

September 9, 2012

Galatians 6:14-16 / Romans 11:13-27 / Ephesians 2:11-22

Israel Redefined (#1): Believing Gentile and Believing Israel (as opposed to unbelieving Israel) as the Church, or God's One New People in Christ.

Back in June I told Randy I wanted to hold off continuing in Ephesians throughout the summer. And the primary reason was because I didn't want anyone to miss what we will be going over in the next two weeks! And it's not that Fall (as opposed to summer) guarantees everyone will be here! But it does seem to make a difference.

And why did I want to make sure everyone was here for these next two messages? Because there is so much confusion in regard to the point Paul makes in these verses and so much at stake as a result.

And what does it all have to do with? It has to do with, ***"The mystery that through the Gospel, the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of ONE BODY and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."*** A theme Paul repeats in Chap. 1:10 / 2:14-20 / and 3:4-6.

It has to do with how God, from ages past, always intended to bring both believing Jews and believing Gentiles together as ONE PEOPLE or ONE BODY in Christ.

Or to use Paul's metaphor in Rom. 11:17-24: It was always God's intention to "graft" the Gentiles, as branches cut off a wild olive tree, onto the cultivated olive tree called "Israel" -- thereby making the Gentiles to be a part of "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16).

The mystery hidden from ages past, but made known through Christ and the Church, was that God purposed in Christ do away with the cause of the hostility between Jew and Gentile / and create one body out of the two. It was NOT (as many still teach) to leave them as two separate groups or entities of people, but make one people out of the two.

It was to join believing Jew and believing Gentile together in the "Church," or what Paul calls, ***"the Israel of God."***

And why is that so important? Why did I not want anyone to miss these messages where Paul makes that so plain? Because what Paul goes over here determines so many things: Like how you view yourself in relation to Israel, or the promises of God given to Israel in the Old Testament -- whether you see them as made to you or made only to the Jews.

It determines whether you see the Jews alone as God's uniquely chosen people / and the objects of a special love and divine favor / or see your-self as having been joined to them, making the things promised to them part of your own spiritual inheritance. That's why it's so important!

So let's dig right in to the text and see what it teaches, starting **FIRST** with the FIVE things that Gentiles (or we as people of non-Jewish origin) did not have before we came to Christ but now possess because we are in Christ. Things Paul wants the Gentile Ephesians (and us) to remember, because if we don't it hinders God's purpose for us in Christ, destroys the unity of the Body of Christ, thwarts God's goal for His One body the Church, and hinders the evangelistic witness and outreach of the Church.

So, what are the five things that were true of all those of Gentile origin, and thus all of us, before we came to Christ?

1st) We were "separate from Christ" (v. 12a). We had no part in Him or of Him

2nd) We were "excluded from citizenship in Israel" (v. 12b). And here, the word "citizenship" does not mean citizenship in the country we call Israel. It means "belonging to the specially chosen people of God."

That's what the word "Israel" frequently refers to: The people of God and not the geo-political nation state we see on maps of the Middle East. After all, many Gentiles lived in Israel and had citizenship there, who had no connection at all to God or Christ.

Being a citizen in the country of Israel is no more spiritually advantageous with God than being a citizen of Canada, Mexico or the U.S.. It means nothing to God. So when Paul here says we were, "excluded from citizenship in Israel," he's using the word citizenship in the figurative sense of belonging to that group

of people whom God had chosen to love / and separate out from the rest of humanity as His special possession / and call His own.

That's why I can say that the word "Israel" is just another name for: "The people of God" or "His chosen people" or "the elect of God" or "the chosen remnant." And as Paul tells us in Gal. 6:16, because of Christ, the word "Israel" (or "the people of God") now includes both Jew and Gentile.

Remember, Paul says to the Gentiles, ***"you WERE (before Christ) excluded from citizenship in Israel."*** But not anymore! Because now, through faith in Christ, every believing Gentile comes to be included in the citizenship of Israel!

Included among those who are called, "the Israel of God" or "the chosen people of God." You and I have been grafted into believing Israel, meaning that what God promised to them, is also promised to me!

You see, so often I have sent people to texts like Zephaniah 3:15-17 in an attempt to show them the great love and delight God has in them. You know the verse: ***"Do not let your hands hang limp. The LORD your God is with you, He is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing."***

But you know what has sometimes happened? People of strict dispensational background (which teaches that the Church and Israel are completely separate entities, or two distinct olive trees, or two bodies of people) will say something along these lines: ***"But pastor Jeff, the preceding verse says, 'On that day I WILL SAY TO JERUSALEM...' That's not a promise to me. I can't take that for myself. That's a promise to the Jews, or the people of Israel, and not me as a Gentile Christian."***

The same has happened in relation of the well-known promise in Jer. 29:11-13: ***"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me, and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you shall search for me with all your heart," declares the Lord..."***

The person who has been taught contrary to what Paul says here will look at those promises and do the same. They'll say something like: ***"I'd like to believe that. I really would. But the previous verses and the ones that follow make it very clear that God spoke those words to Israel. Those are promises to them. He said that of Israel, not us."***

Yet what does Paul say here? We who are believing Gentiles have now (though faith in Jesus) been included in citizenship in Israel -- the citizen-ship that really matters -- belonging to the specially chosen people of God.

LISTEN: The promises God made to THEM (the promises of salvation, and spiritual blessing, and special favor, and a godly seed or heritage, and a delight-filled Fatherly love, and NOT the Land promises, as Calvin rightly noted) are ours to stand on, and not just believing Israel. Because in Christ we as believing Gentiles have been joined as one with them!

And when I understand that, the OT becomes so much more precious to me! It becomes my book, and not just the Jews book! It becomes my spiritual history and not just the spiritual history of Israel! And all those promises I thought (or had been wrongly taught) were promises of God solely to Israel, become mine to encourage me and gird me up in times of struggle and trial.

They were, in a very real sense, made to a Gentile like me, whom God always intended to join or graft into that one tree called, "the Israel of God" as much as any Jew. Not the nation of Israel! Not the country we see on a map! But the specially favored, divinely chosen, and elect people of God! I may NOT be a biological descendent of Abraham, like the Jews, but I am a true son of Abraham, the man of faith, and the "father" of all who believe in Jesus! (Rom. 4:11-18 / Gal. 3:7-9).

HEAR ME WELL: *The spiritual promises God made to Israel He made to me and you, because in Christ Jesus we are now part of "the Israel of God."*

Which brings us to the **3rd**) thing Paul says wasn't true of us, but now is because of Christ. We were foreigners to the covenants of promise (v. 12c).

Not all the covenants. Paul is very clear about that. Not covenants the Mosaic Covenant which declares curses or favor based on one's obedience or performance -- but the covenants of promise. / What we might call, "The Gospel Covenants" -- the covenants that declare the gracious favor of God -- like the Abrahamic Covenant and those that enhance it, like the Davidic Covenant / and the New Covenant -- all of which are "covenants of promise."

That is, unconditional covenants or the covenants of grace. Covenants which promise a place, and a heritage, and a blessing, and the continuation of the line of Abraham and David, and the unspeakable grace of the new covenant purchased for us by Jesus and signed in His blood.

We were foreigners to them. The meant nothing to us. But praise God, not anymore! For in Christ, they are ours!! All the spiritual blessings promised in each one are now ours in Him! In Christ the OT covenants of promise have become ours! It's as if God made them with US in mind!

In fact, that's the fourth thing that was true of us as Gentiles. We were "without hope" (v. 12d). As Barclay notes, as civilized as the Greeks were known to be, **"there was," he says, "such a thing as the Greek melancholy."** Behind their entire view of life was a **"kind of essential despair."**

Why? Because they had no promise or hope of eternal life. Because their gods were fickle, moody, changed on a whim, and were nothing more than magnified versions of themselves, they made no unchanging covenant promises -- neither of grace nor redemption nor eternal life.

As the Hymn of Homer sung at the assembly of Olympus declares: **"even they that endure by the will of the immortals... can find no cure for death, nor a defense against age."** The Greeks worshipped youth, & feared death.

It was the same thing Theognis had written: **"Rejoice, O my soul, in thy youth, for soon other men shall be in life, and you shall be black earth in death... Beneath the earth shall I lie, bereft of life and voiceless as a stone... Good man that I am, I shall then see nothing more."**

How different from the Jewish view expressed by Job. He spoke of the resurrection and said of that time after death: ***"Yet in my flesh I shall see God! My own eyes shall see him and not those of another."***

Sad, isn't it? People with no hope of anything beyond the grave. A viewpoint shared by many in our day who are likewise ignorant of the promises of God and the offer of life after the grave. (The man I painted with in seminary: "When I die that's it. All conscious existence will end. And my body will be food for the insects and the worms." And his lack of hope showed.)

In that sense, it's easy to forget how much the Christian Gospel and the Christian faith and the promises of grace and salvation and redemption and eternal life, have infused hope into us (and even to some degree in the unbelieving culture around us). A hope that was not present in the Gentile culture of Paul's day and tends to be absent in any people or culture that strays from their moorings in God and His "covenants of promise."

People today often see their rejection of Christ and the Bible as a way of "breaking free from religious restrictiveness" (so to speak). But as post-modern culture shows, they trade it in to become captive to a fear of death / and a dread of aging / and a sense of hopelessness / and a pervading, inescapable air of despair.

Then **5th)** Paul says they were "without God" in the world (v. 12e). Why? Didn't the Gentiles have a generic belief in God? Yes. But as the Bible makes clear, until we have Christ, we do not have God. Until we come to Christ in faith, we are devoid of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. God's presence has not yet come to live within us.

We are "a-theos" as Paul puts it. It's the Greek word he uses for "without God" and the same word from which we get our English word, "atheist." Until we have God (not just believe in God) we are essentially atheists.

When Peter speaks to Cornelius in Acts 11 (a God-fearing Gentile and his entire household), we are told that while Peter was preaching to them: "the Holy Spirit came upon all who heard the message."

And as justification for baptizing this first Gentile convert, Peter says: **"Can anyone keep these people from being baptized? For they have RECEIVED THE HOLY SPIRIT just as we did."**

That's the blessing beyond all other blessings: In believing upon Christ, we receive the Holy Spirit, or receive God into our lives. God (Father, Son and Spirit) comes to take up residence within us. That was the promise made on Pentecost: **"Repent, every one of you, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the Holy Spirit."**

That was the greatest blessing of all. The best of all the Good News is that we who were "without God," now have God! Until we have Christ, we don't have God, but in receiving Christ we receive God -- because we receive His Spirit.

So what happens the instant a person comes to faith in Christ? They are no longer separate from Christ, they belong to Israel, they own the covenants of promise, they have the promise and thus the hope of eternal life, and God's Spirit comes to reside within them!

That's why Paul can say of them in conclusion: **"But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far off, have been brought near, through the blood of Christ."** Atonement for sins has been made / the wrath of God has been appeased or satisfied / and the sinner now lives at peace with Him in an habitual state of reconciliation.

But that's not all. The **SECOND** thing we see is that this habitual state of reconciliation is not simply a state of reconciliation with GOD. For when we come to Christ, we also enter into a state of reconciliation with all believing Jews who have also been joined to Jesus and also enjoy that same state of reconciliation with God.

In fact, in the context, it's that second sense of reconciliation that dominates the text! For as Paul writes in v.14: **"He Himself (that is, Christ) is our peace, who has made the two one (that is, made both Jew and Gentile one) and has des-troyed the barrier; the dividing wall of hostility (the wall of hostility**

between Jew and Gentile), by abolishing in His flesh the law, with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create one new man out of the two, thus making peace (that is, between Jew and Gentile), and in this one body, to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility (that is, toward one another)."

So, what do we see? That for God to create this one new body or one new man out of the two, He not only had to reconcile Jew and Gentile to Himself / He also had to reconcile Jew and Gentile to each other. Because before Christ they essentially hated and would not associate with each other.

As Barclay notes, picking up on the phrase, "the dividing wall of hostility": ***"The ancient world had its fences and barriers. The Greek called any man a barbarian who could not speak Greek... They despised them as beasts and put up [social and religious] barriers against them... Plato said that barbarians, or non-Greeks are, "our enemies by nature."***

Likewise, the Jews hated and despised all Gentiles. ***"The Gentiles, said the Jews, were created by God to be fuel for the fires of hell... It was not even lawful for a Jew to render a Gentile mother help in her hour of greatest need, for that would be to bring another Gentile into the world. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, or a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, the parents would have a funeral for that son or daughter. Even to go into the house of a Gentile rendered a Jew unclean... The Jews, he says, regarded all men as hated by God, except their own nation."***

That explains why before Christ & without Christ there was no hope whatsoever of having unity between the two. And what was the main barrier to that unity?
The Law.

That's why God, in bringing together these two groups that quite literally hated each other: Had to "destroy the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in His flesh, the law, with its commandments & regulations." (vv. 14-15)

Because the law required Jews to be separate, they could not eat with, show hospitality to, or intermarry with Gentiles. And this, as Harold Hoehner states,

"led to a hostility of Jews toward Gentiles, and was the cause of the Gentile hatred of the Jews."

And when you add to that law the numerous scribal and pharisaical additions to it, you can see that if God was going to bring them together (as he had always planned to do), He would have to, ***"abolish the law with its commandments and regulations."***

That is, abolish it as the principle of their approach to God and the Gentiles. Because the law (or I should say the unfortunate misuse of the law) and the sinful attitude of rejection, exclusionism and superiority that that good and holy law bred in the sinful hearts of Jewish men and women, was the problem. It kept unity from ever becoming a reality.

It was intended to make Israel "a kingdom of priests unto God." People of integrity who were refreshingly godly and upright. People who could testify to God grace and care and protection and provision. Yet instead, they used it as a reason to look down on others whom they considered morally inferior, and held to their laws and rituals with such unbending tenacity, says Hoehner, that ***"it made the Gentiles think them prideful and stubborn."***

Which brings us to our LAST point: How did God remove the wall of hostility between them? Vv. 16 -18? ***"[Christ] reconciled them to God through the CROSS, by which He put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far off, and peace to those who were near. For through HIM (through Christ) we both (both Jew and Gentile) have access to the Father by one Spirit."***

Or in other words, God made CHRIST, and the CROSS, and not the LAW, the operating principle for attaining BOTH peace with God and unity between Jew and Gentile!

In Christ, the law was removed as the means by which God measured His approval of people and the means by which people should measure each other! It was no longer one's obedience or religious performance or morality that made them able to approach God. It was Christ! He fulfilled the law so as to remove it as the means of approaching to God.

Yet here's Paul's other insight: In doing so He also removed it as the cause of the Jews rejecting the Gentiles, and the Gentiles hating the Jews! And because our peace with God and each other is CHRIST, being Jew or Gentile or Greek or Barbarian or man or woman or child or slave or free or cultured or educated or civilized or uncivilized or "red, yellow, black or white," no longer matters! It should no longer come into play. I accept people in Christ, not on the basis of how well they do.

"Consequently," Paul can say to the Gentile believers in Ephesus, "you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people (that is, "with the true Israel of God") and members of one household, built on the foundation of the [NT] apostles and [OT] prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone."

Thus Hoehner can correctly say: ***"The old covenant is no longer our modus operandi." It's no longer what defines us as people. Christ does! "Christ has fulfilled the old covenant, and thus it is no longer operative... Christ destroyed the enmity between Jews and Gentiles by making inoperative the root or cause -- namely, the law with all its commandments and decrees."*** He removed the source of their animosity and replaced it with Himself.

So let me end with this: Whenever you see disunity occurring in any church / whenever you see people judging and rejecting others / whenever you see barriers of prejudice and dividing walls of hostility existing any the church -- you can KNOW that somehow or in some way, people have gone back to the law (or rules or some human legalism) as the "operating principle" of their life, and life in the church, instead of Christ.

And that should never be! For in Christ, and because of what Christ did on the cross, Paul says "the law" (or any law) can no longer be used to measure or judge or exclude or divide people.

Christ abolished the law in his flesh by fulfilling every last part of it and thus destroyed the wall of division. Which means that now we accept people in Christ, we don't reject them for their failure to live up to the law.