

Peace in Jesus

Ephesians 2:11-22

Video - Alpha Film Series Episode 13 - How can I resist evil? - 24:56-27:05

The world today is rife with division and alienation. People putting walls up. Literally, and relationally. If you've followed the news in the last week, you'll have read about divisions in the Labour party around anti-semitism, divisions and heightened tension between India and Pakistan, forced smiles and handshakes between Trump and Kim before US/North Korea talks broke down.

That's not to mention the divisions many of us grew up with and are really used to - divided communities. Protestant and Catholic. Hutu and Tutsis. Rich and poor. Political divisions. Ethnic and cultural divisions.

The world likes peace and unity. But no matter how much we try hard to press for it, it doesn't seem to be enough. Lots of time and energy is spent by this world trying to make peace without God. But a world without God is missing the kind of peace that only God Himself can bring.

In Ephesians 2:11-22, we read that Jesus Christ brings peace - both vertically, with God - and horizontally, with one another. Pariti, in our video, is a great example of someone who discovered both kinds of miraculous peace in Jesus. That's the incredible result of the life in Jesus that Paul has been spelling out in Ephesians.

Paul starts this passage with 'therefore,' pointing us back to what he's just been saying. In chapters 1 and 2, we've heard about the blessings that God gives to us in Jesus. That the cause of these blessings is the rich, inexhaustible, doting, adopting love and grace of God to us. It's that grace that saves us, lifts us from death to life, as we become bound to Jesus forever by faith.

And the next word in v.11 is the first and only *command* from God in the first three chapters, which are so filled with the *promises* that God always starts with. The command is this - 'Remember...' God tells us, 'remember how things were before you came to know me in Jesus - what your status and prospects were.' And what he describes through Paul here is a state of *alienation* - alienation from God; and from one another.

He talks about those who are Gentiles by birth (or literally, 'in the flesh'). Gentiles means those who aren't Jewish. The Jews of the day liked to draw a distinction from them (that's what all the talk about circumcision is about). Their identity was found in being 'not like those gentiles.' And likewise, the gentiles were happy to call the set apart Jewish community names and mock their ways.

Paul reminds us that before we know Jesus, we are alienated and divided from people 'not like us,' full of suspicion and pride in being 'like this and not like that.' Paul is going to address these divisions in vv.14-18, which we'll come to in a minute.

But he starts by spelling out the plight of human beings who are 'in the flesh.' Those who heard the last sermon on Ephesians might remember that the idea of 'in the flesh' is being 'without God.' And in v.12, Paul spells it out in just those words.

Before we knew Jesus, we were without God in this world. We were without hope. We were separate and alienated from the God who made us, and the promises of life and God's presence and blessing He had made to the people belonging to Him.

Our situation was that we were 'far off.' That's how v.13 puts it. Our problem was, we were miles away from God. Is that how you remember it? I see lots of people treat God like He's just a prayer away when they need Him; as available and close as any other stranger that you can just drop a text to if you want to communicate about something.

But the reality is they are nowhere near God. They don't recognise Him, don't hear Him drawing them near, He's no more than a distant speck in their sight. And we were all living life like that once. Do you remember that? Or maybe this is more than a memory for you - it's how things are just now.

Just like Paul talked about in the last passage, there's a before and after to this. Before you knew Jesus, you were without God in the world, and all His hope, blessings and promises. But since Jesus, *'you have been brought near.'*

Do you see the way that's worded? It's not that *you* drew near to God. It's that *He* drew you near to Him. And, as v.13 tells us, He did it at the cross of Jesus. What the cross achieved, we're going to look at more in a minute.

*Do you remember being 'far off' from God before life in Jesus?
Or if you're not living life in Jesus, how do you feel about the idea that you are
'without Him'?*

So... what did Jesus do at the cross? We often think or talk of Jesus dying as a substitute for us, taking the punishment for our sins, so that we could be forgiven and welcome in the presence of a holy God now and forever. And that is a big part of what Jesus did at the cross, which the books of Romans and Hebrews major on.

But Jesus did even more than that. vv.13-18 point to Jesus at the cross three times - 'through the blood of Christ' in v.13; 'abolished in His flesh' in v.15; and 'through the cross' in v.16. And the theme that surrounds these verses is... *peace*. Jesus *made* peace (v.15). He *proclaimed* peace (v.17). And actually, He Himself *became* our peace (v.14).

How does peace get bound together with this violent form of execution; the cross? Well, Paul explains that peace comes about by what gets destroyed on the cross, as well as what gets created there.

First of all, Paul talks in vv.14-15 about the *horizontal* peace that the cross accomplished. The kind of peace that the Hutu Pariti found with the Tutsi Vincent. What gets *destroyed* at the cross is the barrier, the dividing hostility between the 'us and them' peoples of Gentile and Jew. The thing that separated these people was the Jewish law. But at the cross, Jesus abolished that division.

It's not that He abolished God's law itself - Jesus made that clear in Matthew 5:17 - 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to *abolish* them but to *fulfil* them.' It's that Jesus fulfilled every requirement of God's law (which no human being, Jew or Gentile, could ever do). And because He has achieved that, there is nothing to separate people.

At the cross, Jesus brought divided people together. He did it by *destroying our hostility towards each other* there. The sin of it. The power of it. The deeply rooted, ingrained nature of it. All of that was rooted out and killed in the very flesh of Jesus. So that peace between divided people could no longer be a nice thought or something to aspire to - but something people really have *in Jesus*. It's reconciliation, and living with openness to one another, truly expressed and experienced.

Then in vv.16-18, Paul goes on to talk about the *vertical* peace that Jesus won at the cross. The kind of peace that Pariti found with God. What gets *destroyed* at the cross is not only the hostility we had towards one another, but v.16 talks about putting to death the hostility we all had towards God.

The hostility we've shown God in ignoring Him, fighting Him, living in defiance of His ways and His Lordship, mocking Him and those who love Him - all of that, God was kind enough to destroy not in our flesh, but in His - in Jesus Christ on the cross.

So that peace between us and God wouldn't be something hoped for, assumed, or just forgotten about - but something people really have *in Jesus*. It's reconciliation with a God we were far off from - that's how v.16 puts it. And it's living with an openness to come to God whenever we like, not just as an acquaintance but as a Father, as v.18 celebrates.

The word 'gospel' just means 'good news.' The things that Jesus brings about for those who live *in Him* are good news. ('In Him' comes up 11 times in the Greek in this passage!)

Good news! In Jesus' death, God has destroyed your hostility towards people you were divided from or that aren't like you.

Good news! In Jesus' death, God has destroyed your hostility towards Him.

And that is what brings you the peace that you were missing.

Do you recognise this as the gospel? Do you recognise this happening in your life?

Paul has talked about what Jesus destroyed at the cross, but he also has something to say about what Jesus created there. It's a revolutionary thing. In v.15, he says there aren't two kinds of people any more, Jew and Gentile, but *in Jesus* there is one new people.

The old identity markers are gone. There is no Jew or Gentile, Hutu or Tutsi, rich or poor. There is one new people *in Christ*. What Jesus did at the cross is nothing short of creating *in Him* a new humanity. The word 'create' in v.15 is deliberate. Jesus is creating - or, rather, *re-creating* - the human beings who have life *in Him*.

This is Humanity 2.0. Humanity - but saved, adopted and belonging to God; at peace with one another and with Him; having a transformed life now and an eternity in the New Heavens and the New Earth for this new humanity.

Now, I reckon there's about three objections to that idea that can crop up in our thinking. It sounds a bit utopian; it sounds a lot like just one more division for human beings; and it sounds a bit fictitious in our experience of church.

Maybe it sounds a bit utopian - a new improved humanity experiencing peace in all its fullness. But there's a 'now' and 'not yet' to this. Not yet do we realise this peace with God and with one another in all its fullness - but the promise is that one day, we will, beyond this broken world. But actually, *right now* there is peace to be had with God and one another that I experience, I see many of you experiencing, and that you only needed two minutes of a video to see Pariti is truly experiencing.

Also, most 'make humanity better' ideas come from us human beings. We don't have a great track record of self-improvement as a species. But when the initiative, and the action, comes from *God* - we can be confident that this re-creating work will be fully realised.

Maybe this 'new humanity' thing sounds like just one more division. There's Christians, and non-Christians. What's different about that to any other 'us and them' categorisation of humanity? Well, a life in Jesus is totally unique in being completely invitational and inclusive of absolutely all people - not only in relationship with one another, but *with God too*. v.18 sums it up really nicely - 'For through Him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.'

Other forms of human community can claim to be openly invitational and completely inclusive of one another. But a life in Jesus welcomes all people into the presence of *God*, too. *All types of people*. There are no 'kinds of people' who are not welcome in the presence of God and His people in Jesus, thanks to the cross.

That means people who grew up in church and people with no experience of it at all. It means rich and poor. Remainder or Brexiteer. Scottish Nationalist or Pro-Unionist. Protestant or Catholic. And yes, for the avoidance of doubt, straight or gay (that's always the one that people are waiting to see if the preacher will say).

There are *types of behaviour or lifestyle* that will change when people are living their life 'in Christ' - including loving speech, honest and humble use of

money, restricting sex to heterosexual marriage, putting down the bottle before the bottle puts you down - all of that we'll see unfold in the second half of the letter in chapters 4-6. But there are *no types of people who are not welcome to have new life in Jesus.*

And maybe the 'peace with God and one another' experience sounds fictitious to you. Because your real experience of church is that people are divided and fallen out, and some are very far from knowing peace with God. That's certainly not what Jesus died for. Our peace with God and one another was bought at a very dear cost. But what are we to do about it when we don't have it?

I think the answer lies in vv.17-18. Jesus is proclaiming peace to all alike, Jew and Gentile, near and far. And it's as 'both have access to the Father by one Spirit' that we experience it. In other words, it's when we come to God in worship that peace with God and one another is most realised.

In every divisive church gathering of debate I've been at, in worship together we found new peace with God and one another. In every fall out between Christian friends or family members, it's in worship together that we've found humility and peace. In every gathering of God's people from different church denominations to seek His Kingdom here, it's in worship together that we've drawn deeply close to God and one another. In our prayers. In our songs. In our togetherness in these things.

What happens to our relationship with God and one another when we worship together? What happens to these relationships when we don't?

We've looked at something that life in Jesus has taken from us - the reality of *alienation* and being far off. And we've looked at something life in Jesus gives to us - *peace* with God, and with one another. Finally, in vv.19-22, we're going to see something else that life in Jesus gives us. And it's a whole new *identity*.

When we began this series on Ephesians, we saw that as we read through it, we're going to learn a new way of understanding who we are when we live in Jesus. Identity is something that so many people try to discover, or even to create for themselves. But in Jesus, your identity is something that's given to you. It's something we receive *from God*.

We've already seen in chapter 1 how in Jesus, your identity is - loved, chosen, adopted sons and daughters, the treasured inheritance of God

Himself. And in chapter 2, your identity is - once dead but now alive, bound to Jesus and His destiny. Here in 2:19-22, we discover that being this 'new humanity' means being bound not only to Jesus, but to *one another*.

The image in these verses is of a building. That's what the church is. A building that is 'joined together,' v.21 says; 'built together,' Paul repeats in the next verse. *We* are the building. Together. Individual you is not the construction project (like most modern Westerners think). *We* are what God is building together (which is what our church logo is about).

Specifically, the building we are is the temple of God. Now, if you know your Old Testament, you'll know that the temple was built to be the place where God would come and dwell. When Heaven meets Earth. God would fill it, be fully present in it, and it would be a draw for people all over the world to come and meet God there.

So when Paul says in v.21 that we who are in Jesus are being built into a 'holy temple in the Lord,' He's saying that He comes to fill and dwell and draw people in the church. Not in a physical building, though that can help people gather together of course - but in the gathering of the people of God itself.

So your identity is now bound up with your fellow Christians, as well as in Jesus Himself. *We* are those who are built on Jesus as the cornerstone, v.20 says. The cornerstone was the primary load bearing stone, that determined the shape of the whole building, and that if you pulled away, the whole building would collapse. That's Jesus for us. He defines us, shapes how we are, and holds us all together.

And we're built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, v.20 says. We don't make up how to be a community of God together - we build that on the truth God revealed to the church through the apostles and prophets - those who wrote the Word of God for us, Old Testament and New. This tells us who God is, who we are and how to be who we are in Him.

v.19 has great words of encouragement for the Gentiles who were coming to faith in Jesus along with the Jews who had known God for longer. There's no first and second class Christians. There's no hangers-on or shouldn't-really-be-heres. Everyone with life in Jesus is a *full and fellow citizen* of God's household.

Tom Wright compares it to the refugee, of whom there are so many in the world, not just being tolerated or being made to feel they are half-welcome in

the country of their asylum, but receiving the dignity of full citizen status. That's what you have, if you are in Jesus. Whether you've given your life to Jesus for the past few decades or the past few minutes, your identity is equally 'us in Jesus.'

And it's important that we get this. That our identity is bound up with one another as a church, as well as in Jesus. Because when we come to chapter 4 in a couple of weeks, we'll see how that starts to unfold - how we need each other, and how we take our place, in order to realise the fulness of God's dwelling with us and drawing others to Him through us.

The point of all this - being built together as a temple for God to fill and dwell and draw others to - is that God is on a mission to bring more and more people to life in Jesus too. It's for mission that we're being built together. For the sake of the world that doesn't yet know Him, God is building us up to fill us all the more and cause the world to come and know Him too.

Jesus takes from us our alienation, from God and from each other. He gives to us peace, with God and with one another. And He gives us a new identity, in Him and in one another. Like Pariti and Vincent in Rwanda, let's go walk that out - in worship, in mission, in a new life as a new humanity in the peace of life in Jesus.