

God's Peace Plan

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[0 : 0 0] If you're new here, I'm the pastor of this congregation. Well, there should be a sermon outline in your newsletter, so if you want to follow along, you're most welcome to. And keep your Bibles open to Ephesians chapter 2, page 1174.

Let me just pray for us, please, as we start. Father, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for such great truths that we find in it. Because they are your very words, spoken to give us life, to give us hope.

So as we hear them tonight, again, continue by your Spirit to give us life. Amen. Have you ever found yourself on the outside looking in?

Wanting to be part of a group or something, but excluded? Perhaps it's something as trivial as getting tickets to the grand final.

You've slept overnight, queued, but you just missed out. Then again, it may not be so trivial if your team are the demons, and that's your one and only chance in a lifetime to see the grand final.

[1 : 1 9] I speak hypothetically, of course. Or it could be something more serious than that, like being left out at school, not being invited to parties, getting picked on.

Well, I sort of felt that way when I first came to Australia in year 12. I really wanted to be back in Singapore, and so I was actually separated from my friends on the outside, as it were, by the sheer distance.

At the same time, year 12 is not the right year to really start a new school. Friendships had been formed, and there was only a year before everyone was graduating.

So I spent most of year 12 on the outside looking in. It wasn't a good feeling. Well, as we look at tonight's passage, we find the Gentiles 2,000 years ago in exactly the same position, on the outside looking in.

So let me spend a few minutes just helping us to imagine what that was like. And Paul describes that in our first few verses in the passage tonight. Now reading it, it's clear that Paul is speaking as a Jew.

[2 : 2 9] The word Gentiles only meant something if you were Jewish. The Romans and the Greeks didn't go around calling themselves Gentiles, nor did they call themselves uncircumcised.

But Paul is asking his readers to look at things from the Jewish eyes for a minute. So in verse 11, he says, Therefore remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth, and called uncircumcised by those who call themselves circumcised, or the circumcision, this was how the Jews saw the world.

They had a unique place in it. Circumcision, the cutting of the foreskin, was a sign of Israel's separation from the world, the Gentiles. God had set them apart with that sign.

But there were others that marked them apart from the Gentiles. Laws such as the food laws, and things like not being able to intermarry.

These were big social barriers that separated Israel from the other nations. Now, of course, Israel had a reason for seeing things this way, because God had made it so.

[3 : 37] Paul reminds the Gentiles in verse 12 that without Christ, they lacked the things that God had given to the Jews. His promises to them, the exclusive relationship with them, seen in his covenants one after another with Abraham, Moses, and David.

God had revealed himself to them and given them his name. Yahweh was that name. And he said he would be their God, and they would be his people. So as a Gentile, if you lived then, you were an outsider looking in.

Verse 12, Remember that at that time, you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope, and without God in the world.

Now, we live 2,000 years after Christ, so we're not, you know, perhaps able to appreciate what that was like. But let me give you perhaps a flavor of it.

Consider these Old Testament verses. And some of them are the church's favorites. So Psalm 23, The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures.

[4 : 50] He leads me beside quiet waters. He refreshes my soul. Well, 2,000 years ago, as a Gentile, that didn't apply to you. The Lord was not your shepherd.

And how about this one, from Psalm 103, As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. Well, only if you were a Jew.

And again, Lamentations, chapter 3, The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness.

Well, not if you're not a Jew. And in fact, the psalm we read tonight, and the songs that we've sung, many of them wouldn't have applied to us, because they talk about the Messiah, about promises that are made in the Old Testament.

Now, individuals could, of course, convert to Judaism. But it was a, you know, long process, and you had to sort of forsake your culture in order to do that. Nations as a whole were separate from God.

[5 : 57] As Paul says, without hope and without God. But then in verse 13, But now, Paul says, in Christ Jesus, you who were once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ, brought near to God, brought near to the promises and to hope.

Now, this is the second big but in this chapter. The other one was in verse 4. We looked at it last week. And again, as with last week and the week before, it's only made possible in Christ.

His death on the cross, His blood shed for us. This is the great event that gives rise to all these but's, all these great transformations. So this week, the motif that we're looking at is reconciliation.

That of bringing people together, those who once used to be against each other. He Himself is our peace. That's Paul's summary sentence right up there at the start of verse 14 as we look at this next section, verses 14 to 18.

And Paul says he brings peace and reconciliation in two ways. One, by ending the hostility between Jew and Gentile. And then secondly, by ending the hostility between God and humans.

[7 : 15] So how does Christ bring peace between Jews and Gentiles? That's in verse 14 and 15. By destroying the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, making the two groups one.

And He does this how? By setting aside in His flesh, that is His death, the law with its commands and regulations. So both in His life and in His death, Jesus kept the law and by doing that, He fulfills the law on our behalf so that we don't need to.

So keeping the law is no longer necessary to gain access to Yahweh. This was the dividing wall of hostility, the law with its commands and regulations.

It's not a physical wall like the Berlin Wall, but it was just as effective. And in those days, it created a lot of animosity and suspicion between Jews and Gentiles.

But now Jesus provides a new way of relating to Yahweh. The same for Jew and Gentile. Jesus brings both groups together. There is now one new humanity and Jesus is the head of it.

[8 : 19] The ultimate goal, of course, is not just people-to-people reconciliation. Instead, it is reconciliation between humans and God.

And so here in verse 16, His purpose was to create in Himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body, that is the church, comprising both Jews and Gentiles, to reconcile both of them to God through the cross by which He put to death their hostility.

This hostility, as we know, between God and humanity is caused by sin. You see, God didn't choose the Jews because they were deserving. No, both groups were undeserving.

Both were hostile to God. But God chose the Jews to give us a foretaste of what it would be like for the rest of us. At the same time, it also shows our failings.

Because in Israel, we see how all of us treat God, creating idols, disobeying His commandments, ungrateful for His care. All of us are like Israelites.

[9 : 30] So if God had chosen the Chinese, or the English, or the Persians, we would have all done the same. By contrast, Jesus is the only one that lived at peace with God, keeping God's laws, and then being put to death so that the hostility between God and humanity could be put to death.

He was our perfect substitute. And so with His death, all the walls come tumbling down, and the message of peace can now be preached to all.

Those who are far away, the Gentiles, and those who are near, the Jews, both need to hear this message of peace. And Paul goes on to say in verse 18, through Christ, we both have access now to the Father by the one Spirit.

Jesus is that one person at the center of human history who unites all the hostile parties. He's not just the messenger preaching peace, or the go-between, trying to make peace between two parties.

No, He's that vital linchpin holding that peace together. Only He can give us access to God. And so if you want peace with God, you need to come to His Son, Jesus.

[10 : 58] Well, now we move on to verses 19 to 22, and here Paul changes images. So in verse 14, Christ is our peace, bringing us together. Now in this section, Christ is the chief cornerstone, holding us together as a single dwelling for God, one whole building, a holy temple.

So in verse 19, Gentiles are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of His household. Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone.

In Him, the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in Him, you too are being built together to become, there we have it, a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.

And so Paul goes from having access to God in verse 18 to God dwelling with us in verse 22. I don't know about you, but I love my home.

My idea of a perfect holiday is to stay at home. I know some of you actually agree with me. You know, lazing around my couches, yes, I have more than one.

[12 : 16] My girls playing close by and turning the house upside down. Elissa pottering around in her garden and then having friends pop over, you know, to me, there's no better place to be than at home.

And that's the sense we get with this passage with God. Because over and over again, from Genesis to Revelation, God shows that He wants to dwell with His people.

The Creator having fellowship with His creation. God wants to make His home among His people. So in Genesis, God walked with Adam and Eve in the garden in the cool of the day until they, you know, they sinned and was banished from Eden.

And God was prevented from dwelling with them. And then we move on to the Promised Land, which is a picture of God dwelling with His people. And that's why when Israel was exiled, that was so painful.

Not just for the people, but for God as well. And that reading we had in Ezekiel tonight was a promise by God to restore this relationship. So listen again to some of those verses.

[13 : 29] My servant David will be king over them and they will have one shepherd. They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your ancestors lived. They and their children and their children's children will live there forever.

And David, my servant, will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them. It will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers.

I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them. I will be their God and they will be my people.

When Jesus came, what does John say in his gospel? The word Jesus became flesh and dwelt among us.

And so this theme keeps running right through the Bible, even right to Revelation. And so at the very end in chapter 21 in verse 3, I've got the verse there up.

[14 : 31] And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Look, God's dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God.

So last week, we saw how God's people was raised up and seated with Christ in heaven. Well, this week, we see how God himself comes down to dwell among his people.

But both these images actually describe the same reality. In Christ, we both have this heavenly and earthly reality.

Friends, I don't know about you, but don't we all long for a place to call home? When you look at this world that's full of strife, relationships breaking down, we just long to be somewhere where we can belong and where we can feel safe.

Well, in these verses, we have a great reality to hold on to. God himself is our peace and we together are God's dwelling place, built up to be a holy temple in the Lord.

[15 : 48] Now, we may not live it out perfectly, but God is committed to dwelling with us. And so I want to end by asking, in light of that, how should we respond?

Well, I've got two responses. First, I think we must preach peace. That is, we must preach the gospel, which is the only lasting source of peace. Paul did it to the Ephesians when he was brought near and likewise, we have been brought near because someone else preached it to us.

That is the only way God builds his household. When Christ preaches peace through us, we are his messengers. Notice, for example, in those last few verses what the building of God is now founded on.

Not with laws and its regulations, no, but the apostles and prophets with Christ as the chief cornerstone. That means, Christ is the message, the apostles were the witnesses, it was handed down to us in the scriptures and we are to pass that on.

That is what the church is founded on. So it's not a warm and fuzzy peace, you know, built around just love and harmony. It's built on the solid rock of the gospel, Jesus' death and resurrection.

[17 : 04] And when Paul talks about preaching, it's not just restricted to what we do up here, but he's talking about one-to-one evangelism, sharing our faith with others, reading the Bible with unbelievers.

And I'm actually very encouraged to see a lot of us doing that and doing things like bringing people along to Christianity Explored and Food for Soul. And at Holy Trinity, we're committed to keep training us to do all of this better.

And in fact, next week, we're going to see the results of some of that work when three of our friends are going to be baptized, who are now part of God's dwelling with us. Praise the Lord for that.

But second, we need to respond also by maintaining the unity of the Spirit. Christ has broken down all the walls, so let's not rebuild them. I wonder whether people remember what Sandra Bullock said in Miss Congeniality when she was asked, she was an undercover cop pretending to be a beauty contestant, when she was asked, what is the most pressing thing in the world?

Does anyone remember? World peace, that's right. She actually said, tougher laws for parole violators, and then she said world peace.

[18 : 26] And we all love the idea of world peace, don't we? But often the hard part is trying to put it into practice at the local level. Like loving the brother and sister behind us.

So don't look right now. Do it afterwards. When we have to actually work and live closely with one another, when we rub up against each other like porcupines.

One of the great things about our congregation and our church, I think, is our diversity. We come from different cultures, different ages, different traditions even. And all of us have been brought together in Christ.

And I think it's a picture of Ephesians chapter 2, actually. But the reality is that it does take work to maintain this unity. Because, let's face it, we all, you know, we like things done a certain way.

Our way. We gravitate towards people we like. We're sort of suspicious of people that want to change things or we're not familiar with. We have different backgrounds and we see things differently.

[19 : 30] We value things differently. And so it's easy to misunderstand each other to, you know, have clashes over differences. But these are the very walls that Jesus has torn down.

He himself is our peace. In him, we have someone who unites us, who is more important than all of our differences put together. So, I encourage you, let us be willing to put aside differences for the sake of the gospel, to be generous and listen carefully to each other, to be patient and to forgive, all for the sake of growing this household of God with new people joining us all the time in order that God may dwell with us by his spirit.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you that we who were far away have now been brought near.

We thank you so much that we have, through Christ, access to you by the spirit. And for you, Lord, to want to come down and dwell among us to be our God and we your people.

Thank you for this great gift. help us to treasure it, help us to put into practice and help us to share it with more and more people. In Jesus' name we pray.

[20 : 54] Amen. Amen.