

“Walls Broken Down”

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Fourth in a series on Ephesians

Ephesians 2.11-22

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Therefore, remember that before, you who are Gentiles by birth and called ‘uncircumcised’ by those who call themselves ‘the circumcision’ (which is done in the body by human hands) – remember that at that time you were separate from the Messiah, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and Godless in the world.

But now in the Messiah Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by his blood. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by shutting down in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.

His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity from the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

So then, you 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 the Messiah 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 a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Ephesians 2.11-22

Adapted from the New International Version

Walls are broken down. Hostility is ended. People who were once cut off, are now brought near in peace. This is what happens with Jesus. This is the good news Paul tells in that reading!

For us to get what is going on here, we need the back story.

Let’s suppose all of us represent the peoples of the world. We are very diverse, yet united by our common humanity. Also, our common inhumanity! We all exemplify the human propensity to mess up terribly. Violence, injustice, exploitation, abuse. Also pettiness,

lying, hatred, indifference. Each in our own way, yet all of us together. Every person, and all nations. We are a mess. We have turned our back on God, our Creator who loves us.

Who still loves us. So God sets out to make us right. This is the Story the Bible tells. God starts strangely small. One tiny family, taken out from among us. History has called them Hebrews, Israelites, Jews. They're nothing special, no better than us (or worse). God chooses them because of grace, and God chooses them for a special job. They are to be God's light to all the nations, bringing God's salvation to the whole earth.¹

Since we're all messed up, to do this effectively they are going to need to become different from us. How is that going to happen?

They have to learn to be different. Israel needs to be schooled in the ways of God. So God gives Israel the Law, the Torah to be its teacher.

Also, they need to be kept safe from being messed up, again, by the rest of us. Only by being different will they show us how to love God, how to love our neighbour, because we are not doing that. So the Law is also an incubator. It sets boundaries, practices that will keep Israel distinct. For example, Jews will eat only certain foods. Worship in certain ways. Keep the Sabbath. Circumcise their sons. This is all about keeping Israel's God-given mission secure, its mission to spread God's peace throughout the earth.²

II

The Jewish Bible, our Old Testament, is honest about how this went. Too often, not too well.

The problem was not the Law. God gave it! Yet it cannot change who we are. Israel turned out to be, still, too much like the rest of us. The Law does not change that propensity to sin, to act unlovingly, and generally mess up, that belongs to all of us.³

Instead of being different, too often Israel tried to be like the nations: exploiting the poor, neglecting the weak, building empire, worshipping false gods, and indulging decadence. Too often, Israel's God-given distinctiveness twisted into a sense of superiority over non-

¹ Isaiah 49.6.

² Timothy G. Gombis, The Drama of Ephesians: Participating in the Triumph of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 99.

³ “. . . this is not a specifically Jewish failure; it is a human failure.” Gombis, 100.

Jews, Gentiles.⁴

Israel was no different from the rest of us. That's the problem.

One feature of the Jerusalem Temple symbolized this. There was a short wall around the Temple. Inside it, Jews could go to worship God. But Gentiles were forbidden. It was, literally, a dividing wall between insiders and outsiders. We can taste this sort of bitter ethnic hostility in all sorts of nations and peoples. But this is the people God chose for mission, for the sake of us all.

Jesus is a Jew. Paul was a follower of Jesus, and himself a Jew. He was writing to Christians in Ephesus. Some might have been Jews like him. Most were Gentiles. The good news of the risen Jesus had seized them. God the Spirit was pouring into them. Yet, they were not of Israel. They might have felt hostility toward Jews; antisemitism is ancient. They might have felt hostility from Jews, including fellow followers of Jesus. Paul lists the barriers: they were uncircumcised, so outside the Law, cut off from the Messiah, aliens from Israel, foreigners to God's covenants, hopeless, Godless.

III

With all this back story of hope and then hostility pressing down, Paul springs to the good news.⁵ Jesus is the Heir of Israel's mission. He is the promised Deliverer of God's people. And he has killed the hostility. Jesus has broken down the dividing wall between us. He has shut down the Law's function of dividing us. He has done this by taking the divisive hostility onto himself. Himself being killed, Jesus killed the hostility.

Most conversations about Jesus' death, and how his crucifixion saves us, focus on what he does to our sin. Our sin that builds a wall between us and God. He broke the chains that enslaved me. He absorbed the guilt that plagued me. He bore the shame that buried me. He defeated the powers that twisted me. He paid the price to forgive me. The meaning of Jesus' cross is a treasure house we can enter through different doors.

⁴ "They had a well-developed sense of being a chosen people, which they were. That was a good thing. But along with that, they had also developed an entrenched prejudice against non-Jews as a rejected people, which they were not." Eugene H. Peterson, Practice Resurrection: a conversation on growing up in Christ (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 120.

⁵ I wrote a paper on this passage, from which much of this material comes. "A Wall Came Tumbling Down . . . But Which One?: The Meaning of the Dividing Wall in Ephesians 2:14" (Course TS 718, Conrad Grebel University College, University of Waterloo, April 2012).

Here Paul opens another door. The Good News is not only that Jesus reconciles me with God. Sin divides us from each other. Jesus, in his death, reconciles us back together. He does this for individuals, and communities, and nations.

Paul realizes this starts with that fundamental division between Jews and Gentiles. Jesus is creating a new humanity. The distinctions between people still exist. We are not all the same. God made us different. Our cultures bless one another. Our borders can be meeting places where we start to know each other. Differences are blessings. Yet they need not divide.

Another way of saying it, is that the mission God gave to the Jews, Jesus has now spread to include them and us all. He is drawing us all in, bringing us all together.

IV

This is what we're about, as Jesus' church. Jesus has broken the powers that divide us – Jews and Gentiles, and much more. This community he makes us into, his church here are globally, we are meant to be a monument to his victory. Israel's Messiah has brought us in, so now we share in the mission of peace that belongs to all God's people.

Salvation makes peace. We cannot separate peacemaking from salvation. True peace comes when God saves people from the power of sin and death. True salvation comes when God heals relationships, reconciles nations, and births communities anew. Jesus the Saviour is our peace!⁶

I was with a group of Jews and Christians in Toronto this week. We are working to overcome hostility. Too often, Christians have undermined the promise Paul held to and proclaimed. We've claimed to follow Jesus, who broke down hostility. Yet in his name we've built new walls, especially against Jews. With horrific results. We've still got work to do, together.

That's something I'm doing. How is God calling you to be a person of peace these days?

Are there people you can help bring together? Walls that need tearing down? You might

⁶ “The unity of the gospel is evident in that the message of salvation and the good news of peace are *one gospel* proclaimed by and fulfilled in Jesus. Paul's gospel cannot imagine divorcing salvation from peacemaking, or peacemaking from salvation; for God's salvation in Jesus *is* peace – indeed, Jesus himself 'is our peace' (v. 14).” Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, *Atonement, Justice and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 510.

be a bridge God is bringing into that hostility, part of building peace.

This is Jesus work. It's salvation work. Jesus has grafted you into the mission of Israel. Jesus has brought you into his called people. The mission of being a light to the nations, spreading God's peace, is now your mission.

Remember this. Jesus has defanged and dethroned the powers that divide, the forces that enslave. Anything he calls you to do, you are doing in him, and with him, filled with his Spirit and held within his victory.

Jesus is our peace! Praise God. Amen.