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Ephesians 2:11-22

We Need Grace: An Immigrant Story

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In seminary they taught us to **preach** a passage like it's written. So if you're preaching a **narrative** like a **parable** or **story** of Jesus' life, you should try to **tell a story**. And when you preach one of **Paul's letters** that tend to be more **logical** and **reasoned**, you should make a more logical and reasoned **argument**. But **rules** are made to be **broken**, especially if you think the **Lord** is leading you another direction. So today I am going to start my sermon with a **story** that although is **allegorical** and **metaphorical**, will hopefully introduce both our **hearts** and **minds** to what the **Apostle Paul** has to say in **Ephesians 2:11-22**.

So please **imagine with me** you live in a **brown desert-like land**. You were **born** there and you've **grown up** there. You grew up in a **small town** with very few **job opportunities**. You have some family there, but most have them have **died**. It's not a safe place to live. You've done some **bad things** there and you know that if you stay there those bad things will **catch up with you**. This country is the land of **no hope**. There's no hope for the **present** or for the **future**.

But you hear of a **better country**—the **far country**. You hear the **far country** is a land of **opportunity** and **hope**. You hear there are **green plants** and **living animals**, birds, cows, horses, dogs, and rabbits. But there's a problem. Your country, the land of **no hope** is at **war** with the **far country**. They are **sworn enemies**. As a citizen of your country you are considered **an enemy**, **a terrorist**, by the people of that other land. But you decide that **maybe**, just maybe, they will **receive you**.

You begin to make the **long hard journey**. You travel through **waste lands** and **desert plains**. You pass **dead bushes** and **trees** and **ghost towns**. **Ash** falls from the sky. You pass the **skeletal remains** of **cattle** and **birds** and the **human bones**. And when you think you can't go any further and are parched and dying of thirst you spot something on the **horizon**. At first you think it's a **mountain range** because it **stretches** from the **left** to the **right**, but as you get closer you realize it's a **wall**. It's a **one-hundred foot tall wall**.

The wall is straight up. It's **smooth** and impossible to climb. No **ladder** is tall enough, and as you look at the base of the wall, you realize that even if you had a **shovel** you could never dig **beneath** it. There is no way **over** or **under** this wall. You're stuck. But as you're standing there looking at the wall you **hear life** on the **other side**. You hear **birds chirping** and **cows mooing** and the sound of a **waterfall**. You know if you can just make it over you'll be **saved**.

And then you hear the sound of **laughter**, so you begin to shout. "**Help me!** Help me! **Save me!** Save me!" A handful of people appear at the top of the wall, looking over. They're each wearing **white tunics**. They throw a **rope** down the side of the wall and begin to lower it. You think, "At last! I'm saved." But just before the **rope reaches** you they **stop lowering it**. You hear a voice call to down, "Are you **one of us?**"

You don't know what you mean so you shout back, "**Who** are you?"

There's a **pause** and you hear a second question, "Are you **circumcised?**"

You shout back, "Why do you want to know that?"

A third question, "Have you ever eaten pigs or **dogs** or **cats** or **horses** or **donkeys** or **rats** or **seafood** that has a **shell** like **lobster** and **oysters**?"¹

All Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version (NIV®) unless otherwise noted.

“**Yes!** You shout back.”

“Final question,” they shout back. “Do you work on **Saturdays?**”

“When I have a job” you reply.

There’s a pause, and then those on top of the wall begin to **pull the rope back up**.

As they raise the rope your **heart sinks**. “Why?!” You shout.

“Because you’re **unclean**” they reply. “**Get away** from here. You’re not **one of us**. You don’t look like us or act like us or obey our **country’s laws**. Go away!” And they begin to throw **sticks** and **stones** and **rotten food** down at you. You **flee** the wall—**running** for your **life**.

The people on the other side of the wall **don’t want you**, but you will **die** if you stay on this side. Others have died. You notice a **burial site** a little ways away. And when you walk over you realize it’s an **empty grave** that looks **freshly shoveled**. **Robbers** must have **stolen** the **body**. There’s a **small wooden cross** buried in the **dirt** with a **sign** hanging on it. You read it.

“Here **lay king Jesus**. He shed his **blood** so that **enemies** who **repent** of their **sins** and **believe** in him may **freely come** into his **country**.”

As you look down at this **cross** in this land of **death** and **decay** you **examine your heart**. You know you were **born** in a bad place but you’ve **done many bad things by your own choosing**. You **deserve** to die here as an **enemy** of this king, but this says that if you repent and believe in the king of the far country he will rescue you. Could it **possibly** be **true**? You get on your **knees** and you say a **small prayer, repenting** of your sins, **believing** in **king Jesus** and **hoping** beyond hope that he will **deliver** you.

As you pray this prayer the **ground** begins to **rumble** and **shake** and that **100-foot wall** that seemed to **strong** and **opposing** and **permanent** comes **crashing down**. When the dust from the rubble begins to clear you see a **new man** walking towards you **wearing a red garment** and a **golden crown**. He **walks up to you, embraces** you invites you to follow him. You follow him, slowly making your way through the rubble. And as you pass through the **cloud** of **dust** and it begins to **clear** you begin to **see** the far country for the first time with your **own eyes**.

You see **birds** of all shapes and sizes and you hear all their different **songs**. You see **cattle** grazing and **horses** running in fields of **green grass**. There’s a tall **waterfall** and **blue streams** of **living water** flowing past the **roots** of **apple trees**. In the distance you see a **golden city** with **spires** rising up into the **clouds**.

But before you head that direction the **king dressed in red** leads you to the group of people in **white** who called down to you from the top of the wall. With **fire in his eyes** he picks up their **rope** and **rips** it to **shreds**. As you look into the faces of the men and women who tried to drive you away you see real **humans** with **real faces** and **real lives** and they see you too. With **tears** in their eyes they tell you how **sorry** they are and you **embrace**.

Then you hear the **king** in the **red tunic** speak to you all, “**Welcome** to my country. You are each a **citizen** and a **son**. Come and follow me to the **far city**. I’m still **building it** and you each have a **precious** and **important** part to play.” Together you set off to the golden city. Let me **pray**.

King Jesus, would this story speak to our hearts? Thank you for delivering us from the land of death and decay to the hope of eternal life. Help us examine our hearts so that we don’t drive others away from you. Help us see our blindspots. Help us follow you. In your name Jesus. Amen.

I told you this story because passages like the one Paul gives us are **hard to relate to**. But hopefully my story gives us a context to understand what Paul is saying not just **intellectually** but also with the **heart**. I want us to **feel** what Paul is saying. Paul is saying **three things**:

We Gentiles didn't have access to the Jewish people's salvation. (v11-12)

Gentiles means “**non-Jewish people**.” I am **not** Jewish. Paul is very clear that God's plan of salvation was **first** and **foremost** for the Jewish people. **Verse 12** gives us **four reasons** we had **no hope**.

1. You were separate from Christ.

God promised the **Israelite** people he would send them a “**chosen one**” to rescue them. The chosen one was the **Messiah**, a king. **Christ** means “Messiah. If you were born a Gentile, this Messiah wasn't for you. He was for the people of Israel. *You were separate from Christ.*

2. You were excluded from citizenship in Israel.

To be a Gentile by **birth** (v11) means you are **not born a citizen** of Israel. We understand how important citizenship is in **America**. You have to be **born here** to be a citizen or have **parents** who are citizens. To be born into a Jewish family meant you received the rights and privileges of being Jewish, which meant **access** to the **temple** and knowledge of the **Scriptures** and the **one true God**. If you were a **male** you were **circumcised** at **eight days**. If you were not Jewish but wanted to become one you had to be circumcised and had to keep Israel's **dietary**, **Sabbath**, and **sacrificial** laws. Those Gentiles who did so were known as “**proselytes**,” but even then most Jews didn't consider them to be **fully Jewish**.²

3. You were a foreigner to the covenants of promise.

Throughout the **Hebrew Scriptures** (what we today call the **Old Testament**) God made **promises** (which is what covenants are) to some very specific people and their descendants, first to **Abraham**, who became the father of the **Hebrew** people, and then to his son **Isaac** and his son **Jacob**. It's through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the **Israelite** nation that God brought salvation. Although **Genesis 12:1-3** tells us that God was going to use Abraham and his descendants to **bleed all the nations**, Israel received the covenants first. Even though God promised in **Jeremiah 31:31-34** to make a **new covenant**, which **Jesus** made at the **Last Supper**, it came first to the Hebrew people. We were foreigners to the covenants of promise.³

4. You were without hope and without God in the world.

Being **separated** from the Messiah, **excluded** from Israel, and **foreigners** to God's promises we were truly without hope. We lived in the land of no hope and would die there if it weren't for a Savior rescuing us.

But notice all four reasons include the word “**were**.” These things **were true** apart from Christ.

But now in Christ Jesus the wall between Jewish and Gentile people has come down. (v13-18)

Two weeks ago Andy pointed out a **transition** in **verse 4** like ours today in **verse 13**. He said, “**But** because of his great love for us, **God...**” So you're sinful and broken, “**but God...**” has all this **grace** in store for you. Today we see that **same transition**. You were sinful and broken “**But now** in Christ Jesus...” the wall that divides Jewish and Gentile people has come down. **What is that wall?** What is the dividing wall of hostility that I pictured as a **border wall** or **apocalyptic end of days** wall in my story?

I've brought a **picture** of a **model** of Herod's temple complex.⁴ The temple was built on a large **plateau** called the **temple mount**. It had a large **courtyard** called the **Court of the Gentiles**. This courtyard stretches around the temple but stops before you reach the temple steps. At the steps was a **4.5 foot wall** that non-Jews were not allowed to pass on **penalty of death**. Stone slabs were set all around this wall, which said:

"No foreigner is to enter within the forecourt and balustrade around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to **blame** for his subsequent **death**."⁵

In **Acts 21:27-36**, **Leaders** in Jerusalem **falsely accused** Paul of bringing **Greeks** past that wall and defiling the temple. They **drag** him out and try to **kill** him. That same **hostility** still filled the early church. There was a **deep root** of **racism** that ran through the Jewish believers that Gentiles were **unacceptable** and had to convert to Judaism before they could become **true Christians**. Paul is saying that's **not the case**. You don't have to practice the **sabbath**. You don't have to follow their **dietary** laws. Christ has **fulfilled** all the law's requirements (v15) and is creating "**one new humanity** out of the **two**." He is taking both Jew and Gentile and making them into the **one new people**. Christ roots out our **racism**.

Monica and I turned in our **Safe Families** application this week. Safe Families came in August and told us about an opportunity to help **mothers** and **children** in their **time of need**. Some families don't have a **support network** and need somewhere safe for their kids to go when they have to go into the **hospital** or **rehab**. We didn't fill out the **host family application** but we did fill out the **family friend application**, so if you haven't done that yet please turn yours in. One of the things it asks is if **you feel** any **discrimination** or **prejudices** during **childhood** and **adulthood**. In the application I **admitted** that **in the past** I've felt a **bit anti-hispanic**. I'm from a **mountain town** in **Colorado** where it seemed like a lot of **illegal immigrants** **migrated**. Instead of seeing them as the **precious people** made in the **image of God** that they are, I saw them as harmful to my **town**, **country**, and **way of life**. I didn't see them as **people** but as **problems**. Now I have dealt with that **racism in my heart**, and I hope it is **gone**, because this is the type of stuff Paul is addressing. Is there anyone that you look at or think about and have feelings of **prejudice** or **discrimination** towards? **Arabs? Africans? Blacks? Hispanics? Jewish** people? **Gay** people? Anyone not from **New England**? *But now in Christ Jesus the wall between Jewish and Gentile people has come down.*

Christ is building us up into a brand new people with whom he will live and dwell forever. (v19-22)

In the last couple verses Paul sums it up for the Gentile believers at Ephesus. You once were **foreigners** and **strangers**, but God has made you **citizens** of his **family**. Then he says **how** we are being **built up**—"on the foundation of the **apostles** and **prophets**, with **Christ Jesus** himself as the **chief cornerstone**." As a church family full of **diverse** people from different **social**, **economic**, and **ethnic backgrounds**, we don't gather together for **diversity's sake**. We gather **around Christ Jesus** and the **word of God**, which **unites** us as we **focus** on **him** and his **word**. We are united in Christ. Through him we are being built into a **new** kind of **temple** where **God himself** dwells. The **temple** is **no longer** made of **bricks** and **stones** but of people from all over the world from all **ethnicities** who love and know **Christ Jesus**.

I want to take a moment and ask how this **applies** to each of us by **answering three questions**:

1. How should this change me?

We should each feel an **overwhelming sense of gratitude** because I'm assuming most of us here are not Jewish. That means God's plan of salvation didn't come to us first. It was **always intended** to come to us, but as ones who are **included**. We should each feel incredibly grateful that we don't have to follow specific dietary laws or be circumcised to receive salvation, but that through the blood of Christ Jesus we are saved.⁶

2. How should this change our church?

As a church we should seek to reflect the **diversity of God's plan**. We should work hard to be a place that welcomes **all people** from **all nationalities** and **heritages**. We should **want** to worship and do church with people that **look different** than us. We can **each** apply this to our lives by **intentionally seeking** to form **friendships** and **relationships** with people who are from different parts of the world than us. Invite **families** into your home who are from **India** and **Africa** and **Asia** and **South America** or other parts of the **U.S.**

3. How should this change our worldview?

You may have felt that my **story** said something **political**. Paul is making a **political statement**. He's saying that our **citizenship** should not be defined by **Rome** or **America** or any other **country** because we are **primarily citizen's** of God's kingdom. As believers we should think **long** and **hard** about how **we each** feel about **immigrants** and **refugees** and how those we **vote** for treat them. Why? Because we are each refugees and immigrants into **God's kingdom**. Even when an immigrant is **illegal** or comes from the **worst parts** of the **world** that is the **most hostile** to **Christianity** we must remember that we would each be **condemned enemies** of God if it weren't for his **grace**. Instead of turning us away at the **border** he welcomed us into his family. This **doesn't mean** we will all **agree** on the best way to **welcome** and **care** for immigrants but we should be the **first** to **speak up for them**, **welcome them**, and do our best to **love** them with the **love of Christ Jesus** no matter their **documentation** or **country of origin**.

My closing **big idea** is this.

No matter how different we are we are one in Christ.

When we **confess** our sins and put our **faith** in Jesus, he transforms us from being **enemies** into **friends** and welcomes us into his country. He **removes** the **old sinful** and **dirty clothes**. He removes our **old garments** and gives us each a **new white cloak** that **covers** us in **his holiness**. As we look at each other we begin to see each other **differently**. Instead of seeing someone purely defined by their **ethnicity** or **country of origin** or **wealth** or **gifts** or **talents** or **political party** or any **other thing**, we see them as **brothers** and **sisters** in **Christ Jesus**, as valued members of the family of God. We see each other's **differences** and we **admire** and **appreciate** them. Together we are journeying to that **far city** covered in the white cloaks of Jesus Christ. *No matter how different we are we are one in Christ.*

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes further endnotes and references. Click to listen to sermons or to read our story.

¹ “What made some animals clean and others unclean (Genesis 7)? <https://www.gotquestions.org/animals-clean-unclean.html> Accessed 10/11/2018.

² *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible*. Zondervan. Page 2060.

³ *Coekin, Richard. Ephesians For You: For reading, for feeding, for leading (God's Word For You)* (Kindle Locations 888-897). The Good Book Company. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Nifty Animations Reconstruct The Second Temple Of Jerusalem During The Herodian Era. <https://www.realmofhistory.com/2017/11/14/animation-reconstruction-second-temple-jerusalem/> Accessed 10/11/2018.

⁵ Weima, Jeffrey A.D.. *Romans to Philemon: Volume Three* (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Book 3) (Kindle Locations 10286-10293). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Ken Keathley - The Great Reconciliation - Ephesians 2:11-22 Published on Youtube by Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary on Feb 16, 2015. <https://youtu.be/hvf9hsHERWg> Accessed 10/11/2018.