



Notes

Transformed Life (We Belong)

Text: Ephesians 2:11-22ⁱ

*11 Therefore, remember that formerly 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)—
12 remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

14 For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. 17 He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Introduction

When we believe, we belong! The moment we place our faith in Jesus Christ, we place our lives under the Lordship of the One whose purpose is to reconcile all of creation under His loving and sovereign care. We become part of the greatest kingdom ever - one that stretches across bloodlines and boundaries, across cultures and continents. We belong! As part of the transformed life to which we have been called and for which we have been redeemed comes both the realisation and the responsibility of knowing that when we believe, we belong. The self-centredness of a sinful existence is replaced by the oneness of our new life in Christ. 'Me' gives way to 'we'. 'My' becomes 'our'. We are one. When we believe, we belong.

In a fragmented, divided, polarised world, one kingdom, one family is, from its very inception and by its very design, meant to be a grace-honouring, peace-giving, love-revealing, unity-focused oasis in a dark and barren world. We, as citizens of God's Kingdom, as members of God's household and as designates of God's temple have been purposed to be far more than a mere motley megalith of interesting individuals who just happen to share a common faith. No. God has purposed for us to be one - one people, one family, one body, one temple. If you believe, you belong. am related to you by blood – they very blood of Jesus Christ! He has made us one. We belong! And as such we are meant to be completely unique, radically different, united in our shared pursuit of passionate purpose in Him.

Bill Hybels puts it so well when he describes the church family thus:

‘There is nothing like the local church when it’s working right. Its beauty is indescribable. Its power is breath-taking. Its potential is unlimited. It comforts the grieving and heals the broken in the context of community. It builds bridges to seekers and offers truth to the confused. It provides resources to those in need and opens its arms to the forgotten, the downtrodden and the disillusioned. It breaks the chains of addiction, frees the oppressed, and offers belonging to the marginalised of this world. Whatever the capacity for human suffering, the Church has a greater capacity for healing and wholeness. Still to this day the potential of the local church is almost more than I can grasp. No other organisation on the earth is like the Church. Nothing even comes close.’ⁱⁱ

But it is only in knowing what God has fashioned us to be – one nation, one family, one temple, that our God-dreamed potential is realised. When we believe, we belong.

I love the analogy Paul uses to convey this life-affirming reality. He compares the church to the Old Testament Temple to try and highlight just how awesome this new life-transformation is. He is writing of course primarily to Gentile believers and reminds them of their status before they understood the reconciling power of the cross. He reminds them that outside of Christ they were separated, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenant of promise. There was this unspoken wall of hostility that reminded people daily of their divisions. In fact, the Old Testament Temple was full of divisions and barriers.

Even if a Gentile wanted to find out about the God of Israel (and there were many devout, God-fearing Gentiles), a trip to the Temple would be a reminder of these very barriers, the divisions that were humanly impossible to overcome. A Gentile would be allowed into the outer courts of the Temple, but that was about as close as they dared venture. In fact, there was even a permanent sign carved in stone sounding a warning that any Gentile who proceeded further than the outer courts was in danger of death!

There was no possibility of ever coming close to the glory of God in the Holy of Holies. At best, they were allowed around the fringes. They were in every sense of the word aliens and foreigners, strangers, a people kept at arm's length.

It wasn't much better for most of the Jews mind you. The vast populace could enter the inner court and present their sacrifices to the priests, but that is as far as they were allowed to go. By law they weren't allowed to go into the Holy Place – that was the reserve of the priests.

Yet the priests weren't excluded from divisions either. Only one priest was allowed to go further than the Holy Place, and that was the High priest. Only he was ever allowed behind the veil, the curtain that separated not only the rest of the Temple, but the rest of the world from the presence of God. But even then, there were barriers. You see, the High Priest could only enter the Holy of Holies once a year. That was it. For 364 days of the year (or slightly less if taking the Jewish calendar into consideration), everyone was excluded from the place that housed the presence of God.

There was a sense in which dividing barriers existed everywhere. It's not surprising of course. After all, sin separated us from God. Status added to the dilemma. Citizenry played its part. Everywhere you went, walls and barriers, signs and veils constantly reminded you that even though you belonged somewhere, it was never in the one place that mattered most of all.

But then comes Jesus by the very plan and purpose of our Heavenly Father, and in act of selfless love, He smashes every barrier, breaks down every dividing wall, annihilates every cultural clique, tears down every veil and makes the way into God's very presence such a living reality that Paul reminds us in the earlier verses of Ephesians 2 that we are seated in heavenly places in Christ; we are no longer strangers and aliens, foreigners and outcasts; no! Now we are now fellow citizens. But more than that; we are members of His very household. But even more still, we are being built

up into the His very dwelling place! So let's take a brief moment today to consider these wonderful truths:

1. We are fellow citizens with God's people

Have you ever experienced rejection before? Is there a group you really wanted to belong to, but try as you may, you were never quite deemed good enough? Maybe it was a sports team, or even playing a game at school, and as teams were chosen, maybe you were the poor soul who was chosen last – and then even reluctantly! “Oh, alright! If you have to be one someone's team, you may as well be on ours!”

Or perhaps you were excluded because of your accent – I can't imagine what it must feel like to stand out because of one's accent, can you? Or perhaps your place of birth, your status at birth, your skin colour separated you. Watch a local football derby between two teams from the same town and it soon becomes apparent how deep divisions run! In fact, I am even told that during the filming of Planet of the Apes, people began to sit down to lunch with people who were dressed in the same costumes. In other words, if you weren't dressed as an ape, you had to sit at a different table! We live in a world so full of divisions, don't we?

A very dear friend of mine always used to jokingly say to me, “Tell me Leston, as an outsider, what do you think of the human race?” Charming old fellow!

Dave Smith tells a rather amusing story about a Yorkshireman who had gone to live elsewhere for some time, but who had returned home for a visit. He continues:

“When he returned to meet with some old friends at a café he got a rude awakening. Using his perfect Yorkshire accent, he was conversing with the natives in their own dialect – and was pretty confident they thought he was ‘one of them’ – until the moment when he made the innocent mistake of asking the waiter if they

had any decaffeinated tea. The waiter just looked at him with that awful mixture of disappointment and disbelief – he never answered the question but just exclaimed, ‘decaffeinated tea?’ in a tone of voice that gave the clear message that, ‘No Yorkshireman I know would ever drink that!’ and then walked off muttering to himself, ‘decaffeinated tea!’ Needless to say, the man felt like he was on the outside looking in.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Have you ever felt like that? Now before we came to faith in Christ, we were to some degree or other, each and every one of us, strangers, foreigners, outsiders looking in. Even from a spiritual perspective, as Paul puts it, before Christ, we were literally outside of the promises God. We were, in essence, without God and therefore without hope.

Paul even uses the word *paroikos* which means, ‘an alien who dwells as a sojourner in the land without full rights of citizenship.’

But now, as Paul states, we belong. We are no longer merely believers who come from different countries. Not really. Paul points out that we are actually fellow citizens with all of God’s people. We belong to the Kingdom of God under the Kingship of Christ! We are part of a nation that stretches beyond the borders of this planet, this solar system! We belong!

19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people...

Now imagine making one nation out of all the nations of the world. Imagine for a moment, as Dave Smith puts it, having a nation that has the wonderful food of India, the protective power of the USA, the laid back nature of the West Indies, the weather of Australia, the beauty of South Africa, the precision of the Germans, the organisation of the Brits, the architecture of the Italians, the perseverance of the Polish, the *joie de vivre* of the French; I think you would agree that it would be a pretty good nation to be part of, wouldn’t it? But guess what – we are citizens of a nation just like that – but

even better. As Paul points out, we are fellow citizens of God's glorious people! We belong!

We have an omnipotent, all-loving, omniscient Sovereign Saviour who has promised to bring all things together under His headship. We have a capital that outshines London or Paris. We have food and drink that satisfies the very longings of the soul. We have a glorious future that far outweighs the burdens of the present or the battles of the past. We are part of a family that will last forever! We are fellow citizens of God's people. We belong. But we are more than merely fellow citizens. Which leads of course to the second analogy Paul uses:

2. We are members of God's family.

Paul continues:

19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household,

Not only do we belong to the same nation, but we belong to the same family. In Christ, one family is forged to become a place where poets and plumbers rub shoulders with doctors and dustmen. Seas no longer divide us. Time has no boundaries. We have family that we haven't even yet had the privilege of meeting. On every continent, in every country, you have relatives! I'm not making this up – it's what God says! Let that truth sink home! **WE ARE FAMILY!**

Now here's the thing. If we truly saw one another as we truly are, family, I think it would have a real bearing on the way we treat each other, wouldn't it? I think it would go a long way in helping us forgive each other when we offend or hurt each other, or offer forgiveness when we are hurt or offended. We do that because we're family. It would mean choosing to believe the best of each other. It's not that we are without problems – it's just that the blood that binds us means we sort those problems out.

Of course, we can choose to put those walls up again. But when we do, we do so against the very plan, purpose and will of God. Let's not rebuild the walls that He has purposefully removed! We are one. We belong!

That is why Paul says in **Ephesians 4:3** – 'make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.' Because it is the very plan and purpose of God, and one for which Christ gave His life!

Is there someone you need to connect with today? Is there someone you need to forgive? Is there someone you need to try and connect with again? Are there walls you have built up that need removing?

When we believe, we belong. We are fellow citizens, we are fellow family members, but Paul continues with a third, glorious truth:

3. We are part of God's temple

We are part of the same spiritual temple that houses the very presence of God!

Dave Smith recounts a rather amusing story:

There were two mischievous brothers aged 8 and 10. They were always getting into trouble and their parents knew that if any mischief occurred in their town, the two boys were probably involved.

The boys' mother heard that a preacher in town had been successful in disciplining children, so she asked if he would speak with her boys. The preacher agreed, but he asked to see them individually.

The mother sent the 8-year-old in the morning, with the older boy to see the preacher in the afternoon. The preacher, a huge man with a deep booming voice, sat the younger boy down and asked him sternly, 'do you know where God is, son?'

The boy's mouth dropped open, but he made no response, sitting there wide-eyed with his mouth hanging open.

So the preacher repeated the question in an even sterner tone, 'where is God?!

Again, the boy made no attempt to answer. The preacher raised his voice even more, shook his finger in the boy's face and bellowed, 'where is God?!

The boy screamed, bolted from the room, ran directly home and dove into his bedroom, slamming the door shut behind him.

When his older brother found him, he asked, 'what happened?'

The younger brother, gasping for breath, replied, 'We are in big trouble this time! God is missing, and they think we did it!'

But we know exactly where we can find the presence of God because He tells us:

V21-22 - 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being **built together** to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

We are being **built together** to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit. I love that phrase – being built **together** to become... I think there is something very deep about that particular choice of phrase...

Paul paints this wonderful picture of a New Testament temple dedicated to the purpose of hosting the very presence and revealing the glory of God. That is what we have been designed for, friends! That is what transformed living is all about. When we gather, as we are being built together, we are becoming, more and more, day by day, the place where the presence of God dwells and where the glory of God is revealed.

Folks, our times together are meant to be different. When people come into our midst, they should receive a very different welcome, a very warm embrace, and be overwhelmed by a very tangible sense of the presence, peace and majesty of the God we worship! Why? Because that's His design for us! **We were made to be the people of His presence so that He might reveal His glory through us!**

Conclusion

So then, what is Paul trying to say? That we are no longer outsiders. We are no longer strangers, or foreigners, or aliens. We are one. We are fellow citizens of one Kingdom under the Lordship of our One head, Jesus Christ. But we are even more than that. We are members of one family under the loving care of our one Heavenly Father.

Yet we are even more than that still! We are one temple filled with the glory of the One Spirit.

One nation under Christ. One family under Father God. One temple in the Spirit. That's the stamp of the Trinity right there!

The question now is: will we live like we believe it?

ⁱ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture references are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® Anglicised, NIV® Copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.®

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ⁱⁱ Bill Hybels: Courageous Leadership

ⁱⁱⁱ Dave Smith: Transformed Life sermon excerpt.