

# Series B: Proper 11— Built Together into a Temple for God

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

A day that I will never forget for as long as I live, and I am sure many Americans would say the same thing, is 9/11. I was in fourth grade and remember watching on the big screen tv in the library the smoke, the fire. And I remember seeing the two towers fall, crumble like Jenga towers with the wrong block removed. Those mighty structures came falling down to the ground, leaving only rubble in their wake. It was then that I first realized just how temporary the things that are made by man are. I remember that day feeling hopeless.

But this is true of everything that man does separated from God. Without God in the world, there is no hope in the world. Paul writes to the Ephesians, **“Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—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.”** (Eph 2:11–12). Without God, we’re without hope. Without God, separated from Christ, we have no salvation. This is because the covenants that God made, He made with Abraham and his offspring, the Israelites. The seal that one was a part of this covenant was the mark of circumcision. As uncircumcised Gentiles, there was no hope for us.

But it goes deeper than that. Because we are born sinful, because we are born of this mortal flesh, even circumcision doesn’t help, for that is a work of man. Circumcision might’ve been a fine outward work for the Jews, but it didn’t get to the root of their problem, to the root of our problem. See we who are born sinful, we’re dead. We have no hope of life in us. Every sin that we commit equates to death for us, for that is the punishment that is prescribed. Paul says, **“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”** (Eph 2:1–3). We were dead in our flesh. And just as a dead body cannot get up and live on its own, likewise we have no hope for life in our mortal flesh.

And what is true about us is true about the apostles and the prophets as well. They were human, guilty of the same sins that we are. Peter denied Christ. Paul was guilty of overseeing the murder of Christians. Abraham was a liar. Moses was a murderer. Jonah was a deserter. None of them were, in and of

themselves, worthy to be servants of God. They were, like us, sinful human beings who disobeyed the commandments of God. They were, like us, far away from the living God, even though they were Jews, part of the covenant. They were, like us, dead in their sins.

And yet, the same hope that the Jews hoped in is our hope now also. The Jews hoped in the coming Messiah. And the Messiah did come, but they did not recognize Him. Instead, they took Christ Jesus, crucified Him on the cross, and there He suffered and died. On the cross, He shed His blood so that not only the Jews but the whole world may be reconciled to Him. Paul writes, **“Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”** (Eph 2:13). Through the blood of Christ, we who are far off—that is outside the covenants made with Abraham and Israel—are brought near, which means that you have access to salvation as well.

This salvation Christ offers by having perfectly kept the law and dying as the perfect lamb in our place. This He did so that the ordinances of sacrifices and other ceremonies might be abolished. Instead of looking for peace with God in the blood of animals shed on an altar upon which only Jews could sacrifice, we now find peace in the blood of Christ shed on the cross to which all have access. As Paul writes, **“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.”** (Eph 2:14–16). The Gentiles were physically separated by a wall from going into the temple and making sacrifices to atone for their sins. But now, in the flesh of Jesus, that dividing wall is broken down. No longer does one have to go to the temple to offer sacrifices to atone for sins. No. Now the singular, all-atoning sacrifice has been made in Christ Jesus’s death on the cross. Now there is peace, and we are reconciled, Jew and Gentile, to God through Christ alone.

This is, then, the message that the Apostles and the Prophets proclaimed. They were imperfect vessels, yet God spoke through them to proclaim His truth, both to the people of their time, and to us now through the writing of their prophecies. When Jeremiah prophesied, **“Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply”** (Je 23:3), God was speaking through him about bringing back the remnant of those scattered so that the Messiah would come. And the same is true about the other Old Testament Prophets.

It's also true of the New Testament Apostles, but to an even greater extent. This is because they were proclaiming not something that would happen but something that had already happened. Look at the writings of the apostles—all of it is pointing to the work that Christ did on the cross. They do not proclaim their own greatness but instead point to Christ and His singular work of suffering and dying so that all may have forgiveness. Just as a cornerstone sets the orientation for the entirety of the building, so likewise, Christ and His work for our salvation sets the orientation for all of Scripture. All that the Apostles and Prophets teach and proclaim point to Christ and what He has done for us, for they spoke not of their own accord but by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

And we are built on this foundation. As Paul writes, **“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.”** (Eph 2:19–21). As we have said, Christ Jesus and His work of salvation is what orients all of scripture. Built then on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, that is, built on Scripture alone, we are joined together and become part of the one holy temple of Christ that extends throughout all time. This is why it was key that Luther and the reformers showed that they were not creating new doctrines, but instead were relying only on the foundation already laid—scripture—over and against the papists who were standing contrary to that foundation by adding tradition. And we continue to be built only on this foundation even today, both against those who would try to add tradition as authoritative, but also against those who would try to use human reason as holding any authority.

This is because scripture is clear: salvation is not our own work, just as it was not the Jews own work. Salvation for the Jews did not come through their sacrifices, but through their faith in God. Salvation for us comes not in our own works but by faith

in God. Paul makes this clear, saying, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”** (Eph 2:8–9). Salvation comes to us by grace alone through faith alone. You do nothing to merit it. Instead, God calls you, adopts you as sons through Holy Baptism, and makes you His precious children.

And as children of God, we now go forth and do good works. As Paul says, **“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”** (Eph 2:10). We do not do these good works to earn our salvation. Instead, as a part of the holy temple of God, Christ works through us to do good to our neighbors, to show the love that we have been shown. This is done always with the prayer that they too would come to have the certainty of faith and be made part of Christ's Holy Temple.

A couple months ago, Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin had a roof fire that destroyed most of the historic church. The building was almost an entire loss with an early estimate of \$17 million in damages. Yet a picture emerged after the fire of the altar with the crucifix still standing in its place and bible opened, both soot covered, but otherwise undamaged by all the debris that surrounded the altar. And the image was captioned, **“Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”** (Mt 28:20). Their church building was destroyed, and yet the church was not gone. The church, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, built on the teachings of the apostles and prophets proclaiming the work of the Messiah to save His people from their sins, continues. And the same is true for every other congregation. For the church of God, His holy temple, is not a physical building. Instead, as St. Paul writes, **“In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”** (Eph 2:22). And so, we see that you too are a member of God's holy temple, made so by the Spirit, given to you first in your baptism. May you continue, by grace through faith, to remain a part of this holy temple to life everlasting. Amen.