

Rooted & Grounded in Love ~ Ephesians

Week 3 ~ 2:1-22

2:1-10

In the first ten verses of this week's passage we see a stark contrast between life WITHOUT God (2:1-3) vs. life WITH God (2:4-10). Paul's term throughout Ephesians, and elsewhere, to express life WITH God is "*in Christ*".

We could outline it this way:

- I. Life without God (2:1-3)
- II. Life with God (2:4-7)
- III. The "How" and "Why" of Salvation (2:8-10)

Let's look at each of these sections a little more closely.

First, in one word, life without God is death. Why? Again, in a word, sin. (Though Paul adds "transgressions", he was not trying to create a different category, rather just to create a compounding effect.)

But "sin" needs to be understood as more than just wrong personal behavior (though it includes that as well). More than just "wrongdoing", it's actually a state or condition. Notice how Paul elaborates it: it's following the pattern of "*the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.*" (verse 2).

Paul paints the picture that sin is more than just personal. It's systemic and structural.

Additionally, this WITHOUT GOD life is still WITH someone...the ruler/prince of the kingdom of air, the spirit who is at work in those who are disobedient. The WITHOUT GOD life is not a neutral life. It's putting in our lot with a different ruler and a different kingdom. In verse 3 Paul goes on to say, in essence, we were all citizens of that kingdom and that ruler before being delivered into Christ and His Kingdom. While sin is more than personal wrongdoing, it is still that as well. Paul describes it as "*gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature (flesh) and following its desires and thoughts.*" (verse 3). Our "self", our "identity", our "life" prior to Christ is dead and is conditioned—both from the inside and from the outside—toward selfishness and enmity with God. As such, we are "*by nature children of wrath*" ("children" is a better translation than "objects").

One way—though certainly not the only way—to understand God's wrath is God removing His Presence. (While I'm not sure I'm comfortable with limiting an understanding of "wrath" to only that, nevertheless I think it helps us understand it somewhat.) It is certainly accurate to say that life without God is death. For Him to remove His Presence is to remove His goodness and grace and to simply allow the consequences to fall where they may...then things get really bad really quickly. At the same time, there is no reason to think that God's love and God's wrath can't exist together. If wrath were not possible, we'd really have to question whether love is actually present.

- *How would you define "sin"? How has your understanding of sin changed/evolved over the years?*
- *How would you describe the devil or Satan? How does that compare with Paul's description in verse 2?*

- *How do you understand God's wrath? How do you reconcile God's wrath with God's love?*

Second, in a word, life WITH God is to be ALIVE. Why? Because of God's love for us, because He is rich in mercy and exceedingly (incomparably) rich in grace...all of which is expressed in kindness toward us. A proper understanding of grace and mercy demonstrates how completely undeserved the opportunity for such a life is. God had every reason to write us off. So if any of this thing we call salvation was based on us, we'd be doomed. But, thankfully (and that is hardly a strong enough word), salvation is based on God—and He is love, He is life, He is overflowing in grace and mercy.

Now in this passage we see a very important and theologically deep truth about what it means to be “in Christ”. It means that what is true of Jesus becomes true of us. God raised Jesus up from the dead. Verse 6 states that we were raised up with Christ. Christ is seated at the right hand of God, and this verse says that we, too, are seated with Him in the heavenly realms. Actually, if you're familiar with the teachings of Jesus, you'll recall that Jesus said of Himself, “*I am the light of the world.*” (John 9:5). And He also said about His followers, “*You are the light of the world.*” (Matthew 5:14). So, to be a Christian, to be “in Christ”, means that what is true of Jesus is true of us...though not because of anything we've done, but because of what He has done. He is righteous and blameless...so are we. Now you might stop and say, “Uh, well, actually, I'm not that good.” True, you're not, and neither am I. But Jesus is...and we are righteous and blameless because He is.

Another interesting point regarding verse 6, “*And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.*” (emphasis added) is that it is past tense...meaning it's already true. We tend to think of that as something awaiting us in the future, but Paul states it as if it is already our reality. Paul says something similar in Colossians, “*For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.*” (Col. 3:3-4, emphasis added) I mention this so that we may more fully appreciate our current status in Christ.

- *What do you think about the idea that what is true of Jesus is true of us?*

In this contrast between life WITHOUT God in 2:1-3 and life WITH God in 2:4-7 we need to recognize the existence of two overlapping kingdoms or ages existing at the same time. One is ruled by a benevolent God (as described in 2:4-7); the other is ruled by a tyrant (as described in 2:1-3). The question, then, is which one are we WITH? Which are we FOR? Who are we ALLIED to? The answer to that determines which one we have FAITH in. It is only by GRACE that we, as proven rebels, are given the opportunity to change our allegiance and come under the reign of Jesus. God did not have to make such an offer/invitation. There was nothing that we did that would move Him to do that. This is really what Paul is trying to get across in verses 8-9.

Elsewhere Paul puts it like this: “*[God] has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*” (Colossians 1:12b-14). God “qualified us”—we couldn't qualify ourselves. He rescued us—we couldn't rescue ourselves. He brought us (better translation—He transferred us)—we couldn't do that ourselves either. The point is, we were completely helpless. Thus, when it comes to our salvation, we can't boast about it as if we did something noteworthy. But that is not to say that our response is effortless. As Dallas Willard said, “*Grace is opposed to earning, it is not opposed*

to effort.” We can’t earn our salvation, but we must put forth some effort to receive it, to live into it, as a response to what God has done for us in Christ. Or to say it another way: salvation is the WITH GOD life. Living with God takes some effort. But that effort isn’t in hopes of getting Him to love us (there’s nothing we can do to get Him to love us more) or to get His favor (we already have it in Christ). Love must always be returned for it to be completed.

- *Which ruler are you allied to and cooperating with? How so?*
- *How are you returning love to God in response to what He has done for you?*

There are two important elements to grasp in verse 10. First, the word “workmanship” is the Greek word “poiema” from which we get the word poem. We are God’s poem. Think about that for a second. When someone writes a poem they are usually creatively expressing something deep about themselves (Please think beyond “*Roses are red, violets are blue...*”). That’s a beautiful word for Paul (inspired by the Holy Spirit) to use to describe us. We have worth and value, because God has imbued us with worth and value in Christ. Secondly, we were “*created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*” We don’t need to search for the meaning/purpose of life. It’s been given to us by our Creator. We were created to do “*good works*”. That is far bigger than the occasional nice, charitable act of service or kindness. Rather, it means doing what we were created to do in the first place, which is to manage God’s creation. We are to rule over this planet (remember, what is true of Jesus is true of us...Jesus rules, so do we...with Him as the Chief Ruler, of course.) What Paul is saying is that through Jesus God is making everything right, He is restoring everything to its original design and intent. New creation is breaking forth, full of life and goodness, right in the midst of the old order of things which is passing away (albeit, a bit more slowly than we’d like).

- *What is your job in the Kingdom of God? What are you doing to cooperate with God in restoring His creation to its original design and intent? (Perhaps a different way of asking this question: How are you an “agent of the Kingdom of God” in the life you live?)*

2:11-22

In verse 11 we see the only imperative verb (i.e. the only command) Paul gives in the first three chapters. It’s the command to “remember”! In verse 12 Paul offers the Gentile believers a brief synopsis of what their lives prior to knowing Jesus were like. Verses 13 and 19 remind the believers of what is theirs “*in Christ*”. (Please keep in mind that “*in Christ*” is a key to understanding Ephesians...the entire letter pretty much outlines what it means to be “*in Christ*”).

- *Describe, in as much detail as you feel comfortable, what your life prior to Jesus was like.*
- *Describe how being “in Christ” has changed your life.*

Something we need to be careful of here is that we tend to view our faith from a very individualistic lens. Most of the world—past and present—and most certainly the first readers of this letter think in a more group/communal sense. (To test this, how did you approach the questions above? Compare that to how Paul was addressing a group of people collectively, as opposed to a collection of individuals.)

An important characteristic to understand about broken/corrupt humanity (i.e. humanity that is separate from Christ) is the propensity to create “us & them” categories...which usually devolve into “us vs. them” thinking and behaving. Humanity, sadly, is highly skilled at this us/them thing, and the movement is always toward US gaining power over THEM. It can begin with something as simple as name-calling and eventually develop into something like genocide.

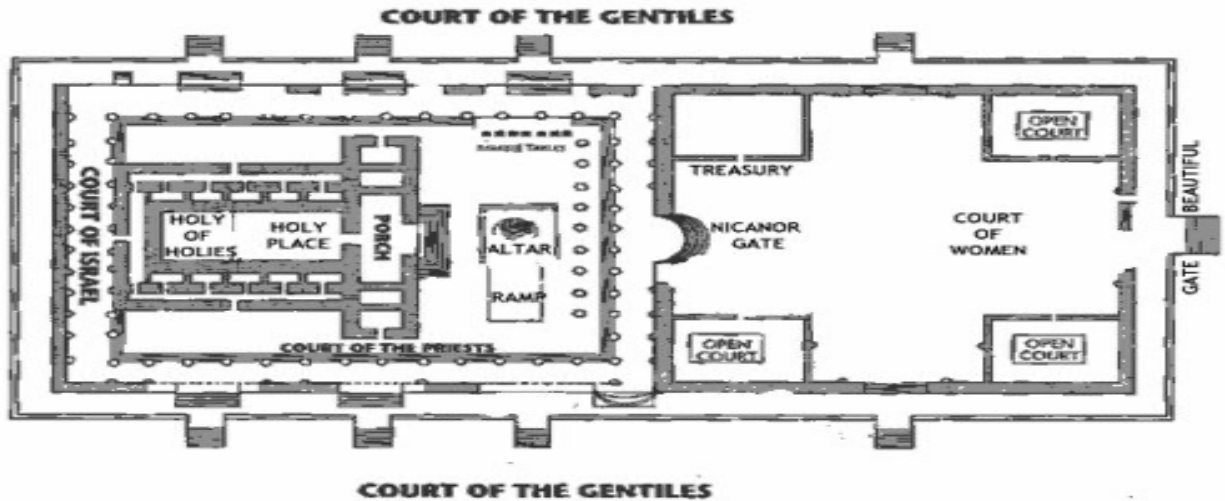
- *List all the different categories of us/them that people function with. Now make it a little more personal: what are some us/them ways that you find yourself thinking sometimes?*

The us/them that the early church dealt with—and that predominantly flavors the entire New Testament—is the Jew/Gentile tension. The first Christians were Jewish. Yet they were commanded to take the Gospel to the world. This would naturally lead to them confronting their own prejudices...which were deep. Paul described it in this passage as the “*dividing wall of hostility*” (verse 14).

Here’s the beautiful and powerful way Paul described what Jesus purposed and accomplished, “*His purpose was to create in Himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace.*” (verse 15). An important understanding of the word “peace” is that it’s more than the absence of hostility; it’s about repairing something and getting it back to its original intention/design. God never intended humanity to be so broken and divided (we took care of that ourselves), but He is working to repair that...and in Christ He did. Now you might say, “But wait! I see all this brokenness and division and tension and hostility all over the place. How can you say Jesus made peace?” Great question!

This is why it’s so important to always remember that we live in the “*Now...and not yet*” tension of the ages. Two different ages exist simultaneously and overlap with one another. And the church has a very unique and important role to play in all this. The church is called to live out the reality of this new humanity. We are a distinct people group in the world. What makes us distinct is our leader...King Jesus. In fact, we can say that as we live out love and unity we become the proof, the evidence, of the truth of the Gospel. (Of course, the opposite is also true...to the degree that we live in division and strife we make the Gospel hard to believe.) Whatever differences we may have between us as humans—language, culture, race, national origin, gender, class, etc.—all take a backseat to what we have in common, our faith/allegiance to King Jesus. He is who we rally around; He is who unifies us. To allow any differences to take precedence over our unity in Him shows that we really don’t get it.

Something that is easy for us to miss in this passage that most of the initial readers would have understood is the imagery of the temple (specifically the temple in Jerusalem) that Paul used. Take a look at the image below and check out the layout of the temple. Notice on the outside is the “Court of the Gentiles”. There were actually signs posted on the wall/fence that separated the Court of the Gentiles from the Sacred Enclosure and stated that any Gentile that came inside would be punished by death. This is likely what Paul had in mind by using the term “*dividing wall of hostility*”. That literal, physical wall symbolized so much of broken humanity. You may recall that in Acts 21 Paul was arrested in Jerusalem because some Jews thought Paul had brought a Gentile into the temple area. The reason Paul was currently in prison writing this letter stems back to that event/misunderstanding/false charge. (Acts 21:27-29)



Notice verse 18, *“For through Him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.”* The key word is “access”. The reality is, even Jews (beyond the High Priest) were denied access to God based on the temple system. God dwelt in the Holy of Holies (or The Most Holy Place) behind a curtain. If anyone besides the High Priest entered (and he could enter only if he followed a very detailed plan) they would be killed. So while the Jews were closer...they still didn’t have access prior to Jesus creating access. (This is why the imagery and significance of the curtain in the temple being torn from top to bottom when Jesus died is so powerful...what previously demonstrated blockage was removed, and access was opened. See Matthew 27:51, Mark 15:38, Luke 23:45.)

So what we really see in this entire passage is a two-fold plan of God. God desires to dwell with humanity, and He desires humanity to dwell peacefully with each other and to enjoy Him and each other. This is the purpose of the Church...to live out God’s plan. Through Jesus (our Great High Priest as the author of Hebrews puts it) we have access to God and we have peace with each other.

Verses 19-21 give us three images of our relationship to one another, each demonstrating an increased level of intimacy. First, we are fellow citizens. (So, we have a shared King.) Second, we are members of God’s household (i.e. we’re family...so we have a shared Father). Third, we are joined together as a building, a temple, that is the dwelling place of God (so we are one with God, having joined the great dance of the Trinity).

The concept of peace is an important one throughout Scripture. Our friends at The Bible Project have a nice little video explaining the Biblical concept of peace. Here’s the link if you’d like to check it out.

<https://bibleproject.com/videos/shalom-peace>

What is important to understand is that Peace is not just a nice byproduct of our faith. It’s central to our understanding of what God is up to, what He’s always been up to, and where everything is headed. To miss this is to really not understand the Christian faith.

- *Who is someone you are lacking peace with? What will it take for there to be peace?*

- *Ideally, people should be able to look at the Church to see a model of Peace. Tragically, that notion is almost laughable. What do you think it would take for that to become the case? What are you willing to do to make that possible? Can you think of a higher priority for the Church at this juncture? Explain.*
- *As you think about and understand your “identity” what competes for top label/description with your identity as one who is “in Christ”. Or, what “badge” do you like to wear? Why is that? (Also, because our skills at self-deception are so well honed, it might be good to ask others who know us well what they observe in us regarding our “identity”).*

Soul Training Exercise ~ Prayers for Peace & Blessing

The invitation this week is to pray a (prescribed) “macro” Prayer for Peace and a “micro” prayer of blessing upon anyone you would consider a competitor, a rival, an opponent, an adversary, or even an enemy.

Here’s the Prayer for Peace...

O God, You have made of one blood all the peoples of the earth and sent your blessed Son to preach peace to those who are far off and those who are near; Grant that people everywhere may seek after You and find You; bring nations into Your fold; pour out Your Spirit upon all flesh; and hasten the coming of Your Kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

(Pray this prayer everyday...maybe several times per day...maybe even memorize it.)

As far as praying for competitors, rivals, opponents, adversaries, enemies...you’ll need to come up with your own words. Generally speaking, pray for their blessing, success, well-being, etc. Try to do this everyday. But let me give you a little inside scoop...the result/outcome we’re looking for isn’t that they will change, but that we will 😊.

(As I always like to share when we talk about prayer...the primary purpose of prayer isn’t to get God to do what we think God ought to do, but to be properly formed.)