

Living As a New Community Because of the Cross **Part 2**

Pictures of the Church – Ephesians 2:19-22

Introduction

Have you ever tried to do something, not having the right tools in which to do it, but you try anyway?

I think of this when it comes to the Christian life. How often do we try to live this life with God, but we fail because we are not getting a hold of what God has given to us in Jesus Christ?

So that this does not happen, God lays out before us in the first three chapters of Ephesians all that He has done through His Son, Jesus Christ. He tells us about an inheritance, and gifts, and life that are offered to all those who believe in Jesus Christ. Do you want to experience all the life that God has purposed for you? Then root your faith in Jesus Christ.

Now last week we began to see what Christ did on the cross to not only transform our personal lives, but also to transform our relationships with one another. This truth is set in the context of a humanity that was hopelessly fragmented. But when Christ gave his life for us He began to reconcile people to God from every people group and He made them one body.

And as we have become one new body reconciled to God, in verses 19-22 we are given three pictures of what God has made us which help us understand how our relationship with God and one another has been transformed. With each description we get a picture of who we now are as the Church of Jesus Christ. We are now *citizens* together in God's kingdom, we are *members together in God's household*, and we are together *the dwelling of God*.

The fact that we share these things together is very strong here. What one person is in the church the other is, because Jesus Christ has created ONE new body, and everyone shares equally in the benefits of His death.

Especially for those who have a sense of how far away you were from God, God is telling you that you have been brought near and you...now...belong. You're included. You now belong to God's kingdom, God's family, and are a part of God's dwelling.

Now let's look at each of these pictures and what they mean for us as the body of Christ.

1. We are fellow citizens in God's kingdom.

First of all, we are told that we are fellow citizens. Jesus Christ has shed His blood, and when we believe in Him He removes our sins from before God, so that we are no longer strangers and aliens, but are made citizens. But citizens of what? Phil. 3:20 tells us, "Our citizenship is in heaven." Above everything else we are now citizens of a different world, we are citizens of heaven, and what this really means is that we are citizens of God's kingdom. Matthew in his gospel calls God's kingdom primarily the "kingdom of heaven" because heaven is the place of God's throne and everything that happens in God's kingdom originates from heaven and will culminate in heaven.

If you and I are going to be a citizen of some place, with all of its rights and privileges, what greater place to be a citizen of than heaven? Heaven is where God is, heaven is where He rules. The significance of having our citizenship in heaven or being a citizen of God's kingdom is that we now live under the protection of God who is sovereignly carrying out His purpose for our lives, fulfilling His Word and promises for His glory. We also have all the rights of those who belong in this kingdom, for example, having open access anytime through Christ to the Father. What an amazing privilege it is to be a citizen in God's kingdom. And to think that at one time we were strangers and aliens...wow...what has happened to us?

Now this is our primary identity. Whatever might have identified us before is now secondary. We belong to Christ and are now citizens of God's kingdom FIRST, but Americans or Iranians second, black or white or Latino second. Everything else is second, and in reality is in last place, because what primarily identifies us is that Christ has shed His blood on our behalf and we now belong to Him, and now He has made us citizens of God's kingdom. To be a citizen is to now belong to a society that shares in all the protection, rights, and privileges that are ours through Christ.

2. We are members of God's household

Now as we move on to the second picture of who we are in Christ, the imagery becomes even more intimate. We have not only been made citizens but we have been made members of God's household, we are a member of God's family. John 1:12 teaches us that by faith in Christ, we have been given the right to become children of God.

This imagery teaches us that we now have been brought into the closest relationship possible with Almighty God. He is our father and we are His children. God now sees and treats us as He sees and treats His Son, with infinite love.

When Jesus was praying to the Father the night before His own crucifixion He describes in John 17:22-23 what His mission was with His disciples. He says, "The glory that you have given me I have given them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me." This is the love that you and I have experienced. Even though you and I are just creatures, and rebellious creatures at that (I mean, we have defamed the name of God and there is nothing worthy in us); but despite this, God has loved us even as He has loved His Son, and as a result, He gave His Son to die in our place.

And having shown us this amazing love, Christ then tells the Father what He plans to continue to do. He says, "I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

Christ is working to reveal the greatness of God to us, so that we may experience in our heart the measure of God's love for us, the same kind of love which He has for His Son. Christ is presently working to this end. Let me know if you can comprehend this, because I can't. But I know this, everything that you and I have experienced in this life since we have come to faith in Jesus Christ testifies to this very truth: We have been made children of God and He loves us even as He loves His Son, Jesus.

This is what gives Cindy and me confidence and peace as she once again faces cancer. God has been so faithful. We have tasted so much of His love that even as we face great adversity, we know that we will see the greatness of our God and we will experience His amazing love. We know this.

3. We are a part of a spiritual temple.

At first, it is hard to appreciate this imagery, but as we probe into this it is quite amazing.

We are taken back to the Temple, the place where the center of life with God happened for the people of Israel. It was at the Temple where the people would meet God, bringing their animal sacrifices and experiencing atonement for their sin. Here is where priests would proclaim God's Word and choirs and orchestras would make His praise great. The Temple was also the place where God manifested His presence and glory as a fiery cloud rested over the Ark of the Covenant inside the Holy of Holies.

So when Paul talks about our growing into a holy temple in the Lord, it brings us back to consider the very essence of man, and how our lives are encompassed by God, Himself, now that Christ has redeemed us. Nothing is more significant about our salvation than the reality that the divide between God and us has been resolved and we now have been made one with God, again. There is no greater longing in the heart of man than to have peace with God and be one with Him. The imagery we have here is that God has made His dwelling in the middle of us. But again, it isn't just me as an individual with God, it is us as a holy temple being built together. So let's look at what is described here.

A. The foundation is the apostles and prophets

First of all, we are told that this temple is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and what Paul means by this is that the church is built upon their teaching. The apostles were ones who were taught by Jesus Christ, and John 14:26 says, the Holy Spirit would teach them all things and would bring to their remembrance all that Jesus had said to them. And it is for this reason that they are the foundation. They are simply the agents used by God to reveal what our Savior and Lord taught. And the prophets worked in a similar manner to the Apostles. As God spoke, they spoke, so their teaching became the foundation for believers of all ages, first, to the Jews, and now to us, as God's new covenant people.

What an important qualification we have here. Folks, our lives are built upon a foundation, and that foundation is the revelation from God, which God over 1,500 years revealed Himself, His purposes, why you and I have been made, what is wrong in us, and how we can both discover and know God, again, through His Son Jesus. God's Word is the foundation for our faith and lives.

B. Christ is the cornerstone

Second, we are told that in this living temple which God is building, Christ is the cornerstone. When we think of a cornerstone, today, we typically picture the ceremonial stone in the corner of the building in which items are placed (in case aliens invade our planet) and on which a date is stamped. But that is not what they had in mind here. When cornerstones really meant something, the cornerstone was the foundation stone for the whole building. For example, the cornerstone which formed the base for Herod's Temple in Jerusalem is about the size of a railroad box car and weighs 570 tons. Now that is a cornerstone. It is a stone which forms the foundation and position of all the other stones of the building. So it becomes the buildings strength and direction.

Peter T O'Brian in his commentary therefore concludes: "Paul seems to be making the following points: Christ is the vital cornerstone on whom the building is constructed....all is built on Christ, supported by Christ, and the lie or shape of the continuing building is determined by Christ, the cornerstone."

You want to know why we focus so much upon Christ and the glorious work of the cross? It is because He is the cornerstone. What He accomplished through His own life, death, and resurrection establishes everything that we have been made and that we will become. It is because His life was perfect that all righteousness has been fulfilled before God and that is my confidence of being accepted and loved by God. It is because He broke the power of sin and that I am united with Him in His death and resurrection that I have power to overcome sin. It is because I have been shown mercy from God through Jesus Christ that I am compelled to show the same kind of mercy to others. We could go on and on. Christ is the cornerstone. He is the foundation. And we have nothing apart from Him.

C. We are being built together into a dwelling of God

Now there are other descriptions about this temple that if we had time we should consider, such as, it is called a "holy" temple, and it is God who is building this temple; that is a great word of encouragement-God is personally building this thing perfectly fitting every piece together. But there is one more primary description of this temple that is so significant. We are told that this temple is being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

One of the most distinct characteristics of the Temple of Israel is that God manifested His presence there. God was tangibly communicating that He was there with His people when this fiery cloud rested over the Holy of Holies. They weren't alone. And we also see that wherever God manifested His presence people saw His glory, because God is full of glory.

It's in these two things that we find the true glory of the church. The church is God's habitation, a place where God intends to manifest His presence, a place where God intends to do works for His glory. And our text says that this is by the Spirit. Here is where we once again see the Godhead working in unison-the Father working, through the Son, and by the Holy Spirit.

Here is the exhortation that I see from this description: The church becomes an empty house. We become a people who acknowledge faith in Christ but we are not really a people where God's presence is evident. And I'm not just talking about miracles here, which I believe still happen today, but I am talking about a work of God that is very real and dynamic. If we are, indeed, the dwelling of God, we will experience His presence and see the work of His hand. We will see it in people coming to faith in Jesus Christ, in a devotion and purity in our lives. Wives will see changes take place in their husband and husbands will see this happen in their wife. Children will be coming to faith in Christ and growing to have a heart of wisdom and a passion for God. In particular, we will see evidence of the Spirit's living influences in our midst.

This is God dwelling among us; a habitation where His presence is evident and His glory is made known. In some ways this is happening in Living Hope, and I commend you for your faith in the gospel and love for God. And so we do see His work. But how much more does God want to do? Some of this is determined by the sovereign work of God. God is not always fully revealing His glory, and there is a mystery here.

But as I am reading through Scripture it is evident that God does reveal His glory more as His people set themselves apart to Him alone, walk by faith in His Word, and will not take one step without the presence of God. In a way, they insist that He dwell among them, and a part of this is that they simply desire God.

Close/Application

Now this morning, we are going to lay this desire before God as we close. We are going to spend some time in prayer pursuing God for this. And maybe God will visit us with His presence in a fresh way, maybe God will move upon our hearts. I will let God decide that.

But I want to close by encouraging us in a particular direction. With each image in our text there is a growing intensity. The first image pictures a king living *among* His subjects, the second a father living in the same house *with* his children, but here the Spirit of God inhabits the temple the way blood indwells the body. And there is not only a growing intensity and intimacy pictured in our relationship with God, but we see this growing intensity in our relationship with one another as well. We are not only people who share the same citizenship, but we are brothers and sisters in the same family wiping each others noses and lovingly responding to each others messes. And now we are pictured as building blocks being fitted and cemented together where God dwells in our midst.

Now here is what we should ask ourselves. Can you square these images with being a Christian who attends every Sunday morning and participates in worship and listens to preaching, but never takes his relationship with God and each other any further? Can you pat yourself on the back because you are here or in some church most Sundays of the year? Do you think that your consistent attendance is enough? I don't think so.

Well, what if we add to our attendance our involvement with the church in which we go to our ladies and men's meetings, and the parent-teen night, so we are actively involved in the functions of the church? Does this square with what we see here? With these images, not at all?

I ask that you consider if you have gotten involved enough with a church until two things take place: First, is personal accountability? And second, is corporate spirituality?

Now let's think about these two things. First, personal accountability. When you become a part of a family, and it starts with marriage, you become accountable.

I wasn't married until I was 25 years old, and I know that this is young compared to today's standard, but I had already gotten used to my independence. If I wanted to buy something, I worked hard, and I was able to buy it. But I remember when Cindy and I were early in our marriage, I went out

and bought a new stereo system for our house. I didn't even think about talking with my wife, because in my mind it was for both of us (at least that is what I was telling myself). And sure enough, when I brought it home and showed my wife the stereo, in a very gentle way my wife said, "Wow, you just went out and bought that all by yourself?"

Then I realized what I had just done; and I wasn't sure I liked this new arrangement. But hey, it was too late, I was already married.

Unless you are being helped to see your independence and your unilateral decision making, I'm not sure you are involved enough in the church. 30+ one another commands. God's Word says, for example in Hebrews 3:13-"Exhort one another daily...that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Does anyone in the church know your besetting sin, one, because you have sought to be transparent and told them, and/or you have spent so much time with them that they can see them; and then, you have last of all given them a green light to talk about these sins? In a sense, you've given them a hunting license so that they can come after you and ask the difficult questions. Do you have that kind of relationship with others in the church?

One of the problems we have in our culture is that we have lived so isolated in relationship with one another that something like this seems extreme, but the truth is you and I can't grow in the way God intended apart from this kind of intimate, family relationship.

And secondly, do we seek a corporate spirituality? It is fascinating especially in the last picture that we are being built together as a temple. It is only as each block is being fitted together that we become a dwelling for God. It is together that we become a habitation for God. It is together that we experience the presence of God.

Now what is corporate spirituality? In personal accountability we are talking about our own lives, but in corporate spirituality we are talking about our life with God. We are praying with people. We are letting them see our relationship with God. We are letting them see our heart toward God.

Now I know that men have a more difficult time with this than women, so yes, men we especially need to hear this, but we all have a problem with this. We don't like people seeing our weak prayer life. We don't like others seeing too much of our heart. But we need each other to grow spiritually.

And I am not just talking about one on one here, but I am talking about the wonderful dynamic of a small group of people, each one using their unique character and gifts and perspective to care for one another. No one human being can bring out everything in another human being. It takes a community, a whole circle of friends in real relationship, with a variety of gifts, in real pursuit of God.

CS Lewis in his book, *The Four Loves* says, "In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself, I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity. I need other lights than my own to show all of my friend's facets." And he goes on to lament how the death of one friend now kept him from seeing the reaction of another friend as the three of them interacted with each other. And even though, because this person died he now has this other friend more to himself, the reality was he saw less in this friend than he did when the other man was alive.

Each one of us brings out different facets in each other, and this is the wonderful dynamic of a small group, and also the wonderful benefit of corporate spirituality. Do you have relationships with people in the church where this corporate spirituality is taking place? God has made us member of His family and a vital part of His dwelling so that together we might experience corporate spirituality and become the fullness of Christ.