

Union With Christ

Paul's Letter to the Ephesians

Beyond Near and Far: Jesus Overcomes Shame and Alienation

Ephesians 2:11 – 22

Introduction: Wanting to be an Insider

My son John was born last September, after a marathon 55 hours of labor, 3 shifts of doctors, 2 hours of pushing, and a last minute C section. Obviously, Ming was exhausted, and I was probably the most tired I had ever been, so when the nurses started to lift John out, I wasn't sure how I would feel. Also, I didn't come from a family where physical or verbal affection was really expressed. So what amazed me when little John was born was the depth and power of my own feelings. I walked over to the table where the pediatrician was cleaning him, and the first thing I thought was, "Yup, he's got my nose." He was crying pretty loudly. Now some babies recognize their mommy and daddy's voices from the time they're in the womb. I guess that's what happened there, because when I started talking to him, he stopped crying. At that moment, I felt my heart sing. I thought, You're my son!, and I felt deeply connected to him. In my mind, I started writing him a poem about where his name comes from and why we think it's meaningful. When we left the hospital, and I found that I could watch him for hours and not be bored. I'd wait for him to open his eyes, and then I'd wait for him to smile. I've even found that I cannot kiss him enough, and though I didn't think I would call my son "cute," indeed I think he is "cute." In fact, one time Ming complained that I was holding him too much. She once said, "Hey, give him to me, the boy needs to eat!!!" And, "I hold him just to nurse him, but you get to play with him all the time!"

Now as I reflected on that episode, it hit me that part of the reason I had such strong feelings for my son is that for about eight years, I have done ministry to at-risk kids. And what I've seen has broken my heart. Some of them have no parents, most have no dad's, some have no one to give them a basic sense of love and structure and encouragement and order. But I felt like I could never do that much, because they weren't my children. They were outside of me and my family. But all those years of working with at-risk kids grew in me a desire to be a good dad to my own children. When John was born, it felt like all my feelings for the at-risk kids I knew could finally be expressed. And I had this thought: To the extent that I can do things right as a dad by the Spirit of God, if only I could love each and every one of the kids I have ever known through my son John, that I could somehow bring them inside my family through John and that by loving John I could be loving them.

What I cannot do is exactly what God does. He is a Father to His Son, Jesus Christ. And though there are many who are outside His family, He desires to bring inside His family by placing them in Jesus. And He is able to do that. He brings the outsiders in, so that they become insiders. Let's see how He does this in Ephesians 2:11-22.

Overview:

1. Therefore remember then that you the Gentiles in the flesh, the ones called ‘uncircumcised’
 2. by those called ‘circumcised’ which is made in the flesh by hands,
 3. that you were once separated from Christ, alienated from the citizenship of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise
 4. having no hope and without God in the world.
 5. But now in Christ Jesus you who were once afar off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.
 6. For he is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the dividing wall of hostility in his body
 7. abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances
 - 7'. that of the two he might create in himself one new humanity
 - 6'. so making peace, reconciling the two in one body to God through the cross bringing the hostility to an end in it.
 - 5'. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near
 - 4'. for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.
 - 3'. So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God
 - 2'. built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone in whom the whole structure is joined together) and growing into a holy temple in the Lord
 - 1'. into which you are also built for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

The first thing to notice is that this section is a poem. It's in the inverted parallel form, a.k.a. chiasm. This is a very common Hebraic way of writing, and it was probably used to help people remember the body of the message. It's called an inverted parallel because the first line parallels the last, the second line parallels the second to last, and so on, until you come to the center-most line. That center-most line is the main point of emphasis.

The second thing to notice is that the poem uses the imagery of the Jerusalem Temple, the place where God's shekinah glory once dwelled. Gentiles were only allowed to be in the Temple's outer perimeter, in what was called the Court of the Gentiles. They were prevented from going any further by a wall upon which hung a sign, "No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosing wall round the temple, anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death." That is what made them separate, alienated from Israel. Jewish women and men were allowed closer, but were separated into two courts. Only a few select priests could go into the Temple proper. And once a year, the High Priest alone could go past the curtain into the Holy of Holies, where God Himself lived in some sense.

The dividing wall of hostility could refer to the wall separating the Jews from the Gentiles. Or it could have refer to the curtain dividing God from the rest of humanity. It's not absolutely clear which it is, and I think that Paul's strategy was to be deliberately unclear because he really means both.

Gentiles

So let's understand how you, if you were Gentiles, would have felt here at the Temple. Paul says in line 1 that you would get called a name: 'uncircumcised.' That was a slur that Jews called Gentiles because Jewish men were circumcised as a symbol of being God's special people. So you poor Gentiles would show up wanting to be close to God, and before you take your seats, so to speak, the Jewish people around you would look sideways, mutter under their breath, and say, "Look who's here: those people." You were also separated, alienated, and strangers according to line 3. This was like segregation. You always have to sit at the back of the bus. You always have to take the nosebleed seats. [in a quiet voice] You could barely hear what was going on up front. And all you could see is everyone else's back. That is what it feels like to be an outsider.

Look at line 4: "You were without hope and without God in the world." In other words, you didn't see how things could change for you, the outsider. And in line 5, we were "afar off." We felt like God was far away, and that we could never become insiders into God's people. What does it mean to be separate, alienated, an outsider? Here are three images of that.

I remember when I was about 10, I was on the city swim team. And once my coach announced that we were going to do butterfly relays. I felt ambivalent because I loved relays but I hated butterfly. But I thought, here's a chance for me to feel like an insider because one of the team captains was my friend Jack. And I thought I would be picked first because Jack was my...what? Friend! But I wasn't picked first. I wasn't picked second. I was picked next to last, and the guy who was picked last had breathing problems, so you know how I was feeling! I felt like an outsider. When I got a little older, I noticed that my swimming friends were white, and I wasn't as verbal as them. So I never felt like I could be as funny, and people didn't confide in me or just talk to me as much as they did others.

The second image of feeling like an outsider is this: In many ways I felt on the outside of my dad. The pattern in my family was that after dinner, my dad would either sit in front of the TV or go into his room and close the door and read. There wasn't much conversation at all. So when I was young, I never heard what he felt about my mom, or about me, or about my sister. I didn't have access to his inner life, his emotions, his growing up. It seemed like I stood on the outside of a door.

Here's a third image of feeling on the outside. The summer after my freshman year I went over to my friend Erica's house to have dinner with her and her family. Hers is a Chinese family. We sat down and during the meal, her dad reached over and held his wife's hand. I was *shocked*. I had never seen that kind of affection before, especially in front of all us kids! And her dad asked me questions, then told some stories, then made conversation with others around the table. At the end of that time, I wished that I could be an insider to that family. But of course, I was an outsider.

And so I came to feel like an outsider even with God. Once I went with some friends to hear a preacher, and this speaker was passionate and loud. And he said, “God is with you; God is near you,” over and over again. Now I and one of my friends had walked into that time feeling spiritually lousy. After the sermon, my friend said he felt great. I didn’t feel any better. In fact, I felt slightly worse. I just sat there wondering why I felt like I was such an outsider to God. What did I need to do?

The real question that I didn’t yet understand was, “What has God done for people who feel like outsiders?”

Jews

But before we get into that, the question needs to be asked, “How did the Jews feel?” They were closer to God, right? Well, in some sense, yes. They were insiders, right? No. Paul says that they were “near” in line 5 and 5’. But being “near” isn’t good enough. Being “near” means that there was still distance between them and God, and distance kills. If that sounds strange, look at Paul’s point in line 2: Circumcision is made in the flesh. He’s poking at them and saying, “That’s an outward issue, just like uncircumcision is an outward issue.” And look at line 5’: He preached peace to those who were near, because the Jews actually didn’t have absolute peace with God before Jesus. Instead, they had to offer sacrifices almost every day, their position in the promised land was always precarious, and they never had rest.

The epistle to the Hebrews puts it this way: “The same sacrifices, year by year, which they offer continually, [cannot] make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins. But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” (10:2-4) The nearer you got to God, the more uncomfortable you were, like a moth near the fire. You could get close to the Temple of God. If you were a priest, you might actually go into the outer parts of the Temple of God to offer a sacrifice. You might even be the high priest and go into the Holy of Holies. But even he went in with a rope tied around his ankle and bells on him, so that if somehow he died in the presence of the shekinah glory of God, the other priests would hear the bells stop ringing and pull him out. Being near God was SCARY. It was FRIGHTENING. Your guilty conscience was not cleansed by those sacrifices and that was as close as you could get. You are a moth drawn to the raging fire of God’s presence. But at the same time, you know that you’ll be burned to a crisp if you got really close. You can be near, but you can’t be within God. And so it was with the Jews. The closer they got closer to God, the farther away they felt. Being near was still being OUTSIDE. And your soul was not satisfied.

Near and Far – The Right Question?

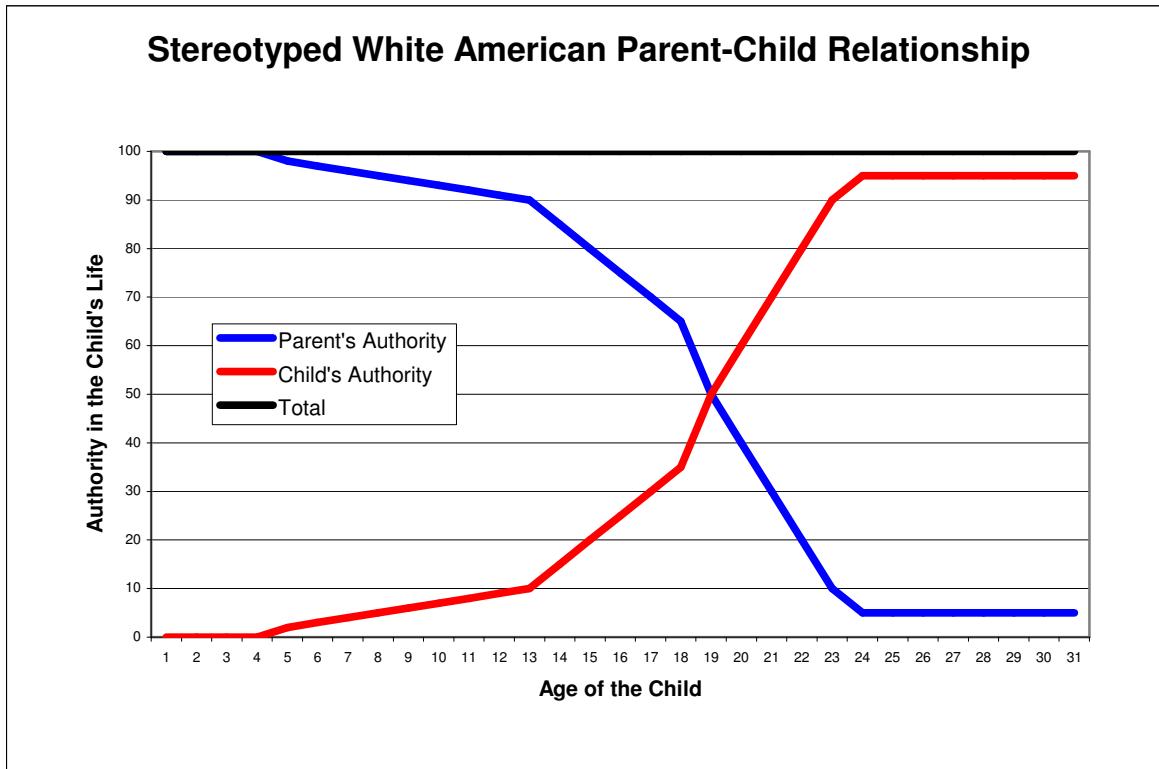
So somehow the near and far comparison isn’t even that significant. And yet how easy it is to fall into this near and far comparison? Especially if you’re performance-oriented. When I was in college, I learned this the hard way. In my junior year, here’s all the things I was doing. I was trying to witness to my drawmates, I was leading worship for my fellowship, I was leading a small group, I was coordinating the small group leaders and setting curriculum for them, I was the core group coordinator, I was teaching a workshop on beginning guitar, I was discipling a younger guy, I was being discipled, I preached three times during the school year, and I was doing tons of outside Christian reading. I must have been doing at least 40 hours a week of my Christian activity.

Then I became really comparison oriented. I was the kind of person who would stand there in worship and wonder if other people were really worshiping. Or I’d wonder what kind of person they were when they were at home. Or I’d think, “That person isn’t doing as much for God as I am!” If you do this, then it’s because you think you’re outside Jesus. That’s why you fall into this attitude of gauging how near or far you are relative to everyone else. When you feel outside, you feel like the best you can do is to be nearer than other people.

And as sad as that is, think about this for yourselves. Aren’t our fellowships sometimes rife with this stuff? Hidden jealousies, secret comparisons, inward pride about “doing more” for the fellowship...

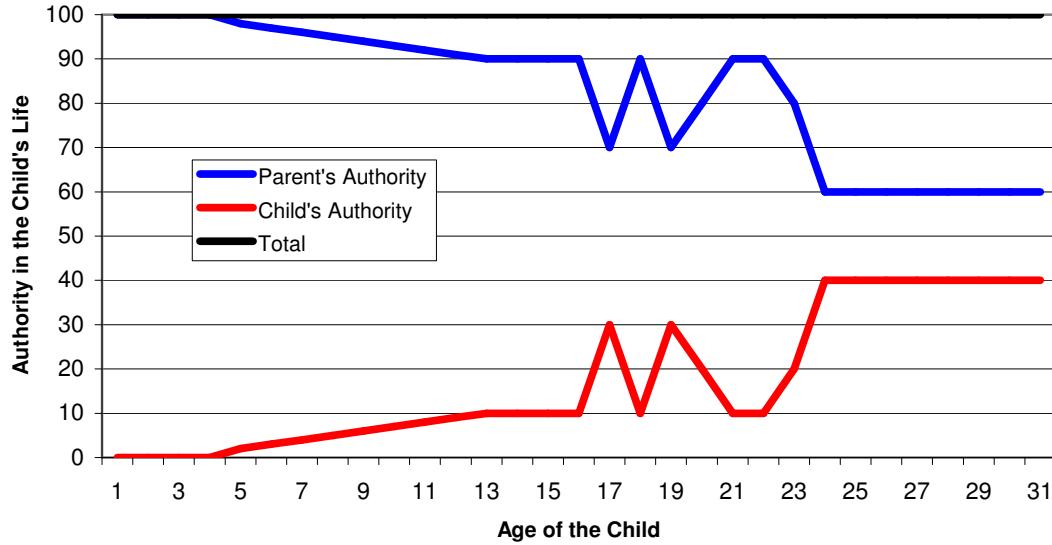
Now I want to explain to you why it was easy for me to fall into these bad habits. Let me return a moment to the story of me feeling like an outsider to God. Now my friend and I had gone to this sermon, and the

preacher's emphasis was, "God is with you, God is with you, God is near you." My friend felt really encouraged and I didn't. As we talked about why, we realized the following: (See graphs, attached)

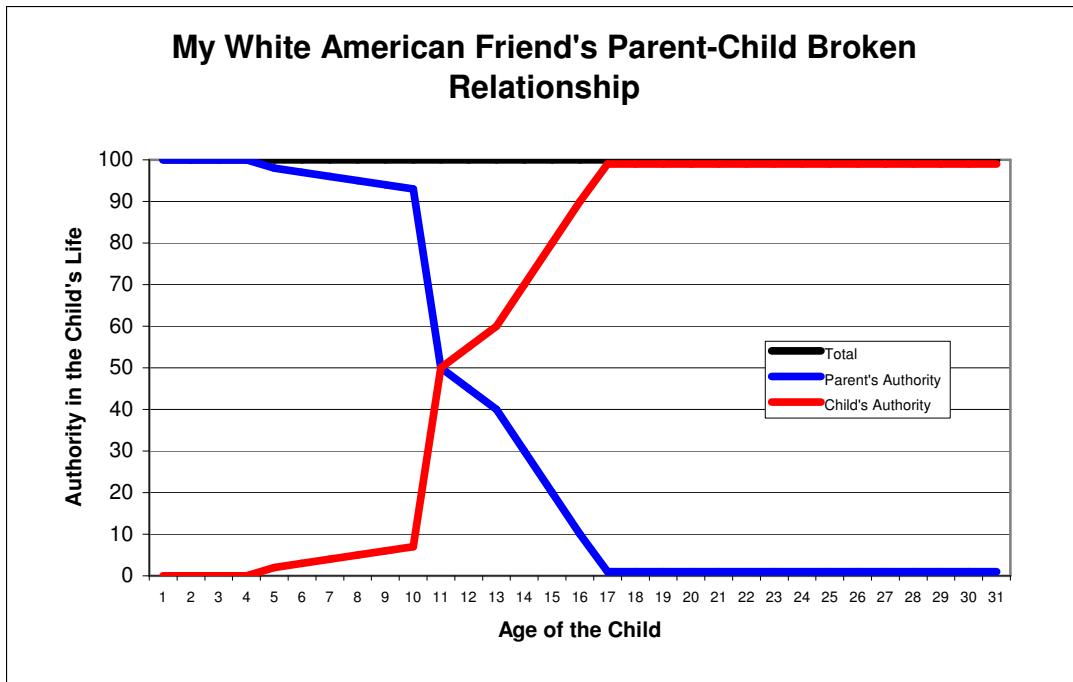


At least part of the reason is that I never had an experience of when an authority figure in my life became an intimate friend. This is explained by the following graphs. Now I realize that these are stereotypes and that there are exceptions to all of this. Nevertheless, I think they're helpful in understanding why we feel the way we do. In all these graphs, the x-axis is your age as a child, starting at age 0. The y-axis is the amount of authority or decision making either you or your parents have in your life, starting at age 0. Now in the first graph, what we see is a typical white American parent-child interaction. Of course when the child is young, the parents make all the decisions, like what the child eats, where the child goes, etc. As the child gets older, the parents' authority decreases and the child's authority increases. Eventually, the child is fully in control of his or her own life. The point where the two lines cross is about 16, 17, or 18, and that explains why there's a lot of fighting around that age. The child and the parents are disagreeing over things like who to date or what to do with one's time. The child typically says, "Who are you to tell me what to do? I'm grown up enough to choose for myself!" But the key point is that the child eventually acquires full authority over his or her own life.

Stereotyped 2nd Generation Asian American Parent-Child Relationship



In contrast, as shown on the second graph, in a stereotypical 2nd generation Asian American family, the child starts out with no authority, of course, and the parents start out with all of it. At around age 16, let's say you start to drive. So for a while, your authority goes up and your parents' goes down. But when your parents become displeased with where you go, they say that you can only drive on certain days, you can only drive 5 miles from home, and you have to be back at 11pm always. So your authority goes back down and your parents' goes up. Then you get to college, and typically you leave home, so your authority goes up. You're making all these decisions about how late you can stay up and who you hang out with, that you didn't make before. But when you say, "I'm going to major in literature," or "I'm dating so and so," your parents might say, "No you're not." And they drive their authority up and your authority falls down again. When you graduate, your parents give you more leeway because you're making your own income and they can respect that. But the point in this graph is that there is never a cross over. Your parents' authority is always higher than yours.



Incidentally, my white friend's family life was a little atypical. In his family, things looked normal until a sudden cross-over in authority lines happened when he was around 11 or 12. Can you guess what happened? His parents got divorced and his dad left the family. His mom, being a busy woman with kids and other responsibilities, raised my friend to be independent. So by the time he reached college, it was pretty clear to him that he was fully in charge of his own choices.

Jump back to the two of us hearing this preacher's message. When my white friend heard, "God is with you, God is near you," he felt encouraged, befriended, warm, and accepted, because he had this example in his own life of an authority figure becoming an intimate friend, a supportive person, an encouraging person. I never had that experience. For him, the issue was abandonment. For me, the issue was being controlled. When I heard, "God is with you, God is near you," I felt watched, like God was going to be critical with me, like heavy expectations were being placed on my shoulders. What was happening to me? I was struggling to understand how an authority figure could be intimate with me, could love me, could encourage me.

Inside or Outside – The Real Question

So what is the solution? It's to understand that you are in Jesus. Let's look at the passage again, and look at the way I've boldfaced the "in Christ" language. That's the next most important observation to make. Follow the preposition "in" and notice how often Paul uses it. In v.11, you Gentiles were in the flesh. We Jews were in the flesh. You Gentiles were without God in the world. Everything in the beginning of this poem is either "in the flesh" or "in the world." And relative to God, the Gentiles are FAR and the Jews are NEAR. But no one is IN GOD. But notice how that changes. Now "in Christ Jesus" you who were formerly far off... Jesus abolished "in his flesh" the enmity... He reconciled both Jews and Gentiles both "in one body" to God... You have access "in one Spirit" to the Father. We are a holy temple "in the Lord." And you are a dwelling place of God "in the Spirit." That is an awesome change. We go from being OUTSIDERS to being INSIDERS through and in Jesus.

1. Therefore remember then that you the Gentiles **in the flesh**, the ones called ‘uncircumcised’
 2. by those called ‘circumcised’ which is made **in the flesh** by hands,
 3. that you were once separated from Christ, alienated from the citizenship of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise
 4. having no hope and without God **in the world**.
 5. But now **in Christ Jesus** you who were once afar off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.
 6. For he is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the dividing wall of hostility **in his body**
 7. abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances
 - 7'. that of the two he might create **in himself** one new man
 - 6'. so making peace, reconciling the two **in one body** to God through the cross bringing the hostility to an end in it.
 - 5'. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near
 - 4'. for **through him** we both have access **in one Spirit** to the Father.
 - 3'. So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God
 - 2'. built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone in whom the whole structure is joined together) and growing into a holy temple **in the Lord**
 - 1'. into which you are also built for a dwelling place of God **in the Spirit**.

Charles Dickens illustrated this well in his story *The Prince and the Pauper*. One day, two baby boys are born. One is born in riches; he is Edward Tudor, the son of King Henry VIII of England. The other is born in poverty; he is Tom Canty of Offal Court in London's poverty stricken streets. One day after years of living in misery outside the palace, Tom the beggar boy decides to wanted to see royalty. He goes to Charing Village, where the King's palace is. Inside the fence, there is a young boy his own age, Prince Edward Tudor. Suddenly, Tom is snatched up very rudely by a guard. He's about to be thrown further out. But Edward comes to his rescue and invites Tom into the palace. On a whim, the two of them decide to exchange clothes, and lo and behold they look like twin brothers. Prince Edward notices a bruise on Tom's hand, so he goes outside to rebuke the guard. The guard laughs, thinking that he's the beggar Tom, and throws him out. So Edward and Tom change places in life and have their separate misadventures. Edward the prince is now the beggar outside the palace, and Tom the beggar is now the prince inside the palace, at Edward's expense. Then one other day, all England hears that King Henry VIII has died, so Edward in his beggar rags scrambles back to the palace just in time to cry out that he alone knows where the King's Great Seal is, because only the true prince of Wales knew about that. Edward is restored to the throne. And what happens to Tom? Is he cast outside? No way! He stays a dear part of the royal family. He becomes the King's Ward, and the Chief Governor over Christ's Hospital, where poor children and orphans are fed, clothed, educated, and blessed. And King Edward VI reigned with great compassion in one of the darkest times of England's history.

That story helps me understand what happened to us through Jesus. Jesus died on the cross; he entered into our death. But when he died, he also made contact with humanity in the depths of our spiritual and physical death. So when he was reborn, he provided a way for all who believe in him to join him and be resurrected into royalty with himself. It is by this great exchange that we become insiders to God's presence, and insiders to Jesus himself.

I mentioned that I wish that I could love all the at-risk kids I have ever known by somehow placing them inside my own son, John. I wish by loving John I would be loving them. I wish by being in John, they would be loved as though they were John. That's impossible for me, but it's exactly what God does for all of us. He offered us His Son, so that by believing in him, we would come to dwell inside, within him, and we could call God Father because God is the Father of Jesus, in whom we are.

Solution: Be In Jesus

How? What has happened? Before, we were outside God and we had to play these "Who's more near, who's more far?" games. It's as if we were jealous siblings, saying, "I'm closer to mom and dad." "No, they love me more!" When Jesus came, we all, both Jews and Gentiles alike, killed him, proving that we were all equally far from God, equally outside God. But in his death, he revealed the truth about us all and so destroyed the dividing wall of hostility in line 6. It didn't matter how close to the Temple we could get. We were all outside God. So Jesus makes us all equal and therefore destroys the dividing wall of hostility, of comparison orientedness, between us as human beings. And he destroyed the dividing wall of hostility between us and God, the curtain of resentment and fear that we have of authority figures. Jesus destroys it.

And so now, do we all get to go to Jerusalem and enter the Temple? Now we have equal access? NO! We ARE the temple. That's evident in the last lines, 3' and 2' and 1'. "So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone in whom the whole structure is joined together) and growing into **a holy temple** in the Lord into which you are also built for **a dwelling place of God** in the Spirit."

It's not that we now get to enter another level in the Temple. Nor is it that we get to be just more "near" than we were before. We are IN. Remember how the word "in" is used here? We were "in the flesh," "in the flesh," and "in the world." But now we are "in Christ Jesus," "in his body," "in one body," "in one spirit," "in the Lord," and "in the spirit." That's because Jesus himself is the new Temple, the new dwelling place of God, and now we get to be in him.

Picture yourself as a woman. Even you men, I want you to imagine that you're a woman, a Gentile woman, standing afar off from the Temple, wishing that you could come near the presence of God within the Temple. Then your heart is about to burst, so you move forward. You cross the dividing wall between

Gentiles and Jews, and you enter the Jewish court of women. The women turn their heads and stare at you in shock. But you don't care, you push through them and cross over into the court of Jewish men. The men are aghast, and even cry out, calling for your punishment. But you quickly move to the Temple doors and move into the Temple itself. There, the priests yell angrily that you've stepped onto holy ground. Then you do the unthinkable. With trembling hands, you open the curtain to the Holy of Holies. The high priest, ministering there on Yom Kippur, cries in an outrage, but you walk right past him, and you walk RIGHT INTO GOD HIMSELF. Picture yourself WALKING INTO GOD HIMSELF. What would that be like, BEING OVERWHELMED, ENGULFED AND TRANSFORMED IN GOD'S GLORY? There are light years of difference between being IN GOD and being just "near." In fact, that is the key issue here. It doesn't matter whether you're near or far. The real difference is whether you are INSIDE or OUTSIDE God. Then after that point, the Temple itself didn't matter because you and God had somehow maintained a sense of oneness.

In fact, in a sense, that's the story of John 4, the Samaritan woman at the well, isn't it? Here's a woman who is a Gentile, who comes day after day in the hot of the day to draw water at a well. One day, she finds Jesus there. Jesus says, "I have living water. If you drink it, you will never thirst again." The woman thinks of all the repetitive trips she's made day after day, and says, "Give me this water." Jesus says, "Call your husband and come here." She acknowledges that she's had five husbands, and the man she's living with is not her husband. Then she suddenly understands that she's made repetitive trips to men, searching for intimacy, hoping in vain that someone would be near her. And she realizes that her real thirst has been to satisfy her soul. So she says, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Where's the right place to worship? Gerizim or Jerusalem?" That's often seen as if she's trying to change the subject. She's not! She's realized her need, and she's asking, "Where do I find God? Where do I find Him? Do I go to Gerizim or Jerusalem, because both would be hard, but I'd be willing to go there. If I go to Gerizim, people will know me for my sins, and I'll face all the hatred there. But if I go to Jerusalem, then people will judge me for the color of my skin, for not being a pureblood Jew, and I'll face judgments again. Either way, I'm willing to go. Just tell me: Where do I go to find God?" And Jesus says, "Dear woman, the hour is coming and now is when the true worshipers will worship in spirit and in truth." Meaning, those who have the living water of the Spirit inside of them will be in Jesus because the Spirit will also seal them into Jesus. And being in Jesus is better than being in the Temple, because Jesus is in the Father, and we will meet the Father through Jesus. We will inherit Jesus' own relationship with his Father by being in him!!!

Concluding Thoughts

So what does that mean for you? Well, if you've ever felt not valued, this is great news. You are infinitely more important than the Golden Temple of Solomon, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. That magnificent building that was covered in gold, which Solomon with all his resources and engineers took seven whole years to build. You are infinitely more valuable than that because God now lives in you through Jesus and by the Spirit.

If you've ever felt distant from God, this is great news. It means that there is no distance between you and God. You are in Jesus, and God loves you through loving him! There are preachers who will rant and rave and say to you, "Don't you know how far away from God you are?!" as if that is motivating. Far be it from me to say that. Instead, I say this: "Don't you know how close you are to God?!"

If you've ever felt performance orientated or comparison oriented, this is great news. It means that you don't have to try on your own strength any more. It means you don't have to look around at your neighbors and wonder how you measure up relative to them. Nearer or farther to God, that distinction means nothing.

If you don't know how to experience God as your Father, this is great news. It means that God isn't condemning and authoritarian as your earthly father might have been. God isn't distant as your earthly father might have been. And if you had a good relationship with your father, there is good news, because even that will pale in comparison with this truth. God doesn't wear your father's face. He is a Father enamored with His own Son, Jesus. And the way He loves Jesus, all His affection, all His praise for Jesus are ours because we are in Jesus.