

Ephesians 2:11-22
From Alien Sojourner to Citizen Saint
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Our text today speaks of aliens and citizenship and a wall. There is a contemporary ring to these terms. They sound strangely familiar. The reason is that we have been hearing these words in the news for a number of years now. The vocabulary of our text sounds familiar, but we mustn't be too hasty in our associations. There is a real disconnect between the current situation and our text for today. The current political debate is about the growing crisis of illegal immigration. Our text for today is about a form of legal immigration made possible by the saving work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text for today is about Jesus' bringing the pagan Gentiles into His kingdom, His making them one with the people of God and His giving them the status of citizenship in the kingdom of God.

Matthew 8:11

- 11 And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

Galatians 3:13-14

- 13 Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"),
14 that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Our text for today is about how the gospel makes both believing Jews and believing Gentiles citizens of new covenant Israel. We will look at our text under three headings: excluded, included and exalted.

We will begin today by looking at our first heading, excluded. These Gentile members of the church at Ephesus had once been excluded from God's covenant people in every sense of the word. Paul is reminding them of their former spiritual poverty in order to help them appreciate their current spiritual riches in Christ Jesus. Paul is reminding them of their former forsakenness in order to help them appreciate their current covenant privileges. Paul is reminding them of their former abandonment in order to help them appreciate their current adoption into the family of faith.

To better understand the situation which Paul is here addressing, we need to think back to the origins of both the pagan nations and God's covenant people. Some time after Noah and his family survived the waters of the flood in an ark, God formed the nations of the world. This occurred at the tower of Babel, and it was an act of judgment. At Babel, humanity united in the building of a gigantic tower, an artificial mountain, a ziggurat. The purpose of this structure was to unite humanity in a proud attempt to subdue and rule the earth apart from the living and true God. This was an effort to re-establish the defiant civilization of Cain which had been destroyed by the flood. The name of the city was Babel, which means "the gate of God." This name implies that the tower had a religious function. This

tower which reached up into the heavens was to be humanity's means of uniting heaven and earth on humanity's terms. It was to be humanity's gateway to God, humanity's means of tapping into divinity and realizing Satan's false promise, "You shall be like God."

As the tower rose up, God came down from the heavens and judged humanity by confusing their language. By imposing on humanity a diversity of tongues, God broke up the unified human race into the diversity of nations. These diverse nations went their separate ways, and God judged them by allowing them to go their own ways not only linguistically and culturally but also spiritually and morally. As Paul said in Acts 14:16: "... the living God ... in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways." This is a severe judgment. God judges sin by giving the sinner over to sin. God judges sin by allowing the sinner to continue in his sinful ways and to harden in his sinful habits. The pagan nations, alienated from God and deprived of God's protective oversight, fell prey to the devil. The devil deceived them as he had deceived Eve in the garden. The devil devoured them like a roaring lion. The devil plundered them and took them as his treasure. The pagan nations, overwhelmed by the power of darkness, were enslaved to pagan religions and totalitarian governments. They were taken captive by Satan to do his will.

In Genesis chapter eleven, God formed the pagan nations in an act of judgment. In Genesis chapter twelve, God, in an act of grace and mercy, called Abraham to be the father of the one nation with which God would work until the coming of the

Christ. God formed the nation Israel to be His covenant people in the former age.

In order to understand our text for today, we need to consider the significance of being a citizen of the old covenant nation of Israel instead of being a citizen of a pagan nation. Even outward membership in God's people was a great privilege of grace and mercy. In Romans chapter three, Paul asked the question, "What advantage has the Jew?" He answered, "Much in every way!" Paul then elaborated on these advantages in Romans chapter nine. The old covenant Jew had the adoption. This is a reference to the national adoption of Israel under the old covenant as the people of God. He had the glory, the Shekinah glory of God which indwelt the holy of holies first in the tabernacle and later in the temple until the time of the Babylonian exile. He had the covenants which God made with Abraham and David. He had the law which God gave through Moses at Mount Sinai. He had the service of God, which is a reference to the priestly worship first in the tabernacle and later in the temple. He was a part of the people through whom the Messiah, the Christ, would come in the flesh. As Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well, Salvation is of the Jews.

Now I have been talking about the blessings of outward membership in old covenant Israel. Even greater was the blessing of being a member of Israel inwardly as well as outwardly. Many old testament Jews were not only descendants of Jacob but also Israelites indeed in whom there was no guile. Many old testament Jews not only had the blood of Abraham in their veins but also had the faith of Abraham in their hearts.

Many old testament Jews not only possessed the promise of salvation through faith but also possessed the salvation promised because they believed.

In contrast to these precious privileges, Paul describes the plight of the unconverted pagan in verse 12 of our text:

12 ... at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

Before their conversion, the Gentiles in the Ephesian church had been without Christ. They had had no heart relationship with the historical Jesus of the gospel message nor with the Messiah of prophecy, the Christ made known to old covenant Israel through prophecies and types. They had had no citizenship in Israel in any sense and had not been members of God's covenant people in any sense. The covenants which God had made based on the promise of a coming Redeemer had not been made with them. Thus they had no hope and were without God in the world.

Our first point is that unconverted Gentiles did not possess the heritage of old covenant Israel and had never been members of God's covenant people in any sense. Our first point is exclusion, and our second point is inclusion. The transition from exclusion to inclusion is found in verse 13 of our text:

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

The Gentile Christians in the Ephesian church are here referred to as those who once were far off. Under the old covenant, God's Shekinah glory dwelt in the holy of holies in the temple at Jerusalem, and the people of God could approach God and draw near to God in both a spatial and a spiritual sense as they worshipped Him with sacrifices at Jerusalem. Thus they could rightly be described as those who were near to God. The pagans who lived far away from Jerusalem and who could not draw near to God through temple worship were rightly described as those far away. Thus when pagan Gentiles believed in Jesus, those who were far away from God were brought near to God by the atoning blood of Jesus' finished sacrifice upon the cross.

When Paul here says that these believing Gentiles have been brought near, he is not saying that they have been made a part of old testament Israel by being circumcised and by adopting the Mosaic ceremonial laws as a way of life. Paul is here saying that the uncircumcised Gentile Christians are now members of Israel in its new covenant manifestation. In verse 15, Paul refers to the covenant people in this age as a "new man." This is the new redeemed humanity made up of both Jew and Gentile. In this age, Jesus has reconciled both believing Jews and believing Gentiles first to God and then to each other and has incorporated them together in the church which is His body.

Our passage says that Jesus has brought together believing Jews and believing Gentiles in the church by breaking down the wall which separated them. That separating wall was built upon a system of rituals which emphasized the sacrificial blood of bulls and goats. Jesus fulfilled all these bloody redemptive types by

His atoning sacrifice upon the cross. God then set aside that old system of worship and replaced it with a new and simpler system. As Paul says in this text, "the law of commandments contained in ordinances" has been abolished in Jesus' flesh. That is to say, the Mosaic ceremonial law was abolished by the nailing of Jesus' body to the cross as the finished sacrifice, as the "once for all" sacrifice which truly atones for sin.

This abolishing of the Mosaic ceremonial law was also the breaking down of the wall of separation between Jew and Gentile. The Jew was circumcised; the Gentile was not. The Gentile ate pork; the Jew did not. Under the new covenant, this no longer matters, and believing Jews and Gentiles are together in the church. Jesus replaced the Mosaic ceremonial laws with baptism and the Lord's Supper and the Lord's Day in a new and simpler form of worship which is suited for all nations, tribes and tongues. Thus in this age, the believing Gentile becomes a part of God's people without submitting to circumcision and without becoming a practicing Jew as defined by the law of Moses.

Galatians 3:27-29

- 27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.
- 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.
- 29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

The old covenant wall of separation between Jew and Gentile was symbolized by a barrier which was part of the temple of Herod at the time of Christ. This barrier separated the court of the Gentile from the temple proper which only Jews were allowed to enter. This barrier had signs posted warning that any Gentile who went past this point into the temple proper would be put to death.

Now both Jew and Gentile have access to God in His heavenly temple through the priestly ministry of Jesus. The earthly temple's veil has been rent from top to bottom, and the barrier to the Gentile has been removed. Having Jesus as their High Priest over the house of God, both Jew and Gentile can now draw near to God with a true heart in full assurance of faith.

That brings us to our last point, which is exaltation. During the time of the old covenant, the uncircumcised Gentile pagans were in a low position and the circumcised members of Israel were in a high position. In this age, both believing Jews and believing Gentiles are together exalted to a much higher and more privileged spiritual position than anything experienced by anyone under the old covenant. In this age, believing Jews and believing Gentiles are together made members of the new man, which is a reference to God's covenant community in this age.

We can see the contrast between the believing Gentile's old and new standings by comparing verse 12 with verse 19. The uncircumcised Gentile Christians had been "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise," but now they are "no more strangers or foreigners."

Now they are instead "fellow-citizens with the saints and members of the household of God." The Christian is a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem and therefore a fellow-citizen with the saints of all ages. The "saints" are God's holy people, the people of the covenant. The Christian is also a part of the household of God. This is a reference to the family of faith and is another reference to the covenant people through the ages.

Paul now uses a play on words which is not as evident in the English translation. The Greek word here translated "household" can also refer to a house in the sense of a building. Paul uses this double sense of this Greek word to make the transition from the people of God as the household of faith to the people of God as the house of God or as a metaphorical temple. Paul makes that transition in verse 20 and refers to the new covenant people of God as a new covenant temple made from living stones.

In the sixth chapter of Zechariah, there is a prophecy that the Messiah will build the temple of God. Here in Ephesians chapter two, we learn how the resurrected, exalted Jesus fulfills that prophecy. He is building a temple not out of literal stones but out of people as metaphorical stones. The emphasis is no longer on the Shekinah glory indwelling the holy of holies in a temple of stone but on the Holy Spirit indwelling the hearts of God's people. This is how God fulfills in this age the covenant promise, "I will dwell in the midst of you."

This new covenant temple, we read in verse 20, is built on the foundation laid once for all through the historical work of Jesus and His apostles and prophets. Jesus Christ Himself is the chief

cornerstone of the foundation. The laying of this chief cornerstone is a reference to the saving work which Jesus accomplished during His earthly ministry, during the days of His humiliation. This is the primary foundation stone which Jesus laid once for all in an act of atonement never to be repeated. The foundation of the apostles and prophets is a reference to the work of the new testament apostles and prophets in revealing and declaring the message of Jesus, and in recording this message for us once for all in the pages of the New Testament. This is the faith once for all delivered to the saints. This is a foundation which the new testament apostles and prophets laid once for all in the inscripturation of Jesus' message and in the completion of the canon of Scripture. The people of God are in this age the temple of God built on this sure foundation of redemption and revelation, this sure foundation of finished sacrifice and completed canon.

The Jews of Paul's day who didn't accept Jesus as the Christ looked down upon the uncircumcised Gentile Christians. They regarded them as still being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise. Paul says this is an entirely mistaken view of the situation. The reality is that the uncircumcised Gentile Christians had something higher and greater than anything which the unbelieving Jews thought to be possible. This age is an age of greater grace and privilege. In this age, Jesus has accomplished His finished work of redemption in history. In this age, Jesus is now ruling at the right hand of God in His resurrected, glorified body. In this age, the Holy Spirit has been poured out in greater fullness. In this age, the gospel message is being preached to the ends of the

earth. In this age, he who is least in the kingdom of God has a position of greater privilege than that the greatest saints of previous ages. The uncircumcised Gentile Christians are full members of God's covenant people in this age of significantly higher and greater covenant privilege.

Beloved, who are the true heirs of the covenants which God made with Abraham and David? If you believe in Jesus, then you are. Beloved, who are now the people of God and the apple of God's eye? If you believe in Jesus, then you are. These are your privileges as members of God's covenant people. The promises of the covenant are yours. Now you need to be good stewards of those promises. You need to believe them and live your lives in terms of them. You need to look to Jesus alone for your salvation. Then you will have not only the promises but also the promised salvation. Then you will be God's people not only outwardly but also inwardly. Then you will be not only a new covenant son of Jacob but also a new covenant Israelite indeed in whom there is no guile.