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Our Biography in Brief Ephesians 2:11-22

One of my favorite pastimes (although I don't get much time to do it!) is reading, and my favorite area of reading is the biographies of godly men and women. I have gained more from reading Christian biographies than from any other type of reading. A well-written story of someone else's life makes you feel as if you know the person as a friend. When I finished the second volume of Iain Murray's life of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, I felt a sense of sadness as if an old friend had died. I felt the same way when I finished reading the two-volume autobiography of Spurgeon.

Our text is a spiritual biography in brief, not of someone else, but of you and me, if you have trusted in Christ for salvation. As we study it, it should call forth some deep feelings in us, feelings of gratitude and reverence, along with a sense of the responsibility that falls on us because of what God has done for us in Christ.

There is an interesting parallel between the first and second sections of Ephesians 2:

Our Position Individually	Our Position Corporately
Our past (2:1-3)	Our past (2:11-12)
Our present (2:4-9)	Our present (2:13-18)
The consequence (2:10)	The consequence (2:19-22)

While salvation is always and must be an intensely personal matter between the individual and God, it is always, at the same time, a corporate matter, and Paul here is giving our corporate biography. God does not save us to become an isolated bunch of holy hermits, having no contact with other believers. At the point of salvation, the Holy Spirit baptizes us into the one body of Christ, made up of all true believers (1 Cor. 12:13). Thus the Christian experience is to be lived out in community with other members of Christ's body, growing in practice into the positional unity that exists from the moment of salvation.

Three words here capture the progress of our corporate spiritual biography: Before Christ, we were *alienated*, both from God and from one another (2:11-12). In meeting Christ, we were *reconciled*, both to God and to one another (2:13-18). In walking with Christ, we are *unified*, both in our experience with the Lord and with one another (2:19-22). Paul is showing us that ...

Because God has reconciled us to Himself and to one another we must practice true biblical unity in Christ's church.

Paul was writing to a church that was in danger of being fractured into two distinct segments, Jewish and Gentile. Both sides believed in Christ, but the racial divisions between them were deeply rooted in centuries of animosity. Two thousand years before, God had called Abraham and promised through his descendants to bless the nations. Thus the nation of Israel was the chosen object of God's blessings, but God's people were not supposed to bottle up those blessings, but to channel them to the nations, that in Abraham's seed, all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3).

But, sadly, Israel for the most part never fulfilled that role. They viewed the Gentiles as unclean "dogs," and they thought that their identity as children of Israel made them closer to God, apart from the condition of their hearts. When a Jew would return to Palestine after being in a Gentile nation, he would shake the dust off his feet so as not to pollute the Holy Land with Gentile dirt. As you know, the Jews would not even walk through the Samaritan section of the land to avoid contact with these despised people. They would not eat with Gentiles. They spoke of them derogatorily as "the uncircumcision" (Eph. 2:11).

Of course, the animosity between Jew and Gentile went both ways. Every culture, by fallen nature, is proud of its own ways and looks down on others who are different. The Greeks called others "barbarians," a term that made fun of the way their language sounded to the Greeks, that these unsophisticated people went around babbling "bar-bar." The Greeks viewed their own language as the language of the gods.

With these deeply engrained cultural hostilities, it would have been very easy for the early church to split, even by friendly agree-

ment, into Jewish and Gentile sections. But Paul saw that the very mystery of Christ centered on the fact the “the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (3:6). Christ had said that His people would be one flock with one shepherd and He prayed that through their unity, the world would know that Jesus had been sent by the Father (John 10:16; 17:21). All of this relates to the eternal purpose of God, that His manifold wisdom would “now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places (Eph. 3:10). For these reasons, Paul wanted the Ephesians to know that their reconciliation to God necessarily entailed their reconciliation to one another as Jews and Gentiles. Thus they must strive together for the genuine unity in practice that was true of them in the Spirit through Christ, their peace.

1. Remember our hopeless past: Alienated from God and from His people (2:11-12).

Paul begins our text with a command: “Therefore remember...” Why? What is the connection with 2:1-10? In those verses, Paul has outlined the grace of God in saving us from His wrath. While we were dead spiritually, unable to do anything to improve our spiritual condition, God mercifully saved us. He made us alive together with Christ, and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places. Tremendous!

But be careful! One of the spiritual dangers that accompanies being an object of God’s grace is pride. Even though we have been saved apart from and in spite of any human merit, our flesh begins to think, “Hey, I must be better than that pagan for God to pick me!” That’s just the way our corrupt flesh reasons. That’s what happened to the Jews, as we’ve seen (2:11, “uncircumcision”). Their pride led them to keep the outward letter of the law, but their hearts were far from God. And so God allowed a partial hardening to happen to Israel, and grafted the Gentiles into His purpose. But then the Gentiles must beware of the same trap of pride. Paul argues the same way in Romans: In 1-8 he tells the Gentiles of God’s grace toward them; in 9-11 he warns them not to become proud or they too will be cut off as objects of God’s grace.

That’s what Paul is doing in Ephesians 2. He tells us of God’s grace, but then he is quick to remind us of our former condition,

so that we do not get proud. Pride alienates us from one another and from God, but gratitude unites us. So the over-riding feeling that we should have as we look at this brief biography is one of overwhelming gratitude for God's grace.

Paul describes our spiritual past as Gentiles as one of utter helplessness and despair. We forget that we live in an age of God's blessing upon the Gentiles. We have a few Jewish believers in our churches, but most churches are predominately Gentile. But this hasn't always been the case. The Gentiles of the church in Ephesus had been *separate from Christ*—they had only known of the worship of the idol Artemis, a pagan fertility goddess.

That word "separate" ought to jar us. Think of it, to be without any knowledge of the Savior or any way to connect to Him! I was in my thirties before I learned that my great grandmother on my father's side was a full-blooded Cherokee Indian. Since then, I have often thought, "If I had been born a few generations earlier, I would have been separate from Christ." I would have been born into a completely pagan culture with no knowledge of the living God and no access to come to know Him.

They were *excluded from the commonwealth of Israel*. Israel could rightly say, "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord" (Ps. 33:12), and they could even refer to God as "the God of Israel" (Ps. 72:18). But that was not true of any Gentile nation. They were foreigners from the people to whom God had granted His blessing and protection. If you've ever traveled in a foreign country, you feel a bit excluded, like you don't belong. The people treat you as an outsider. You don't speak the language, so you are excluded from conversations. You don't know their ways and customs, so you often feel stupid or unable to do things that you know how to do in your own country. You're excluded.

They were *strangers to the covenants of the promise*. Although God provided for the Gentiles in the covenant to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3), He never made covenants directly with the Gentiles. Many generations of Gentiles from many nations had lived and died without a knowledge of God's covenant promises.

Paul sums it up with the bleak reminder that they had *no hope* and were *without God in the world*. What a horrible description!

Those are perhaps the saddest words in all of the Bible, to be without hope and without God in this wicked world! Do you look at lost people and think of them in these terms? I recently traveled in Eastern Europe, and as we drove through the cities and villages, I saw all of these people and thought, "Some have the false hope of Roman Catholicism, that if they try to be good people and go to church and confession, they will someday get out of Purgatory into heaven. But many others grew up under atheistic Communism, and the only hope they have in life is to become moderately prosperous before they get sick and die." What a bleak prospect, to be without hope and without God in this world!

Paul wants us all to remember that *this described us!* Before we met Christ, we were alienated from God and from His people. Let the wave of hopelessness and despair sweep over your soul before we move on to the next chapter of our spiritual biography.

2. Rejoice in our peaceful present: Reconciled to God and to His people (2:13-18).

"But now"—what glorious words! They recall the parallel words, "But God," in 2:4. What a great word "but" is! It opens the floodgates of hope, so that it washes over our souls. It shows God's undeserved grace toward us who deserved His wrath. Through the gracious intervention of Christ's blood, we who formerly were far off have been brought near.

There are two key words in these verses: enmity and peace. Enmity means hostility or hatred, and it necessarily means separation or distance. There was enmity between the Jews and Gentiles and between both groups and God. Thus there was a T-shaped barrier, with God on the top, and the Jews and Gentiles on each side of the upright. The cross of Christ nullified those barriers and brought reconciliation in every direction.

- A. Christ reconciled the Jews and Gentiles to one another.

He "made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, the enmity, . . . that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace," so that now they are "one body" (2:14-16). We cannot fully appreciate how radical this statement was, since we have nothing to compare to the deep, longstanding hostilities between the Jews and the Gentiles.

Perhaps the closest thing in our day is the racial tension between whites and blacks in the South, or, in our region on a lesser scale, the prejudice between whites and Native Americans and/or Mexican immigrants.

While the Gentiles in Paul's day could become Jewish proselytes, they were always reminded of their exclusion, even in worship. There was a four and one-half-foot wall in the Temple with an inscription that warned any foreigner that if he went beyond the barrier, he would have himself to blame for his death. Paul was mobbed and almost killed when the Jews thought that he had brought some Gentiles inside that barrier (Acts 21:28-31). That's the picture behind Paul's reference to the barrier of the dividing wall (2:14). That wall pictured the enmity between Jews and Gentiles, but Christ broke it down.

In and of itself, God's Law is not the enmity—it is "holy and righteous and good" (Rom. 7:12). But when the Law came into contact with sinful human hearts, the result was enmity between the Jews, who had the Law, and Gentiles, who did not. (For this reason, I prefer the NIV, which translates "the dividing wall of hostility" [or, enmity] over the NASB, which makes the Law equal to the enmity.) Thus Paul is saying that the Law, which made distinctions between the Jews and Gentiles in many areas (diet, ritual cleanliness, circumcision, feasts, offerings, etc.), when combined with proud human hearts resulted in a barrier of hostility which separated the Gentiles from the Jews, pictured literally in that dividing wall in the Temple. Christ rendered the Law inoperative through His death ("flesh" [2:15] is a figure of speech referring to His death) so that in Himself He might create the two groups into one new man, His body, the church. I understand this to refer to the ceremonial law; He did not abolish God's moral law, which stems from His holy nature and can never be set aside. Verse 17 is a loose paraphrase of Isaiah 57:19 supporting Paul's point. Christ preached peace to the Gentiles through the apostles.

Thus Paul's point is that through Christ's death, He fulfilled the ceremonial aspect of the Mosaic Law and thereby broke down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles. When a person from either group believes in Christ, he becomes a part of the one new man, the church. We who are Gentiles should especially rejoice in the

fact that in Christ, we do not have to become Jewish proselytes, and adopt all of the ceremonial laws that they had to follow. Rather, God is doing a new thing, the one new man, the church.

B. Christ reconciled both the Jews and Gentiles to God.

Christ Himself is our peace, not only in human relationships, but also between us and God. The cross took care of our sin problem, so that we are no longer alienated from God. His wrath is appeased in Christ. Thus the cross reconciles both groups in one body to God (2:16), so that both groups now have access in one Spirit to the Father (2:18; note the Trinity in this verse).

Paul here assumes what modern evangelicals often minimize, that before a person is reconciled to God, he is at enmity with God. He is a child of wrath (2:3) due to his sin. It is ironic that we have downplayed the biblical truth of God's wrath against sinners in an attempt to avoid offending them so that we can reach them with the gospel. But if sinners (even "nice" sinners) do not realize that they are enemies of the holy God, they have no great motivation to flee to the cross. Decent people don't need anything as radical as a Savior. If Jesus can help them polish their self-esteem or make their marriages a bit more happy, they may give Him a try. But marketing Jesus as a means to a happier life is not the gospel. We must present the bad news that sinners are God's enemies before they can appreciate the good news, that Christ and His cross is God's way of reconciliation.

The other salient point here is that it was God who took the initiative in reconciliation. Leon Morris (*The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* [Eerdmans], p. 233) observes, "Indeed the whole process is described from the point of view of Christ, and men are not said to do anything in the matter." He further points out (p. 236) that the Greek words used in the New Testament for reconciliation "signify the removal of enmity, not from the *offending*, but from the *offended* party." In other words, our sin had offended God. We could never have done anything to remove the offense. In His great mercy, God took the initiative in sending His Son to be the propitiation of our sins. Now we have access (the word was used of court officials who brought people before the king) to God Himself because the cross made peace. We should rejoice greatly in what God has done for us through the cross of Christ!

Thus Paul wants us to remember our hopeless past. He wants us to rejoice in our peaceful present. Finally,

3. Reflect on the practical consequence: Unified with God and His people (2:19-22).

“So then” introduces the consequence of our reconciliation, that we are now unified with God and with His people. Sin always results in division and separation, both between people, and between people and God. When Adam and Eve sinned, they immediately lost the oneness they had formerly enjoyed. The division became even more apparent between their sons, when Cain murdered his brother Abel. Before the fall, Adam and Eve enjoyed unbroken fellowship with God, but afterwards, they tried to hide from Him. Thus unity in both directions was destroyed by sin.

But unity is important to God, as seen by the perfect harmony between the members of the Trinity. The original couple was to reflect God’s image, which included this perfect harmony. But what they lost through sin in the original creation, God now is regaining in the new creation (2:15 reads, literally, “create the two into one new man”). God wants both husbands and wives in the home (5:31-32), and Jews and Gentiles in the church, to reflect His image. As Jesus prayed, “That they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they may also be in Us; that the world may believe that You sent Me” (John 17:21).

Paul uses three analogies to show the unity of the church with its fellow-members and with God: First, we are *fellow-citizens with the saints*. We are no longer foreigners, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel. There should be no racial or class distinctions within the church, even if they exist in the society at large.

Second, we are *members of God’s household*. We’re family with God and His people! We have all the rights of family members as children of God. We are brothers and sisters with one another.

One of our daughters is on a two-month mission trip in Latin America. At the first place she went to, she couldn’t understand why the people were unfriendly toward her. It gradually dawned on her that there was a definite class system. The pastor was on top, and others served him. The servant class viewed our daughter as a rich American, and so they did not talk with her. Only as she

washed clothes with them and helped them in the kitchen did the barriers come down just a bit. Before she figured all this out, she did the cooking one day when the cooks were sick and she made the mistake of serving the servant class first and the pastor last! I think it was a divinely ordained mistake! That pastor needs to learn the lesson Paul is teaching here: We're all family!

Third, we are *stones in the living temple of God*. Paul states that we have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone. Some understand this to mean that the apostles and prophets laid the foundation, which is Christ, since elsewhere Paul says that He is the only foundation of the church (1 Cor. 3:11). But others (including Charles Hodge) argue that Paul is simply looking at things from a different perspective here, in that there is a sense in which the apostles and New Testament prophets are the foundation of the church (Rev. 21:14). He may have been hinting at the direct revelation that they received from God (now contained in the New Testament). So here he views Christ as the cornerstone that ties the whole temple together; the apostles and prophets are the foundation; and, we are the stones of the growing building.

The fact that we are being fitted together as stones and that the building is growing into a holy temple in the Lord implies a process. New stones are added as people get saved. To be fitted together, the divine stone mason has to chip off our rough edges, which is often a painful process! But the goal is worth it, that we are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. This means that the church today is what the temple was in the Old Testament, the place where God and His glory are manifested. This does not refer to the building where the church meets, but to the people themselves. To refer to a church building as "the Lord's House" is misleading. *We* are the Lord's House!

Conclusion

That's our biography in brief. When you finish reading a biography, it's good to spend a few minutes distilling some of the practical lessons. I can only hit them quickly:

(1) *The local church is of vital importance in God's program.* Sometimes I fear that the church is getting set aside as not being on the

cutting edge of what God is doing. Many pastors get frustrated with the politics and petty squabbles that take place in the church, so that they leave the pastorate and start their own ministry organizations. That way he can be the founder and president. If someone is difficult to work with, he can fire him! We have seen an unprecedented proliferation of parachurch groups in our day. While some such groups are legitimate and needed, I question whether we need the thousands that we have. What we need is for pastors to recover the glory of the church as the dwelling place of God and to impart this vision to God's people. Christ promised to build His church. Thus we should be committed to seeing His church, locally expressed, become all that He wants it to be.

(2) *Relationships in the church are important in God's program.* We're family members, and not just any family, but *God's family!* As pastors, we have to make sure that we are practicing biblical character qualities and principles in our relationships, both with our immediate families, but also with the family of God. We must make sure that our people are working through relational differences in a manner pleasing to God. Petty quarrels, rivalries, and the conflicts that exist in the world have no place in the church.

(3) *Unity among believers is important in God's program.* I am appalled at how far some evangelicals are taking this, disregarding serious doctrinal differences, even between Protestants and Catholics, in their appeal for unity. And yet we would be wrong to overreact by disregarding the legitimate emphasis on unity in the New Testament. To discuss the many ramifications of this would take at least another message, if not a series of messages. But our text would at the very least make us think about the issue. If someone truly knows Christ, then we are members of the same body, members of God's family, and stones in the same building that God is fitting together. I struggle (as I'm sure you do) with many of the weird doctrinal views and practices of some of our brethren. I'm embarrassed by many of the things that they do in the name of the Lord. But even so, we must try to treat them as brothers in the Lord and not create divisions over non-essential matters.

Alienated, reconciled, and unified—that's our biography in brief. Let's seek to live it out daily to the glory of our Savior!