

GOD'S DREAM HOME

SERIES: EPHESIANS: THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST



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Ephesians 2:11-22
Fourth Message
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Ephesians 2:11-22

My grandfather lived in St. Louis, Missouri. He worked in an office but dreamed of raising horses in the country. Eventually, he bought some land outside of the city. But then he had to build a house. So he did what anyone would have done in this situation in the 1950s. He bought a book called "Your Dream House: How To Build It For Less Than \$3500."¹

My grandfather would go up to his property every weekend and work his way through that book—chapter by chapter—until finally, he had a house. Then he had a barn. Then he had some horses. For years, he raised and trained horses. I remember visiting him at that house he built.

You may not realize it, but we are trying to build something here. Or maybe it's more appropriate to say, "something is being built here". You'll see why in a few minutes.

What is being built here is a community. Maybe even a family. Multiple generations gather here. There's a variety of backgrounds and perspectives. Unique life experiences and ethnicities mix and interact. We are different, but something binds us together.

When you build a house, the main thing you're hoping for is that it doesn't fall down. You want to keep the building standing.

When you build a community, the main thing you want is not to split apart. You want to keep the community together. How do you do that?

This morning we're looking at one of the most theologically rich passages in the entire New Testament on the topic of building a unified community. These verses describe the spiritual reality that lies behind a community that is truly one. Our passage concludes by describing this project as a dwelling place for God himself to live. What is being built here is God's dream house.

There is perhaps no more critical topic in our culture today than the issue of unity. Divisiveness, tribalism, and polarization are entirely out of control. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers had concluded that polarization in the United States had grown faster and larger over the past four decades than any other democracy in the world.²

At first, the pandemic brought us together. But then came masks and shut-down orders, vaccines and boosters, and everything else. Now we are more divided than ever—the issue of coming together as one is desperately needed in our world.

Here's what the Bible suggests: lasting unity of the kind that we all long for is only possible through the work of Jesus. I know that's a bold claim. We won't have time to explain all the reasons why that is true. But if what we believe about God and the world and humanity is true, then this becomes true as well. Only Christ can provide real lasting unity.

The apostle's manual for building a community plays out in this way. There are two groups: Jews and Gentiles. The Jews are the in-group, and the Gentiles are the outsiders. In the first part of our passage, the outsiders are brought to God. That's the vertical dimension. In the second part of our passage, Jews and Gentiles are brought together as they are each brought to God. That's the horizontal dimension. In the last part of our passage, the community is under construction.

Let's see how this works, determine how it can help us, and how we can offer this kind of unity to a world that desperately needs it.

Brought near to God

In the previous section, we heard about the transition from "being dead in our sins" in Ephesians 2:1 to being made "alive together in Christ" in verse 5. Scott helped us to see how the grace of God works. In the words of Eugene Peterson, we saw how grace gives us a "reorientation from living anxiously by my wits and muscle to living effortlessly in the world of God's active presence."³

If last week was about grace on a personal level, this week is about grace in a community. The apostle shifts his metaphor to talk about what God has done. Instead of life and death, the image of proximity or nearness is used. You'll hear that clearly in the first verses.

Ephesians 2:11-13:

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— 12 remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

These verses contain the only imperative in the first three chapters of Ephesians. The only instruction given to the readers to do in the first part of this book is to remember what life was like before believing in Christ. Remember what was true before.

These words were originally written to a very specific group of people. Paul describes them as “Gentiles in the flesh.” They grew up without access to God. They were excluded from the benefits of faith. The last verse describes them as “you who were once far off.” God was distant, unapproachable.

Paul's description of that life is chilling.

There is ridicule—being called names. God is far away—you are unconnected to anything outside yourself. Exclusion from privilege—that feeling that things are harder for you than others. We see being left out of a promise as if the world is tilted in favor of others. The conclusion of all these things is simple: “having no hope and without God in the world.” You are hopeless and alone.

This list describes the human condition apart from God's work. Notice how many of these ideas describe life in community, not just an individual experience. Life without God is full of rivalry, hurt feelings, competition, in-groups and out-groups, name-calling, unfairly distributed privilege, and no sense that anything will ever improve.

Think for a moment about history. Think about all the strife this world has seen: the Crusades, the Inquisition, Nazi Germany, the conquest of the Americas, slavery in the US, the Civil Rights movement. There has been so much bloodshed, conflict, and dis-unity over time.

That's the large scale. But we see the same thing play on the smaller stage of our lives. Think about the past week. Have you felt left out? Ridiculed? Hopeless? Far from God?

After all that humanity has learned—after all our technology and improvement, after civil rights and diversity initiatives—we've made a lot of progress, but can anyone say that modern humanity has managed to overcome tribalism and prejudice?

This passage uses a time difference to draw out a distinction: remember that once this was true, but now this other is true. For some of us, that time reference resonates. There was a time in our lives when we felt all those things. For others, it doesn't; we have never known life apart from God.

Even if the time reference doesn't fit, the contrast stays the same. Life far from God is different from living near to him. A life of division and exclusion compared to a life of unity and inclusiveness. As we begin to build this house, the first thing we are called to do is remember life without God.

Even if this wasn't your experience, we could see what life looks like without God. It's easy enough to look around at our world and recognize how things turn out when left to our own devices.

What happens if you put two toddlers in a room with one toy? How is that going to end? I think we all know.

What happens if you put a group of people on a planet without any supervision, higher authority, or spiritual direction? How is that going to end? Look around. I think we all know.

This verse tells us to remember life without God precisely because now things are different. If you have believed in Jesus, then the apostle Paul says that you have been brought near to God—you are no longer far away. You are no longer excluded or an outsider. You have been brought near.

“NO ENTRANCE,” “KEEP OUT,” “RESTRICTED AREA,” “AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.” Get

Away. Stand back. Give me some space. Leave me alone. This is life apart from God.

Come here. Welcome. Bring it in. You're fine. Come close. My house is your house. I'm so glad you're here. This is life with God.

Notice the language. This is not something you did. It happened to you. It's not something you have to make happen. It has already happened. The only instruction is to remember when life with Christ wasn't the case, so you can appreciate what you have now.

The first thing you do when you build a house is to make sure that the weight of the house can be supported. You need to have vertical supports. There are many different ways to support piers, foundations, and vertical trusses.

For this community, the vertical support is that each of us has been brought near to God. That's the beginning. Like you can't build a house without vertical supports, you can't build a community without nearness to God.

Finding unity begins with being brought near to God. You can't truly be near to another person until you allow yourself to be brought near to God. This is true in friendship, marriage, family, and church. Building a community starts with being brought near to God.

But that's not where it ends.

United with each other

Having built the vertical foundation, the apostle Paul describes the horizontal connection. In these verses, listen for the words "both" and "one" and the connection created between the two groups referenced.

Ephesians 2:14-18:

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. 17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

The first phrase in this verse is incredibly powerful: "he himself is our peace." The "he", of course, is Christ. The grammar emphasizes that we're talking about the person of Jesus Christ: "he himself." The "peace" being spoken of is not a warm fuzzy feeling within our hearts. It refers to the lack of hostility between two warring groups.

You can see that emphasis throughout the passage: "made us both one," "broken down the dividing wall of hostility," "reconcile us both," "one new man in place of the two." Nowhere in the New Testament are more powerful statements about how two factions become one.

What unites these two factions is not a thing but a person. Christ is the peace between these groups. It is not shared values, a common goal, or a set of ideas. The peace is a person. Peace between these groups comes because a person has come between them and brought them together.

If we read this passage carefully, we see how that peace doesn't come easily. Something had to be destroyed first. In this passage, it's the "dividing wall of hostility." There's some debate as to what exactly is being referred to here. But it obviously has to do with the Law, which physically separated Jews and Gentiles.

We don't have that same kind of dynamic, but we have many things that separate us. There's no lack of things that divide us in our culture. Let's share some of those. What divides us today?

For the Jews and Gentiles, the situation was really interesting. There was an actual wall in the temple that separated Jews and Gentiles. Many people think that could be what's in view here. But the language here is stronger. Several times we see the word "hostility." The separation is called "the dividing wall of hostility," and we are told that Jesus has "killed the hostility."

So what is it that creates hostility?

We came up with a good list of things that divide us. But I suggest these things don't divide us. Something else comes in, takes advantage of these distinctions, and creates division among us. By themselves, these things don't create hostility. Hostility comes from somewhere else.

In Romans 7:8, Paul says that sin seized the opportunity that the Law created, and it came alive.

I think the Law didn't create hostility between Jews and Gentiles. COVID or vaccines or politics or theology doesn't create hostility between us. Sin creates the hostility. And, more specifically, it is pride. Pride turns a distinction into a division.

Pride takes an innocent difference of opinion—like the appropriateness of vaccines or the effectiveness of masks or the best way to govern a nation —and turns that difference into hostility. Pride says that “I’m right.” Pride turns the other person into an enemy. Pride causes me to be unable to see or think or act reasonably.

If that's true, then Paul's statement starts to make more sense. He says that Jesus Christ reconciled both Jews and Gentiles to God through the cross by killing the hostility. How did the cross kill hostility? At the cross, Jesus shredded human pride.

At the cross of Jesus, we're all the same. Jews and Gentiles get to God the same way. There is no distinction. In Christ, we are all the same. It doesn't matter whether you went to Stanford or junior college or didn't go to college at all. It doesn't matter whether you started a company, have a job as a vice president or struggle to find work at all. It doesn't matter whether you're white or Asian or Latino or black. It doesn't matter whether you've been to seminary or just barely understand that Jesus loves you.

At the cross, we are all the same. This is the horizontal structure that we need to build a community. We are the same in Christ.

The single biggest factor for achieving unity is humility. Humility leads to unity, and the cross of Jesus Christ brings all of us together in humility. “Through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.”

When we began the book of Ephesians, we looked at how Paul introduced the idea of mystery. In Ephesians 1, he said that the “mystery of his will” was “to unite all things in him, things in heaven and on earth.” We talked a lot about how God intends to bring unity to the entire cosmos.

Now we see that the first step in unifying the cosmos is to unify people. Maybe that's the hardest step in the process. God's purpose is to unify everything in him, but he'll start with the groups of people who hate each other. Once his people are unified, everything else in the cosmos will follow suit.

The apostle has built the vertical support for community—we have all been brought near to God. Then he builds the horizontal structure—our pride is destroyed, and Christ draws us together in humility. Now the real building begins.

Building a temple

As we move into the last few verses of this section, we're going to notice a change in tense. The first section asked us to remember what was true before. The second section talked about what Christ did to bring about a new situation. This section uses the present tense to describe what is actively happening as a community gets built.

Ephesians 2:19-22:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by[the Spirit

These verses begin with a reminder of what's happened: “you are no longer;” move on to the new situation—“you are members of the household of God”. They come to their climax in the process at work now. “You are being joined together into a holy temple in the LORD.”

This temple is being built day by day. This is happening now. Our community is not a building project that is finished and concluded. We are constantly in the process of being built by God day by day.

I took a photo of buildings when I was in India several years ago for one of our mission trips. It struck me how so many buildings had rebar protruding from the top floor. I asked one of our hosts about this, and they told me that taxes were higher once buildings were finished with construction. So people often left them “under construction” forever.

That's a good way to think about our community. We are “under construction” forever; we are constantly a construction zone.

If that's true, it's helpful to remember that construction zones are dangerous places. One part might be near completion while another section has a delay. All the work doesn't happen at the same speed. It can seem chaotic and confusing, but it's all part of the process.

Later on, in the book of Ephesians, we're going to see the part we have to play in the construction process. But in this section, all the focus is on the work God is doing. We are being built together. God is building a house for him to dwell in. It's his dream house. It's the kind of home he has always wanted. He's in the process of carefully constructing each and every part of it.

For us, that means that we see this process unfold. Our call is to be built together.

When COVID first struck and people started having different opinions about handling the situation, I was really discouraged. I remember a sarcastic comment I made to several people: "as if we needed one more thing to divide over." We were already polarized, and now it seems worse.

Maybe that's not the way to think about it. If God is building a community, then he is using these distinctions as a way to teach us humility so that we can come together in Christ—so that we can "be built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."

Perhaps this pandemic isn't one more thing to divide over. Maybe it's one more thing to unite in spite of. It's one more opportunity that we have to learn humility and come together in the person of Jesus.

Let's go back to that list we brainstormed of things that divide us. Let's replace the question but keep the same answers. Here's the new question: what are the opportunities we have in our culture to unite over complicated issues?

The apostle Paul uses language that we are "being joined together." In all these things, we are being joined together.

I've done a little woodworking at different times. I know a few of you have built some beautiful things. When I first started some projects, I was so surprised by how many different ways there are to join together two pieces of wood. You can use nails or screws, or other fasteners. You can also cut the wood to be joined in really beautiful ways.

Now, look around this room. Or think about the people in our community if you're online. You are "being joined together" by God into a temple for him to live in. Each join between each one of us is different. There are different obstacles. Different opportunities. Different ways we might need to grow in humility in order to be built together.

Think now about someone in particular that you disagree with in this community. Do you see how God is joining you together? Are there ways this is happening? Maybe you're not aware of it. Maybe you're even trying to resist it because you don't realize that this is the work of God in a group of people who follow Jesus.

Be built together. Recognize that this is a priority of God as he's preparing his dwelling place. He has brought us near. He has destroyed the dividing wall of pride which separates us. Now he is building us into a temple. Don't stand in the way.

Conclusion

My grandfather wanted to build his dream house, so he bought a book to guide him. Week by week, he put in the effort. Eventually, he had a house in which he could live.

This is a similar process going on in our midst. But here's how it's different. We are not the builders. Do you understand that? We are not the builders. We are the house. God is the one building this house. He has brought us near to him. He has destroyed the dividing wall of hostility between us. At the cross, he has taken away all of our pride. And he is the one joining us together with each other in unique and beautiful ways.

As we continue in worship, we're going to sing the new song introduced to us last week: A Thousand Hallelujahs.

We have seen an incredible truth here this morning. As the first step in unifying everything under heaven and earth, God has chosen to provide a way for hostile people to be unified with each other. They are brought near to God. Their pride is destroyed. And they are joined together into a building in which God Himself will live.

Each of them will sing "hallelujah." Each of us will sing "hallelujah." Over time, all those individuals who God has joined together raise their voices in praise to God. This has been happening throughout history, and

it continues here today. Let's join our voices with all the saints throughout history and praise God, who is building his dream home here in us.

Endnotes

1. Hubbard Cobb, "*Your Dream House: How To Build It For Less Than \$3500*" (New York, NY: Wise, 1950), Various."
2. May Wong, "*America leads other countries in deepening polarization*" (The Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research (SIEPR, 2020), <https://siepr.stanford.edu/news/america-leads-other-countries-deepening-polarization>).
3. Eugene Peterson, *Practice Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 96.