 38] We see that in Philippians, don't we? But he wasn't above critiquing it when Judaism got it wrong. They got it wrong with Jesus Christ and Paul wasn't above correcting them.

We must be careful, friends, that we don't become so blinded by loyalty that we can't critique our own tribe when we get it wrong. When we make mistakes.

We're sinful, fallen men and women looking into the things of eternal God. We're going to get it wrong sometimes. And when we get those things wrong, we should be prepared to accept and acknowledge that we should be prepared to call one another out on that.

So Paul said there, circumcision, verse 11, it's done by hands. It's all outward. It's made in the flesh by hands.

But notice he isn't completely lambasting it. He isn't completely writing it off because what does he go on to say in verse 12? He says, remember when all this was happening. Remember when all this was taking place.

[14 : 48] When was it? When they were cut off, verse 12, when the Gentiles were cut off. They were separated from Christ. They were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel. They were outside the covenant community.

They were outside the chosen people of God. They were outside the covenant community of God. You were strangers, Paul says, to the covenants of promise.

They were strangers to the covenant with Abraham. They were strangers to the covenant with Moses. They were strangers to the covenant with David.

They didn't understand, didn't know, didn't appreciate God's covenant fidelity. But one of the most distressing things that Paul says here, one of the things that paints it in the starkest picture is what he finishes verse 12 with.

Having no hope and without God in the world. That's what they were before Christ. That's what they, that's how they lived before they came to know Christ.

[16 : 08] What a picture this is, friends, of man and his natural state. What a thing for these Ephesian Christians to read.

That they had no hope and they were without God in the world. Some people will read these verses, verse 11 and 12, and say that what Paul's engaging in here is kind of rampant Israeli nationalism.

That he's saying look at you Gentile dogs, look how bad you are. You're strangers to the covenants of promise. You're alienated from the covenant of Israel. You have no hope.

You're without God in the world. They say that he's really reminding them that the Jewish faith, that the Jewish religion, that the Jewish nation is better. It was one of the kind of, the key issues in the last independence referendum, wasn't it?

Could Scotland really go it alone as a country? The SNP said, of course we could as you would expect them to. We have tourism, we have whiskey, we have all of these things that mean we could survive as an independent nation.

[17 : 21] It's fine. They were beating the drum for Scotland and Scottish nationalism as you would expect them to. And some argue that that's what Paul's doing here in verses 11 and 12.

He's banging the drum for Judaism. He's extolling the Jews as the chosen people of God. What he says in a moment I think is going to undermine that, to undercut that.

But he's reminding the Gentiles of the facts, isn't he? This is what you once were. This is how you once lived. This was once the reality for you, that you were strangers to God, that you were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, that you were outside the covenant community of God, that you were outside that relationship of blessing with God.

It was with Israel that God entered into covenant. It was with Israel that the promise of a Messiah was made. It was as a Jew that Jesus Christ came and lived amongst us.

Not that all the Jews accepted him, not that all the Jews believed on him, but those were the facts. That was history, as Paul would say. And these Gentiles were outside that promise.

[18 : 37] These Gentiles lived having no hope, and without God in the world. And when we see that, when we understand that, I think it helps us to understand why people make some of the decisions that they do.

Why do the people come into the drop-in, make the choice to choose drugs, some of them? For the social isolation?

For the loss of control? No. Because they've no hope in the world. Why do some of our relatives with good jobs choose to work every hour that God sends to make more and more money?

Because they enjoy never seeing their family? Because they enjoy time spent away from home? No. Because they've no hope in the world. Whatever sin we see manifested in ourselves, whatever sin we see manifested in the world around us, the fundamental problem is this, that people are without hope and without God.

Don't misunderstand me, friends. You know, this makes it sound like the non-Christians in the world are the most miserable people. Being without hope can look quite satisfying in this world's terms, can look quite enjoyable.

- [20 : 08] People without hope can look like they have good lives, but right at the heart of it, in the middle of the night when no one else is there, it's empty.
- it's without hope and without God. And that reminds us, it shows us why we need to share the gospel with people, why we need to share the good news of Jesus Christ with people.
- Because the gospel is hope. The gospel is hope of a right relationship with God. The gospel is hope that life can be better, that life can be different, and that life doesn't have to be all that they see.
- It's only the good news of Jesus Christ that brings hope. It's only the light of the gospel that shines in the darkness. Anything else, anything else will leave us without hope.
- So we're reminded then, firstly, that we are aliens. But secondly, then, we want to remind ourselves that we're aliens until Christ comes. That we're alienated until Christ comes.
- [21 : 18] And we see that in verses 13 through 16. It's exactly the same as what Paul did last week in many senses, isn't it? Because he gives them the bad news first. He reminds them, last week he reminded them that they were dead in sins and trespasses.
- Last week he reminded them that there was nothing they could do to save themselves. And then he reminded them that God could save them. This week, verse 11 and 12, he's reminded them that they were, at one time, cut off from the promises of God.
- That they were one time alienated to the promises of God. And then he reminds them, verse 13, as we come to it, but now in Christ Jesus, this is what you once were, this is how you once lived.
- But now, verse 13, in Christ Jesus, you who were far off have been brought near. That this is their old way of life, verses 11 and 12, living without God, was their old way of life.
- But now in Christ, they have been brought near. You who were cut off, Paul says, have now been welcomed.
- [22 : 26] But notice how it is that they're brought near. It isn't by social revolution that brought this change in status. It isn't that the Ephesians worked really hard to make themselves acceptable to God.
- It wasn't that the Ephesians worked really hard to get themselves close enough to God. But rather, it's in Jesus Christ that they've been brought near.
- It's through the blood and the sacrifice of Christ that they have been brought near. And it's only through the blood and sacrifice of Christ that any of us have been brought near.
- prayer. It's what we remind ourselves of as we come to communion, isn't it? That's what we remind ourselves of as we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. We drink the wine remembering the blood that has been shed in our place, the blood that has brought us near.
- We take the bread remembering the body that was given for us so that we might come to know God. God. It's one of the mistakes we can make in thinking that the gospel we preach is a gospel of social improvement.
- [23 : 44] That the gospel says, well, if we behave certain ways, if we do certain things, if we dress a certain way, if we follow enough rules, if you make more and more like us, then everything will be fine.
- But the gospel that we preach says that we're all by nature aliens, we're all by nature strangers cut off from God without hope, but that in Christ we're brought near.
- That's the gospel. Obviously it has social implications, obviously it has behavioral implications, but the gospel we preach isn't a gospel of social improvement.
- It's a gospel of grace. Paul makes himself, Paul himself makes this point, verse 14, he himself, Paul says, is our peace.

He is the one who's broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility. That's the, that's the social implication if you like, that's the behavioral implication.

[24 : 55] The Jews and the Gentiles hated one another. The Jews and the Gentiles had no time for one another by and large. And Paul says to them here, verse 14, look, this isn't the gospel, but this is the overflow of the gospel.

This is the outworking of the gospel. That this middle wall of hostility, this way that you hate each other, that has been broken down. And you're now one in Christ. Let's live like it.

That's not the gospel, but that's the, the, the overflow of the gospel. That's the outworking of the gospel. That in Christ we've been brought near. That in Christ we're one. And so this then is how you live.

There's peace between Jew and Gentile. There's peace between two former enemies. Because in Christ we're made one. It doesn't matter.

The hostility is gone. We are no longer Jew or Gentile, but we are in Christ. Christ. I saw a powerful illustration of this on Twitter the other day.

[25 : 59] It's not often you'll hear that, but it's true. Someone I vaguely know is planting a church in a housing estate in Glasgow. And they had this church weekend away. And one of the pictures that they put up showed a forearm, this is a forearm of two men.

One of them had a tattoo of a Union Jack on it. And the other one had a tattoo of an Irish tricolor on it. And the caption beneath it simply said that at one time we would have been enemies.

But thankful to share this weekend with my brother in Christ. The hostility that would have once existed between these two men due to their political persuasions was gone.

Because they were one in Christ. They realized the truth that this wall of hostility has been broken down in Christ and they were now one. Not through a political dialogue.

not through a peace and reconciliation process but through Christ. We cannot, friends, simultaneously worship God and have hatred in our heart for our brother.

[27 : 08] We cannot allow fractured relationships to persist in the fellowship if both are genuinely in Christ. Christ. Because Jesus makes us one.

He takes that wall of hostility. He takes that dividing wall of hostility and breaks it down. The things that used to divide us, the things that used to separate us, the things that used to mark us out as different.

Christ has broken down in himself. himself. And he makes peace between us with the blood of the cross. We cannot simultaneously worship God and have hatred in our heart for our brother or sister.

But how does he achieve this? How does Christ break down that wall of hostility? Well, we get the answer in verse 15. He does it 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.

He abolishes the law of commandments expressed in ordinances. That's how he does it. So we'll just move on. A friend like me the first question you ask is what on earth does that mean?

[28 : 24] What does it mean that he's abolished the law of commandments expressed in its ordinances? Does it mean that Jesus has abolished the ten commandments does it mean that Jesus has abolished the law? Well, Jesus of course himself told us, didn't he?

That he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. So what is it that Jesus Christ has abolished in verse 15? What is it that Paul's telling us Christ has done in verse 15?

What Christ has abolished is the ceremonial law. The things that mark the Jews out is different. The things that kept the Jews apart from the Gentiles. The things that separated the Jews from the rest of the world.

That kept the Gentiles from coming in. That Jesus Christ has abolished in his body and created one man. So that verse 16 so that he might reconcile us both to God in one body.

Both Jews and Gentiles no longer two but one. and bring us to God. That's why I don't think Paul's banging the nationalist drum in verses 11 and 12.

[29 : 35] Because the whole purpose Paul's writing to the whole end that he's writing to is here in verse 16. That Christ might reconcile that Christ might bring one body to God.

Here he recognizes that the Jews as well as the Gentiles need reconciliation. Here he recognizes that the Jews as well as the Gentiles in their current form are cut off from God.

Ephesians 2 the whole of the chapter but I think what we've been studying tonight especially is some of the most lovely comforting theology that we have friends.

Because you see we have been aliens. We have been cut off from God. We have been separated from God and from each other. We have been without hope in the world.

But in Christ we've been brought near. In Christ we've been brought together as one. In Christ we have hope in the world.

[30 : 45] In Christ we have right relationship with God. In Christ we have right relationship with God. It is true that we are not what we one day will be.

But it's also true that we're not what we once were. The final thing that Paul reminds the Ephesians of he's reminded them that at one time they were alienated.

He's reminded them that that was until Christ came. The final thing that he reminds them of is that they have access to God. There's a lovely flow to what Paul writes here isn't there?

There's a lovely flow in a lot of what Paul writes. But notice the flow of this section. What does he say? First of all verse 11 you were cut off. You've been alienated from God.

You were alienated from the covenant community of God. Secondly then he reminds them but now they've been brought near through Jesus Christ. And as we come to this section we see just how close they come.

[31 : 50] We see just how near they have been brought. We see that in verse 18. That in him through him we both have access in one spirit to the father.

Through the holy spirit we have access to the father. Don't miss how radical this thought would have been for both the Jews and the Gentiles who were reading this letter. See for the Gentiles you didn't have access to your God.

For the Gentiles you tried to placate your God. You offered the right sacrifices. You did the right things and hoped that your God was pleased with you. As a Jew you didn't approach God.

You didn't even speak his name. The high priest approached God and once a year at that. And yet Paul here says through Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit we have access to the father the God of the universe.

The God who made the world. The God who made each one of us. Welcomes us as sons and daughters tonight. That's how near we've been brought.

[32 : 57] That's how close we are. We were aliens, strangers, foreigners to God. But we've been brought right into God himself through Jesus Christ.

at one time we were far off. But we've been brought near. One of the first things I did when I started studying at the Free Church College was by a program from my computer called Bible Works.

It allows you to sort of study the Bible in the original languages. It has lots of little resources that are quite useful, quite boring for most folks. But you know, it was a great bit of kit for me really enjoyed it.

But just over six months ago they announced that they weren't making any more updates to Bible Works and we'd lose all access to it. It was a great tool, but I can't use it anymore.

I don't have access to it anymore. But tonight, friends, we have been given access to the very throne room of heaven.

[34 : 07] we've been brought in the air by the blood of Christ. We have access to the God of the universe.

How slow we can be to make use of that tool. How slow we can be to make use of that resource that's at our disposal. How slow we can be to pray.

how slow we can be to read God's word. How confident and sure we are that we have the situation together. But tonight, friends, let's make use of our access to God.

Because at one time we didn't have it. At one time we were far off. At one time we were alienated from each other and from God. But now in Christ we've been brought in the year.

Reconciled to one another. And reconciled to God. As we come round the table this evening, that's the truth that we're declaring.

[35 : 19] Those twin truths are what we're saying as we gather round the table in just a few moments time. We're declaring that we're reconciled to one another, that we're right with one another.

father. So as we come tonight we need to ask ourselves, well am I right with my brother? Am I right with my sister? Is there something that I'm holding against people that I need to let go?

no. But we're also declaring that we're right with God. That we're looking and trusting in Jesus Christ as our only saviour tonight.

As the only hope that we have tonight of eternal life. if that's you tonight, then I invite you to come.

This isn't my table, it's not the church's table, it's the Lord's table. If you're looking to Christ, I invite you to come in a few moments and share the family meal with us.

[36 : 22] To come and share in the fellowship of the Lord's sufferings with us. To come and take and eat and drink.

Amen.