

The Gospel Brings Family

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Preacher: Ash Kwok

[0 : 00] Good morning, church. It is so good. Summer camp is finally here. How wonderful. How wonderful. I want you to cast your minds back to a time when you were at a school that taught history.

It might have been called HSIE or sociology. And I want you to imagine in your head, you hear the history teacher's voice, and they're obsessed. They're absolutely obsessed. So obsessed as if they should jump back into a time machine and go back to the past because they love it so much. That was always my experience of history lessons. I didn't get the point of it. I always struggled. I was confused. In fact, the teacher didn't make it interesting or relevant to my life at all. Sorry, history buffs. But what I have learned is that a good history teacher is one that helps you see the beauty and its relevance to today. And guess what? Paul, the writer of Ephesians that was just read out to us by Judd, he is a good history teacher.

Paul has this style of writing where he constantly contrasts the past with the present. Because in this chapter, he loves giving this little quick glance back at the past. Why? Because his prayer and desire is for the Ephesian church to see who they used to be and remind them, you are not those people of the past. You are a new kind of people. So stop walking as those who are people in the past, but be people who live in the now, the present reality. So why don't we talk to God before we launch in? Gracious Father, you are a good and wonderful King. We ask that you might challenge us today, that you might really help our ears here and our hearts be slow and ready for your word today. Reveal yourself and your glory through your word. May you alone be glorified. Amen.

[2 : 01] All right. Our focus passage is Ephesians 2, 8 to 22. But I'll be remiss if I don't quickly mention what happens in verse 1 to 7, where Paul does this first little history lesson for the Ephesians. So come keep your Bibles open at verse 1 of Ephesians 2. It says, as for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. The history lesson is this, you were dead. That is the state of the Ephesian church. In fact, that is the state of all people. It's a shocking history lesson. You were dead.

I wonder if you've ever thought about it that way. Have you ever realised before a Christian says, yes, Jesus is my Lord, there was a state in which you were dead. Now, the death that Paul is talking about here is not the literal sense of death, not like the roadkill you often see driving through the highway, but more like this flower. This flower is no longer alive. You might think it looks pretty and pretty alive, but it's been cut from the source. It's been cut from the plant. It's got colour, it's got form, but eventually it will really be dead. Spiritual death is being cut off from the person who created you, who made you, God, the giver of life. That is the history lesson for the Ephesians. You were dead. But remember, Paul's a good history teacher. He's not just going to teach the history. He wants to remind you that now you are something else. Verse 4, but because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions.

But God made us alive. You once were dead. You were like the dead flower, but for those who put their trust in Jesus, you have been made alive. Telling them they were dead wasn't to get them all sad and mopey. The purpose of telling them they're dead is to amplify how you have been made alive.

Alive. You are no longer a dead person. You are an alive person. You are a person made alive in Jesus. You are someone who was raised to life with Jesus. The only guy who has ever been raised to life.

[4 : 37] And you will receive the riches of his kindness. That is who you are, not a dead person. The history lesson is meant to compare and contrast the past to now.

So you are this. Don't go live in the past. Live who you are, made to be now. And that's the pattern of this chapter. And here, as we start, Paul further describes what this death is like. Have a look at verse 11.

Here's some key definitions that you might not know of.

Jews were God's chosen people from the Old Testament. And a Gentile was everyone else. A non-Jew. Paul is talking to the Gentiles here. They didn't have the special privilege of always knowing God.

But he's talking to Christian Gentiles, those who have professed faith in Jesus as their king and saviour. That's who he's talking to. Okay? And in verse 12, he is saying, before you knew God, before you believed in Jesus, you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, and foreigners to the covenant of the promise. Let's go through each of one of them. Before someone knows God, they are physically distant from God. They are socially distant from God. And they're also culturally distant from Christ.

[6 : 22] You are mega distant. You are cut off. There is no coming back from this. And that is the history lesson. The history lesson for the Gentiles was, you once were alienated from God. Alienated.

Think about the idea of an alien from outer space. The Gentiles were so far away from God. Why? Because of sin. It's not that God asks you for no good reason. Sin separates you from God. Sin is whenever we choose to say, I am king, not the creator of the world. Sin is choosing to live in opposition of God. And so sin is a heart problem. Remember hearing when you were younger about that little rumor about chlorine in the pool? If you were to pee in the pool, the chlorine around you would turn the surrounding area purple. And then you would see who did it and dealt it. Everyone would start swimming away from you. And as you swim closer to them, the purple would spread throughout the pool.

Good news. Fake news. That's the image of sin and death. This death pool, is talking about, causes separation from God and death. Sin causes distance from God. You can't approach God. No matter what you do, you are tainted. You are, as verse 12 says, without hope and without God in the world. And you cannot save yourself. And that is what Paul says in verse 8.

Follow along with me. It is by grace you have been saved. It is a gift of God. This means the way that you are saved is not from yourself. You cannot do anything to heal the broken relationship with God. If you're in that pool, all you do with the purple liquid is spread it around. You need that to be removed. All you do is spread it and people do not want to be near you. The same grace that brings you from death to life is the same grace that saves you. Last year, our speaker told us that grace is a gift, undeserved, free of forgiveness, fullness and life eternal. Paul reminds the Ephesians. He's reminding you that salvation is not from you. There are never enough good deeds that you can do. You know those kids who are in school photos who just give this, oh, look at me. I look good. I look cute. And I know, and I know it.

[9 : 16] And I know that I can get anyone to do anything for me. They give you that look. And I almost want to scream at them and be, you can't be proud of it. You didn't do anything. That's what Paul is saying.

If you were not the cause or the means of your salvation, you can't boast. You didn't earn your salvation. So salvation doesn't come through us. How does it come by? Verse 13.

That now in Christ Jesus, remember verse 4, but God, Paul does it again. This shift from the history of the past to the present is supposed to give us hope. But now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. All this time when you were culturally separated, socially isolated, spiritually distant, you are far away, alien. But now you have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Have a listen to that phrase, being brought near. Notice that it isn't coming near, going closer to God. You are a passive participant in the action. You're doing nothing. Being brought close to God is an action done only by Jesus, by his blood shed on the cross.

What Jesus accomplishes on the cross is not just the forgiveness of your sins, but the ability to freely come to God. That's why you can pray to God and say, Father, that's why you don't need to run away from God. Lock your room and be ashamed of yourself in front of God. You can boldly approach his throne with confidence that he hears you and he cares for you. See, the beauty and relevance of this lesson is that you once were alienated from God, but now you have peace with him.

So live like you are at peace with him. Talk to him regularly. Hear from him regularly in the word. We keep talking about being in the Bible four or more times a week. When you see how far you were from God, you have a deeper and deeper appreciation of the depths of God's love, grace, and mercy.

[11 : 46] Even though you were as far as the planet Pluto from the sun, God through Christ has brought you near. But that's not all that Jesus accomplishes for us. There's even more that he does. Ready? Verse 14.

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. The two groups Paul was talking about are the Gentiles and the Jews, remember? Paul's final history lesson is this. You, Gentiles and Jews, were hostile to each other. In fact, it's not just a history lesson. It was a problem they still faced. Get this. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl or vice versa, the funeral of that Jewish boy or girl was carried out. In that verse, you see that dividing wall of hostility? Yes, it's a metaphor. But you know what? There was actually a physical wall that barred Gentiles, foreigners, from going into the inner section of the temple where the Jews would worship God. And on the wall, there was an inscription. It said, No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure around the temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death. You just have to look at that and your brain is screaming, get back! This is the unimaginable hostility and distance. Today, it breaks our hearts when we see awful hostility in war-torn countries. But this is the hostility and distance inside the church.

But just like what we saw earlier, sin is a heart problem. Sin causes us to be alienated from God, far away from him. And this wall, too, is a heart problem. Therefore, again, a sin problem needs an external solution.

[13 : 59] It needs to be a power, a work outside of ourselves. We cannot solve our own issue of sin. And that is why in verse 14, it says that Jesus is our peace. It is by him that he would bring Jews and Gentiles together.

And for what reason does Paul, does Jesus do this? Verse 15. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace. He's bringing them together to create a whole new group all together. You are not Jews and the Gentiles. You are followers of Jesus. You are not Japanese Christians and Australian Christians. You are followers of Jesus. The geeks and nerds don't sit on one side of the room at youth group and then the sporty party animals sit on the other side.

No, you are followers of Jesus. Christians. And in reconciling the two groups, not only has he created one new humanity, but he has put to death the hostility between the two groups. In fact, the church is so countercultural. It's not just this hodgepodge of all people in one room who are civil and fine to sit next to each other, not like an extended Christmas family dinner. But verse 19 paints the new reality in Jesus. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household. That's how transformative the gospel is. It literally, literally raises spiritual death to life, but transforms people who were once enemies into family. The gospel means that the church should feel like family. Each Sunday you walk into church, when you step into someone's house in community group, when it hits 6.40pm and it's youth time, my prayer is that it has and will feel like family. If you're new to St. Paul's, I hope you've been welcomed and embraced and been made to feel like family. But friends, let's be real. We aren't perfect.

I'm not perfect. And there are ways we can demonstrate Jesus' warm and generous welcome, but sometimes we don't. And I wonder if the barrier between people in our church today is not obvious, it's not a blatant hostility, but of a different heart problem. We might not have walls, but we might have a little picket fence. I've just put three possible reasons down on the screen why sometimes we might not make church feel like family. I don't think it's usually ever one person's fault.

We all have a heart issue that plays a part. And these come from my own personal sins and from ones that I've wrestled in part of being part of God's family. Number one, it might be because we might be prioritising preferences such as similarity in life stage, similar hobbies, culture, background, shared history, being at the same church together. Number two, maybe it's because of a struggle with discomfort. You know, I don't like awkward conversations. Sometimes I don't want to have those conversations because I know it's going to be awkward or I'm just happily content here rather than doing what I know God wants me to do, which is welcome someone. Perhaps you are

worried about being vulnerable and you're fearing of being judged and you want to hide away.
[17 : 44] Friend, if that's you, I get that and I've been there. But don't forget, you are an alive person. You are a peace with God person. Jesus has brought life. Jesus has brought peace.

Don't go back to the past. Don't act dead. Stop building walls. There is no more separation. There is no wall between Christians. Because what you need is not for me to tell you to get rid of your preferences, discomfort and vulnerability. There's no amount of icebreaker games and questions that will bring us together. It's knowing the lengths that Christ went to have you reconciled with him. Friend, know that Jesus is holding out a hand and pulling you into his grasp to be a part of his family. I can point to countless times when youth or kids have asked me, Ash, why do we keep talking about Jesus? Maybe you're in the room and you know you've asked that question to me. Like, are we ever going to move on from Jesus at Sunday, kids? Guess what, kids? Answer is no. No. No. In fact, you might be a youth kid who has kept hearing the stories of Jesus from Sunday kids from Cray. And you're here at youth, you're here at summer camp, and you've been hearing about Jesus, his promises, his kingship, his salvation story, and gone, I've heard it all before. Why am I hearing it again? We talk about him when we're in discussion groups, we talk about him over the table when we're doing craft. I even encourage parents to talk about Jesus over the dinner table.

It's because Jesus is the only person who can bring you salvation and eternal life. It's only by Jesus that our heart problem of hostility, discomfort, preference, and vulnerability get broken down.

The mark of a Christian is someone who is confidently at peace with God and peace with each other, which is why at St. Paul's we're on about treasuring Jesus and doing that together.

[20 : 04] Just as your salvation has been won by the grace of Jesus, so too is our connection with each other. When we don't feel like family, what brings Christian people together isn't anything but the grace of Jesus.

So if you're a summer camper who's going to go to Collaroy, and you know that you're a little afraid of the kids from the other youth group, or even from our church, or you know you were comfortable with just hanging out with your own mates, I just want you to be real with yourself.

I want you to recognise that in you. Then what I want you to do is I want you to pray. I want you to pray that God might soften your heart and help you know how the gospel transforms your relationships with other Christians. Then go. Go out in faith and chat to someone you don't know well. Be okay with an awkward conversation. Can we be a church that's okay with an awkward conversation? Christian family and friendship has to start from somewhere. But know that Jesus goes with you and is forming that relationship. Let's pray. Our Father God, may we deeply know how hostile we once were to you. That in your great kindness and mercy, you gave us hope in Jesus.

Jesus. Jesus paid the penalty of death that we deserved. Lord, we cannot change our own hearts, but we are confident that your Spirit can and does. Help us be a community, a church that feels like family.

Amen.