

No Longer Strangers

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You can turn in your Bibles to Ephesians 2 beginning in verse 11. "Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh..." That would be us. "...called 'the uncircumcision' by what is called the circumcision." Some ancient names. Perhaps it's still common verbiage among Orthodox Jews. I don't know that. But this was definitely Old Testament descriptive language. The uncircumcision - we were called, "...by what is called the circumcision which is made in the flesh by hands." We're talking just about physical realities here. "...remember that you were," and here's the spiritual reality. "...Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ; alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now, in Christ Jesus, you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace who has made us both one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances that He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through Him (through Christ) we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then..."

Now you can stop right there. So then. Do you feel a shift? Undoubtedly there was a shift back between 10 and 11. "Therefore remember..." There was an obvious shift. And if you read the whole chapter, you get that feel. If you read the whole letter, you get the sense that at v. 11, he moved over in a different direction. He had been talking about our being dead in trespasses and sins and being made alive together with Christ. Life with Christ. Raised up with Christ. Seated with Christ. Now this workmanship of God - good works. But then, there's this shift. And when he shifts in v. 11, his interest is, it seems, this is a miracle that we actually have Gentiles. This is a mystery that we have Gentiles among - not just Jews, but the true Jews - the saints of God. How is this? And that where he shifts. See, it's another aspect of our salvation. And he's been building; he's been building. But you know when you get to v. 19, "so then..." Shift. He's been painting this picture.

And really if you think about it, I just read it. I read it kind of monotone. But there's glory here. It's like he's painting this picture. You can imagine the artist. And you know what he's done? He's painted this mountain right up into the clouds. That's what he did. When he gets to v. 18 and he talks about us having access to God, he's taken this picture of salvation right up to the very peak: access to God. Close. I'll tell you. Close to God. That's where it is.

God designed us. God designed us to be worshipers, and that's why man is always going after some idol or another, if he's not going after the true God, because man is a worshiper. And the thing is, I'll tell you this, all you have to do is look at somebody that actually has the Spirit of God; somebody that is being worked upon by God whose eyes are opened, and they behold the Lord. You will see, they're blown away by it. You will see that there's nothing better. They love it. They delight in it. They want it. You take somebody like Moses. There's many examples. Down through history too. You take somebody like Moses. They've

had glimpses of these things and what's the desire? Show me Your glory. It doesn't get any higher than this. The only reason that this doesn't impress us as it should is because our hearts are still too much taken up with idols. That's the reality, brethren. I'll tell you what, if we could have such visions of God as some in Scripture have seen... Oh, we would not want anything more than that. That's what's happening here. What has happened is, Paul has brought us in v. 18 to where the mountain doesn't go any higher. It's having God. It's the Presence. You put a capital "P" on that. The Presence. He's completed his main statement.

And you know the thing about it is, at least in my Bible, you know it breaks it up. Our Bibles oftentimes are not only broken up into chapters - which remember the chapter divisions and even the verse divisions are man-made. But v. 18 doesn't fall at the end of a chapter. It doesn't fall at the beginning of a chapter. It's just kind of in there in the middle. I don't know about your Bible, but I know in mine, at least the people who put together my Bible, they didn't highlight it; they didn't underline it; they didn't italicize it. There's nothing there that seems to indicate that it's it. It's not specifically designated any way.

You can just say, well yeah, I see it. We're brought near by the blood of Christ, and He's removed the obstacles, and He made us both one, and He's made peace. Yeah, we see that. And we see that He's reconciled us to God in one body through the cross. He's killed the hostility. We see that. And He came and preached peace. Yes, we see that. We have access to the Father. Yes, we see that.

But you know the question is, do we really see it? This is the point of salvation itself. This is it. To come before God; to come into the light; to be able to draw close; to have what Moses had; to see the glory. And see what happens is as Paul brings us all the way up to the climax of this thing... Bang! He's finished his statement, and now the shift. "So then..." Why do you say that? Well, you say that when you want to say - after you've said what you want to say, now you want to sum things up. "So then..." if all this is true, what does it all mean? In light of this - in light of the fact that all the hostility, all the enmity, it's gone between the Jewish Christian and the Gentile Christian. And even more than that - all the hostility and the enmity and the obstacles are broken down between God and both of us. Reconciled to God. What does it all mean? What's the conclusion of the matter? What then? So then. That's where we are today - v. 19. So then...

Here's what it means. You are no longer strangers and aliens. And I would just say right there, if you think about the reality that Jesus Christ said, speaking of life; speaking of the narrow way, the few there be that find it, you will find that the world is largely filled with strangers and aliens. Because you see, what defines somebody truly as being strange, is when you're a stranger to God. You are no longer strangers and aliens. But, "you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."

Now, you just think with me about those two words. "You are..." You see them there? So then... that's the shift. That's the conclusion of the matter. What is it? "You are..." Again, you might say, so what? You emphasize these things. What does that mean? But before you brush over it as being somewhat insignificant, just think with me about what's happening here. One man is saying - and I recognize the "you" is plural - he's speaking to the Ephesians. But basically, let's narrow this down to what's happening here. One man is looking at another man and saying, "you are real." You are no longer strangers. You are fellow citizens. You're

Christian. That's what's happening here. That's the significance. You are Christian. With respect to these Ephesian believers, Paul looks at them and he says, I have no doubt; I have no question about it. You are no longer on the outside. You are fellow citizens with the saints. Paul doesn't say that he has hopes that they are. He doesn't say, well, perhaps that will be the outcome. I desire it, but it's somewhat doubtful or uncertain. No. You are no longer this and you are now this. And what you are no longer is lost. You are no longer unbelievers. You are no longer outside. You are no longer strangers. You are no longer aliens. You are now fellow citizens. You're in the same country. You're in the same family. You've got the same Father. You do. You are. It's not being set forth here in question.

Now look, maybe one of the reasons that this especially jumps out at me so emphatically is because just this week, Ruby and I met with a man and a woman. Husband and wife. And the wife asked, is it possible to affirm somebody's Christianity in this life? Now you know why she was asking that? She was asking that because her husband had been telling her that he could not affirm his wife's Christianity until the end.

What do you think of that? Now, look, I know there's verses. Have we heard Jesus say, the one who endures - not just for a little while, to the end, what? Shall be saved. Or, we are sharers in Christ, if what? Kevin what? We share in Christ if what? Firm to the end. Original confidence. Well, I know there's verses like that. Unquestionably there are. But you know what? Verses and realities like that, truths like that - they don't prevent Paul from talking the way he does, do they? I'll tell you, you look at Paul's words. Oftentimes, he looks at people and he says, "you're sanctified." "You're the people of God." "Brother..." Brethren; sister. That's not specific to men. That's not gender specific. Sometimes we'll get preachers that say, "brothers." They're doing that because - that's just bad that the ESV does that. At least say, "brethren." You know you hear some of the older saints here talk that way. "Brethren." That's more gender non-specific, right?

But brethren, of course, we must endure to the end. We must. But though that be altogether true, Paul can still proclaim that he has no doubt, no question whatsoever about whether these folks - these Ephesians are Christians or not. Just look at his words - v. 19. "So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens. You are fellow citizens with the saints." You are no longer what you once were. You now are what you once were not. He's affirming the reality before they've lived their lives fully and completely to the end. Right? Doesn't Scripture speak like that a lot? Certainly it does. It's clear to Paul. It's obvious to Paul what the state of these Ephesians is. It's real to him. You are fellow citizens with the people of God.

And I would ask this: how can Paul know that? How does he know that? Now somebody may say, wait a second, he was an apostle. He was inspired. What are you talking about? He had supernatural revelation. Just like Jesus did. Jesus knew what was in every man's heart. Jesus knew what people thought. You don't want to think that about Paul. That's not the issue. It's not like the Spirit of God gave him some secret revelation that the Ephesians were genuine. Now, look, it's true he was inspired. But he doesn't know them to be Christian because of some secret revelation. You say, how do you know that? Were you there? Did you talk to Paul? Well, I know that based on the way Paul talks. You say, what do you mean?

Just turn over to 1 Thessalonians. I want to show you what I mean. The reality is Paul didn't have some secret knowledge that you and I don't have. When he looked at people and he

affirmed their Christianity, it's because of his ability to observe the very same things you and I can observe. It's evidence. That's the issue. 1 Thessalonians 1:4 Now, this is the Thessalonian church, not the Ephesian church, but the reality is here. V. 4, "We know brothers..." There it is - that dreaded "brothers." (incomplete thought) "For we know, brothers..." Do you like that sisters? All the men at Thessalonica were certainly in. The sisters were pretty questionable. Now, I know the ESV footnotes that, but that's a wretched footnote. It really is. It's just bad.

"For we know..." But aside from that, just ignore that. But look what he's doing here. "...we know." See, he's doing the same kind of thing to these folks. "We know." What do you know, Paul? "We know, brothers loved by God, that God has chosen you." Seriously? Again, secret revelation? No. Evidence. Notice: "...because." You see, there's a reason? What's the reason? Because something has happened that is observable. What's observable? "Our Gospel came to you not only in word..." What he means is we didn't just preach to you, but when we preached to you, something happened. It came in the power and in the Holy Spirit... You guys came under conviction when we preached that Gospel to you. Something happened. The Holy Spirit was active. Notice this - v. 6. "You became imitators of us." Their lives were transformed. They became like other Christians. Not only that, "...and of the Lord." They began to become imitators of the Lord Jesus Christ. "You received the Word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit." There were trials. You were being persecuted. And yet, you had joy in the Lord. "You became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia." Jump halfway through v. 8. "Your faith in God has gone forth everywhere." Notice about halfway through v. 9 towards the end. "You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God."

Here's the thing. Can I know someone else's salvation? Can I know my own? Look, all you have to do is read 1 John and you recognize, John is writing exactly for that purpose, is he not? So that you might know. There is a way to know. How do you know? You know by the evidence. Certainly that's it. How can Paul know that these Ephesians he's writing to are no longer strangers and aliens, but are rather fellow citizens with the saints? How, brethren? How can Paul know that? Well, based on the evidence. What evidence?

Well, you know there might be many forms of evidence that we would look at. But I would call us to the evidence of the very thing that is right before us of verse 19 of Ephesians 2. Go back there.

You are no longer strangers and aliens. But can I tell you this? You no longer are strangers and aliens if indeed you're no longer strange. There's evidence right in the very thing that he brings before us. I can affirm that a man, woman, or child are no longer a stranger and alien among God's people, if it can be affirmed that their strangeness is actually gone.

Just think with me about these two words. Stranger. What do we do with that? What's a stranger? Basically a stranger is a person who looks around and says, all these people I'm among, they're not my own people. I'm out of place here. The people, they belong to each other. They're connected. They have ties. I'm an outsider here. That's what it is to be a stranger. All the other people are somehow the same. Somehow connected. The stranger's different. The stranger is an outsider.

Or how about the idea of alien. You know, I know the KJV, the New KJV uses the term foreigner, but don't you like the word alien? I mean, you think of martians. You think of monsters. You think of something so different. But what's the idea of an alien? What's the idea

of even a foreigner? Well, again, it's a non-citizen. Someone who comes into a country, but they don't belong to that country. Whether you came from another galaxy, or whether you came from Canada. Their citizenship is somewhere else. Just as a stranger is an outsider, so it is with an alien. The alien is an outsider. There's a certain sense in which they don't belong. See, this is what I'm saying. If you're no longer a stranger and an alien, then the alien-ness, the strangeness is gone. If you're still a stranger, then you can't say you're no longer a stranger. That's the issue. That's what he's saying. You're no longer strangers and aliens. They were, but something changed.

I was thinking about our sister Ms. Marta. You know, the reality is that there used to be something strange and alien about Marta. If you looked at her passport, it has strange color. Strange flag. But you know what? She's no longer a stranger and alien, because if you actually look at her passport, all the strangeness is gone. The passport's now blue. You open it up - American flag. Bald eagle. She used to be a stranger. She used to be a foreigner. No longer. No longer. But how do we know that? How do we know it? Because there's proof. She can produce that passport. It's blue. It's American. It's U.S. of A. on there. There's evidence. And that's the reality. Evidence. Evidence.

The very same thing is true in the spiritual realm. It does no good to affirm that someone is no longer a stranger and alien if indeed they are still cloaked with strangeness and have all manner of alien qualities. And you know what the question of the hour is? The issue is not whether or not you call yourself a Christian, carry a Bible. The issue is this: Is there a reality that you belong to the heavenly kingdom; the heavenly country? And belong to the household of God? The question we need to answer is this: Is this as clear, definite, distinct, and unmistakable in us as it was in the Ephesians? That is a life and death question. That's an important one.

So, what I want you to do is remember where v. 19 comes from. There is a very clear tie with v. 12. Let your eyes go back there to v. 12. You see, this is where this comes from. "Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ." Here's our word "alien." Or foreigner. "...alienated from the commonwealth of Israel." Here's our word "stranger." "...strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." But you know what? Paul's freely using synonymous language here. What I mean by that is when you say you're without God, you could also say you're an alien to God. You're a stranger to God. When you say "separated from Christ," you could also say, "separated from the commonwealth of Israel." Separated from the promises. You could also say you're an alien to Christ. These are all interchangeable. The reality is there's a strangeness and an alien relationship to Christ, to Israel, to the covenants, to hope, to God the Father. You see those words: "alienated," "strangers." That's where Paul is drawing from. This is what they were. What they no longer are - it's what they were.

Can you see just how alien, how strange, how far removed from God? Do you see what this is saying? To be a stranger in the greatest sense is when Christ is a stranger to you. Savior of the world. And you know Him not.

Do you know what Scripture says? He says, "My sheep hear My voice." Can you imagine what it's like to be deaf and you're standing in the midst of a bunch of people who can hear? You're a stranger. You come among God's people. And they can hear a voice you can't

hear. Now listen to me. Listen to me. No matter the fact that you're in here and you're seated among God's people. I can tell you this. You're a stranger and an outsider if you've not heard that voice. Because Jesus says, "My sheep know My voice." "My sheep hear My voice." And you know what Paul talks about? He talks also about the aroma, the fragrance of Christ. Life unto life for some; death unto death for others. But the reality is there is a fragrance of Christ. And the idea is that the redeemed have smelled life.

Or, Scripture talks about seeing. Have you ever read in Scripture about the God who shines in our hearts to give us a light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ? You see, seeing the glory - having that revealed to you, and right there in the same context, Paul talks about beholding the glory of the Lord. And he's talking about what every Christian sees. Listen. Listen.

Whatever may be true in your life, it's great to be able to say to people, you are no longer strangers and aliens. But I can tell you this, if you have not heard the sweetness; the saving sweetness of His voice; if you have not smelled the sweetness of the aroma of life in Christ; if you have not beheld the glory of the Lord and seen the glory of God in His face, you are yet a stranger. You yet have very strange qualities about you. And that's if Christ is strange to you. What a terrifying thing is when you are strange to Him. Do you remember how He speaks? "I never knew you." "Depart from Me you workers of iniquity." "...You workers of lawlessness." "I never knew you." You're a stranger to Him.

Listen. It doesn't make you no longer stranger and alien, because you came to church and you sat among God's people. If you are yet a worker of lawlessness - you say, what do you mean? I mean, you don't have power to overcome sin. You may have had resolutions. You may have had determinations, but the truth is, it's been one year, two years, three years, five years, eight years - you still go back to pornography, like a dog back to vomit. You've shed some tears over it. You don't like it. But you don't have power to overcome. You are a worker of lawlessness. And you are a stranger still. Why? He Himself bore our own sins in His body for a reason. That we might die to sin and live to righteousness. That's just a reality. One new man. You know what we're going to get to? That one new man. That new man is created in the very image; in the very likeness of God with true righteousness and holiness. And here you sit among God's people and the truth is your life is a deception. It's a mask and you know it, because when you're by yourself or when you're with the guys from work, or with the guys who don't go to church, you're at home. You're not a stranger there. You're altogether different. Your life is a deception. There's covetousness. There's idolatry. See, you're still a stranger. There's still something strange about you. That's the reality.

"I never knew you." What terrifying words! Though you may be actually moral on the outside, there's this pride. The secret be known - you love sin. Sometimes you hate it. Sometimes you've been exposed to enough truth that you know, you don't want it to be true. You know there's hell coming. But the truth is, you're uncomfortable among God's people. And oftentimes when you hear them talk - you know how it can be if you're an outsider, and you come in like to a family. And it can be great and you can have good conversation, but you know maybe perhaps, you get around a certain group of people, and all of a sudden they start talking in a way that you hear the same words they all hear, but you know there's kind of a code there. There's secrets. They're talking in a way that you hear them, but it's like they know something

you don't know. You hear God's people. You watch. You look over. They're singing some of these songs, and you see the smile on their face. It's like what makes these people so happy? I feel miserable. You've tried to blend in. You've tried to be one. But the truth is, sin still has a grip in your life. The truth is talking about hearing His voice is like what? What is that? What do they mean? You've tried to force yourself to believe it's a reality, but at the end of the day, you know there's this frustration because you know you haven't heard it. You feel like you're on the outside. There's still something alien and strange about you.

You know what Peter said? Peter said, "by His wounds you've been healed." But you know there's still this oozing sore of the soul; something unhealed. And it proves that you're the stranger still. But you know in all of this, he actually comes to the end there in v. 12, and he says, "...without God." And we know because He spoke about Christ at the beginning of this list, that when he speaks about God at the end, we know He has the Father in mind. See, when you go to v. 18, we see the reality. No more a stranger. Right? We have access to God. No longer a stranger. No longer on the outside. No longer homeless and countryless and promiseless and hopeless. We have access in one Spirit to the Father through Christ. Access to the Father. It means you're no longer a stranger to the Father. Now listen. Listen.

I can remember driving to church one Sunday morning. I lived about 20 minutes west of Kalamazoo, Michigan. The little church building I attended was just north of Kalamazoo. And I remember driving. It was clear and it was cold. It was crisp. It was the kind of day, you just stepped in that snow, and it just crunched. And during the night - it was clear now, but during the night, there had been a snow storm, and I mean everything was covered. Every limb on the trees. And it was still. So there was no wind blowing that snow off the trees, off the power lines. Everything was covered. Now you know what? There's two kinds of people in this room. There are those of you that are strangers to that, and you try to imagine it. And then there are others. You know exactly what I'm talking about. Just like this.

Brethren, before I was converted, I had no idea what access to God meant. If you would have told me about it, just like talking about the snow storm and everything covered and blazing white. See if I grew up in Texas all my life and I'd never been up there and seen it, I could try to imagine it. I could try to think about the picture I saw. But you know, there's no picture in a calendar that captures it. Kind of like standing at the mountain range. A picture doesn't do it. Twenty-five years of my life, somebody could have talked about access to God; I was a stranger. I was a foreigner. I could hear the words, but I'll get religious one day. Listen to me. If your life is simply one of hoping to be a Christian or trying to be a Christian, you're still a stranger.

Access to God. I mean, having the Spirit of God so speak to your soul: your sins though they be many, they're forgiven. They're washed away. And there is a sense of God and a sense of Him in the Word, and it is breathtaking. It is awe-inspiring. You're being confronted by a God who is holy; a God who is not small. He is great. And it just explodes on you. And you recognize His Son bears His image. He's the radiance of His glory. And Christ is not small anymore either. And there is this sense of God that comes in upon you, and you're bid to come, and you begin to talk to Him. Because you know what I read in Scripture? He gives us His Spirit and by that Spirit we cry, "Abba, Father." See, that is a Spirit-inspired, a Spirit-compelled - it's not just I hear intellectually that Christians should call God "Abba, Father." There's something that wells up in

me. He's no longer a fearful terror that God is going to rip me apart and throw me into hell for my sins. He's a Father who's forgiven me and He bids me to come to Him now. And He's kind towards me. He's not dealt with me according to my sins. And I know it. And I've experienced it. And it's real. We have been given access though Christ in one Spirit to the Father. And if that sounds like I'm speaking Greek or Portuguese, it's because you're a stranger and you're from another country. That's it.

Brethren, you walk into a family. A husband and wife are talking and they kind of give each other a glance of their eyes, and it's like there's communication going on in this family. You just feel like what's happening here? I feel like I'm an outsider. Well, it's true. You are. They know things you don't know. There's history here. Have you ever read: "the secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him." The secret. The ESV says, "friendship." All the other translations, "the secret." It's for those who fear Him. There's an intimacy.

Brethren, I remember one time when I was in an airport in Amsterdam. And I was in this little coffee cafe right in the middle of the airport. And I looked over and I saw a woman. Her skin was dark. She had a Bible on her table. And I went over and I sat down. And she was from some country in Africa, and she just lit up with this smile and we talked about the Lord. And then I went and flew to Romania and she went wherever she was going. It's like there's a connection. Why? Because we both heard the voice of Christ. We've both seen His glory. We've both been let into His secrets. We're no longer foreigners and strangers. We're no longer outsiders. We're among the people of God, and we have identity there. And it's been confirmed by the Spirit. And "Abba, Father" is a reality. That's the reality.

Do you know what Paul said earlier in this letter? He said for this reason, I pray for you that you would know about the hope of your calling and about the riches of this inheritance and about the power of God at work in believers. For this reason. What? Because I have seen your faith in the Lord Jesus. I've heard it. He didn't say he'd seen it. He said I've heard it. I've heard of it. You trust Christ. You don't trust other things anymore. You don't trust your goodness. I see you're not foreigners anymore. And your faith works through love. You have a love toward all the brethren. It's not just a stale, dead faith. It works. And it works through love. And I've heard of it. And I know you're the real deal. Brethren, this is it. This is it. If you've heard His voice, you know what that means. You have access to Him. You cry, "Abba, Father." You know what that means. You know it. It's the compulsion of your heart. You get in trouble: "Father, please help. Help." I mean, it's there. You know. You once were something not like this. You once did not have a love for the brethren. You had a love for yourself. You had a love for your own pleasure, your own gratification. That was it. Period. But now you do have a love towards the brethren. And your only hope is the Christ who went to that cross and you have no other hope. And if He doesn't save you, you won't be saved. You know what? You are no longer stranger and aliens. Period. Amen. You're dismissed.