

God made the decision to create a worldwide community He could call His people. He made that decision before He created the world, and love prompted Him to make it. Jesus Christ carried out His decision by emancipating His followers from guilt and lies and estrangement from God and constituting them as God's chosen people, the Church. As a result, God began to unveil **the mystery of his will**, which is **to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ**. Those are some of our spiritual blessings in Christ, and they make the Church more than a match for the spiritual forces of evil that make war against the Church and against all human flourishing.

Paul knew his teaching baffled the Ephesians, who were new converts to Christianity. He also knew they needed help that only God could give. So, he prayed for them to know God better by knowing the hope God called them to, the riches of God's people, the Church, and the power of God at work on behalf of the Church.

On behalf of the Church and of all creation **God placed all things under his feet** (under Christ's feet). Christ rose from the dead and is authorized to exercise God's power anywhere on earth in any way that His love and justice deem wise. And the Church is to embody the full meaning of Christ for human life.

Ephesians 1 is a magnificent summary of the meaning of Christ. But Paul didn't stop there. If he had, the hardheaded realists in the congregation would accuse him of having his head in the clouds and being out of touch with reality. Ephesians 2 is as real as it gets. It opens with a watershed article of belief about human nature: **As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. Dead** is the crucial word. To be **separate from, excluded from, foreigners to, and without** God and His purpose is spiritual death. That is humanity's natural state.

God had to create His chosen people out of people who were **dead in transgressions and sins**. Love prompted Him to mount a costly rescue operation. Jesus carried out God's decision by His death on the cross. The biblical name for this costly act of God's kindness for people who don't deserve it is grace.

We respond to God's grace and receive spiritual life by faith. We believe in our hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead, we say publicly, "Jesus is Lord," and we are baptized into His name. Faith unites us with Christ, joins us to the people of God in covenant with God, and gives us an enduring hope. We are alive. The Bible calls the entire process – from God's decision before the world began to the death of Christ to the most recent baptism and forward to the New Jerusalem – salvation. Jesus Christ has saved us from spiritual death.

### **The Mystery of Israel**

That brings us to a mystery. You bloom where you are planted, right? But God planted Himself in this world in a band of wandering Arameans, who were later called Jews. He began with Abraham and promised him that he and his descendants would bless all nations on earth. He shaped Abraham's descendants into His chosen people, because He loved them and kept the promise He made to Abraham. For 1500 years and more God drummed into Israel's soul the kind of God He is.

But when Israel's great moment arrived, Israel's leaders missed it. They refused Jesus and had Him killed. It's a lie to say that the Jews rejected Jesus. Some did, but many Jews

believed in Jesus and formed the first Church in Jerusalem and spread the news about Jesus' resurrection. But they didn't tell anyone but Jews. Something unexpected had entered the world through them, a holiday from the inevitable. Their Jesus had overcome death once for all and promised to judge the world with justice, and they thought they could keep that as a Jewish secret? What were they thinking?

I'll tell you: They thought they were obeying God, and I for one have nothing but sympathy for their predicament. They were the chosen people. God had taught them for 1500 years not to defile themselves with Gentiles. The law with its more than 600 commandments and regulations was designed to keep Israel pure of Gentile defilement, and the resurrection of Christ didn't change that. The effort to retain their Jewish purity is how the first Christians, all Jews, chosen by God, became the bottleneck that threatened to stymie God's decision to create a worldwide community He could call His people. That's the mystery that gnawed at Paul's heart. It is still a mystery.

Paul knew all about that Jewish way of thinking. It had been his way of thinking. He had presided over the imprisonment and occasional execution of Christians to preserve Jewish purity. Then, he changed and became a devoted follower of Christ. We have to picture Paul 25 years later as a prisoner of the Roman State. He had time in his chains to reflect on the long struggle to bring the message of Christ to the Gentile world and to welcome Gentile believers into the Church apart from Jewish rituals.

He wrote about the outcome. He wrote to Gentiles who were recent converts to Christianity. He got personal in Ephesians 2:11-12. **Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men) (can you feel the barriers going up between Jew and Gentile?) – remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenant of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.**

Paul was not talking sociology and politics here; he was talking eternal life and death. To be **separate from Christ, excluded from God's people, foreigners to God's covenants with Israel, and without hope and without God** are what it means to be **dead in transgressions and sins**. Paul grieved that the first Christians were more concerned about their religious purity than about the spiritual death of the rest of the world. Paul almost alone saw what was at stake in the Church of his day. You may not like Paul, but he taught the Church to see the whole world through God's eyes, and BVBC is never more loyal to Christ than when we see the whole world through God's eyes.

### **Paul's Inspiration**

Verse 13 sums up the conviction that inspired Paul to travel and preach and teach and debate and write and suffer and to travel and preach and teach and debate and write and suffer some more until a critical mass of Christians could see the whole world through God's eyes. Verse 13: **But now in Christ Jesus you (Gentiles) who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.** The rest of the chapter blows us away with what happens to people who are brought near to God.

Verse 14 is astonishing. **For he (Christ) is our peace, who has made the two (Jew**

and Gentile) **one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. Christ is our peace.** Jews and Gentiles were oil and water; they were apples and oranges. Many Romans despised Jews, and Jews returned the favor. The apostle said that Christ brought them together. They couldn't agree on the time of day, but they agreed on Christ.

Let me give you a taste of Christ our peace. Carole and I went to a Billy Graham crusade in 1969 at Madison Square Garden. It was my first visit to New York City. We left the Garden around 11:00 p.m., and I went downstairs in Penn Station to use a rest room. Downstairs was empty, and when I came up the stairs to rejoin Carole, I froze. A group of black guys was coming down the stairs. I thought to myself, "I'm toast." I was scared. My imagination was overheating. It was the late '60s, racial tensions ran high, and New York was more dangerous then than it is today.

Then, everything changed. I saw a booklet in the big guy's hand. I recognized it as the booklet used to counsel people, who went forward at the crusade to receive Christ as Savior. I thought, "If these guys have just been to hear Billy Graham, and one of them has accepted Christ as his Savior, I'm going to be okay." I was experiencing Ephesians 2:14: Christ **is our peace.** I actually stopped the guy and his friends and said, "Did you just go to the Billy Graham meeting?" He said, "Yes, it was good." I told them I was a Christian too. Christ made that possible. Recognition of something bigger than both of us united us in that chance encounter.

For one shining moment Jim Crow and Malcolm X didn't matter. The Black Panthers and the Klan faded into impotence. Christ had destroyed those barriers, the dividing wall of hostility that separated blacks and whites in this country in the 1960s, as surely as he had destroyed the barrier between Jew and Gentile in the '60s of century one. In Paul's day, as verse 15 reminds us, the barrier was **the law** (the Jewish law) **with its commandments and regulations** that walled off most of the human race from the unique spiritual blessings God had given Israel, including Christ.

Because of Christ something unprecedented was happening in synagogues and house churches of the Roman Empire. Little bands of Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus were meeting together to worship Him. It wasn't easy. They often disagreed about how believers should spend their time on the Sabbath. They often disagreed on what food was proper for Jesus people to eat and even where they should buy their meat. They disagreed, but they worshipped together and tried to get along. The unthinkable was happening, and the apostle saw a deeper meaning to it all.

### God's Purpose

The rest of verse 15 and verse 16 express that deeper meaning. **His purpose** (Christ's purpose) **was to create in himself one new man out of the two** (he means the Church), **thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.**

How would you feel if someone gave you \$30 million? That's how I feel when I read verse 15. Mere wealth cannot hold a candle to this insight into the mind of Christ. **His purpose** (Christ's purpose) **was to create in himself one new man out of the two.** It's even bigger than that. **His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the** whole human race. I've said several times that Christ is authorized to exercise the power of God anywhere on earth

in any way that His love and justice deem wise. He exercises it chiefly to **create in himself this one new man.**

My experience in Penn Station illustrated the power of Christ, but Christ is not satisfied with chance meetings in Penn Station. He is creating a worldwide community of people among whom He breaks down barriers that have been in place for hundreds of years: blacks and whites in this country, Koreans and Japanese, Sunnis and Shias, Hutus and Tutsis. He would call those four young guys I encountered and me to build strong relationships with each other and with Him that prosper over time. That's the **new man** He is creating around Himself.

Because of Christ something new is happening at BVBC. We now have fellow believers in this congregation who are from several countries in East Asian, the Indian sub-continent, the Middle East, at least two nations in Africa, the Caribbean, South America, and American Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians. We are not the United Nations, but we are different from what we were a decade ago. Are we just going to smile and nod and pass each other like ships in the night, or are we going to build relationships with each other that break down old barriers and learn to trust each other and handle differences with each other and solve problems with each other and fuel affection for each other, because we have Christ in common, and we have caught His vision of the new man He is creating? Christ has given us here an opportunity to get on the same page with His eternal purpose. Let's not miss it.

### **Take-aways**

I'd like to suggest some take-aways that might help us seize this opportunity that God has given us. First, to all in this congregation who are not Caucasian I want to say I'm glad you are here. We've been waiting for you a long time. I suspect hundreds of others of us feel the same.

Second, I don't know how to make the most of this opportunity, unless we do it together. White people have a habit of offering solutions for racial issues that fail, because they were our solutions and not shared solutions. It took 300 years for blacks and whites to get into this mess we are in; it may take another 300 years to make it right, but we have to do it together in small but significant steps.

Third, I hope we can do better here than political correctness. Jesus defined political correctness when He said, "**These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.**" (Mark 7:6) I do not for a minute want to diminish the real accomplishments in this country in pursuing equality. They have been substantial. We can't go back. But if we only pay them lip service, we will have only a sullen truce between people who never get to know each other or like each other.

We can transcend political correctness, if Christ's purpose to create **one new man** out of all the nations of the world captures our hearts, and His purpose becomes our purpose, and we do the hard work of building trust and affection where there was once fear and rejection. Christ is our peace in the deepest sense, when His purpose becomes our purpose. Let's pray and ask Him to open the eyes of our hearts to be captured by His eternal purpose.