

April 10, 2011, First Baptist, Vancouver

## **Look What Is Being Built in the City**

Ephesians 2:11-22

(Ephesians: Navigating An Alternative Reading of Reality)

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It is happening all over the city: Building. Nearly everywhere we turn: Building. In the downtown core: Constant daily activity. Dump Trucks, construction cranes, jackhammers, electric saws, pneumatic nail guns. And in residential neighborhoods like the one Sharon and I have lived in for eleven years. Old houses being demolished, replaced by newer, bigger homes. Lane-way houses under construction in nearly every alley. All over the city: building, building, building.

Nothing, of course, compared to what is happening in the great cities of Latin America and Asia. For miles and miles in every direction...building, building, building. Now that I have been to New York City, my heart's desire is to go to Shanghai! New York may still be the media and advertising centre of the world, but everyone knows that the financial centre has shifted to Shanghai. Building, building, building.

And in the midst of it all...in every city of the world...another kind of building is taking place. To which the Apostle Paul is portraying us in the text we just read. Through Ephesians Chapter 2, verses 11-22, Paul helps us realize that in the midst of all the building going on in the world, the Living God is actively building something else. In every village, in every town, in every city of the world, the Living God is, through Jesus Christ, building a new human race; to constitute a new commonwealth; who together are given access into the Presence of God; and to - amazingly – constitute a new dwelling place for God in the world.

Step back for a moment and recall with me the flow of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. When focusing in on just one section of any of Paul's letters, it is good to see and hear it in the larger context.

Chapter two of his letter flows out of his prayer recorded in Chapter One. In that prayer, Paul asks God – “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory” (1:17) – as Paul calls Him – to enlighten the eyes of our hearts “so that”...”so that you may know the hope of His calling”..., ”...that are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us to believe” (1:18-19). Paul then heaps up all kinds of “power words” to describe the power God is exercising toward us to believe. “These are in accordance with”, he says “the working of the strength of His might” (1:19) – a LOT of power! This power, says Paul was first exercised in Jesus Christ when God raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places far above all rule and authority and dominion! (1:20-21). This power, says Paul was then exercised ...and is now being exercised...by taking us who were dead in sin, and captive to powers of evil, and slaves to our own lust and making us alive with Christ, raising us up with Christ, and seating us with Christ in the heavenly places in Christ (2:1-

7). This power, says Paul, was exercised...and is now being exercised...by making us into new creations in Christ who are called to participate in God's "good works" in the world.

And then in the text before us today, Paul is telling us that this power is at work building...building a new human race; who constitute a new commonwealth, a new society; who together are granted direct access into the very Presence of the Holy God; and Who – amazingly – constitutes the new temple where the Creator of all things fulfills His desire to come and live in the world.

Paul is in jail in Rome, chained to a soldier, awaiting trial before Caesar, the most powerful human being alive at that time. And yet, in jail he can see that all around him God is building something no one else could or can build.

And what Paul sees...and wants us to see...this "alternative reading of reality"...is nothing short of revolutionary...Especially coming as it does from a life-long Jew. There simply is no way for us Gentiles to feel how revolutionary a vision it is. In New York last week, Sharon and I and the Pughs stayed in the guesthouse of "Jews for Jesus" on 31<sup>st</sup> and Park Avenue. They can feel how revolutionary what Paul writes is! As ethnic Jews, they know at a gut level just how mind-blowing what Paul develops is.

It is this vision of God building something new in the world that got Paul into jail! Paul is not locked up in Rome because he offended Rome...Paul is in Jail because he had offended his fellow Jews who then wanted to kill him. Paul is in jail in Rome because as a Roman citizen he had appealed to Caesar to protect him against the desire of some of his fellow Jews to have him wiped off the face of the earth. In the next chapter of his letter, Chapter three, Paul will speak of himself as "the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of the Gentiles" (3:1). He is in trouble because he preached what he called "the mystery of Christ" (3:4), the "mystery" of Messiah. The "mystery" that "Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers in Messiah Jesus through the gospel" (3:6).

The vision of this new human race constituting a new dwelling place of God in this world is what got Stephen, one of the first deacons of the church, in trouble. Standing before the great Sanhedrin, the ruling council in Jerusalem, meeting in the great temple, Stephen dared to say "the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands" (Acts 7:48). The leaders gnashed their teeth, throwing him out of the Temple to the edge of the city, pelting him to death with rocks. Standing by approving of the action is Saul, who would become Paul; who would expand Stephen's vision, and end up in jail for proclaiming and acting on it.

I hear Paul saying through the text: "Look! Look at what is being built in the city." A new human race; constituting a new commonwealth; who together as Jews and Gentiles – have access into the Holy Presence of the Holy God; and who – amazingly – constitute a new temple, a new dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

As you can see and hear in the text, Paul is working with many different metaphors. Underneath them all is the architectural metaphor of "temple".

People living in the Roman Empire of the first century knew all about temples! Everywhere you traveled you found temples. Ephesus was especially proud of its temples. The biggest one was built for the goddess Artemis, as the Greeks called her, or Diana, as the Romans called her. (Twin sister of Apollos, son of Zeus.) At the time Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians, the temple of Diana was one of the Seven Wonders of the World. It was built on a platform measuring more than 100,000 square feet, twice the size of a football field! Built with 100 stone columns, all made of marble, each 55 feet high. Ephesus was also one of the centres for the worship of goddess Roma. And one of the centres for the emperor cult. Rome honored Ephesus for its loyalty to the Empire by granting the city permission to build a temple to the emperors. The temple of Domitian, for example, (built after Paul wrote) had eight stone columns five feet in diameter and 46 feet high. The Ephesians knew all about temples! Life revolved around temples.

What Paul expressly has in mind in Ephesians 2:11-22 is the Temple of Jerusalem, built by Herod the Great. It, too was one of the great wonders of the world. It no longer stands. It was destroyed by Rome in 70 AD. That was the most devastating event in the history of Judaism.

There simply is no way to exaggerate the role the Jerusalem temple played in the life of first century Jews. It was thought to be the place where the Living God dwelled. Everything else in Jewish life revolved around the Temple. It was for many, literally, the centre of the cosmos. Which is why Jesus' actions in the Temple, especially on Palm Sunday were so problematic. Jesus is messing with the cosmic center of the universe!

The Temple was made up of four courts. From the outside moving inward they are: the court of the Gentiles, the court of the women, the court of the priests and the Holy Place or Holy of Holies.

The Court of the Gentiles was so named because that was as far in as the Gentiles could go; and even then facing much disdain from hyper-strict Jews. They were, as Paul says in the text "far off" (2:13), "far away" (2:17) from the presence of God. This is the court where Jesus cracks the whip, driving out the money-changers and sellers of sacrificial animals; crying out "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations: (Mark 11:17; quoting Jeremiah 7:11).

The court of the women was so-named because that was as far in as Jewish women could go. And even then they too faced much disdain from the hyper-religious.

The court of the priests was so named because that was where the priests offered up the daily sacrifices and prayers.

And the Holy Place or Holy of Holies was so-named because it was thought that it was there the Holy God choose to dwell in all His Holiness. Only one person, the High Priest, was allowed to enter that space; and only once a year, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. And only then after a long, elaborate process of purification. And only then at great risk to his life, lest he not do things correctly. A rope would be tied around the High Priest's waist so that should he displease the Holy God and die, his body could be retrieved. You can see then that the Temple

was thought to be the centre of the cosmos. And you can see then why what the Apostle Paul declares as “the mystery of Messiah” is so revolutionary and why it got him in such trouble.

Paul, the life-long Jew, is declaring that Jesus the Messiah has changed everything through two primary actions; “through His blood”, as Paul puts it (2:13) Jesus has “broken” and abolished”. Jesus has, by His blood, “broken down the barrier of the dividing wall” – verse 14. And Jesus has in His Flesh, “abolished the enmity” – verse 15. “Broken” and “abolished”.

Jesus has “broken down the barrier of the dividing wall”; or, “the middle wall or partition”, as some translate it. To what is Paul referring?

Here we need to know more about the Jewish, temple. Gentiles, standing in the outer court – “far off” or “far away” – could look up at the real Temple, the real dwelling place of God, but could not “draw near”. That is putting it mildly! The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that the Jewish part of the Temple was “encompassed by a stone wall for a partition”. It had “an inscription which forbade any foreigner to go under penalty of death“. The wall was three cubits high, four and a half feet high. On the wall were the words “law of purity”, and in Greek and Latin the words “no foreigners”. In 1871, archeologists found the exact wording. It goes like this: “No foreigner may enter within the barrier or enclosure around the temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death”. As a number of commentators have pointed out, the sign did not say “Trespassers will be prosecuted”. The sign said, “Trespassers will be executed”!

“Barrier of the dividing wall”. The “wall of partition”.

Jesus broke it down! Can you hear the gasping in Paul’s voice. Stunning. Startling. Revolution of revolutions! The Jewish Messiah broke down the dividing wall! Not a Gentile invader. But a Jew. The Jew. The Messiah. He broke down the wall of partition.

It is what we see Jesus doing from day one of His ministry. He breaks down all kinds of walls to offer a drink to a Samaritan woman. He breaks down all kinds of walls to go to the house of a Roman officer whose child is sick. He breaks down all kinds of walls to touch those with leprosy and other kinds of “unclean-ness”. Jesus is always jumping over and breaking down walls to seek and save sinners...to “draw near” those who are “far off”. The actual dividing wall would stand until 70 AD. But it was broken down in 33 AD by Jesus on the cross. No more wall!

And, says Paul, Jesus abolished in His flesh the enmity. Or, as some translate it, “He put to death the enmity”. To what is Paul referring?

“The law of the commandments contained in ordinances – verse 15. The Law. The enmity that kept people apart was the Law.

Now, here is where we have to be careful. To what Law is Paul referring? Jesus has abolished in His flesh the enmity which was the Law. What Law has been abolished? The so-called Moral Law as chiefly embodied in the Ten Commandments? OR the so-called Ceremonial Law,

proscribing and describing all the sacrificial and purity ordinances. Which Law has Jesus put to death?

Paul cannot be referring to the Moral Law. There's just no way. He knows what Jesus taught, especially in His Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5:17 – “Do not think that I came to abolish the law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill”. In jumping over all kinds of walls to seek and save us, He did not put the Moral Law to death. In the rest of His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus draws out the inherent goodness of the Law; and expands it, deepens it, calls us to the fundamental reasons it was first spoken. The Moral Law is not the enemy. Yes, when we encounter the Law, we realize how far short we fell from God's good will; and we realize we are to keep God's good will. But in order to seek and save us, in order to draw us near, Jesus did not have to abolish the Moral Law. He takes away the curse for our disobedience (Galatians 3:10,13). He cancels the debt of our disobedience (Colossians 2:13-14). He breathes His Holy Spirit into us, enabling us to being to live in sync with God's good will (Romans 8:1-11). But He does not abolish the Moral Law.

He abolishes the Ceremonial Law. All the supposed ways humans were to cleanse themselves so they can approach the Holy God. Jesus puts it all to death. For it is no longer needed. Jesus has fulfilled it through His death on the cross. He is the final sacrifice that makes all other sacrifices unnecessary. By offering up His life on the cross, there is no longer any need for the sacrificial system. No more blood needs to be shed. His blood is enough. By His blood we are made clean. “What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me pure within? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.”

And as a consequence of Jesus' work – broke down and abolished – God is building something new in the city. God is building a new human race; who constitute a new commonwealth; who together have direct access into the Holy of Holies; and who – amazingly – constitute the NEW temple of the Living God in the world.

A new human race. “For He Himself is our peace”, says Paul. “Who made both groups into one” – verse 14. Hear the gasping in his voice? “That in Himself He might create the two into one new man” – verse 15. Hear the gasp again? Hear the thrill in his voice? Both...into one. The two...into one...into one new human. Remember: It is a lifelong Jew who is saying this. “Circumcised on the eighth day of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews...” as he tells the Philippians (3:5). Yet he sees that the Messiah...because of the Messiah's work on the cross...Jews and Gentiles are brought together as a new human race. Jesus is the new human; and in Him we become the new human race. Incorporating both Jews and Gentiles. And transcending both Jews and Gentiles. A third race, as some call it.

So Paul can tell the believers in Colossae, not far from Ephesus, “put on the new human that is being renovated to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created Him. A renovation in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ (Messiah) is all and in all” (3:10-11). And he can tell the believers in Galatia, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus: (3:27-28).

God is building a new human race

Who constitute a new commonwealth among the nations. Apart from the Jewish Messiah, Gentiles, says Paul, were “excluded”...verse 12 – “excluded from the commonwealth of Israel”. The word translated “commonwealth” is “politeia”, from which we get the English words “polity”, “politics”, “political”. It refers to a whole way of life shaped by common vision and values. In the case of the Jews, a politeia shaped by the great covenants God made with the patriarchs; the covenant with Noah, the covenant with Abraham, the covenant with Daniel and the promised New Covenant. To which, says Paul, Gentiles were strangers. But now, in Messiah, no longer strangers and aliens, but “fellow citizens with the saints”. The phrase “fellow citizens” is sum-politeia, with – politeia. In Jesus Christ and because of Jesus Christ, Gentiles get in on the politeia God has been shaping for centuries.

Because “members of God’s household” – verse 19. The term “household” (oikeios) is used in the Greek version of the Old Testament for “blood relation”. Mercy! Gentiles in Christ are now “blood relatives” with Jews in Christ. The blood of the Jewish Messiah brings Gentiles and Jews together in Himself.

All this is why John Stott entitles his commentary on Ephesians, “God’s New Society”. God is building a new politeria - a new commonwealth in the world, centered in the One who is our peace (2:14).

“Who together have access”, says Paul. Access: a life-giving word. In Paul’s day used of those who are granted “an audience” with the Emperor. We both – Jews and Gentiles – have been granted an audience with the Great Emperor. In terms of the architectural metaphor, we both have been given access into the Holy of Holies! We get to go all the way in!! Through the court of the Gentiles, through the court of the women, through the court of the priests, all the way into the Holy of Holies!

Can you handle it? Free, full, unhindered access into the Presence of the Holy God!

Verse 18. The foundational text for a theology of prayer, for a theology of relationship into the Triune God. “For through Him (Christ) we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father”.

Through,  
in,  
to.

- *Through* Jesus Christ; God the Son who makes peace between human and human, and between human and God.
- *In* the Spirit; God the Holy Spirit who carries us into the Presence.
- *To* the Father; God the Father, who so loved the world He sent the Son to make life with God possible.

Never again do we meet any sign that says “restricted access”. The wall is down! All the walls are down. Full, free access into the very life of the Triune God!

And then, in a morphing of the metaphor, we not only have access into the Holy of Holies; the new human race becomes the Holy of Holies! Verse 21: “in whom (Christ) the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord.” Remember, it is a lifelong Jew who is saying this, and for whom the temple was the centre of the cosmos. Jews...and Gentiles...together in Christ...the new temple!

Now – get this – there are two words the New Testament uses for temple. One (hieron) refers to the whole temple area...all four courts. The other (naos) refers just to the Holy of Holies. It is that word Paul uses here. “Growing into a holy temple”, “Growing into a holy naos”, “Growing into a holy Holy of Holies”. We, broken, sinful human beings, being redeemed, becoming new creations. We constitute the new Holy of Holies in the world! We do not just go to the Holy of Holies; we are the Holy of Holies. It takes my breath away!

Built on the foundation of apostles and prophets, like Paul, and Peter, and Priscilla, and Jews, we just announce the good news. The cornerstone being Jesus Himself. The cornerstone determines the size and shape of the rest of the building. Given who He is, the building can be very big!...and will be very beautiful!

A new human race; constituting a new commonwealth in the world; who together have access into the Holiest place in the cosmos; who together make up the dwelling place of the God who can never be contained in temples made by human hands.

So what are the implications for us in this city?

1) First, and foremost, we invite the city to join the building project! We invite everyone we can to get in on what the living God is building in the midst of all the building.

2) And then we make sure that we do not create new forms of the “barrier of the dividing walls.” Jesus’ work on the cross levels all barriers. So we make sure not to lift them up again in any form.

3) And we treat each other in light of the building project. We treat each other as the new humans we are; as the new society we are, as the Holy of Holies we are.

At New Life Fellowship in New York, when someone speaks ill of a member of the church, they say, “The Father does not speak that way to His children, and neither do we.” We treat each other with the reverence deserving of holiness.

4) And most of all we do everything we can to grow in sensitivity to the Presence of the Holy One. In all we do we live aware that the Triune God of grace is dwelling among us and in us!!

I want to conclude with a reading from C.S. Lewis. It captures for me the message of Ephesians 2:11-22.

“Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on. You knew those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to?

The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making

courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage, but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”