

# Salvation for the Gentiles

## Bible Reading - Ephesians, chapter 2 verses 11 to 22

*<sup>11</sup> Don't forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders. You were called "uncircumcised heathens" by the Jews, who were proud of their circumcision, even though it affected only their bodies and not their hearts. <sup>12</sup> In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope. <sup>13</sup> But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.*

*<sup>14</sup> For Christ Himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us.*

*<sup>15</sup> He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups. <sup>16</sup> Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death.*

*<sup>17</sup> He brought this Good News of peace to you Gentiles who were far away from him, and peace to the Jews who were near. <sup>18</sup> Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us.*

*<sup>19</sup> So now you Gentiles are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. <sup>20</sup> Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself. <sup>21</sup> We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord. <sup>22</sup> Through him you Gentiles are also being made part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit.*

## SERMON

For the sake of clarification, the definition of a Gentile is ‘One who is not of the Jewish faith **or** is of a non-Jewish nation.’

The Old Testament is not about gentiles at all! It is about God’s chosen people – the people of Israel, descendants of the patriarch, Abraham, and we refer to such people today, as the Jews. The Old Testament is also about the coming of a Saviour for the Jewish people, or Messiah – and we, as gentile followers of Christ, believe that Jesus Christ was and is the Messiah. His Hebrew name is ‘Jeshua’.

If you and I had been born as gentiles during Old Testament times (from about 4,000 BC up to the birth of Christ), we would have had no part in God’s Kingdom, and no chance of spending eternity in Heaven when we died.

However, Jesus’ death on the Cross and His resurrection changed all that.

Today is what the Church calls Epiphany Sunday.

Friday 6<sup>th</sup> January was Epiphany, the twelfth day after Christmas – and is the day we celebrate the manifestation of Jesus Christ to the gentiles. The first gentiles to meet with a very young Jesus Christ were the three wise men or Magi, as they are called, from the East.

The Magi knew that a special birth had taken place a long way away from where they lived in the East and they believed a huge star they followed would take them to the birth place of a very special King. And of course it did!

I often wonder if they knew **just** how special a king they were to discover, living with His mother and father in a small house in Bethlehem in Judaea. By the time they found Him, Jesus, the Saviour of the World, was almost certainly toddling around – He would have been about 18 months to two years old. It is clear from Scripture that Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus were not still in the stable when the Magi brought to Him their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

We know this because, so angry was Herod, the actual human King of that area at the time, (to find out that a ‘supposed King’ had been born just down the road), that Herod sent his ‘death squad’ to (as Matthew tells us in chapter 2) ***‘kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, based on the wise men’s report of the star’s first appearance.’***

Jesus was forced to become a refugee because of Herod. An angel, aware of Herod's plan, instructed Mary, Jesus' natural mother, and Joseph His, let's say 'adoptive father', to go to Egypt until it was safe for them to return. After a while they returned and settled in Nazareth and we learn in the Gospels about Jesus growing up and beginning his ministry at the age of about 30.

In the reading today, the apostle Paul is writing to a church established in the city of Ephesus not long after Jesus' death.

I discovered recently that at the time of Jesus, Ephesus was the fourth largest city in the world after Rome, Alexandria (in Egypt) and Antioch in Syria. Ephesus was a busy trading city of 300,000 people on the coast of the Mediterranean, in present day Turkey. It was incredibly corrupt with all sorts of pagan religions, temples and idolatry. It was nothing short of a divine miracle that a Church was established against all odds in such a place – but then, God is in the business of performing miracles.

I believe God laid it on my heart to talk about this passage of Scripture today, because He wants me to inform you (or remind those of you who already know), that there is essentially only one reason that gentiles like you and I can come into a personal relationship with Almighty God and be saved from eternal punishment - which is the consequence of our sin – and receive the gift of eternal life, living with God and all believers in Heaven for eternity.

Yes, it is primarily because Jesus Christ, His only Son, died on the Cross for you and me in our place, that we are saved; **but** there is another equally important reason that seems to be overlooked or made much less of, by the Church today.

The reason is expounded partly in the Bible passage I just read, but also in another Scripture that is also written by Paul, which I will refer to shortly.

In today's reading what we heard was this:

Prior to the coming of Jesus Christ, we were excluded from God's Kingdom; we were without God and without hope. But the blood, Jesus shed on the cross, meant the possibility of reconciliation to God for those who will believe in Him.

We, as gentile followers of Christ, together with Jewish followers of Christ (known more commonly as Messianic Jews) have become one people in God's eyes, because of Jesus' death and resurrection.

We are all members of God's family – children of the living God and will, praise God, share in Christ's inheritance; that is, to live with God in Heaven forever. That is the rightful inheritance of a repentant believer, says the Bible here in Ephesians.

But why did God do this? Why did He 'open the gates' as it were to the gentile nations? Why the change of heart?

Until Christ came, gentiles had no place in the Kingdom, it was reserved for Jews alone.

The answer will become clearer in a few minutes, so please bear with me.....

As we have talked about before, Jesus was a Jew. He didn't grow up in a nice Christian family home as some people think. He grew up in a poor Jewish home!

The disciples Jesus chose to follow Him were Jews. The Apostles were Jews, and the first converts to Christianity were Jews not gentiles.

The Word of God makes it very clear that the Jews despised gentiles and the Jewish leaders despised Jesus, even though He was a Jew.

One such leader was Saul of Tarsus. He, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, was so sure Jesus and His followers were working against the purposes of God, and was so zealous for God, that he went about persecuting, imprisoning and in some cases killing Christians.

However, what God saw in Saul was his heart, and his love for the Father, and so God chose him to be His instrument (or evangelist) to the gentiles. You probably know the story well, Saul was on his way to Damascus to round up and imprison more Christians, when he had a personal encounter on the roadside with the risen Jesus Christ. He then became converted, had his name changed by God to Paul, and after meeting up with and gaining the approval of the Disciples and apostles, Paul himself became an apostle. But God told him he was to focus his ministry on preaching the Gospel to the gentiles, not to the Jews. Initially the other apostles couldn't believe that God would do such a thing. Why? Because throughout their history, gentiles had no place in God's kingdom. Jews weren't even allowed to associate with, or talk to such people. And Gentiles weren't allowed to enter the Temple. Jesus Himself said in Matthew 15 and verse 24 "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

God was the God of the Jews and that was that.

Why then did God suddenly decide - during the life of Jesus, or immediately after His death - to save gentiles, after thousands of years of them having no hope of salvation?

After all, God's original intention was to save the Jews only. The Jews – like all people – were sinners. The New Testament writers tell us that the laws laid down by God through His servant Moses simply convicted the Jews of their sins. Those laws couldn't save anybody. The Law could not **stop** anyone from sinning because of our fallen nature, and God decided that He had had enough of the priests offering Him animal blood sacrifices to appease Him, as it were of the people's sins. He decided he could only now save His chosen people – the Jews – by shedding the blood of His precious Son, Jesus Christ.

So, the rhetorical question I just asked was this 'Why did God suddenly decide to offer salvation to the Gentiles'?

And the answer is:

Because the Jews rejected the One they were waiting for, the One whom God sent to them as He promised He would - their Messiah – the only begotten Son of God – Jeshua (Jesus).

You can read a very full account of this in the book of Romans chapters 9 through to 11 but allow me in the interests of time to precis what Paul is saying in a part of that passage:

In Romans 11 verses 13 to 21 we read this;

***"I am saying all this especially for you Gentiles. God has appointed me as the apostle to the gentiles. I stress this, for I want somehow to make the people of Israel jealous of what you Gentiles have, so I might save some of them. For since their rejection meant that God offered salvation to the rest of the world, (the gentiles) their acceptance will be even more wonderful. It will be life for those who were dead! And since Abraham and the other patriarchs were holy, their descendants will also be holy—just as the entire batch of dough is holy because the portion given as an offering is holy. For if the roots of the tree are holy, the branches will be, too.***

***But some of these branches from Abraham's tree—some of the people of Israel—have been broken off. And you Gentiles, who were branches from a wild olive tree, have been grafted in. So now you also receive the blessing***

***God has promised Abraham and his children, sharing in the rich nourishment from the root of God's special olive tree.***

***But you must not brag about being grafted in to replace the branches that were broken off. You are just a branch, not the root.***

***“Well,” you may say, “those branches were broken off to make room for me.” Yes, but remember—those branches were broken off because they didn't believe in Christ, and you are there because you do believe. So don't think highly of yourself, but fear what could happen. For if God did not spare the original branches, he won't spare you either.’***

What does this mean? Paul is saying that because many of the Jews had rejected Christ as Messiah, those unbelieving Jews had forfeited their salvation. Instead of them receiving salvation (God's original will for them), God decided in His Sovereignty to offer salvation to gentiles who would believe (as well as to any Jews who would believe). Describing God as an olive tree, Paul is saying the Jews are all part of the tree and he refers to them as branches. He says that those branches who decided not to believe Jesus was their Messiah would be broken off, no longer a part of the tree, even though later in the passage he goes on to say they could be grafted back in again if they repent and turn to Christ.

He says that gentiles, you and me, by turning to Christ and accepting Him as their Messiah would be grafted in to the Olive Tree (God's Kingdom) in place of those broken off branches (unbelieving Jews), and we would receive an inheritance in God's Kingdom which would include eternal life.

Isn't that amazing?

I said earlier that God decided to use Paul as His chosen evangelist to the gentiles. Most of the disciples and other apostles at that time were evangelising the Jews – convincing the Jews that Jeshua (Jesus Christ) was their promised Messiah.

However, I suspect that even though we read that the disciples and early apostles cautiously accepted Paul when he came to them claiming to be an apostle (their scepticism was of course due to his reputation for having any Jew persecuted who claimed to be a follower of Christ), some of them may still

have had their doubts, especially when he claimed that God wanted to use him to reach gentiles and not Jews.

In Acts 10 v 34 and 35 we read that God told **Peter** to evangelise a gentile, a Roman Army Officer called Cornelius. Peter was very uncomfortable with the thought of this and took some convincing by God because it involved visiting the man's house and talking to him – expressly forbidden under Jewish law.

But as a result of Cornelius' prayer, he and his family heard from Peter the Gospel message, responded to it, and received baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

As a result, it says in these verses, ***'Peter replied, "I see very clearly that God shows no favouritism. In every nation he accepts those who fear him and do what is right".'***

When Peter went back to tell the other disciples what he had done in obedience to God, together with the outcome of his actions, they were now totally convinced that God's plan was to offer salvation to both Jewish **AND** gentile believers. I am sure any lingering doubts they had about Paul's calling by God to preach to the gentiles were finally dispelled.

St John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, tells us in chapter 1 of his Gospel and verses 11 to 13, that although the long-awaited Messiah had come, as foretold by the prophets of old and appeared to His own people, the Jews, John tells us that although or because, the Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah, **all** who choose to believe in Jesus and accept Him as their personal Saviour are given the right to become Children of God, whether Jew or gentile.

This is what he said (talking of Jesus)...

***'He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.'***

Let me ask you a question.....

Do you believe in Jesus?

Do you accept Him as your Saviour?

If not, I would love to pray with you after the service. A simple but life-changing prayer, that will change your life and your destiny for ever. Eternal

life is a gift from Almighty God. Our part is to receive and accept it. We cannot earn it through doing good things.

If you **do** believe in Jesus and accept Him as your Saviour, then as we have just heard, the Bible says, you are now a child of God. If you are a child of God that means you have a share in an eternal inheritance.

Of this inheritance, Paul tells us in Ephesians 1 v 14:

***'The (indwelling Holy) Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people. He did this so we would praise and glorify him.'***

And in Colossians 3 v 24 we read:

***'Remember that the Lord will give you an inheritance as your reward, and that the Master you are serving is Christ.'***

In case of any doubt, in Hebrews 9 v 15 we read:

***'That is why he is the one who mediates a new covenant between God and people, so that all who are called, can receive the eternal inheritance God has promised them. For Christ died to set them free from the penalty of the sins they had committed under that first covenant.'***

And finally, the man who Jesus chose to be the rock on which He would build His Church (St Peter) said this to 'God's chosen people', that is, to all who believe in Jesus Christ, whether Jew or gentile – This scripture is from 1 Peter 1 v 4:

***'We have a priceless inheritance—an inheritance that is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay.'***

And so there I am going to close.

Michele and I love the Jewish people. We personally know some Messianic Jews (Jews who believe in Christ) and we pray regularly for Israel and for the peace of Jerusalem.

Because of God's immense love and grace, and because the Jews of 2,000 years ago rejected their Messiah, God gave you and me, as gentiles, as well as repentant Jews, the opportunity to respond to The Father's awesome love by putting our trust and faith in the Jewish Messiah, Jesus Christ our Lord and



Saviour. In return for doing this, God offers us the gift of eternal life which begins the day we believe.....

Praise His Holy Name for ever!

AMEN!

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