

A DWELLING PLACE FOR GOD

(09/10/17)

Scripture Lesson: Ephesians 2:1-22

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him 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.”

This week we are continuing to explore some of the apostle Paul’s insights as revealed in his *Letter to the Ephesians*. Paul writes this letter to his parishioners from prison, exhorting them to hold fast in the faith. At the time this letter was written, the Roman authorities had begun their persecution of Christians. It was a time of crisis. The theme of life and death shines through strongly in the second chapter of this book.

In the first part of the letter, Paul starkly contrasts the opposites of death and life. He tells his parishioners that they were dead because of their sin. They had become lost or absorbed in the materialistic values of their culture. So Paul is also speaking to us.

Paul tells us that we can be physically alive; we can be mentally alive; but we can be spiritually dead. He reminds us that there is a “dark spirit” that is alive and at work in the world. We can picture this as a spirit outside us, a dark force that roams the earth. We can also picture this as a spirit inside us, a force that can take us over and lead us to think, feel, say and do things that are contrary to the teachings and the will of Jesus.

Paul reminds us that there is a mean spirit that dwells within us. There is a self-centered spirit that dwells within us. There is a cold, unfeeling, and uncompassionate spirit within. I think of the ending of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals as an example of the work of this dark spirit. As Paul puts it, we are often “children of wrath,” behaving like little children who become angry when things don’t go their way.

Paul then reminds his listeners that God loves us. He tells us that God shows mercy toward us. He tells us that God calls us forth into fullness of life. He tells us that God makes us alive with the spirit of Christ, that he makes us alive “in” the spirit of Christ. This God “raises us up.”

As we noted in Chapter 1, when Paul uses the term “redemption” or “redeemed” he means that something is restored to its proper place. Paul says that we are redeemed

by the grace of God. By grace we are saved through faith. This redemption is not of our own doing; it is the gift of God.

In the first section of this letter Paul enumerates the blessings that come to those who are “in Christ Jesus.” In the second section he calls attention to the disabilities that come to those who are without Christ. Those who are without Christ are basically not in a covenantal relationship with God; they are strangers to God. This is why they have no hope either in this life or in relation to immortality, a life after death.

The metaphor that Paul uses to illuminate the blessings of a life in Christ is the metaphor of life and death. These are two very different states of being.

To be dead is to have no feeling. To be dead spiritually is to be apathetic, to have no empathy or compassion. It is to be cold and rigid. This leads to decay. The dark spirit comes upon us when we are self-centered rather than Christ-centered.

To be alive is to have feeling. To be alive spiritually is to care. People who are alive feel empathy and compassion. They are warm and flexible. They grow. The spirit of God, the spirit of life comes upon us when we are Christ-centered or other-centered. It brings with it an experience of joy.

Paul tells us that Christ brings us alive. The experience of Christ within us leads to a transformed life. This transformed life finds expression in good works. Paul tells us that we are actually “created for good works.” He says “we are what he has made us: created in Christ Jesus for good works.” Both as individuals and as a church, we are called to do God’s work in the world.

I recently read about a man who killed his girlfriend and then killed himself. On his blog he wrote that he was not afraid to die because then he would be with Jesus in heaven. According to the teaching of his church, salvation has nothing to do with the way we live our life. If entrance into heaven were based on the kind of life we live, no one would be admitted. From this he concluded that it doesn’t matter to God what kind of life he lived. If he believed in Jesus, when he died he would go to heaven.

Paul never says that it doesn’t matter how we live our life. He tells us that as individuals and as a church we are “created in Christ Jesus for good works;” we are created to be “the fulfillment of Christ.” Faith, the quality of our relationship with God

through Christ, will invariably give rise to good works. I don't see how the killing of innocent people or turning our backs on children fits into this doctrine, this theology.

Paul tells us that when we live our life as strangers to God, we forfeit the blessings he enumerated in chapter 1. I don't think we can ever be separated from the love of God that is present to us in Christ Jesus. I don't think we can ever be separated from God. I can't imagine a state of being within me, or even a place in the universe, no matter how dark, where God is not.

Yet I know that we can *feel* separated from God. We can feel lost and alone. People who are struggling with depression often feel cut off from God, adrift in an uncaring universe. They cannot experience the presence of God within them. This is why depressed people often feel so guilty, why they feel so helpless and hopeless, why they experience so little joy. When you are depressed you are not cut off from God, not separated from God, but it *feels* as if you were. This is precisely when you are most apt to make ill-advised and self-destructive decisions.

In verse 12, Paul calls his parishioners to "remember when you were without Christ." This would apply to all those who had not even heard of Christ let alone experience his presence until the Word was brought to them. What Paul is saying can also be true of us in those moments, which may last much longer than a moment, when we feel that we are "without Christ," when we can not feel his comforting presence and guidance. Paul tells us that when this happens we will experience an absence of hope. This is especially true when we are depressed: we feel helpless to change the present, and because we cannot change the present we feel no hope for the future.

Now we come to verses that speak clearly to us today. Paul tells us that Christ breaks down the walls that divide us. This is true on a social level. There are walls that divide us from our brothers and sisters: walls of race, sexual orientation, even religion, walls that find expression in prejudice and discrimination. They lead us to view "the other" as the enemy rather than as a child of God, as a part of God and also a part of us.

Paul, who was speaking specifically of the theological and cultural walls that divided Jew and Gentile, tells his followers that Christ breaks down these walls. We witness to this teaching when we sing the hymn "In Christ There Is No East or West."

Paul tells us that the spirit of Christ breaks down the walls that give rise to hostility between groups, leading to the creation “of one new humanity.”

When we keep Christ, when we keep God on the margins of our life, we become strangers to God. Paul then articulates the glorious affirmation that we are no longer strangers and aliens from each other and within ourselves. He tells us we are “citizens with the saints” and “members of the household of God.” Paul says,

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him 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.

Paul is calling us as individuals and as a church to be “members of the household of God.” He calls us to open ourselves to the spirit of Christ, to “see with the eyes of our heart enlightened” that we might come to love our brothers and sisters, even those who declare themselves to be our enemies. We are to become a dwelling place for God.

If we become a “dwelling place for God,” if God dwells within our heart, we can never be alone. Just as there are dark forces present within us, the saints are also present as spiritual realities within us, spiritual forces that can do battle with the dark forces that seek to overwhelm us.

It is not just the church that is the dwelling place of God. Each one of us is a dwelling place for God. For those of us who are Christians, Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone of this dwelling. It is his presence that joins us together, that keeps us together even when things seem to be falling apart.

If we open ourselves to Paul’s teaching we will come to discover the real meaning of the dichotomy of life and death, and we will know what it means to truly live.

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