

# Horizontal Atonement: The Cross *and the Church*



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Eph. 2:11–22, Rom. 3:31, Rom. 7:12, Isa. 52:7, Isa. 57:19, John 14:27, 1 Cor. 3:9–17.*

**Memory Text:** “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” (*Ephesians 2:13, 14, ESV*).

**Y**ou are a Gentile, a Greek, who has learned to treasure the God of the Jews. In fact, you have left your worship of many gods and have embraced the one true God. As you make your way through the beautiful courtyards and fluted columns of the Jerusalem temple, the sounds of worship call forth your praise. Just then, though, you find yourself confronted by a stone barricade four feet high. Engraved every few feet in Latin and Greek is this message: “No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure around the temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.” In that moment you feel shut out, alienated, and separated.

In Ephesians 2:11–22, Paul sees the cross of Christ as making a dramatic difference, destroying such barriers and walls. Vertically, the Cross dissolves alienation, reconciling humans with God. Horizontally, it reconciles people with each other. The Cross removes enmity and brings peace between Jews and Gentiles, making of them “one new humanity” (*Eph. 2:15, NIV*). Together they become a new temple, “a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (*Eph. 2:22, ESV*).

What does this truth mean for us today?

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 29.

## Brought Near in Christ

**Compare** Ephesians 2:1–3, Paul’s earlier description of the Gentile past of the addressees, with Ephesians 2:11, 12. What does he accent in his fresh description of their past?

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Gentiles who were now believers in Christ and members of His “body,” the church, were once totally separated from Israel and the salvation God offered. Paul judges it important for them to “remember” (*Eph. 2:11*) this past. They were then “without Christ,” the Anointed One, the Messiah of Israel. They were “aliens from the commonwealth [the state or people] of Israel.” And they were “strangers from the covenants of promise,” oblivious to the promises of salvation God had offered down through salvation history. The alienation from Israel and the salvation offered through it meant that they once had “no hope” and were “without God in the world” (*Eph. 2:12, NKJV*).

Also, in their past existence, Gentiles were caught up in a grand feud between themselves and the Jews. Paul gives a sense of this entrenched hatred by referring to one symptom of it, name-calling. Jews referred to Gentiles with derision as “the uncircumcision,” and Gentiles referred to Jews with equal disdain as “the circumcision” (*Eph. 2:11*).

Ephesians 2:13, however, points to something radically different now. Paul wrote: “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (*NKJV*).

When Paul describes Gentile believers as once “far off,” he borrows from Isaiah 57:19: “‘Peace, peace, to the far and to the near,’ says the LORD, ‘and I will heal him’ ” (*ESV; compare Eph. 2:17, 18*). In Christ and through His cross, Gentile believers had been brought near to all from which they were separated—God, hope, and their Jewish brothers and sisters. Here is the powerfully good news implied by Paul’s description: that the cross of Christ can heal the wide rift between Jews and Gentiles means that all of our feuds and divisions can be resolved there. This good news invites us to consider the divisions that exist in our own lives and in the church and to ponder the power of the Cross to supersede them.

**From what condition has Jesus redeemed you? Why might it be important for you to recall, with some regularity, where you were when He found you and where you might now be had He not found you?**

## Reconciliation: God's Gift From the Cross

“For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility . . . that he might . . . reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross” (*Eph. 2:14–16, ESV*).

**How** does Paul describe the Cross and the impact of Christ's work there in each of these passages in Ephesians? How would you summarize what Paul says about the Cross and how it transforms our relationships? (*See Eph. 1:7, 8; Eph. 4:32; Eph. 2:13, 14; Eph. 2:16; Eph. 5:2, 25.*)

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In the context of our passage for this week, Ephesians 2:11–22, the Cross yields three great assets for believers: (1) Gentiles, who were “far” from God and His people, are “brought near” (*Eph. 2:13, ESV*) to both, being now sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters of Jewish believers (*Eph. 2:19*); (2) the “hostility” (Greek, *echthran*, “enmity,” related to *echthros*, “enemy”) between Jewish and Gentile believers is itself “put to death” (*Eph. 2:16, NASB*). The cross of Christ removes what seemed to be the permanent state of hostility and war in which Jews and Gentiles were sworn enemies (*Eph. 2:17*); (3) in the place of hostility comes reconciliation. It was Christ's purpose to “reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross” (*Eph. 2:16, NKJV; compare Col. 1:19–22*).

What does reconciliation look like? How does it feel to be reconciled? Imagine severe estrangement between a mother and daughter, one that has settled in over a period of years. Imagine this rancor being dissolved in a wave of grace and forgiveness and the ensuing reunion between the two. That is reconciliation. Reconciliation is experienced in the moment when one church member lays aside whatever issue divides from another and acknowledges the other church member as a beloved brother or sister who accepts what has been offered. Reconciliation is not a mechanical or legal term but an interpersonal one that celebrates the mending of broken relationships. Paul dares to imagine Christ's powerful work on the cross as impacting the relationships, between not just individuals but also people groups. He imagines it invading our lives and destroying our divisions, dissolving our quarrels, and renewing our fellowship with and understanding of each other.

**In what ways might you need to apply the principles here to be reconciled to someone else? How do you go about doing it?**

## Breaking Down the Dividing Wall

**What** action does Paul say Christ took toward “the law of commandments expressed in ordinances” (*ESV*)? Why did He take this action? (See *Eph. 2:14, 15*.)

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Paul probably alludes here to the balustrade or fence that surrounded the court of Israel in Herod’s Temple, with its death threat. Paul imagines this wall coming down and Gentiles being granted full access to worship God (*Eph. 2:18*). Any such wall, says Paul, is removed by the Cross. For there we learn that these two peoples, Jews and Gentiles, are really one.

Some believe that Ephesians 2:14, 15 teaches that the Ten Commandments, inclusive of the Sabbath commandment, are “abolished” or “set aside” by the Cross. However, in Ephesians, Paul demonstrates profound respect for the Ten Commandments as a resource for shaping Christian discipleship. He quotes the fifth commandment (*Eph. 6:2, 3*) and alludes to others (*e.g., the seventh, Eph. 5:3–14, 21–33; the eighth, Eph. 4:28; the ninth, Eph. 4:25; the tenth, Eph. 5:5*). This aligns with Paul’s earlier assertions about the law (*Rom. 3:31, Rom. 7:12*). He addresses the misuse of the law, but he honors the law itself and assumes its continuity. Hence, to use these verses to abolish the Ten Commandments, especially in light of all the other verses in the Bible about the perpetuity of the law, is clearly a misinterpretation of Paul’s intent here.

Instead, any use of the law to drive a wedge between Jews and Gentiles and especially to exclude Gentiles from full partnership among the people of God and access to worship, would be anathema to Paul and a misuse of the divine intention for the law. The “law” in Ephesians 2:14, 15 is either the ceremonial aspects of the law that divided Jew from Gentile, represented in Paul’s complex phrase “the law of commandments expressed in ordinances” (*ESV*), or it is the whole Old Testament system of law as it had come to be interpreted, augmented, and misused as a wedge to distance Jews from Gentiles.

**What tensions among Seventh-day Adventists or among members of the wider Christian community need to be confronted and overcome? Why should our common love of Christ be enough to overcome these tensions?**

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## Jesus, Preacher of Peace

**How** does Paul summarize the ministry of Christ in Ephesians 2:17, 18?

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The concept of peace is important in Ephesians, with the letter beginning and ending with blessings of peace “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (*Eph. 1:2, NKJV; compare Eph. 6:23*). Earlier in Ephesians 2:11–22, Paul argued that Christ personifies peace, “For He Himself is our peace,” and that His Cross creates it (*Eph. 2:14–16, NKJV*). Christ not only destroys something—the hostility between Jew and Gentile (*Eph. 2:14, 15*)—He creates a new humanity, marked by relationships of reconciliation and peace (*Eph. 2:15–17*). Such peace is not just the absence of conflict but resonates with the Hebrew concept of *shalom*, the experience of wholeness and well-being, both in our relationship with God (*Rom. 5:1*) and with others.

**How** does Paul imagine believers participating in sharing Jesus’ message of peace? *Eph. 4:3; Eph. 6:14, 15; compare Rom. 10:14, 15 with Eph. 2:17–19, Isa. 52:7, Isa. 57:19.*

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The Gospels contain examples of Jesus as a preacher of peace. In His farewell messages to the disciples, He promises them—and us—“ ‘Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you’ ” (*John 14:27, NKJV*). And He concludes, “ ‘I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world’ ” (*John 16:33, ESV*). After His resurrection, when He appears to the disciples, He repeatedly says to them, “ ‘Peace be with you’ ” (*John 20:19, 21, 26, ESV*).

In Ephesians 2:17, 18, Paul is keen to point out that Christ’s preaching of peace extended beyond the time of His earthly ministry. He has “preached peace” in the present to both “far” (Gentile believers before they were converted; *ESV*) and “near” (Jewish believers, *ESV; compare Eph. 2:11–13*). Having accepted this proclamation, all believers experience a profound blessing.

**How can we learn to be preachers of peace as opposed to conduits of conflict? To what situations, right now, can you help bring healing?**

## The Church, a Holy Temple

**What** culminating set of images does Paul use in Ephesians 2:11–22 to signal unity between Jews and Gentiles in the church?

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Reviewing Ephesians 2, we recall that verses 1–10 teach that we live in solidarity with Jesus, while verses 11–22 teach that we live in solidarity with others as part of His church. Jesus’ death has both vertical benefits in establishing our relationship with God (*Eph. 2:1–10*) and horizontal ones in cementing our relationships with others (*Eph. 2:11–22*). Through the Cross, Jesus demolishes all that divides Gentile believers from Jewish ones, including the misuse of the Law in order to widen the gulf (*Eph. 2:11–18*). Jesus also builds something—an amazing, new temple composed of believers. Gentiles, once excluded from worship in the sacred places of the temple, now join Jewish believers in becoming a new temple. We all become part of God’s church, “a holy temple in the Lord” (*Eph. 2:19–22, ESV*) and are privileged to live in solidarity with Jesus and our brothers and sisters in Christ.

**How** does Paul’s use of the metaphor of the church as a temple in Ephesians 2:19–22 compare with the uses in the following passages? *1 Cor. 3:9–17, 2 Cor. 6:14–7:1, 1 Pet. 2:4–8*.

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Paul employs the metaphor of the church as temple as a culminating image for the full inclusion of Gentiles in the church. Once banned from worship in the “Court of Israel” in the temple, they now not only gain access (*Eph. 2:18*) but themselves become building materials for a new temple designed as “a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (*Eph. 2:22, NKJV*).

New Testament authors employ the temple metaphor to visualize the sanctity of the church, God’s role in founding and growing the church, and the solidarity of believers within the church. The metaphor is used in conjunction with biological language (*see Eph. 2:21*, where the temple “grows”), and the process of building is often accentuated (*see Eph. 2:22*, “you also are being built together,” *ESV*). Rather than a static image, the church is able to acknowledge its identity as “the temple of the living God” (*2 Cor. 6:16, NKJV*).

**Further Thought:** Study carefully the following preamble to the discussion questions listed below:

What is the specific context in which Paul writes Ephesians 2:11–22 as he describes the sweeping effects of the Cross on human relationships? He is addressing the relationships between Jewish and Gentile believers who together are members of the church. He expresses an obvious concern that they understand and live their shared, reconciled status as fellow members of God’s household (*Eph. 2:19*). However, in the context of the letter as a whole, Paul demonstrates a broad, far-reaching purpose. His theme is God’s grand, ultimate plan to unite all things in Christ (*Eph. 1:9, 10*), and his scope includes “every family in heaven and on earth” (*Eph. 3:15, ESV*).

More important, the unity of members within the church—the specific topic he addresses in Ephesians 2:11–22—itself has a wider purpose that Paul discloses in Ephesians 3:10: “so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God [in creating the church out of both Jews and Gentiles] might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (*ESV*). Through actualizing the unity Christ won on the cross, believers are to signal that God’s ultimate plan to unite all things in Christ is underway. Their reconciled relationships signal God’s plan for a universe unified in Christ. So, it is appropriate to look to Ephesians 2:11–22, set in the context of Ephesians as a whole, for biblical principles concerning a topic of importance today, relationships among people groups or races.

### Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What biblical principles concerning ethnic relations are provided in Ephesians 2:11–22? How does the passage offer a distinctive, Christ-centered approach to the theme of how members of one ethnic group should relate to members of another?
- ❷ Given God’s plan for the future of humankind (*Eph. 1:9, 10; Eph. 2:11–22*), how important is it for the church to deal with its own internal issues and conflicts between races?
- ❸ What simmering issues between ethnic groups, which all too often may be hidden and ignored, exist in your community? How might your church play a positive role in actualizing the unifying work Christ already has accomplished on the cross? How might you participate in that work?

## Safe in Jesus: Part 2

By ANDREW McCHESNEY

One afternoon, 16-year-old Almira decided to take a nap after returning home from school, exhausted from months of fitful nights. She lay down on a couch, her face to the open door of the room. She was at home alone.

Suddenly, she sensed the presence in the room. Looking toward the door, she saw the presence for the first time. He looked like a gray cloud, completely obscuring the doorway. Almira didn't know why, but she understood that something terrible would happen if she even blinked. She stared at the doorway for what seemed an eternity. Finally, she had to blink. In that split second, the gray cloud darted to her. Almira felt like she was entombed in a giant stone, helpless and unable to move. She struggled to breathe. She pleaded with good forces for help. There was no response.

At that moment, she remembered a prayer that she had memorized. It was a non-Christian prayer associated with her ancestors' traditional religion. She recited it. For a moment, she was free and could breathe. But then the presence captured her again. She repeated the prayer again and again. She was released and recaptured, released and recaptured.

Growing weary of the struggle, she frantically wondered what she could do to save herself. Abruptly, she remembered that one of the Russian teachers at the supernatural courses had mentioned Jesus Christ was more powerful than all good and evil forces. The thought flashed into her mind to call upon Jesus. She opened her mouth to speak. She only managed to utter the first syllable of Jesus' name, and the gray cloud fled. She felt as though Jesus had entered the room and thrown the evil captor off her.

Almira had no doubt that she needed Jesus. But how? She was not a Christian. So, she went to her ancestors' traditional place of worship for two months. She began to sleep better; so, she decided that Jesus must also visit that place of worship.

Then her older sister, Faniya, came home with two friends whom Almira had never seen before. She learned that day that Faniya had started going to a Seventh-day Adventist Church located on the same street as their apartment building. The two friends were members of the Adventist Church.



Almira related her story to the Adventist girls.

"That is Satan," one girl said.

The other girl said Almira had entered Satan's territory by taking the classes on the supernatural.

"But Jesus is on your side," she said. "Only He can free you from Satan's power."

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*Read more about Almira next week. Thank you for your mission offerings that help spread the gospel in Russia and around the world.*