

05. Ephesians 2



Ephesians 2

Part I of the body of the Letter - God's plan revealed

Gentiles are called to be united to Jews, living Christ's life in the Church

Paul is now ready to focus on the key points which he wishes to develop in this letter. As we will see, he begins by reflecting on the amazing way in which God has shown his love by sharing with us the glory that he has given to the risen Christ (see 2:4-10). To prepare his readers he reminds them of what their life was like before they came to believe in Jesus and to experience true 'life'.

Ephesians 2:1-2

You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.

Paul is following contemporary thought in speaking of the ‘the ruler of the power of the air’, ‘the spirit’.

Ephesians 2:3

All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and thoughts and we were by nature [φύσις] children of wrath, like everyone else.

In his letter to the Romans (7:14-24), Paul describes the psychological state of living in this way. Here he simply states that before God lovingly gave us the Messiah and a share in his risen life, this is what the human condition was like for ‘all of us’: Jew and Gentile alike.

This is the way it still is for ‘those who are disobedient’: who fail to hear and follow God’s word. ‘Those who are of the flesh cannot please God’ (Romans 8:8), and ‘in following our sinful passions we were bearing fruit for death’ (Romans 7:5).

children of wrath

In the Hebrew Scriptures suffering was understood as God's punishment for sin. God was pictured as being angry when we fail to obey. 'Wrath' referred to the suffering which they assumed was inflicted by God who was imagined as being angry. In the New Testament 'wrath of God' is not projecting anger onto God. It is 'of God' in the sense that it describes the human situation of those who have cut themselves off from God.

'God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Thessalonians 5:9).

'The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth' (Romans 1:18).

'By your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed' (Romans 2:5).

Catholic Catechism

‘To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from God for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called “hell” (n.1033).

‘The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God in whom alone we human beings can possess the life and happiness for which we were created and for which we long’ (n.1035).

‘God predestines no one to go to hell [= It is not God's prior will for anyone to go to hell]. To go to hell, a wilful turning away from God (mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end ... The Church implores the mercy of God who does not want “any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9)’ (n.1037).

Ephesians 2:4

God, who is rich in mercy [ἐλεος], out of the great love with which God loved us

The Greek word ἐλεος is used to translate three different Hebrew words.

1. ḥanan, which speaks of God's gracious care and all the ways in which God looks after us:

‘**Gracious** is the Lord, and righteous’ (Psalm 116:5).

‘The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be **gracious** to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace’ (Numbers 6:24-26).

2. raḥam, which speaks of the tenderness of God's love:

‘I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us, and the great favour to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his **tender mercy**, according to the abundance of his covenant love’ (Isaiah 63:7).

‘The covenant love of the Lord never ceases, his **tender mercies** never come to an end; they are new every morning’ (Lamentations 3:22-23).

3. There are innumerable texts in which ἐλεος translates ḥesed which places the focus on God's faithfulness to the commitment of love which he has made to us:

‘I will not take my **steadfast love** from David’ (2 Samuel 7:15).

‘I the Lord your God show **steadfast love** to the thousandth generation’ (Exodus 20:6).

‘With everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer ... my **steadfast love** shall not depart from you’ (Isaiah 54:8,10).

Ephesians 2:4-6

God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love (ἀγάπη) with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together [συνζωοποίησεν] **with the Messiah** – by grace you have been saved – and raised us up together [συνεγείρω] and seated us together [συνκαθίζω] **in the heavenly places in the Messiah, Jesus.**

Paul writes: ‘just as the Messiah was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life’ (Romans 6:4). The new life is a sharing in the risen life of Jesus. Paul speaks of this experience as one of being ‘raised with the Messiah’ (Colossians 3:1), and he writes: ‘when you were dead in trespasses ... God made you alive together [συνζωοποίησεν] with him’ (Colossians 2:13).

by grace you have been saved

Here Paul goes further: we are already seated with Christ in heaven, reigning with him in glory. We are already living ‘in the heavenly places’ (see 1:3), because he is there, and he is our life (see Colossians 3:3-4). In this sense Paul can say that we ‘have been saved’.

In his Corinthian correspondence, he speaks of Christians as those who ‘are being saved’ (1 Corinthians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 2:15).

To the Romans he speaks of our confidence, because of what Jesus has done, that we ‘will be saved through him’ (Romans 5:9).

Here Paul says that we ‘have been saved’.

Ephesians 2:7

so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in the Messiah, Jesus.

Paul cannot hold back the words that tumble over each other as he speaks of the abundant and endless love (**‘the riches of his grace’**), that God is pouring out upon us **‘in the Messiah, Jesus’**, and will continue to pour out **‘in the ages to come’**.

Ephesians 2:8

For by grace you have been saved through faith

Final salvation is still to come. We still can fall from grace. Heaven is assured from the point of view of God's grace, but we are still able to reject the call and not be saved at the final judgment. We still have to make this salvation our own, as will become especially clear from the second half of this letter.

Paul wants to emphasise here God's magnificent eternal design that is above and beyond time. From the eternal perspective it has all already happened. It is all there waiting to be fully enjoyed, and we are already experiencing the first-fruits of this salvation in the life we are living in Jesus.

Ephesians 2:8-9

By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

God is love. The ‘**gift of God**’ is offered to us freely and graciously out of love. It is not forced upon us, nor is our receiving of it automatic. Though we cannot earn it by anything we do, or gain it by our human striving, there is something that we need to do, and that is to welcome God’s gracious gift ‘**through faith**’.

Faith is not something we do. What we are to do is open our hearts to welcome God’s love. Paul is always stressing the fact that our faith is Jesus’ gift to us of his faith, his ‘believing’, his choice to be within the love that God has for him. Sharing Jesus’ life we share his Spirit, his love; we share his faith. As he said to the Galatians: ‘the only thing that counts is faith working through love’ (Galatians 5:6).

‘Faith’ in Ephesians

‘I have heard of your faith in (ἐν) the Lord Jesus’ (1:15).

“By grace you have been saved through faith’ (2:8)

‘We have access to God in confidence through Jesus’ faith’ (3:12).

‘I pray that the Messiah may dwell in your hearts through faith,
as you are being rooted and grounded in love’ (3:17).

‘There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism’ (4:5).

‘Faith’ in Ephesians continued

‘Building up the body of the Messiah until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of the Messiah’ (4:13).

‘the shield of faith’ (6:16).

‘Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus the Messiah’ (6:23).

Ephesians 2:10

For we are what he has made us, created in the Messiah Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

We are God's creation' (ποίημα, 'poem', 'work of art'). God has given us this new life 'in the Messiah Jesus' so that what we do will be good. We are not to forget that our good deeds are the fruit of grace. As Paul will say later, it is 'his power at work within us' (3:20) that enables us to do 'what he has prepared beforehand to be our way of life' (see 1:4)..

“God creates you. Therefore, if you are God's work, wait patiently for the hand of your artist ... Offer him your heart soft and pliable, and preserve the form which the artist forms out of you; preserve it by keeping yourself moist, so that you do not dry out and harden and lose the trace of his fingers” (Irenaeus *Against the Heresies* 2.299).

Ephesians 2:11-13

So 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 [idol terminology] – remember that you were at that time without the Messiah, being aliens from the commonwealth [πολιτεία] of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God [ἄθεοι] in the world. But now in the Messiah Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of the Messiah. [see 1:7]

In the previous section, Paul spoke first of the way things used to be for everyone (2:1-3), only in order to describe what all now enjoy in Jesus (2:4-10). He follows the same pattern here, speaking first of the way things used to be for the Gentiles (2:11-12), only in order to state what things are like for them now that they have been ‘**brought near by the blood of the Messiah**’ (2:13).

Ephesians 2:14-15

For 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. He has **abolished** (καταργεω) **the law** with its commandments and ordinances

By making his death a gift of love for all, he welcomes all, whatever our culture, to enjoy his love-communion with God. Formerly we were divided, each group hostile to the other. When Paul focuses on the law as the source of this hostility, he is not disparaging the cultural or religious value of Judaism. He is saying that the law was, in fact, a 'dividing wall' between Gentiles and Jews, and that it is not the defining factor in being in communion with God. It has been '**abolished**' because it has reached its goal and has been transcended by Jesus, who picked up all that was of value in the law and set aside all in it that limited our access to divine communion.

‘When the complete comes, the partial will **come to an end**’ (1Corinthians 13:10).

‘The ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses’ face because of the glory of his face, a glory now **set aside**’ (2Corinthians 3:7).

‘Grace has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who **abolished** death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel’ (2 Timothy 1:10).

In the new community of love which shares the life of the risen Jesus: ‘there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised ... but the Messiah is all and in all’ (Colossians 3:11).

Ephesians 2:15

that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace.

Paul continually insists that it is essential that Christians live in a communion that is characterised by love. It has to be so since there is only ‘one God’ and ‘one Lord’ (see 1 Corinthians 8:6).

Paul speaks of ‘one new humanity’. This is more than a new social entity formed from previously separate groups. It is a new creation, born of Jesus’ love and existing only ‘in himself’:

‘For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!’ (Galatians 6:15).

‘So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new’ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Ephesians 2:16

that he might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility in himself.

Speaking of the sinful human condition in which we are alienated from God, Paul wrote to the Romans: 'While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son' (Romans 5:10).

Reconciliation encompasses the whole of creation: 'Through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things ... by making peace through the blood of his cross. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death' (Colossians 1:20-22).

Here in Ephesians, Paul focuses precisely on how reconciliation with God 'through the cross' has brought about reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles 'in one body', the Church.

Ephesians 2:17-18

So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

Verse seventeen reminds us that Christ's whole life was a proclamation of peace, and that this peace is central to the gospel. Paul's words echo those of Isaiah:

‘How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns’ (Isaiah 52:7).

‘Peace, peace, to the far and the near, says the Lord’ (Isaiah 57:19).

Ephesians 2:16, 18

‘that he might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross ... for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.’

It is because we are ‘in one Spirit’ that we are ‘in one body’. Paul is speaking of the ‘one Spirit’ that is the life of the body created by the Messiah. This Spirit is the love that is the bond of communion between Jesus and the Father. It is this Spirit poured out upon the whole of humanity from the heart of Jesus on the cross that binds all of us to the same Father in the same communion of love. It is this Spirit that makes us the body of the Messiah: ‘For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit’ (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Ephesians 2:19

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are co-citizens [συμπολιτης] with the saints and also members of the household of God

Paul picks up what he said earlier about the Gentiles being ‘aliens from the commonwealth (πολιτεία) of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of the promise’ (2:12). He went on to say that things were different now thanks to Jesus (2:13). Having spelt out what the Messiah has done (2:14-18), he states here that they are now ‘co-citizens’ (compare 2:5-6) with the saints’. Just as the Jews have inherited the promises by being members of the Christian church (the ‘saints’), so have the Gentiles. He also said earlier that formerly they were living ‘without God in the world’ (2:12). Now they are at home with God, for they are ‘members of God’s household’.

Ephesians 2:20-22

built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with the Messiah Jesus himself as the capstone. In him the whole structure is joined together [συναρμολογεω] and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together [συνοικοδομεω] into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit.

Having spoken of Jesus as being ‘head over all things’ (1:22), Paul speaks of him here as the stone which is at the highest point of the building, crowning the whole edifice. The church in which Jews and Gentiles are ‘**built together**’ reaches up into the heavens where Jesus its head is the source of its unity, life and organisation. All the members of the Church are living towards being with him for ever in glory, for the church ‘is his body, the fullness of him who fills all things’ (1:23).

Ephesians 2:21

²¹In him the whole structure is joined together [συναρμολογεω]

The verb ‘joined together’ [συναρμολογεω] contains the root of the English word ‘harmony’. It is not any kind of growth that is important for the church: it is growth ‘**in him**’, and therefore growth that is in him who ‘is our peace’; it is growth that is harmonious, that respects the differences between Gentiles and Jews while binding them together in love. This kind of growth can happen only ‘**in him**’.

A reflection on Ephesians 2

As we look back over chapter two, we are struck with Paul's insistence on the necessity of Jews and Gentiles respecting each other's differences, but living together and growing together in love. This concern shows through in all his letters, but it is particularly evident here as he focuses on reconciliation and harmony. It is striking that he speaks of Christ as 'our peace' (2:14). He calls the Christian community a 'holy temple'. He opened his letter with a hymn of praise, with the refrain 'for the praise of God's glory'. Now he has spoken of a growing together in harmony.

Though Paul himself does not explicitly use the comparison, we are being faithful to his thought if we think of the church in a musical metaphor. Like an orchestra, the church is a celebration of difference. In an orchestra each instrument has its own special character. If the music is to have harmony, each group of instruments must not only be true to itself, but must be sensitive to each of the others. So it is to be in the church whose life is ‘**for the praise of God’s glory**’. The music that is to rise to God from his holy temple is to be the music of love, the love of the heart of Jesus, the love which the risen Jesus enjoys in the intimacy of his Father’s eternal embrace, the love that God has ‘poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit’ (Romans 5:5).