

LESSON TWO**ONCE FAR OFF, BUT NOW NEAR
&
THE BREAKING DOWN OF THE MIDDLE WALL OF PARTITION**

Scripture Reading:

Eph. 2:11 Therefore remember that once you, the Gentiles in the flesh, those who are called uncircumcision by that which is called circumcision in the flesh made by hands,

Eph. 2:12 That you were at that time apart from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of the promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

Eph. 2:13 But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have become near in the blood of Christ.

Eph. 2:14 For He Himself is our peace, He who has made both one and has broken down the middle wall of partition, the enmity,

Eph. 2:15 Abolishing in His flesh the law of the commandments in ordinances, that He might create the two in Himself into one new man, so making peace,

QUESTIONS:

SECTION 1

1. What did sin do to our human body?
2. What did the circumcision do to Abraham and his descendants?
3. Give an example of a necessary procedure that legalised God's promise to binding covenant.

SECTION 2

1. What is the "world"? How is it in contrast to the commonwealth of Israel?
2. What was our status before we were saved?
3. What saves us from our old status? What is our new position/status?

SECTION 3

1. What does the law of the commandments in ordinances refer to? What is the difference between it and the moral laws?
2. What are the three main columns/ordinances of Judaism? Why were they broken down?
3. What is the problem that arises in the church when we hold onto ordinances? Give personal examples if you have any.

SECTION 4

1. How did Christ break down the middle wall of partition?
2. If we experience the breaking down of the middle wall of partition in us, what type of church life will we have? Recite the 4 aspects with your group.
3. Why did Christ abolish the law of commandments in ordinances "in His flesh"?

[Section 1]

ONCE FAR OFF BUT NOW NEAR

Ephesians 2:1-3 gives us a picture of our condition by nature. ...verses 11 and 12 portray our position according to our status. Because of our sinful nature, we were in a condition of death; according to our status, we were far off from God, Christ, God's kingdom, God's blessings, God's promise, and everything related to God.

I. THE GENTILES IN THE FLESH

The first point concerning our status is that we were the Gentiles in the flesh (v. 11).

The man whom God created to fulfill His purpose was pure, without sin or any kind of negative mixture. However, sin, the evil nature of Satan, entered into man through the fall. When the evil nature of Satan entered into man, first, it caused man's body to become the flesh, full of lusts, and eventually, caused the whole being of man to become the flesh. In a very real sense, God created only the body of man, not the flesh. But when sin came into man's body, the body was changed in nature and became the flesh. The body was the pure vessel created by God; the flesh is the corrupted body. God did not create the lusts in man's body. The lusts came from sin. According to the Bible, eventually, fallen man in his entirety became the flesh. Fallen people live according to the flesh, not according to the spirit, the conscience, or reason. Because in the eyes of God fallen man has become flesh, the Bible says, "Because out of the works of the law no flesh shall be justified before Him" (Rom. 3:20). The word *flesh* in this verse denotes a fallen person who lives according to the flesh and has become flesh.

Because his whole being had become the flesh, man was damaged and thus prevented from fulfilling God's purpose. Since mankind as a whole could not fulfill His purpose, God came in to call out of fallen mankind a race—Abraham and his descendants—for the accomplishment of His purpose. God then commanded Abraham and his descendants to be circumcised, that is, to put away the flesh. Thus, circumcision indicates that God's chosen people must put aside their flesh. The fact that the called race was circumcised meant that they were separated from fallen mankind and delivered out of the fallen condition. Circumcision made a tremendous distinction between them and the rest of mankind. The circumcised people were called "the

circumcision," those who were separated from the fallen situation. The rest of mankind was called "the uncircumcision," those who remained in the fallen state. Because Abraham and his descendants, the called race, were circumcised, those who remained in the fallen state became the Gentiles in the flesh. We were in this category before we were in Christ.

II. UNCIRCUMCISION

Ephesians 2:11 says that the Gentiles in the flesh are "called uncircumcision by that which is called circumcision in the flesh made by hands." The words *uncircumcision* and *circumcision* in this verse both apply to people; they do not refer to actions. "The circumcision" are those who are circumcised, and "the uncircumcision" are those who are not circumcised.

III. APART FROM CHRIST

Verse 12 says that we "were at that time apart from Christ." Christ, in whom all of God's blessings to His chosen people are embodied, came out of Israel, the circumcised people. Since we, the uncircumcised Gentiles, were separated from Israel, we were apart from Christ, having nothing to do with Christ.

IV. ALIENATED FROM THE COMMONWEALTH OF ISRAEL

Verse 12 also says that we were "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel." *The commonwealth* here refers to the citizenship, the civil rights, of God's chosen people, including God's ruling, blessing, and presence. Through the fall, mankind lost all the rights that God intended for man in his creation. God called Abraham and through circumcision brought His chosen people back to all these rights. But we, as uncircumcised Gentiles, still remained alienated from such rights.

V. STRANGERS TO THE COVENANTS OF THE PROMISE

According to verse 12, we were also "strangers to the covenants of the promise." God's covenants are His promises. His promise is His word that He will freely do certain things for His chosen people. Such a word of promise is not a demand, a requirement, or a rebuke. The basic thought regarding God's promise is that it is His word. Apart from the word, there is no promise.

Eventually, God's promise became the binding covenant because it had been legalized by the necessary procedures. Both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, God's words of promise have been legalized to become a binding covenant. You may wonder what procedure was necessary to legalize God's promise into a covenant. The best illustration concerns the death of the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins. The Lord promised that He would shed His blood on the cross so that we might receive the forgiveness of sins. The promise of forgiveness was legalized by the shedding of His blood. Through this procedure His promise became a covenant.

No promise binds a person as much as a covenant does. ...All the words God spoke to His chosen people, from Abraham to Malachi, were His promises made into law to be His covenants. These words cover all the Old Testament from Genesis 12 to the end of the book of Malachi. Because these words have been legalized to be God's covenant, the Old Testament is called a *testament*, which is another term for *covenant*. The whole Bible is a covenant, and the Old Testament is the old covenant.

VI. HAVING NO HOPE

According to our status before we were saved, we had no hope. All of God's blessings are contained in Christ, all the civil rights are related to the nation of Israel, and all good things are promised in God's covenants. Since we were apart from Christ, were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and were strangers to the covenants of God's promise, we had no hope whatever.

[Section 2]

VII. WITHOUT GOD

As Gentiles in the flesh, we also were without God (Eph. 2:12). God is in Christ; He rules and moves in the commonwealth of Israel; and He bestows His blessings according to His covenants. When we were apart from Christ, the commonwealth of Israel, and the covenants of God's promise, we were without God. We did not have God as our enjoyment.

VIII. IN THE WORLD

Verse 12 also points out that we were "in the world." The world, which is the system of Satan, is in contrast to the commonwealth of Israel. The commonwealth of Israel was the kingdom of God, whereas the world is the kingdom of Satan.

Before we were saved, we lived in the world, where we had no hope, no expectation, and no God as our enjoyment; we were empty both in the present age and in relation to the coming age. That was the reason we pursued worldly entertainments. The worldly people today hunger after entertainment because they do not have God as their enjoyment. But now that we are in Christ, we have God as our enjoyment. How satisfying this enjoyment is!

A number of years ago some of my unsaved friends asked me why I did not indulge in certain gambling games. I told them that I was busy enjoying the Bible and had no time for or interest in such games. When I was asked why I did not go to movies, I replied that I had a heavenly movie theater, the church life, where I saw the heavenly vision. Because I have such a full enjoyment of God, there is no room in me for worldly entertainments. Today we are no longer in the world; we are in Christ, in the Spirit, and in the heavenlies.

Now we have a clear picture of our status before we were saved. We were in the position of being the Gentiles in the flesh, the uncircumcision, who were apart from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of the promise. We had no hope, and we were without God in the world. According to our nature, we were in death; and according to our status, we were aliens to God, Christ, God's promise, God's kingdom, and everything related to God. Because we were in such a position, we had no hope, and we did not have God as our enjoyment. In the world we pursued sinful entertainments in the attempt to find satisfaction. Nevertheless, the church has been brought forth out of such a deplorable condition and position. God has saved us out of that condition and has made us members of the Body of Christ. Now we are God's masterpiece, and we have a new condition, a new position, a new nature, and a new status.

Ephesians 2:13 says, "But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have become near in the blood of Christ." Verse 4 begins with the words *but God*, whereas this verse begins with the words *but now*.

In Ephesians 2 the apostle Paul presents two pictures: the picture of our condition according to our nature (vv. 1-3) and the picture of our position according to our status (vv. 11-12).

... Ephesians 2 reveals that we need not only to be saved out of our condition by God's grace but

also to be transferred out of our position by the redemption of Christ. When we are transferred out of our former position, we who once were far off are brought near.

God has saved us by working Himself into us to be our salvation. This is the saving grace that rescues us from the condition caused by our fallen nature. When life entered into us, we were saved from the condition of death. God also transferred us from our former position to a new position, where we have a new status.

IX. ONCE FAR OFF

In order to appreciate verse 13, we need to review the main points in verses 11 and 12. ... Because we were far off from Christ, from the commonwealth of Israel, and from the covenants of God's promise, we were far off from God and all His blessings.

X. BUT NOW NEAR

The precious words at the beginning of verse 13—*but now*—indicate that now we have hope and we have God. We are no longer in the world; instead, we are in Christ Jesus. In Christ we have been brought near.

But to what, or to whom, have we been brought near? We have been brought near not only to God but also to Christ, to Israel, and to God's promise. This equals being near to God and all His blessings. Hence, in the redeeming blood of Christ, we have become near both to God and to Israel.

We have pointed out that once we were far off from Christ, from the commonwealth of Israel, and from the covenants of God's promise. This equals being far off from God and all His blessings. But now in Christ we have been brought near to the very things from which we once were far off. We have been transferred out of our former status into Christ. Because our new position and status are in Christ, we are no longer far off.

Verse 13 specifically says that we have become near in the blood of Christ. This means that we are not only in the Messiah but also in the redemption accomplished by the Messiah. The Jews are still expecting the Messiah to come; however, they do not realize how much they need Messiah's redemption. The transfer from our former status to our new status in Christ actually was accomplished by the redemption of Christ. We were in a low status because we had fallen.

When Christ shed His blood on the cross for our redemption, His blood brought us out of that low status. Now that we have been transferred by the blood of Christ, we are in Christ and in the heavenlies. Therefore, we are near to God. We are also near to Israel, to God's promise, and to God's blessings. In other words, in this heavenly position we are one with God, one with the proper Israel, one with God's covenants, and one with God's blessings. Because we have been transferred out of the former status and into a new status, we can participate in all that is of God. This is our portion in Christ. ...Hallelujah, we have been saved and transferred! Chapter 2 presents a clear picture of how we have been saved from our miserable condition to be God's masterpiece and of how we have been transferred from our former position and status to become the new man, the commonwealth of God, the household of God, and the dwelling place of God. This is the revelation in Ephesians 2.

[Section 3]

THE BREAKING DOWN OF THE MIDDLE WALL OF PARTITION

I. CHRIST BEING OUR PEACE

Speaking of Christ, 2:14 says, "He Himself is our peace." The word "our" refers to both Jewish and Gentile believers. Through the blood of Christ we have been brought near both to God and to God's people. Christ, who has accomplished full redemption for both Jewish and Gentile believers, is Himself our peace, our harmony, in that He made both one. Due to the fall of mankind and the call of the chosen race, there was a separation between Israel and the Gentiles. Through Christ's redemption, this separation has been removed. Now the two are one in the redeeming Christ, who is the bond of oneness.

At present, there is still a separation between Israel and the rest of mankind. But according to God's economy, this separation has already been removed. In the eyes of God, it was taken away by the redemption of Christ on the cross. Now the Christ who has removed this separation is the bond of peace between Israel and the Gentiles.

II. CHRIST HAVING BROKEN DOWN THE MIDDLE WALL OF PARTITION

A. The Middle Wall of Partition Being the Law of the Commandments in Ordinances

Verse 14 speaks of the middle wall of partition. This middle wall of partition is “the law of the commandments in ordinances” (v. 15), which was given because of man’s flesh. The first of these ordinances was circumcision to cut off man’s flesh. Circumcision became the middle wall of partition because it made the main distinction between the Jews, the circumcision, and the Gentiles, the uncircumcision. Thus, the middle wall of partition, this distinction, became the enmity between the Jews and the Gentiles.

In the law of Moses there were two kinds of commandments: moral commandments, such as the commandments concerning stealing and the honoring of parents, and ritual commandments, such as the commandment concerning the keeping of the Sabbath. The commandments regarding circumcision and the eating regulations were ritual commandments, not moral commandments. In Leviticus 11 there are a number of commandments dealing with eating. These commandments surely have nothing to do with morality. A person’s morality is not affected by whether or not he eats something that is regarded as unclean.

The three main ordinances in Judaism were circumcision, the keeping of the Sabbath, and the dietary regulations. Every Israelite male had to be circumcised on the eighth day. Furthermore, the Jews were required to keep the Sabbath and to observe numerous regulations concerning their diet. These ordinances were the three main columns supporting Judaism. When the Lord Jesus was on earth, He broke down the column of Sabbath keeping. During the years of His ministry, He purposely broke the Sabbath by healing people on the Sabbath day. The Jews were very much offended by this. Then Peter took the lead to break the dietary regulations, although he did it in a rather weak way. Because he received the vision in Acts 10, Peter was forced to give up these regulations. However, in Galatians 2, Peter withdrew from eating with the Gentiles when certain men came down from Jerusalem. Nevertheless, through the breaking of the dietary regulations, another supporting column of Judaism was brought down. The Apostle Paul broke down the column of circumcision. In Philippians 3 he even used a new derogatory term, the “concision,” to replace the honorable term, “circumcision.” Furthermore, he referred to those of the circumcision as “dogs” and told the Philippians to “beware of dogs.” No wonder the Jews tried to kill him! In a sense he

was even worse in their eyes than Jesus, for circumcision was the leading ordinance in Judaism; it meant more to them than the Sabbath or the dietary regulations. Therefore, through the work of the Apostle Paul, the remaining structure of Judaism collapsed.

We need to keep in mind the difference between moral laws and ritual laws. The moral laws will never be abolished, not in this age nor in the millennium nor in eternity. The ritual commandments, on the contrary, are not permanent. Whether a person is allowed to eat pork or is required to keep the Sabbath or practice circumcision depends upon the age in which he lives. Any Jewish male born after Abraham and before John the Baptist was obligated to practice circumcision. Likewise, the commandments regarding the Sabbath and diet were in force during a particular time.

By the middle wall of partition Paul meant the law of commandments in ordinances, the ritual commandments related to circumcision, the Sabbath, and diet. The law of ritual commandments was a middle wall of partition between the Jews and the Gentiles. As we shall see, any ordinance or ritual is a middle wall of partition.

The ritual commandments were given firstly because of man’s flesh. Circumcision, for example, was required because man had become fleshly. Therefore, God commanded man to cut off the flesh. The ritual commandments concerning diet were given so that God’s chosen people would be careful to keep themselves clean. Animals that did not have cloven hoofs and that did not chew the cud were unclean. The cloven hoof symbolizes discernment in walking; it indicates that we should not walk in any place that is defiled. God’s people need to have a keen discernment in their daily walk. Furthermore, they need to learn to “chew the cud” by taking in God’s word and considering it again and again. Because fallen people do not have the necessary discernment and do not consider God’s word, these commandments were given to God’s chosen people. However, these ordinances became the middle wall of partition between the Jews and the Gentiles. Moreover, this distinction and separation became the cause of enmity between the circumcision, the Jews, and the uncircumcision, the Gentiles.

We must be careful not to bring any ordinances into the church life, for all ordinances kill. Some

may prefer shouting in the meetings, and others may prefer silence. It is possible to make ordinances about either shouting or being silent. These ordinances cause not only division but enmity. I have witnessed the enmity created by such ordinances.

[Section 4]

Although we may like certain practices, we should not insist on them. If we insist on a particular practice, we make it an ordinance that separates and creates enmity. Christians have been divided by ordinances, such as the various ordinances concerning baptism. Some insist upon baptizing backwards; others insist on doing it forwards. Some Christians are divided over the use of musical instruments. Some permit a piano, but not an organ; the practice of others, however, is the opposite. As soon as we have ordinances, division comes immediately. Although I appreciate shouting and loud praises in the meetings, I am not for these things. To insist on any practice is to cause division. Hence, we must not have any ordinances. On the cross of Christ all ordinances were abolished.

Because ordinances create enmity and division, we must deal with them very seriously. It is possible for ordinances to become a cause of hatred even among those who have been close to one another. Two brothers may have enjoyed pleasant fellowship for a number of years, but simply because one is for shouting and the other is for being silent, there may be enmity between them. Instead of loving each other, they may come to hate each other. Religious jealousy is a terrible thing. History tells us that many have been slain because of it through the subtlety of Satan, the murderer. Therefore, we must repudiate all ordinances and go along with the practices of the saints, as long as these practices do not involve anything sinful, immoral, or idolatrous. Although we may not approve of certain practices, we should go along with them in order to give no ground for ordinances.

B. The Breaking Down of the Middle Wall of Partition

1. By Abolishing the Law of the Commandments in Ordinances

Christ broke down the middle wall of partition between the Jews and the Gentiles by abolishing the law of the commandments in ordinances. When He was crucified on the cross, all the ordinances were nailed there. The law spoken of in 2:15 is not the law of the moral commandments, but the law of the ritual commandments, such as the ordinances of circumcision, keeping the Sabbath, and eating certain foods.

Ordinances are the forms or ways of living and worship. Every people has its own way of living. We need to be careful not to make our way of living or worship an ordinance. At the same time, we should not regard what others do as ordinances. If we all practice this, there will be no problems.

The various ways of living are seen in the instruments used for eating. The Americans and Europeans use a knife and fork, the Chinese use chopsticks, and the Indonesians use their fingers. Who can say which way is best? Because this is a very delicate matter, we need to take care of the feelings of others. If you visit Indonesia or Taiwan, you should follow the custom of the people there. Likewise those from Indonesia and Taiwan should do the same when they visit the West. If we want to eliminate ordinances, this must be our practice.

Due to the improvements in transportation and communication, the people of the world are becoming intermingled more and more. This is under the sovereignty of the Lord so that He can have the new man, the proper church life which includes all different peoples. Therefore, concerning our way of life, we all must learn not to impose requirements on others and not to have any ordinances.

The differences among the peoples began at Babel. In God's economy in the church life we must overcome Babel. Our very language can become an ordinance. When we stay for a long period of time in another country or even live there, we should, if possible, learn the language of the people there and not insist on our native tongue. As the redeemed and recovered ones, those who have been transferred into Christ and into the church life, we must learn to hate the differences that divide the peoples. The worldly people regard cultural differences as a mark of prestige. But in Christ we have all lost this prestige. Now our only prestige is Christ and the genuine oneness. We should not have a prestige

unique to our locality or meeting hall. We all need to exercise ourselves to go along with others. As long as a certain practice does not involve idolatry or immorality, there is nothing wrong with it. Do not hold on to your prestige. If we are willing to let go of our cultural pride, it will be possible for the Lord to have the proper church life.

The breaking down of the middle wall of partition is for the new man, the commonwealth of God, the household of God, and the building of God's dwelling place. If we keep our differences, it will be impossible to have the church life in these four aspects.

2. In the Flesh

Ephesians 2:15 says that Christ abolished "in His flesh" the law of commandments in ordinances. Because mankind became flesh (Gen. 6:3) and was thus kept from God and His purpose, God ordained His chosen people to be circumcised from the flesh. This ordinance was given because of man's flesh. It was in the flesh that Christ was crucified. When he was crucified, His flesh, which was typified by the separating veil in the temple, was rent (Heb. 10:20). By breaking down the middle wall of partition on the cross, Christ has made peace.

We have seen that, according to the Bible, the basic ordinances are those regarding circumcision, the Sabbath, and diet. But even these ordinances, which were ordained by God, have been abolished. If the basic ordinances have been abolished, how much more should the minor ones be abolished also. We should not keep any ordinances, and we should not create new ones. By the Lord's grace, we must learn to be flexible and to drop all differences for the sake of the church life. No matter where we may go, we must learn to be the same as others. Then we shall enjoy the church life as the new man, the commonwealth of God, the household of God, and the dwelling place of God.