

# JEWES AND GENTILES FORM ONE TEMPLE

## BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Ephesians 2:11-22

## A VERSE TO REMEMBER

In [Jesus Christ] 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. (Eph. 2:21-22)

### Daily Bible Readings

<b>M</b>	Aug. 11	Isa. 49:1-6	A Light to the Nations
<b>T</b>	Aug. 12	Rom. 9:14-24	God's Mercy Reaches All
<b>W</b>	Aug. 13	Rom. 10:1-15	Salvation Is for All
<b>Th</b>	Aug. 14	Rom. 11:16-29	Privilege with Humility
<b>F</b>	Aug. 15	Zech. 8:1-12	God Will Dwell in Our Midst
<b>Sa</b>	Aug. 16	Zech. 8:13-23	Seek God Together

## STEPPING INTO THE WORD

This session's reading introduces us to the book of Ephesians, one of the shorter letters in the New Testament with which not all of us might be fully familiar. Here are a few things to consider about the book.

First, for reasons having largely to do with questions of style and theme, some biblical scholars question whether Paul actually wrote it. For example, the book contains little by way of the personal details we find in some other letters of Paul, such as 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philippians, and Galatians. In the ancient world, writers would sometimes adopt the voice of a more famous teacher or leader, believing that they were carrying forward that person's message. This may be the case here.

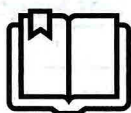
Second, the final half of the writer's greeting in verse 1 addresses the book to "the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus." Some early manuscripts of the letter leave out the phrase "in Ephesus," meaning that the letter might have been intended for a broader audience of faithful saints.

Third, those saints are assumed to be Gentile converts who are learning what kind of lifestyle their decision to follow the Jewish Messiah Jesus now requires.

Fourth, in addition to what it means to be a faithful church in the midst of an unbelieving Gentile population, the book's most important themes include thoughts on the new age inaugurated by Christ. Both ideas arise in our reading for today, as these new Gentile Christians join their Jewish brothers and sisters in making up the people of God.

Finally, the book describes the work of Christ in exalted terms. It promises its readers that they will be raised up with Christ and seated with him in "the heavenly places" (2:6), so that in Christ they might be "filled with all the fullness of God" (3:19).

*Glorious God, we give thanks for the riches of your grace in Jesus Christ. May our lives make your riches known to the people we encounter this week. Amen.*



## SCRIPTURE

Ephesians 2:11–22

**2:11** So then, remember that at one time you gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision"—a circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—<sup>12</sup>remember 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. <sup>13</sup>But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup>For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, <sup>15</sup>abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, <sup>16</sup>and might reconcile both to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. <sup>17</sup>So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, <sup>18</sup>for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. <sup>19</sup>So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup>built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone; <sup>21</sup>in him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, <sup>22</sup>in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

*Note:* Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.



## JEWES AND GENTILES SHARING IN THE PROMISE


The word “mystery” appears several times in the book of Ephesians. Often it refers to the wonder of what God has accomplished in Christ. It also addresses the conundrum of how Gentiles fit within a religious movement that started as a reform to Judaism. The author of Ephesians speaks at length about the mystery of Gentile Christianity, and how Christ breaks down the divisions that have long-separated Jews and Gentiles.

The passage presents a tight argument, each point building on the one before as it persuades the reader to recognize its audacious claim about Jewish and Gentile unity in Christ. In verses 11–13, it constructs a potent contrast between the “then” of Gentile life with its new “now.” When they were “without Christ” (v. 12), Gentiles were aliens and strangers to the divine promises, without hope and without God. Now, those who were “far off” have been “brought near by the blood of Christ” (v. 13).

Verses 14–18 form the heart of the passage. The author assures us that Christ is our peace; the work of Christ reconciles us to God and makes possible our reconciliation to one another. Christ tears down walls that divide Jews and Gentiles, making out of the two groups one new humanity, creating peace between them. Christ’s death on the cross is also the death of the long-standing separation between the two groups. Those who were far off (Gentiles) and those who were near (Jews) have been granted equal access to God the Father through the Spirit of Christ.

The payoff comes in verses 19–22; Gentiles are now “fellow citizens with the [Jewish] saints, and also members of the household of God” (v. 19). Resting on Christ the cornerstone (v. 20), Jews and Gentiles have been made into a holy temple in which the presence of God can be seen.

A wealth of sermons have made a big deal about the enmity between Jews and Gentiles during the New Testament era. Much of the time, such claims are exaggerated as the implication of open animosity between the two groups, expressing itself as prejudice and violence, is false. Closer to the truth would be to say that the two simply inhabited different worlds, making mutual understanding and support difficult. This sounds like a good description of our own perpetually divided society. Might Christ the cornerstone have something to offer us as well?

 What other dividing walls can the work of Christ tear down? How could that happen in your community?



## WHAT ABOUT JUDAISM?

**F**or Christians, this passage raises the question of Judaism's ongoing place within God's plan. It's a difficult subject, fraught with centuries of misunderstanding. Humility and openness to learning from Christianity's conflicted history with its parent religion are required to approach this question.

On one hand, verse 15 seems to say that tearing down the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles means "abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances." Elsewhere, Paul makes clear his conviction that faith, not works of the law, are what justify a person before God (Rom. 3:28–30). Is Ephesians 2 telling us that the Jewish law makes up at least a significant portion of the wall that divides the two groups? Then would doing away with the requirements of the law go a long way toward ridding us of the divisions between us?

The problem with this reading of Ephesians 2 is that it perpetuates misunderstandings of Judaism and of Christianity's relationship to it. The metaphor of the dividing wall might refer primarily to the obstacles to conversion that the requirements of the Torah represented to Gentiles interested in following the God of Israel. Thus, what is being abolished is not the law itself, but the insistence that Gentiles had to become Jews first if they wished to follow the Jewish Jesus. Acts 10–15 depicts the early church's conversation and decision around this question.

The new humanity created when the two groups reconcile does not undo the distinctive identities of each. The passage does not envision Judaism's erasure and absorption into Christianity. Judaism is assumed to possess the default relationship to God, to which Gentiles are added on (see Rom. 11:11–24). Ephesians 2:19 says that Gentiles are going to be "fellow citizens *with the* [Jewish] *saints*" (emphasis added). It is Gentiles who join the Jewish family that already makes up the household of God.

Finally, the assumption that Judaism will one day be folded into Christianity represents both bad theology and bad history. God's covenant with Judaism is ongoing and is not superseded by the Christian gospel. Twenty centuries of anti-Jewish words and deeds on the part of Christians have largely, with a few exceptions, closed the door to Jewish conversions to Christianity.

**?** Have Jewish friends ever told you of attempts by Christians to get them to convert? How did the friends feel about the experience? How did you react to their telling?



## STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Christianity possesses a long and difficult relationship to Judaism. One explanation for this is a lack of familiarity with Judaism as a living religion. When I was growing up in church, I thought I knew everything there was to know about Judaism because I'd read about it in the Bible. When I began to study religion in college, I discovered that this thinking was wrong. The picture of Judaism given in the New Testament is overlaid with the early church's conflicted feelings toward its Jewish parent. Even if the New Testament's picture of Judaism was completely objective, it would be twenty centuries out of date. Clearly, a lot has happened since then.

As someone who spent a career in theological publishing, the first thing I suggest is that you read a book. Few Christians fully appreciate just how Jewish Jesus' message and personal identity were. The best recent book to explain this is Amy-Jill Levine's *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*. A Jewish scholar of the New Testament, Levine taught for a number of years at Vanderbilt University. An introduction to basic Jewish beliefs and customs is found in *What Do Our Neighbors Believe?*, Second Edition, by Micah Greenstein, Kendra G. Hotz, and John Kaltner. The book discusses Christianity and Islam alongside Judaism, highlighting their shared history.

Many mid-to-large cities have interreligious dialogue groups that meet regularly for discussion, with open invitations to the public to join. Jewish-Christian dialogue is more often than not the heart of these groups, with Islam, Hinduism, and other religious traditions sometimes joining. Good will and openness to learn are the only prerequisites; no one there is going to know much more about religions other than their own than you do.

Visit a synagogue. For several years, I taught a college class in world religions and required the students to visit a worship service of a religion other than the one to which they belonged. The local Reform Jewish synagogue was always the most frequent choice, for good reasons; the folks there were unwaveringly gracious and welcoming to my students. If you go, it's always a good idea to call first, explain why you want to visit, and ask for the best time to do so.

 **When have you visited a Jewish synagogue or participated in a conversation with Jewish friends about their religion and yours? What insights have you gained?**

## SCRIPTURE NOTES

*The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.*

1. "So then" (v. 11): Paul now draws out the implication of verses 1–10. As Jewish and Gentile believers are individually reconciled to God in Christ, these formerly hostile peoples are also reconciled with one another in Christ.
2. Verse 13: Midrash on the Septuagint translation of Isaiah 57:18–19. Isaiah meant the Diaspora Jews, but rabbis included Gentile proselytes. See also Zechariah 6:15. In genuine Pauline epistles, Christ's death brought peace and union with God (Rom. 5:10–11; 2 Cor. 5:18–20). In Ephesians, reconciliation includes peace and unity between Gentiles and Jews.
3. Christ not only brings peace and reconciliation (Col. 1:20) but is the embodiment and personification of peace (Isa. 9:6; Micah 5:5). Ephesians 2:15–18 shows that the peace that believers have with God is foundational for mutual acceptance and love between Jewish and Gentile believers (4:16, 32).
4. The dividing wall of hostility may refer to the railing in the temple that separated the court of Gentiles from the inner courts. It serves as a metaphor for the Mosaic law and holiness code that separated Israel from the other nations and caused hostility between Jews and Gentiles.
5. In 1 Corinthians 3:10–17, Christ is the foundation upon which the apostles build. Here, Paul employs a shift in the metaphor. In Ephesians, the apostles and prophets are the foundation of the first-century church. Christ is the "chief cornerstone"—the first stone to be laid and the stone that determines the placement of the foundation and subsequent stones. In 3:5, "apostles and prophets" refers to people in the first century. In 4:11 (and 1 Cor. 12:28–29), Paul distinguishes apostles from prophets, viewing them as two separate groups.
6. The church as a building metaphor (v. 21) merges with the body image to create the picture of a building constructed of living stones that grow and develop into God's dwelling place, the temple. The body image is also found in 4:15–16. See also 1 Peter 2:4–5.