

The New Nationalism
Ephesians 2, 4, 5

Turn to Exodus 19 please. This is the first of a few messages to revisit some of the difficulties of the last two years. These challenges have been hard on relationships, and have strained us and tested us. This church has done well, it seems to me, we've lived honourably before the Lord.

But painful things have also happened, which we know. There needs to be a kind of healing, I think, and only the Lord does that. So let's keep praying for that and for our unity. These messages cannot bring healing, but they will look at some of the things that brought pain, and if God is gracious he will bring us to a wiser and deeper unity.

I'm also revisiting these difficulties because this will happen again. One way or another, the same kind of challenges will flare up again, and I'm doing this so we enter the next one a little better equipped.

We'll mostly be reading Ephesians today. That church had a Jew-Gentile problem of some kind. There were Jewish believers and Gentile believers, and there was a problem with belonging to God's people. The Jewish believers were not sure the Gentile believers were really a part of God's people, and it seems the Gentile believers also were not sure if they were all the way in.

Most of Ephesians 1-3 explains salvation to make clear that Jews and Gentiles share equally. But first we'll read from Exodus 19, because that's where this began.

Exodus 19:5-6 – This is God speaking to Israel shortly after they crossed the Red Sea, and they have just gotten to Mt Sinai. *If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*

God is talking to one nation, out of all the nations. This is Israel, descendants of Jacob's twelve sons and their families. *Out of all the nations, your nation will be my treasured possession.*

You will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Part of the problem here is that for us, "kingdom" is a fairy-tale word. In the Bible, it is not. It is just another word for "nation." We could say, *You will be **nation** of priests, a holy nation.* The point of being "priests" here is to be set apart for God. In that sense, "priest" here means much the same as "holy."

God chose one nation, that's the thing, one nation, and that one nation would be his treasure. In Deuteronomy 7 we read it this way: *The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the nations on the face of the earth to be his nation, his treasured people.*

The Jews in NT times, including believing Jews, all still knew this to be true of them. They were God's chosen nation, there was no getting around it. So Gentiles could trust in Christ, yes, and have their sins forgiven, yes, and receive the Spirit. But they were not part of the one nation, and there was nothing that could be done about that. Something like that was happening in Ephesus. But, something *could* be done about that. Ephesians 2.

Before, When We Were Outside the Real Citizenship Eph 2:11-13

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands)—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Outside Israel also meant outside Christ and all the good things he brings.

But Now Through Christ, Into the Real Citizenship – Eph 2:19-20

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

This is the new nationalism I'm talking about. I tend to see my kingdom citizenship and my Canadian citizenship as not having any connection to each other. My kingdom citizenship is in the spiritual realm and my Canadian citizenship is in the earthly realm, or something like that.

But we know very well that the Jews did not see their Israelite citizenship like that. For Jews there was no separation between spiritual citizens and earthly citizens. They were the chosen race, they were God's nation. It was a real race, and a real nation, spiritual and earthly, and that's why they held the Gentile believers at a distance.

And Paul does not tell the Jews that their special status as God's holy race and God's chosen nation does not matter any more. No, Paul tells Gentile believers that through Christ, they are now included in that special race, that chosen nation, that holy people different from other nations and peoples and races. The Gentile believers have been given that full citizenship within the chosen people. And Jews who do not receive Christ fall away from that citizenship.

A Jew could have Roman citizenship, as Paul did. But for devout Jews like Paul, that was a matter of convenience. There was no loyalty or ownership toward Rome. They were a part of God's holy nation, God's chosen race, and that was the only citizenship that mattered to them.

I believe we spiritualize this new citizenship more than we should. Remember that in NT times “king” and “kingdom” were not fairy tale words or spiritual words.

Jesus came announcing the good news of the nation of heaven, the nation of God. Jesus told Pilate, “my nation is not of this world, my country is not of this world, or my followers would fight.” Pilate said, “So you are a king then.” We should hear Pilate say, “So you are a Prime Minister. So you are a President.” “King” and “kingdom” were daily political terms. And the new citizenship, this new nationalism, removes us from the systems around us. Listen to how Peter describes these things:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special people. I will read that again: you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special people [right out of Exodus 19], that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; [once you were not a nation, but now you are the nation of God], once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul.... Live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. 1 Peter 2:9-12; 1:17

The writer to the Hebrews says much the same thing: *All these people were still living by faith when they died. They ... admitted that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. Hebrews 11:13-16.*

Our citizenship in God’s people, our citizenship in heaven, changes our relationships to earthly loyalties. Where we belong has shifted. Along with belonging completely with God chosen nation, we belong less to other nations. God cares about different nations, he cares about Canada, he has his eye on all the nations, he always has. But belonging to his people pulls us away from other nationalisms. We are foreigners, strangers, and exiles, even in Canada.

I have a friend who belongs to a group of churches that will not sing any national anthem. He has Canadian citizenship, and he’s glad of it, but he will not sing “O Canada.” And the reason these churches will not sing any national anthem is that they take this new nationalism very seriously.

When the Bible says we are foreigners and strangers and exiles, they take that to heart. When the Bible says we have a different citizenship, and look for a better country, they grab that.

Try it on. View yourself as a foreigner and exile in Canada. When you came to Christ, you received a different and far better citizenship. Usually when people become citizens of a country, they turn in their previous citizenship. It is possible to have dual citizenship in Canada and the US, but that’s unusual.

What if when we became Christians, we turned in our Canadian citizenship? We don't, and God is not asking us to do that. But in some ways, that is what has happened. When we said, "Jesus is Lord," our loyalty to Canada and our involvement with Canada changed. To a considerable extent, we walked away from Canada.

Now we do have instructions about Canada: Jesus, our new Leader and Ruler, tells us to be model Canadian citizens, so we are model Canadian citizens. Be good for Canada, our Lord says. But not because we love Canada, rather, because we love the Lord Jesus, our Leader and Ruler, and we love our new nation and new citizenship.

And now, back to Ephesians 2:19 - Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

Our country, Canada, has been deeply divided in the last year or so, by its response to some government regulations. The first thing we need to do is step back. We need to relax our sense of ownership. Let it go. Act like we are devout Jews in Canada, with a deep conviction that we are part of God's chosen race, God's holy nation, and the only citizenship that matters is with God. We belong to a nation that is not of this world. Here we are foreigners and strangers.

The Seven Pillars of Unity - Eph 4:4-6

We in this new nation are so different from each other. Back in Ephesus, the ways Jewish believers and Gentile believers worshipped God and lived for God were not at all the same. They clashed. It will take something very important to hold them together. We have this listed in Ephesians 4. Seven great spiritual realities we all share, built around the Trinity.

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Our new nation is held up by seven pillars: one body, one Spirit, one hope: those three go together. The Spirit makes us one body, and the Spirit fills us with hope. One body, one Spirit, one hope.

One Lord, one faith, one baptism: these three also go together. This is how we get in, this is how we get our new citizenship. We say "Jesus is Lord." That's our faith, and when we have faith and when we say "Jesus is Lord," we get baptized. That's conversion, how we enter. One Lord, one faith, one baptism.

And, the one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. Look around you at the rest of us: he fathered us all, he is over us all, he moves through us all, and he is in us all.

God covers each one of us, God's presence itself adorns us, clothes us, he lives within us, he does his work through us. This all we share with each other. This is what makes us citizens of heaven, and makes us strangers and foreigners on earth.

This list is not given to make us feel warm and happy, though it can do that, and that would be good. These seven are given us so that we will look at the people we're having trouble getting along with, and realize what kind of things bind us together and hold us all up.

Let's discipline our minds, when other believers are a challenge. God is telling us with his word, "Just remember what you share with that person, remember these seven pillars, these seven great cords that bind you together to this person." I may never act as if these are not true. These seven guide us when things are difficult between believers.

And now briefly, what is the flavour of life in this new people, the new nation?

Forgiveness and Love – Eph 4:32 – 5:2

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

My brothers and sisters, in the last two years we have hurt and disappointed each other. I saw a you working hard not to do that, there was much Spirit obedience as you tried not to hurt and disappoint each other. But it happened. I tried not to hurt and disappoint you, but I am sure that I did, and I wish I had not. If you need to talk to me, please do so. Not all at once please.

That also happened in the church at Ephesus, it turns out. And it has happened in every single church on this earth. It happened among the 12 disciples of the Lord.

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children.

Do you think you could be like God? "I could be like God!" Does that appeal to you? You and I could forgive each other just like God forgave us. Imitate God, follow God's example, as dearly loved children. How did God forgive me – the overwhelming question: how did he forgive me?

The biggest things I have had to forgive others, they never apologized or confessed or asked forgiveness. One way or another, that was not going to happen. I had to forgive in self defense, because if I didn't forgive, I became an evil person. I could feel myself getting hard and resentful. Why should their evil make me evil? The key is: just the way God forgave me. I was evil, but God forgave me. And now they are evil, and what will I do?

Walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

There is a picture here of one person loving another person. Can you see the picture of love? It is a man with arms stretched out [Ed, stretch arms way out]. His hands are nailed to a cross, and he's dying. *Walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

We did not think love would be so hard, did we. I did not. To whatever extent there needs to be healing among us, it will take forgiving one another as God forgave us, and it will take loving one another as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us. That's life in the new nation. Amen.

PRAYER: O God, when we heard the message of Christ, the gospel of our salvation, and you opened our hearts to receive it, we were included among your people. Now, out of all the nations on earth, we are included in the chosen race, the royal priesthood, the holy nation, your treasured people. May your Spirit and your word always use this to guide us. And O God, help us think rightly about the challenges of the last two years, and bring us the healing and renewing that you think we need. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give us a spirit of unity among ourselves as we follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.