

## God's Purpose in History: Tearing Down the Walls that Divide

I can remember in high school how the student body would gather in distinct groups. There were the jocks, the nerds, the band geeks and so on. Humans tend to coalesce in groups. On the world stage today, we see groups: liberals, conservatives, ethnic groups, people in need, people of privilege, immigrants, and patriots, to name a few.

In Ephesus, and throughout all of Asia Minor during the first century, the separation between those who were Jews by birth, and the Gentiles (from the Jewish perspective: not Jews by birth) was intense. There was hostility. The ancient, Jewish, historian Josephus, says that Jews were oppressed in Ephesus in ways that were not lawful under Roman rule and in ways that were worse than other places in the Roman Empire.



In this section of the epistle Paul writes about a fundamental truth. He calls it a mystery long hidden but now openly revealed. The mystery revealed is that God is doing more than saving us as individuals to be near to Him. He is bringing us together as a people. God is "creating something new" in Christ. He is tearing down the walls that divide us and bringing us together into one new humanity. Paul has already told us that God chose to adopt us - the practical outworking of that is that God has made us one family, in Him.

This section of Ephesians tells us that this is the central work of God in history: to destroy the enmity that separates human beings from one another and then in creating this new society, to reconcile them to Himself.



We were made for fellowship with each other as well as relationship with God. Doesn't something within you know this is true? We love to gather with others in our families and at church!



As Americans, we are taught the values of rugged individualism, standing up for our rights, and about how our country was founded in pursuit of freedom. This individualism is a valuable American ideal. However, rugged individualism has the danger of leading us to the sin of self-centered, self-worship. Today other voices are reminding us that freedoms were not enjoyed by all, and in fact, while some

were free, others were exploited and enslaved. The Scriptures call us to look beyond ourselves, to something greater than ourselves, to love our neighbor as ourselves.

What Christ has done is to erect a new edifice – not the Jewish theocracy, not simply a religion, but a new society of people, united on a spiritual level, by the blood of Christ shed on the



cross. The new society, the new edifice, like a temple in which a deity was said to dwell, is where God dwells in a special way. That society is the people of God. We call it the church (the church universal, not the building, not a local congregation, but all of God’s people united as one.) At the heart of God’s purpose moving in history is His plan to erect His church. His plan is not for alienation and estrangement but for unity – people dwelling together in harmony, bringing their unique

distinctives and joining them together for a grand purpose, like unique instruments in a symphony orchestra blending together to make glorious music.

## Day 11, Monday

Preparation: God is with you as you begin today. He comes to you in love as His adopted child. Pray asking God to show you how much you need Him and His Fatherly care in your life. Ask Him to open your eyes to see things as they truly are.

Introduction: Paul includes a detailed description of the way it was for the Gentiles, but then also for himself. Hence this is a description of all of us, Jews and Gentiles, anyone, before we come to faith in Christ. This passage describes it as death. Yet the dead walk! There is something more profound meant than merely physical life and death.

Reading: Ephesians 2:1-3 **Description of Life Before Christ: The Walking Dead**

Questions for Reflection:

1. How does Paul describe our state before Christ came to us?
2. What would it mean to “walk” in this manner of life?
3. What are three forces these verses say are driving this manner of life?
4. Paul includes himself, saying “we”. In what ways can you relate to this experience of life as described here?
5. Why is it described as death?

## Day 12, Tuesday

Preparation: God has a gift for you today. Pray that you might have a willing spirit and a heart ready to receive it.

Introduction: Powerful words interrupt the picture of the walking dead: "But God." Our Heavenly Father did not leave us in such a state. Notice what God has done as you read.

Reading: Ephesians 2:4-10 **God's Free Gift of Life in Christ**

1. What words are used to describe God in this passage?
2. What actions does God take?
3. How is our resulting experience connected to the experience of Christ? (See v. 6)
4. Grace – means it is unearned, a free gift. How do we receive this free gift of life?
5. How are you experiencing the gift of life God has given you right now?
6. How have you been tempted to make Christianity something of your own doing? Paul asserts it is totally God's doing here. What is the role we are to play in it?

## Day 13, Wednesday

Preparation: Begin today confessing your sins to God. Ask Him to direct you in prayer to remember and realize the sins you have committed before Him. Thank Him for the forgiveness that comes to you through the blood of Christ.

Introduction: This passage can be hard for Americans and those educated in the West. It speaks of God working with us as a people, a corporate reality. It speaks of God's desire for unity among peoples. It suggests that our relationship with God as a people is vitally important. God is a God who seeks to tear down the walls that divide. This was a fundamental work that Jesus did for us on the cross.

Reading: Ephesians 2:11-18 **Tearing Down the Wall that Divides**

1. What was the previous state that the Gentile Christians were in before coming to Christ? (Look for five things in verse 12.)
2. What was the wall that divided the Gentiles from the Jews?  
*Note that though something more than a physical wall is meant here, around the Temple in Jerusalem there was a physical wall that was meant to keep the Gentiles out. They could stand and look up at the Temple, but they were not to enter. An archaeological dig revealed one of the signs that was on that wall. It read: "No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure round the temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death."*
3. What three actions has Christ taken in verses 15-16?
4. This is a striking statement here. How might the Old Testament "law" have kept people from being a part of God's family? (Paul will say in Romans, quoting from the Psalms, that there is no one righteous not even one.)
5. What does this passage have to say about God's purposes for humanity?
6. What might this passage call you toward in this present divisive age?

## Day 14, Thursday

Preparation: Spend a few moments praying for others in your church community. Allow people to come to mind and then pray for them. As you enter God's presence today you might thank Him for the fellowship you share with other believers.

Introduction: I love our stone church. The stones in the walls are each unique, but are joined together, held together to become a beautiful church building. If one of those stones was missing, there would be a problem. Rain, snow, wind, and animals could get inside. In this text Jesus is the cornerstone. The cornerstone helped to hold all the other stones in place in the building. Jesus is joining us together as His church. The church is not the building, but the people.

Reading: Ephesians 2:19-22 **God's New Creation: The Unified People of God**

1. What are the three images used here to describe the newly created people of God?
2. What would it mean to be fellow citizens? What are the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship?
3. What does the concept of being family ("members of God's household") add to this picture of the people of God?
4. How might the metaphor of a temple be especially meaningful to the residents in Ephesus?
5. What was the role of the Old Testament prophets? The New Testament Apostles? How are they the foundation of God's new society, the church?
6. How might you be tempted to practice Christianity with a more "individualistic" mindset than is depicted in this section of Ephesians? What might God be saying to you about this?

## Day 15, Friday

Preparation: Seek the presence of the Lord with you. In what ways might you come seeking only a blessing for yourself? Who is there on your heart today that you might ask God for a blessing for as well? Pray for the Holy Spirit to come upon you and these others as you begin.

Introduction: It is easy to approach Christianity as a consumer, gathering up what we believe will bless us. In the readings this week the corporate nature of our faith is revealed. It might challenge us to consider how we approach the church – only for what we can get out of it – or might we also consider our commitment to the church and what we can give?

Reading: Ephesians 3:1-6 **The Mystery Proclaimed**

1. How does Paul describe his calling?
2. What is the mystery of the gospel that he is called to proclaim?

*Note: This mystery is no secret knowledge but an open secret, revealed now through the Scriptures and Paul's ministry. Yet it is interesting that this was not understood before. The*

*Old Testament speaks of God blessing the Gentiles through His people. John Stott explains the confusion this way: "What neither the Old Testament nor Jesus revealed was the radical nature of God's plan, which was that the theocracy (the Jewish nation under God's rule) would be terminated, and replaced by a new international community, the church...It was this complete union of Jews, Gentiles and Christ which was radically new."*

3. Unless you are reading this and you are Jewish, the inclusion of the Gentiles includes you. What impact should this have on you that you are now: "Fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (v.6)?
4. What part of the "body of Christ" do you feel most disconnected from? What might God be saying to you about this?

### **Day 16, Saturday/Sunday**

Preparation: How are you today as you come before the Lord? You might take a moment to thank God for your blessings and seek His help for your challenges. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you and speak to you today.

Introduction: Paul was sold out for the gospel. It cost him much to serve God in this way. Today he gives us insight into how he understood his ministry and why he was not discouraged though in prison as he wrote.

#### Reading: Ephesians 3:7-14 **The Example of the Apostle Paul**

1. How does Paul describe himself and his ministry? Do you detect pride or humility?
2. How does Paul describe this ministry of the gospel that has been entrusted to him?
3. Paul is writing from prison, yet he encourages his readers not to lose heart. What has the ministry of the gospel cost Paul (consider what you know of his life as well)? Why does Paul continue, undiscouraged and boldly? (You might look at 2 Corinthians 11:21-27 to see the extent of Paul's hardship in his ministry.)
4. What in your present situation is challenging?
5. How might the call of God on your life, likewise demand your all?