

## Introducing the Theme

One of the metaphors that is used in our Bible passage today is that of building, so I'd like to start with a story about that – and, yes, I will be making a spiritual point to it!

### *Read story*

Right at the start of the Bible, we discover that God is a design genius: creative and constructive. He likes to build things for His children and everything He made at the start of all things was good and perfect. There was no evil. He created the Heavens – all planets and stars, including the Earth that alone has perfect conditions for life to exist and flourish. He designed and created all that is in it: all animals, fish and birds; all physical, chemical and biological processes. He then created man and woman to live in the Garden of Eden which He had created for them – it was perfect and it was all truly good. There was work for them to do, but this was satisfying and enjoyable. No bad days in the office here!

Adam and Eve knew God existed because they walked and talked with Him every day. They had it all, with only one rule to follow – they were not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil otherwise they would die. This was not God being a kill-joy with boring rules, but about living in a way that brought joy and life. That rule was in place for the benefit of God's children - as we know all too well, the knowledge and experience of evil is a horrendous thing.

There was just one way they could knock down the perfect goodness that God had built – disobedience. Eve ate the fruit from that tree and then Adam did also. They rejected God's way and did their own thing with tragic consequences. They did not die physically at that point, but there was a spiritual death and separation from God.

Dysfunction was released into the world. Into human life (health problems - both physical and mental, aging, work and relationship struggles & frustrations, crime, injustice etc), into the world situation (nations at war, political arguing over how things should be done) and into the Earth itself (climate, natural disasters). These are all signs of the Fall – the knocking down of what God created from something wholly good and perfect, into something dysfunctional.

As Mr and Mrs Brick discovered, children knock things down *until* they discover that there is something better. We all sin, either through rejecting God or disobeying the rules He gave us for our own well-being. But that is not the end of the story, because God has dealt with our sin and with the separation that brought between mankind and Him, and between people.

## Message

We are part way through a letter that the apostle Paul wrote to the believers in Ephesus. So far, Paul **has rejoiced in their faith**, praying that they would know more of God's wisdom, love and power. (2:15-21)

Paul **has reminded them** that:

they were dead in their transgressions and sins, in which they used to live when they followed the ways of this world (2:1-2)

they have been chosen by God to be holy and blameless in His sight (1:4) and adopted as His sons through Jesus (1:5)

they have been saved by grace, through faith in Christ Jesus (2:8-9)

‘For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.’ (2:8-9)

Paul is leading up to dealing with a matter of pride, here, and it is in this context that we come to this passage about the Gentiles and the Jews.

Here comes the history lesson. We read about the Fall in Genesis chapter 3. Following that moment, God has looked out for those who choose Him, excluding all other gods or idols; and who faithfully walk before Him in His ways, instead of doing what seems right to us. One such person was Abram, whose story begins in Genesis 11. Because he acted rightly before God, God met with him and gave him an incredible blessing that we read about in Genesis 17.

### **Genesis 17 :1- 11 (NIV)**

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. <sup>2</sup> Then I will make my covenant between Me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.”

<sup>3</sup> Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, <sup>4</sup> “As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. <sup>7</sup> I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. <sup>8</sup> The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God.”

<sup>9</sup> Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. <sup>10</sup> This is My covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup> You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.

*God appearing to him and speaking to him – difference between Him and false gods.*

*ABRAM = exalted father*

*ABRAHAM = father of a multitude*

Abraham’s descendants were to be set apart from the other nations, the Gentiles, through this covenant relationship with the Living God – the one who met with them and spoke with them. The one who gave them a home, a hope and an inheritance. Like a marriage, this relationship was to be exclusive – no other gods or idols were to be worshipped.

This was in contrast with the other nations around them, the Gentiles, who worshipped a range of false gods. These *false* gods, by their very nature, could not offer or promise hope, life, love, help, family.

The Canaanites, for example, worshipped the Baals and Ashtoreth. The Philistines worshipped Dagon, who was half man and half fish! The Ammonites worshipped Molech, and this involved child sacrifice which was and is abhorrent to God. It should be such a clear choice for the Jewish people: worshipping and following a God who they knew to be real, good and life-bringing over worshipping something man-made in a way that was repellent. But all too often, they copied the other nations.

We read of the great King Solomon, who knew that God was real, who had received the gift of wisdom in an encounter with God, and who still turned away from Him in his later years. We read in 1 Kings 11:4-6

As Solomon grew old ... his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord; he did not follow the Lord completely, as David his father had done.

Again, this was not about God being a kill-joy. His rules are founded on stopping people from doing things which at the very least cause misery and dysfunction all round and at worst cause spiritual death and eternal separation from the only God who is good and true.

The advantage was all on the side of the Jewish people! However, all too often they turned away from their covenant relationship with God and turned to worship of false gods.

There are two Old Testament verses which I think sums this up.

Firstly in Judges 21:25,

In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

When we reject our God as king and ignore His rules, we unleash chaos. If we want proof of this, drive somewhere! When people do what is right in their own eyes on the road, ignoring the law, things get stressful very quickly.

Secondly, the prophet Jeremiah wrote in Lamentations 1:9 (NKJV)

She did not consider her destiny; Therefore her collapse was awesome

The Jewish people had been set apart from the other nations to be part of something glorious with the one true God, but when they did not value that, there was a tragic fall.

However, there were Jews who stayed faithful to God and trusted in His word. In the Old Testament, we have the words of many prophets who listened to God and heard His promise to restore Israel through a promised Messiah – a Saviour. Through the prophet Isaiah, we find the following two statements:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. (not ours!!) And He will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, **Prince of Peace**.  
Isaiah 9:6

The Hebrew word for peace is *Shalom* (Hebrew) # 7965 which comes from the root verb *shalam*, meaning “to be complete, perfect, and full.” Thus *shalom* is much more than the absence of war and conflict; it is the wholeness that the entire human race seeks.”

Jesus is the Prince of wholeness, mentally, spiritually, emotionally. And He did not come just to save the Jewish people. If we return to the book of Isaiah, we later read this prophecy and promise of what God had in mind:

**“It is too small a thing** for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. **I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”** Isaiah 49:6

By the time God put His covenant plan into action, the situation was that there were Jewish people who gave every appearance of being devout believers, but they did not truly know God. They were part of God’s chosen people by birth, they followed the Laws and looked like they were good people. They were proud of their birth and heritage, but their hearts were far from God. When Jesus the Saviour came, they hated Him and plotted to kill Him. Jesus did things they hated, like healing people on the Sabbath – a day when no work should be done. He overturned the market stalls in the temple, accusing them of making a place of worship into a den of thieves.

Those who hated Jesus, falsely accused Him and had Him crucified. This only happened because Jesus allowed it. Why? So that He could take our sin and shame upon Himself and deal with it once and for all. He gave up His life on the cross, and as He did so, the curtain in the temple that separated people from the holiest place of God’s presence was torn in two by God. (v.16)

Jesus destroyed the spiritual barrier between man and God.

Jesus destroyed the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile **by** setting aside the law with its commands and regulations through His death on the cross. (Eph. 2:14-15)

It took some time for the Jewish and Gentile believers of God to see themselves as family. Jesus’s disciples kept apart from the Gentiles, until Peter was guided by the Holy Spirit to a household of Gentiles who wanted to hear about Jesus (Acts 10). Peter broke the Jewish law and went into the Gentile’s home. He taught them about Jesus and, as they listened and believed, the Holy Spirit came upon them.

These were Gentiles who were not part of God’s chosen people originally, who were ‘separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.’ (Eph. 2:12) But through believing in Jesus Christ, these Gentiles were now **‘fellow-citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.’** (Eph. 2:13)

Peter could not deny that God was at work amongst the Gentiles as well as amongst the Jewish people. Jesus was the uniting element that brought the sense of family between the Jews and Gentiles who had received Him. Jesus opened the way for there to be one new humanity instead of two –through Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, we have **access to the Father by one Spirit, through one Saviour.** (Eph 2:18)

God was doing a new thing which was and is centred on Jesus Christ. Paul described it as God building a holy temple (a place of worship) and a dwelling (domestic structure) with all those who believe in Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

The Jewish believers were not to boast in their birth or in the law any more. The Gentiles were not to boast at being accepted into God’s family, for it is only through God’s grace that any of us have been saved and our faith is founded on this Jewish story that began with Abraham. For all, the only way to God the Father was and is through Christ. There is no room to boast in anything but the sacrifice and redemption of Jesus Christ.

This new structure begins with the cornerstone – Jesus.

The cornerstone is carefully selected – it has to be high quality stone, without fault or weakness. It must be able to bear the weight of the other stones that go above. The cornerstone is the first one placed. All other stones placed must line up with the cornerstone. If any stones in the structure need replacing, the builder goes back to the cornerstone so that he is guided by the best possible example of stone. The cornerstone is the reference point.

Along from the cornerstone, we find other stones – not perfect, but faithful. We find the Jewish prophets who stayed close to God and honoured Him. We find the Jewish apostles who recognised that Jesus was the promised Saviour sent by God and who devoted their lives to telling others about Jesus. It is their teachings and revelations of God that we use when we read the Bible. Jewish followers of God, Jewish followers of Jesus Christ, wrote this book.

When we receive Jesus, it is like another stone being added in. We can't be perfect, but we can be faithful.

## Conclusion

Paul wrote another letter to the Gentile believers in Corinth, saying this:

<sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and **gave us the ministry of reconciliation**: <sup>19</sup> that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And **He has committed to us the message of reconciliation**. <sup>20</sup> We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us. **We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.** [it's our choice] <sup>21</sup> God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

We Gentile believers are part of God's ministry of reconciliation now; sharing the good news that the relationship that people broke, God has restored.

All are welcome to become part of this structure of worship that is also a home. All are welcome to become citizens of God's kingdom, all are welcome to enter into the hope of eternal life and blessing that we have with God. God is still looking for those who will choose Him, putting their trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

If you have not yet welcomed Jesus into your life, please do consider this. When I was a teenager, I concluded that life was going to be tough. I decided that in those tough times, I definitely wanted God with me. I did not want to go through anything without the hope and the help that He promises. That was the choice as I saw it. With God or without Him. I chose with Him. I chose to enter into that covenant, faithfully (if not perfectly) living my life as one of the 'living stones' in this new family God is building. I chose that set apart life, so that I could receive all that God has to offer.

God has been with me and is with me and will continue to be with me. It is His grace and help that has brought me here. I know that there are many others today who would share that testimony – different details, but same message. With God life is so much better.

## Reflection

I am going to read some verses from Psalm 118 now, which starts as an outpouring of thanksgiving and praise for God's deliverance, and turns into a prophetic message about the coming of Jesus. Please just close your eyes and listen. Share with God your thanksgiving and praise for what He has done. And if you have not yet received Jesus into your life, why not give that some thought. There is no pressure, just an open invitation from Him.

<sup>13</sup> I was pushed back and about to fall, but the Lord helped me.

<sup>14</sup> The Lord is my strength and my defence<sup>[a]</sup>; He has become my salvation.

<sup>15</sup> Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous:

"The Lord's right hand has done mighty things!

<sup>16</sup> The Lord's right hand is lifted high; the Lord's right hand has done mighty things!"

<sup>17</sup> I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done.

<sup>19</sup> Open for me the gates of the righteous; I will enter and give thanks to the Lord.

<sup>20</sup> **This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter.**

<sup>21</sup> I will give you thanks, for You answered me; You have become my salvation.

<sup>22</sup> **The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;**

<sup>23</sup> the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes.

<sup>24</sup> The Lord has done it this very day; let us rejoice today and be glad.