

## BECOMING A PEOPLE OF GRACE

### STUDY EIGHT

## Breaking Down the Barrier

*Ephesians 2:11–16*

*Paul is telling us as members of the church of the twenty-first century, “Get rid of prejudice. Let it go. In the family of God, we are one in Christ Jesus.” The church is one of the few places where the ground stays level.*

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

**S**INCE the days of Moses, a thick curtain hung at the entrance to the holy of holies, separating sinful people from their holy God. One day each year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest entered this sacred chamber on behalf of the nation and “brought the blood of animals into the Holy Place as a sacrifice for sin” (Hebrews 13:11). This practice of reconciling people with God went on for centuries, until Christ put an end to it with the blood of His own sacrifice.

On the cross, Christ, our High Priest, “offered himself to God as a single sacrifice for sins, good for all time” (10:12). It was the ultimate Day of Atonement all the other Days of Atonement anticipated. As a result, Christ’s priestly act made the old system obsolete; it opened access to God for anyone who believed. *Anyone!*

To herald Christ’s epochal achievement, “the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom” (Matthew 27:51). God literally tore down the barrier between Himself and sinful humanity through the sacrifice of His Son.

However, the veil between God and sinners wasn’t the only barrier that Christ’s atonement brought down that day. Long before Moses and the tabernacle, Gentiles (non-Jews) were excluded from God’s covenant with Abraham and his descendants, the nation of Israel.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

## **Breaking Down the Barrier**

*Ephesians 2:11–16*

As we'll discover in Ephesians 2:11–16, Christ put an end not only to the alienation of sinners from God but also the alienation of Gentiles from God's covenant. Christ's death broke down both barriers! Let's learn from Paul how this happened as well as how we can experience the freedom of living without a wall between us and God or between us and others.



### **PREPARE YOUR HEART**

As you open the Word, follow Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1:17. First, ask "the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you spiritual wisdom and insight so that you might grow in your knowledge of God."

And then, pray that your heart will be "flooded with light so that you can understand the confident hope he has given to those he called—his holy people who are his rich and glorious inheritance" (Ephesians 1:18).

Conclude by thanking the Lord for breaking down all barriers between you and Him, opening a way for you to join the community of His "holy people."



### **TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES**

In his message, Chuck Swindoll identifies three main sections in this passage, using the key questions, *where*, *what*, and *why*:

- Where were we as Gentiles (Ephesians 2:11–12)?
- What difference did Christ make (2:13–14)?
- Why can we be grateful (2:15–16)?

As you read *Ephesians 2:11–16*, mark these sections in your Bible or make mental notes as you observe these sections in the passage.



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### **Observation: Where, What, and Why**

A technique in the *Searching the Scriptures* method is to use your imagination to enter a biblical scene.<sup>1</sup> Picture yourself joining the Ephesian church as a new Greek or Roman convert in the first century. As you enter a church leader's home, you notice Jewish converts in the meeting. Only months ago, these same Jews shunned you as if you had a disease and, in return, you mocked and laughed at them. How awkward it must feel to sit side-by-side! How are you supposed to relate to people you formerly considered enemies?

Paul addressed this sensitive issue by first explaining to the Gentiles their state of separation from God and His people before Christ.

### **Where Were We as Gentiles? Ephesians 2:11–12**

As a Jew, Paul wrote to the Gentiles as “you,” not to deride them but to explain the reality of their standing as “outsiders” in God's plan. Although God chose Abraham and his descendants to be “a light to the Gentiles” (Isaiah 49:6), the Jews kept God's glory to themselves. What attitude did the Jews have toward Gentiles (*Ephesians 2:11*)?

Can you name the five ways that Gentiles were outsiders in God's redemptive plan, according to Paul's description in *2:12*?



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*The Gentiles were aliens to Messiah—Christ-less; aliens to God’s nation—stateless; aliens to the covenant—friendless; aliens to any kind of meaningful future—hopeless; and aliens to the Creator—godless. —Chuck Swindoll*

### What Difference Did Christ Make? Ephesians 2:13–14

Without a Savior, the Gentiles turned to pagan shrines, empty rituals, and futile prayers. Endlessly, they chanted incantations to idols and gave themselves over to demonic powers bent on keeping them enslaved. “But now,” Paul declared in [Ephesians 2:13](#) as if ringing a liberty bell! What did Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, make possible not only for the Jews but particularly for the excluded Gentiles?

As the perfect covenant-keeper, Jesus fulfilled Israel’s mission to be a blessing to “all the families on earth” (Genesis 12:3). God brought *near* to Himself the alienated Gentiles. He also brought *together* the Gentiles and the Jews. According to [Ephesians 2:14](#), how did God give Gentiles peace with Himself and His people?

*Peace is not in some monument. One wag put it this way: “Our nation’s capital has a large assortment of peace monuments; we build one after every war.” Peace isn’t found in some song. You will not find peace in the world apart from Christ Himself. If you’re hoping to find peace in your neighborhood, you’ll never find it. If you’re hoping to find it at work, it won’t be there. You’ll only find it in a Person. —Chuck Swindoll*



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### **Why Can We Be Grateful? Ephesians 2:15–16**

How grateful we are! God has united us to Christ and to one another as brothers and sisters in God’s multiethnic, multicultural, worldwide family. How did Paul explain this union according to *Ephesians 2:15–16*?

The Mosaic law with its dietary restrictions and countless regulations *required* Jews to separate from Gentiles. By abolishing these laws, Christ could open His banquet table of grace to Jews and Gentiles, reconciling all races to each other and God as “one new people” (Ephesians 2:15).

What does “new people” mean? The New International Version uses a broader term, “one new humanity” (2:15 NIV). This new classification breaks the old distinction of Jews and Gentiles. Some have called it “a third race”!<sup>2</sup> Let’s decipher the meaning of this phrase in the next section.



### **Interpretation: Reconciled into One New People**

In the interpretation phase of *Searching the Scriptures*, we can consult commentaries and resources to find the meaning of “one new people” that Christ created. If you have a commentary that explains Ephesians 2:15–16, what does it say?<sup>3</sup> For an online resource, we recommend *Constable’s Notes* at NetBible.org.



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Bible scholar John R. W. Stott helps us grasp the magnitude of Christ's creation:

It would be hard to exaggerate the grandeur of this vision. The new society God has brought into being is nothing short of a new creation, a new human race, whose characteristic is no longer alienation but reconciliation, no longer division and hostility but unity and peace.<sup>4</sup>

What does Christ's vision look like in day-to-day living? Let's survey three verses to find out how citizens of God's new society relate to one another.



### **Correlation: God's New Creation**

Write down what you discover.

*Romans 13:8*

*Galatians 5:13*



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*Hebrews 10:25*

Christ formed the church by reconciling us with God and with each other so we can obey His great commandment: “Love each other” (John 13:34). This is Christ’s grand vision for His church. As we close our study, let’s consider how we can bring His vision to life.

### **Application: Two Closing Questions**

Return to your earlier mental picture of the Ephesian church. As a new Greek or Roman convert, imagine that you attend a church meeting with Jews who were once your enemies. Suppose the church leader has just read this section of Paul’s letter on reconciliation between races in Christ. If you had lived in first-century Ephesus, would you have believed what you just heard? Would Paul’s letter inspire you to embrace the enemies sitting next to you? What walls would have to fall for them to embrace you?

What about in your twenty-first century church? Do you believe Paul’s words are possible? Can Christ’s ideal be reality? Yes, it can! If you’ve been at odds with another believer, what bridges of peace can you build this week in the name of Christ?



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Peacemaking may not be simple. How can families split by divorce or abuse live in peace? What about churches divided over theological issues? Paul offers this helpful counsel: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men” (Romans 12:18 NASB). The key phrase is “so far as it depends on you.” Although you may not be able to restore broken relationships in all situations, love is always possible. Hatred, prejudice, favoritism, an unforgiving spirit, resentment, and animosity are never appropriate for Christ’s new society.

Seek peace when possible and always make Christ’s love your aim. As we close this study, reflect on Chuck’s words from his message.

*Paul is telling us as members of the church of the twenty-first century, “Get rid of prejudice. Let it go. In the family of God, we are one in Christ Jesus.” The church is one of the few places where the ground stays level. —Chuck Swindoll*



### **A FINAL PRAYER**

*Father, thank You for my seat at Christ’s banquet table of grace where all people are welcome . . . even my enemies. Fill me with Your love and help me reconcile with those to whom I feel anger. If any prejudice exists in me, please stamp it out and replace it with brotherly love. Thank You for reconciling enemies through Your Son. Make Your church a great haven of peace in a hostile world. Amen.*

#### **ENDNOTES**

1. To learn about Chuck Swindoll’s *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, “[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#).”
2. R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 97.
3. Recommended commentaries include Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Galatians, Ephesians*, Swindoll’s Living Insights New Testament Commentary, vol. 8 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2015); R. Kent Hughes, *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*, Preaching the Word Series (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990); John R. W. Stott, *God’s New Society: The Message of Ephesians*, The Bible Speaks Today Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979); Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).
4. Stott, *God’s New Society*, 110.

