

"Y'all Means All"
A sermon preached at Heritage Presbyterian Church
Reverend Henry T.C. Sun, Ph.D.
January 28, 2024
Genesis 12:1-3; 28:10-15
Ephesians 2:11-22

Genesis 12

¹Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Genesis 28

¹⁰Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. ¹¹He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹²And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³And the LORD stood beside him and said, “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; ¹⁴and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

Ephesians 2

¹¹So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision” —a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— ¹²remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁴For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

I. Introduction

The 2023-24 school year will be my 16th year as a Math teacher in the Vallejo City Unified School District, a total that includes two years in the Fairfield Suisun district. One of

the things I have always valued in Vallejo, and hence I have never really given much thought to leaving Vallejo for greener pastures, is the role that I can play in a Title I school district that is constantly losing teachers to other school districts over pay and benefits. One of the reasons I agreed to take on an extra class in 2023-24 is because a teacher we hired to replace a retiring math teacher informed us that they were not coming to Bethel *the day before the school year started*. That's just soooooo not good. Though we tried to hire a teacher in August and September, that worked out as badly as one might expect, and so the Math department was faced with the prospect of 175 students having a sub for an entire school year. Had we chosen that route, those students would have effectively lost an entire year of math education. So we worked out a way for the existing math teachers to take on one extra class each.

Why did we do that? Because the math teachers at Bethel all take the title of this morning's sermon seriously when it comes to education: "Y'all means all." None of us want to see students fail at math, even though we all know that happens. Consequently, we all do all that we can to make sure that our students feel safe and welcome in class. We do everything we can not to embarrass or shame students in front of their peers. The chair of our math department teaches a zero-period class (7:30 - 8:30) for seniors needing help with completing their 30 units of math, opens her classroom during lunch for tutoring, and often stays at Bethel until nearly 5pm. For my part, I have tutored students after school multiple days a week because I want them to know that I am available to help the struggling students who make the effort to get some extra help. And even though not everyone takes advantage of that, I am always willing to do what I can to help struggling students transition to being successful students. That's the kind of context that lies behind our text from Ephesians 2 this morning.

Moreover, it is one of the most important passages in the entire New Testament. But before we get to Ephesians, we need to take a short detour into Genesis. So let's take a brief look at our passages from Genesis 12 and 28 as we set the stage for Ephesians 2.

IIA. Pivot to Genesis

(**slide2**) Although the history of salvation can be considered to begin at the beginning of creation in Genesis 1, the history of salvation as it relates to the children of Israel does not begin until Genesis 12. That chapter describes God's initial call to Abraham to leave his family, his land, and everything he knows and to follow God's leading to Canaan, the land that would become God's Promised Land for the children of Israel. Lurking in that initial promise from God to Abraham is one of the most important verses in all of the Hebrew Bible: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3b; the Hebrew verbal form [וְנִבְרַכְתָּ] is a Niphal perfect 3cp whose subject is "all the families of the earth." That much is clear, but interpreters are divided as to whether the Niphal carries a passive force [NRSV, NIV, NASB, NAB, Alter] or a reflexive force [NET, NJB, NJPS Tanakh], especially since this same formula occurs in a different Hebrew conjugation in Gen 22:18 [וְהִתְבְּרַכְתָּ בְּנִי] and 26:4 [וְהִתְבְּרַכְתָּ בְּנִי]; see H. W. Wolff, The Vitality of OT Traditions, for a comprehensive discussion of the grammar).

That promise that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" recurs several times in Genesis. God reaffirms that promise in Genesis 18:18 ("all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him") and again in Genesis 22:18 ("by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves"). The blessing is passed on to Isaac in Gen 26:4 ("all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves through your offspring"), and then to Jacob in Gen 28:14 ("and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring"). Note that the language is occasionally written in the passive voice, "will be blessed" and at other times in reflexive form, "shall gain blessing for themselves." Exactly how

to interpret those different expressions has been a persistent problem for Old Testament scholars.

But despite that, it is clear that in some way, the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are to effect some form of divine blessing on all the families of the earth. That is partly why the Abraham narratives follow upon the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11. In that chapter, God separates humans one from another by multiplying their languages and making them unable to understand each other. The promise to Abraham is thus to be understood as God's way to overcome that separation and to reunite all the families of the earth.

IIB. Pivot to Ephesians

Except that God's intentions did not materialize in the long history of the children of Israel. Instead of reunification, the ethnic differences between the Jews and their Canaanite enemies was hardened, a difference that eventually became the separation between Jews and Gentiles. (slide3) One non-biblical Jewish text takes this separation so seriously that it puts the following words into Abraham's mouth as he addresses Jacob: "And you also, my son, Jacob, remember my words, and keep the commandments of Abraham, your fathers. *Separate yourself* from the gentiles, and *do not eat with them*, and do not perform deeds like theirs. And *do not become associates of theirs*. Because their deeds are defiled, and all of their ways are contaminated, and despicable, and abominable" (Jubilees 22:16; OTP 2:98). That gives us a good inkling of the divide that Paul will address in Ephesians chapter 2.

(slide4) He begins in verses 11-12 by reminding his Gentile readers to "remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth ... were at that time without Christ, being aliens (ἀπηλλοτριωμένοι, elsewhere in the GNT only at Eph 4:18; Col 1:21) from the commonwealth

of Israel, and strangers (ξένοι) to the covenants of promise." What does it mean when Paul calls these Gentile readers "aliens"? He gives us a little clearer picture when he next uses that language in Eph 4:17-18, where he instructs his readers, "you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated" - there's that word again - "alienated from the life of God *because of their ignorance and hardness of heart*. They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves of licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. That is not the way you learned Christ!" Paul isn't being kind or politically correct when he reminds the Gentiles that they were formerly "aliens"; he is alluding to their previous lives in a highly critical way. That kind of critical language continues in the kind of parenthetical comment at the end of verse 11, where Paul says "you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision." Note that the New RSV puts both of those phrases in quotation marks. It does so because many Jews "referred to Gentiles as 'the uncircumcision'" (ZIBBC 3:316), and because the fact that the Jews were circumcised and the Gentiles were not "became a matter of inappropriate ethnic pride for many Jews" (ZIBBC 3:316). Thus, Paul is using rhetorically inflammatory language to emphasize the distance between the Gentiles and the Jews prior to the coming of Christ (see, e.g., Lincoln WBC 135 ["Gentiles are called by the name 'the uncircumcision,' which for a Jew often announced the inferiority or even shame of those so branded"]; Barth AB 1:255 ["The emotional overtones of the nomenclature are obvious: uncircumcision is a terrible shame and an ancient Israelite regards it with contempt"]; Hoehner, Ephesians 354 ["The term ἀκροβυστία, "uncircumcision," is anathrous and thus is given the qualitative force of contempt in this context"]; Baugh Ephesians 182 ["the phrase "the so-called uncircumcision" appears to show that hostility between the two groups has come from the Jewish side, since uncircumcised was a term of derision for a long time"]. When I raised this question in a FB group, Professor Gary Manning expressed a different view [see image at end of sermon]).

(slide5) But that was then, and then isn't now. "But now," according to verse 13, "in Christ Jesus you who once were far off (μακρὰν) have been brought near (ἐγγύς) by the blood of Christ." And that introduces the second main section of this morning's passage, verses 13-18 (so, e.g., Bratcher and Nida, UBS Handbook 49; Barth AB 1:275; Bruce old NICNT 291-308; surprisingly, to me anyway, most commentators take verse 13 as the concluding sentence to verses 11-12 and not as the introductory sentence to verses 14-18; see, e.g., Best new ICC 236 ["2:11-22 consists of three sections, vv. 11-13, 14-18, 19-22"; Hoehner Ephesians 351 ["Ephesians 2:11-22 divides into three sections: the statement of the union (vv. 11-13), the explanation of the union of believing Jews and Gentiles into one "new humanity" (vv. 14-18), and the consequences of that union (vv. 19-22)."]; see also Cohick new NICNT 175; Fowl NTL 84; Martin IBC 32-37; Schnackenburg Ephesians 105. The introductory νυνὶ δὲ in verse 13 seems to me to point decisively in the direction of verse 13 being the opening sentence of the next main paragraph of this section). That horrible situation of being without Christ and separated from God's covenantal promises is cured by the "blood of Christ" (ἐν τῷ αἵματι τοῦ Χριστοῦ), which is in the NT generally and in Paul's epistles particularly is a traditional reference to Jesus' death on the cross (Bratcher and Nida, UBS Handbook 54 ["By the sacrificial death of Christ: literally 'in the blood of Christ'"]; Best new ICC 246 ["The NT normally relates 'blood' ... to the death of Christ and AI is indebted to tradition for this connection"]; Lincoln WBC 139 ["all that is necessary has already been accomplished through Christ's sacrificial death—ἐν τῷ αἵματι τοῦ Χριστοῦ, 'through the blood of Christ'"]; Cohick new NICNT 180 ["The preposition en with the dative noun "blood" carries the sense 'by means of' and indicates that God the Father, by means of the Son's death on the cross, brings gentiles near to himself and includes them with the people of God"]; Hoehner, Ephesians 363 ["the significance of the 'blood of Christ' ... speaks of the sacrificial death of Christ"]; Baugh Ephesians 188 ["through Christ's blood, which refers to his death on the cross"])). How does the death of Christ on the cross bring the two different groups together? Paul discusses that in verses 14 and in 15-16. Verse 14 affirms that Jesus "is our peace (αὐτὸς γάρ ἐστιν ἡ εἰρήνη ἡμῶν); in his flesh he has made both groups into one (τὰ ἀμφοτέρωθεν) and broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." Note how carefully Paul crafts this proclamation. He says that Jesus is **our** peace - not yours only, but your and ours - and he is our peace because he has made one group out of two groups that were very much at odds with each other. And he made us into one group by breaking down the

dividing wall of hostility between us. We are so used to hearing that claim that we don't always appreciate its full impact. So perhaps we should listen and hear these words as if they were spoken in 1942 and claiming that Jesus is the peace between Americans and the Japanese who bombed Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Or in 2024 and hearing that Jesus is the peace between Russia and Ukraine, or between Israel and Hamas, or between Moms for Liberty and public school districts here in America. Whether the differences are social, cultural, or political, Jesus' death and resurrection has the goal of making two warring sides into one reconciled family. That is what verse 14 is all about.

(**slide6**) Verses 15-16 continue this line of thinking but in a more specific way. Having proclaimed that Jesus is our peace, the vehicle by which two warring parties were brought together, Paul now focuses on the thing that most significantly effected that separation, namely the Old Testament law, and says that Jesus "has abolished (καταργήσας, a word used exclusively by Paul and his disciples in the GNT with the exception of Luke 13:7 and Hebrews 2:14; the other 24 occurrences are all in Romans - 2 Timothy. This passage brings to mind the saying of Jesus in Matt 5:17 [Μὴ νομίσητε ὅτι ἦλθον καταλῦσαι τὸν νόμον ἢ τοὺς προφῆτας· οὐκ ἦλθον καταλῦσαι ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι]; note that the verb there, καταλύω, is used predominantly in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts [14 times] and only three times [Rom 14:20; 2 Cor 5:1; Gal 2:18] by Paul.) the law with its commandments and ordinances" (verse 15a). It was the Old Testament law that created the barrier between Jews and Gentiles in the first place, with the law's emphasis on the holiness of Israel that was to match the holiness of her God, a holiness that demanded that she keep herself separate from the Gentiles as much as was humanly possible. I've mentioned before that in Nehemiah's time, Hebrew husbands were forced to divorce their Gentile wives just because they were Gentiles and hence might lead their Hebrew families away from Israel's God. That's the kind of

separation that God in Christ was working to overcome by abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances.

And overcome it, he did. The point of abolishing the law is found in verses 15b-16, "so that he might create in himself *one new humanity* in place of the two, thus making peace (εἰρήνην; compare verse 14, αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐστὶν ἡ εἰρήνη ἡμῶν), and might reconcile *both* groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that *hostility* through it." Note the parallel way that Paul has constructed this clause:

A1. that he might create in himself one new humanity

A2. thus making peace

B1. and might reconcile both groups to God

B2. thus putting to death that hostility

The goal, the point, and the intention of Jesus' death and resurrection is the creation of this one new humanity, the reconciliation of two divided people (A1 and B1) which will lead to peace and the putting to death of the hostility that separates them (A2 and B2). Jesus has no interest in our lame human attempts to protect what *we* have and what *we* value from outside interlopers; by abolishing the law he creates a way forward where our different beliefs are no longer any sufficient reason to keep Jews and Gentiles or anyone else separate and divided.

(**slide7**) Verses 17-18 bring this section to a close. Paul says that Jesus "came and proclaimed *peace* to you [Gentiles] who were far off and *peace* to those [Jews] who were near; for through him *both of us* have access in one Spirit to the Father." Paul returns here to the proclamation of peace (so rightly Best, new ICC 273 [verse 18 "summarises and explains what has gone before...: the

Gospel of peace is the joint access of Jew and Gentile (note the first person plural as in v. 14a) to the Father"]; Lincoln WBC 149

["this statement as one which provides the grounds for the assertion of the previous verse that Christ has proclaimed peace to the far

off and peace to the near"]), this time to both sides of the divide, emphasizing that both sides have access to the Father in - probably better translated "through" or "by" - the Holy Spirit (so Lincoln WBC 149 ["It is also access to a new relationship to God as Father through the one Spirit"]; Fowl NTL 96 ["Participation in Christ's reconciliation enables both Jews and Gentiles to have a common access to the one Father, a access through the work of the Spirit"]; Martin IBC 36-7 ["United in fellowship, Jews and Gentiles in Christ discover their oneness in a mutual and free access to God by the (Holy) Spirit who is the author of unity within the church"]). **BOTH** sides, Jews and Gentiles have access to the Father, not just one with the other being separated and distant because of the OT law. **BOTH** sides get this access through the Holy Spirit, which doesn't discriminate against any of God's children regardless of their ethnic origin.

(slide8) And what is the consequence of that? Paul describes that in verses 19-22. First, the effects of the ethnic separation that Paul described in verse 12 is undone: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens (ξένοι καὶ πάροικοι; compare verse 12, ἀπηλλοτριωμένοι τῆς πολιτείας τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ καὶ ξένοι τῶν διαθηκῶν τῆς ἐπαγγελίας), but you are **citizens** (συμπολῖται, only here in the GNT and LXX) with the saints and also **members** (οἰκεῖοι; see also Gal 6:10; 1 Tim 2:19; and especially the LXX Lev 18:6, 12, 13, 17; 21:2) of the household of God." Paul couldn't be clearer in his assertion that the death and resurrection of Jesus brought Gentiles together with Jews as equal members of God's household. That's a very far cry from the position staked out in the history of Israel and their relationship with the Gentiles. According to verses 20-22, that household is constructed on the witness of the apostles and prophets (scholars dispute whether this reference to "prophets" is to the Hebrew prophets or the early Christian prophets; I prefer the latter, along with most commentators [e.g., Bratcher and Nida, UBS Handbook 62; Best new ICC 282-83; Lincoln WBC 153; Bruce old NICNT 304; Cohick new NICNT 198; Martin IBC 37; Schnackenburg Ephesians 122; Hoehner Ephesians 400; Baugh Ephesians 202]) and built on the foundation of Jesus, in whom "the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God" (vv 20-22). The oneness of this new family of faith is

reinforced by the reference to the language of a house and its foundation, and the mentions of a holy temple and a dwelling place for God. God's design and intention for this new humanity created by the death and resurrection of Jesus is to be one family of Jews and Gentiles, males and females, slaves and free, rich and poor, a family in which these social and cultural distinctions means nothing in the light of our common salvation.

III. Pivot to today

(slide9) So the message for us today is one message, but it's one with two different sides, both of which are of equal importance in the church's ministry. The first has to do with the dismantling of the walls that divide us. And man oh man, the things that divide us now seem to be overwhelming our country and our churches. The clearest current example of this is the exodus of some 25% of formerly United Methodist Churches to form a new denomination, all because some churches disagree with other churches over the issue of homosexuality and the ordination of gay and lesbian pastors. I get that this is a controversial issue, and I'm pleased that the Presbyterian Church (USA) has left the question of the call and ordination of gay and lesbian pastors up to the conscience of its individual churches. But I'm pretty sure that churches breaking fellowship with other churches over a matter of theological dispute isn't the kind of thing Paul had in mind when he talked about becoming one body, a body that is intended to be joined together and to grow into a holy temple to the Lord. Paul notes in Romans 14-15 that genuine disputes over different interpretations of the Bible were present in the church at Rome, but his counsel to them was that those who disagreed should neither judge nor despise the ones with whom they had such disagreements. So the first thing we have to consider out of this passage is whether or not we are dismantling the barriers that divide the body of Christ. If

people come to worship who don't look like us, vote like us, think like us, or act like us, will we still welcome them into the fellowship of the church and love them as if they were members of our own church family?

The second point is related to the first. Are we willing to do the same kind of work that Jesus did in order to expand God's household here on earth? The word "Christian" actually carries the meaning "little Christ." Well, as "little Christ's" we ought to do what we can to imitate Christ himself. What did he do that is worth imitating in the light of Ephesians 2? Well, "he repeated crossed cultural, religious, and political boundaries to reach those on the other side (women, Samaritans, lepers, Gentiles, tax collectors, sinners) and to welcome them into fellowship with himself" ([Brian Peterson, Commentary on Ephesians 2:11-22 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary, accessed 27 Jan 2024](#)). So what cultural, religious, and political boundaries are we willing to cross to reach those on the other side?

In about 6 hours, we'll know whether the 49ers will get to play in Super Bowl 58. Imagine that they beat the Detroit Lions - they are favored by a touchdown, so the oddsmakers think they have a good chance of winning - and then imagine that they win the Super Bowl. What will happen next? There will be a victory parade in San Francisco. Who will attend? Whoever wants to attend, whoever chooses to attend, and whoever can arrange their schedule to make the parade, that's who. Will it matter whether they a zillionaire owner of Facebook or a lowly high school math teacher? Will it matter if they are red or yellow, black or white? Married, divorced, widowed, or single? Straight or gay? Rich or poor? Democrat or Republican?

(slide11) Of course it won't. The point will be to celebrate a victory and whoever wants to celebrate it will be welcome to attend. Well, if we can be that unified over a football game that our team won, why is it so hard to be that way in the church? As important a football game as the Super Bowl is, the victory Christ wins over sin and death is immeasurably more important.

So as we leave this house of worship, let's remember that we are all members of the same heavenly family, celebrating the biggest victory imaginable, and that we are called to celebrate it with everyone who bears the name of Jesus. Period. End of story. Hallelujah! And amen.

Henry's Post

Gary Manning

Admin

Top Contributor

Paul uses ἀκροβυστία in a fairly neutral descriptive way elsewhere. Incidentally, he is the first one to use ἀκροβυστία to describe the person or the condition, rather than the body part (first one in writing; clearly it was probably already in use in spoken language). But the addition of the λέγω participles seems to add to Paul's description of the gap here between Jew and Gentile.

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Henry Sun

Author

Top Contributor

Gary Manning So am I interpreting you correctly to say that you don't think there is a derogatory connotation in Eph 2:11?

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Gary Manning

Admin

Top Contributor

Henry Sun Correct. But it's hard to be sure, since we lack prior use of the term to refer to the category of people. Rather than derogatory, I think Paul is highlighting the distinction and even enmity, as in the rest of this passage. Sort of "you who were labeled outsiders by those who were labeled insiders."

Screenshot of my conversation with Professor Gary Manning about the possibly inflammatory connotation of the noun "uncircumcised" in Ephesians 2:11.