

Hope Christian Church
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Sermon Series: *The Book of Ephesians*



Once Far Off, But Now Brought Near

(Ephesians 2:11-13 ESV)

¹¹ 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— ¹² 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. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Introduction

There are some things that should always be remembered and never forgotten.

Therefore

As we continue listening for God's word to us today as we are keep reading Paul's letter to the Ephesians from yesterday, we now arrive at verses 11-13 of chapter two. Verse 11 begins with the word 'therefore,' which tells us that what Paul is about to say follows as a result of what he has just said.

Ephesians 2:11 (ESV)

¹¹ *Therefore, remember...*

The emphasis at this point is upon the word '**therefore.**' We must ask, What's it there for? The word 'therefore' means that the conclusion that follows is based upon the premises that have preceded it. Let's quickly trace Paul's argument. Let's go back to verse seven.

To Show the Immeasurable Riches of His Grace

One of God's purposes in saving undeserving, condemned sinners, like you and me, is to put on display, before all the hosts of heaven, the unlimited and manifold treasury of one of the most awe inspiring qualities of God's beautiful, impeccable character—his grace.

(Ephesians 2:7 ESV)

⁷ *so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*

If you have ever wanted to know what God's will is, here's one very clear declaration of it. This one sentence is part of God's mission statement. It explains one of his foundational principles which guides his work and activity. Since the future display of the glory of his grace is God's goal, this purpose then determines how God acts towards us whom he has chosen to save.¹ Since it is God's will to display the evidence of his grace, he has chosen to save the elect by grace. **God's goals determines God's actions.**

You Are Saved by Grace

And so we see that main point explained in verses 8-10. In these three verses, Paul argues that the *salvation of every believer has ultimately come about because of the gracious work of God.* This was the point of the sermon last week. Salvation is a gift which is given by God, it is not a reward that can be earned. No human soul is saved as a result of some worthy deed which he

¹ Eph 1:4.

or she does. Salvation comes only by faith in Jesus alone, not by works. *We are not saved by a work we do, but simply by trusting in the work that Jesus has done.*

You Are Not Saved by Good Works

What Jesus did for us is a *gift* of God and even the faith to trust in what he has done is also a gift from God (v.8). All that pertains to effecting our salvation, Paul says, is “**not of your own doing, it is a gift of God**” (v.8). Then to make this point perfectly clear, he restates this truth by saying that salvation is “**not a result of works, so that no one should boast**” (v.9). There will be none who are saved who will brag about his own intelligence bringing himself to a place where he was so wise as to chose to be saved. None will stand before God and say, “See what wonderful deeds I have done, therefore I deserve to be saved.” No. It will not happen that way. The only works that will be praised when we stand before God, are those that he has graciously chosen to work in and through our lives.

Yet, Do Good Works

And yet we are not to forsake doing good works, because doing good works is one of the very reasons for which we have been saved. God intended beforehand, “**that we should walk in them**” (v.10). This means that the lives of the followers of Jesus should be consistently marked by observable good works. However, these good works should **never** be done as *means* of earning God’s favor, but always as an *expression* of God’s favor.

God wants you to have no confidence in your ability to save yourself and to have every confidence in Jesus’ ability to save you. God wants you to put no saving faith in your good deeds, but all saving faith in Jesus’ good deeds. The good works that we do after putting your faith and trust in Jesus, is not because we have the power to do them, but because God—through his indwelling Spirit—is at work within us, enabling us to do good works in his name.² **We are his workmanship, newly created in Christ Jesus, that we should consistently be doing good works.** This is also part of God’s will for our lives.

Do Good Works for the Glory of God

Since we have this calling—to do good works—and since it is God’s will to put on display the glorious riches of his grace, we should then be very careful *how we do those good works*. We should never do good works thinking that we are doing them in our strength or that by them we are earning salvation. We should do good works in such a way that God is glorified and not us. Listen to the words of Jesus.

(Matthew 5:16 ESV)

¹⁶ *In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

² See also Phil 1:6.

How do we do that? How do we do good works in such a way that people see our good deeds and then say, "Praise God," instead of saying, "Praise Todd."

We do that by remembering something. This is what the 'therefore' is there for.

Ephesians 2:11 (ESV)

¹¹ **Therefore**, remember...

Since God intends to put his grace on display for all eternity, **therefore** remember...

Since God is graciously at work within us, not only saving us, but also enabling us to consistently do good works, **therefore** we need to remember... some things.

Because we have been saved grace, **therefore** remember...

Because God's grace is actively working in the life of the believer, **therefore** remember...

Because salvation is not earned, but is given as a gift, **therefore** remember...

Because salvation is not given as a reward for meritorious behavior, **therefore** remember...

Because we are saved so that our lives can be filled with visible examples of God's gracious activity in our lives, **therefore** remember...

Therefore, Remember

Now we know why the 'therefore' is there for. It is there to inform and provide the foundation and the background for how we do these good works to which we have been called.

Ephesians 2:11 (ESV)

¹¹ *Therefore*, **remember**...

You will notice that **this is a command, not a suggestion**. All of God's commands are good and so this command must be good for us. This is God's word to us today. This is his will for us today. *Remember*. Remembering is a mental activity therefore we know that God cares about what goes on inside your mind. He is here telling you what to think about. The authority of God extends to unseen meditations of your mind. God is concerned with what you think about. God has an opinion about the secret thoughts that run through your mind and here he tells you what you should think about.

So what should we remember?

(Ephesians 2:11-12 ESV)

¹¹ 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 — ¹² 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.

Paul lists five facts which you should remember.

1. Remember that you were formerly separated from Christ
2. Remember that you were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel
3. Remember that you were strangers to the covenant of promise
4. Remember that you had no hope
5. Remember that you were without God in the world.

You Gentiles In the Flesh

He is particularly speaking to Gentiles. The term ‘Gentiles’ is a Jewish term that signified all non-Jews. It was a slightly derogatory term.³ ‘Gentile’ was a term only used by Jews. No Gentile would call himself a Gentile. He would refer to himself as Greek or Roman or Italian, but Jews lumped all non-Jews into one giant category called “gentiles.” The word in Greek is *ethnos* and can be translated as ‘heathen; pagan.’ It refers to those who do not worship the God of the Jews, the inference being, ‘those who worship idols.’⁴

Paul is here directing his attention to all non-Jewish Christians. That’s you and me. So this is for us. We need to hear this. We need to listen to what God would have us hear today.

Paul uses the term ‘Gentile’ but he has no derogatory intention behind it. We know this because of his slight “rabbit trail” in verse eleven. The phrase which opens the door to this little aside is “*Gentiles in the flesh.*” This brought to mind the term Jews generally used to refer to Gentiles, “*the uncircumcision,*” while Jews were referred to as “*the circumcision.*”

This terminology was based upon the physical difference due to circumcision between Jews and Gentiles. Circumcision represented God’s covenant (i.e. his promises) with his chosen people which were first given to Abraham. *The term was used to highlight that Gentiles were outside a defined relationship with God, while Jews were inside a defined relationship with God.* It is painful to be defined by what you do not have.

³ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 126.

⁴ Ibid.

Paul does not approve of the distinction. He notes that circumcision is **made in the flesh with hands**. His point is that circumcision is simply the work of man, “made in the flesh with human hands.” A relationship with God is infinitely more than minor surgical procedure. Paul explains this in his letter to the Romans.

(Romans 2:28-29 ESV)

²⁸ For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. ²⁹ But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.

Having a relationship with God is not effected by the outward working of human action, but by a gracious, inward transformation of the heart which is worked by the Holy Spirit. This is not new teaching. Moses taught the same, but his teaching had been forgotten—or perhaps it had been ignored. In Moses’ farewell speech to Israel, after leading them for 40 years, he said this,

(Deuteronomy 29:4 ESV)

⁴ But to this day the Lord has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear.

(Deuteronomy 30:6 ESV)

⁶ And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

Coming alive (i.e. into a living relationship) to God happens by the gracious, inner heart-work of the Holy Spirit, not by the outer hand-working of human striving.

Paul now returns from this hope-giving, covenant-clarifying, grace-exalting, Holy Spirit-inspired rabbit trail. He now returns to the **only command** in the whole of this chapter.

Ephesians 2:12 (ESV)

¹²remember 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.

Remember

Recall that Paul is speaking to Gentiles. The command is “**Remember.**” I said earlier that remembering is a mental activity. It is. However it seems obvious to me that what Paul is here calling for is not the kind of remembering that leaves you unmoved, unchanged, and dispassionately disconnected from the purpose of the memories.

I remember hiking through Daniel Boone National Forest with my twin best friends, Keith & Kevin Hornbeck. We were trying to find our way down from a mountain peak we had summited. Our cardinal rule of hiking was that we could never go down the same way we came up, so we were walking in a place we'd never been before. We were in a wooded section slightly uphill and about 20 feet from the edge of the cliff. I was highest up the incline and furthest from the edge, just a bit in front of them both as they walked on my right.

We went down a slight dip in the ground which is a small valley that was noticeably flat at the bottom. As we hit the base of the little valley, suddenly, Kevin, who was about 2 or three steps in front of Keith, was swept off his feet and onto his bum as he began hurtling down the little valley with amazing speed. He looked as if he had walked from gravel onto greased, glass sliding board which had been camouflaged by fallen leaves and pine needles. He zoomed down about ten or twelve feet and with his left hand caught hold of a large root sticking out of the ground. He safely stopped.

As I said, Keith was just two steps behind him. They are twins and so he too experienced the same sequence of events, only about two seconds later. Except Keith was further to the right of the greased, glass sliding board and couldn't reach any roots to stop himself. Fortunately, Kevin caught Keith by the collar and yanked him to a stop just before he slid past him.

This all happened in about 5 seconds. As I looked at them, I eyed the trajectory of the little valley and saw that it went straight to the edge of the cliff. I cautiously walked to the edge and peaked over. What I saw nearly caused my heart to leap out of my chest. It was about a 200 foot drop to the bottom. When we realized their potential destination, our mouths went dry, and eyes went wet.

They both were about eight or ten feet from destruction, saved by the gracious placement of a "random" tree root shaped like a refrigerator handle. After we all caught our breath and thanked God for tree roots and study collars, we turned around to try to understand how this had happen and upon what they had stepped.

We discovered that there was a near constant trickle of a little stream which ran over the face of mostly flat rock. The water had smoothed the surface of the rock and the constant dampness had made the rock a wonderland of moistened moss, the danger of which had been concealed by the thin covering of fallen leaves and pine needles.

I remember that experience every time I go hiking. I remember and keep my eyes alert to moist, mossy, leaf-covered rocks. I remember because I want to stay alive. Remembering that experience changes my behavior.

This is how Paul wants you to remember. This is how God wants you to remember. The kind of remembering that is being commanded here is not the kind of remembering that recalls that 2 plus 2 equals 4, or that Mrs. Nina Bush was my second grade teacher, but the kind that recalls

that hidden dangers can lead to death so keep ever watchful of them. The kind of remembering Paul wants is the kind that changes your behavior and saves your life and glorifies the glorious grace of the one God who created all things through Jesus Christ.

Remember, what? Paul wants you remember what your existence was like before you were saved by grace. Remember and be moved by the knowledge of all from which you were redeemed. Remember the depths from which you've been lifted. Remember how dark was the prison cell from which you've been liberated. Remember...

1) Separated from Christ

The first fact Paul wants us Gentiles to remember is they were **separated from Christ**. Not separated from Jesus, but separated from Christ. Christ the Greek translation of the Hebrew word meaning 'messiah.' Messiah is God's uniquely chosen king of Israel through whom he would decisively work salvation for the nation. It refers to the promised deliverer of the nation of Israel. The Gentiles were given no such promises. Only one nation on the face of the whole wide earth had the distinct privilege of being the people through whom messiah would come and that was Israel. Jesus told the woman at the well, "*Salvation is from the Jews*" (Jn 4:22). Gentiles were outside the Jewish nation and therefore *separated from Christ*.

We Gentiles have no natural claim to the blessings and deliverance messiah was to bring. God only ever promised to send a savior for the Jews. If it were not for the Jews, the Gentiles would know nothing of the coming of messiah. They would not know where he was to be born or what he would do to distinguish himself from all other kings, nor would they be citizens of the kingdom over which he would reign with all justice. Prior to the gracious working of God, all non-Jews were separated from Christ.

2) Alienated from the Commonwealth of Israel

The second sad fact about being born a Gentile is that they were **alienated from the commonwealth of Israel**. Gentiles had no rights of citizenship. The blessing and benefits of citizenship did not accrue to Gentiles. Jews had the privilege of being able to draw near to God in worship of God, first in the tabernacle, and then later in the temple.

Foreigners were not allowed in the sanctuary (Ez 44:9). Aliens could only come as close as the outer walls. They could not offer sacrifices and enter in to the corporate worship of the gathered Jews. Foreigners could not partake of Passover (Ex 12:43, 45). They were kept at a distance. They were not citizens. They had no right to enjoy the benefits of worship. They were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel.

We Gentiles have no inalienable rights to experience the benefits that come with worship, like atonement, for example. What are Gentiles to do about our sins if we have no right to participate in the ceremonies of worship? Who will atone for our sins? If atonement and

forgiveness only come according to the rules of the God who created the world and he had forbidden foreigners from approaching and entering the sanctuary to offer sacrifices for our sins, then what are we to do? Must we have some Jews sacrifice on our behalf? If Gentiles cannot participate in Passover, then we are left outside the covering of the blood and therefore condemned to death. We were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel.

3) Strangers to the Covenants of Promise

The third fact to remember was that they were **strangers to the covenants of promise**. Here the plural *covenants* suggests a series of covenants with Abraham (Gen. 15:7–21; 17:1–21), Isaac (Gen. 26:2–5), Jacob (Gen. 28:13–15), Israel through Moses (Exod. 24:1–8), David (2 Sam. 7)⁵, and finally the New covenant that was foretold through Jeremiah and Ezekiel (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:24–30). God promised his blessings first to Abraham, then reconfirmed it with Abraham’s descendants. No doubt each generation was told what these promised blessings were.

One generation passed down the covenant blessings to the next. The parents proclaimed God’s covenant promises to their children inspiring hope and faith in God and encouraging the next generation to put their faith in God. The Gentiles did not hear of these wonderful promises of God. Gentile children were not told about God’s covenants by their parents as the Jewish children were. The Gentiles were **strangers to these covenants of promise**.

4) Having No Hope

As a result of not knowing and not being subjects of these wonderful covenant promises, the Gentiles were left **having no hope**. Israel was filled with hope because of the abundant and repeated promises which God gave to them. No so with the Gentiles. They had no hope. There was no expectation of future blessings or future deliverance by a savior. The Gentiles were without the hope known by the Jews.

5) Without God in the World

To summarize the dreadful situation of the Gentiles in a word, Paul says, they were “**without God in the world**.” The Gentiles were separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope, and essentially without God in the world. The Gentiles were created by God but they knew only little of him. They knew only what can be known of God through looking at creation. They knew nothing of God’s love, nothing of his election, nothing of being a citizen of his kingdom, nothing of his promised goodness, and nothing of the hope which he had to give. They were

⁵ Peter Thomas O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 189.

simply without God in this wide world. This is a desperately sad place to be in. And no one to rescue them from the spiritual wasteland.

But..

But...

But, there's another verse to read.

But Now In Christ Jesus

Ephesians 2:13 (ESV)

¹³ *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

In Christ Jesus all of these five disadvantages are removed. In Jesus all that would keep us from God are done away with. All the barriers that would keep us far from God are torn down and it is **by his blood that we are brought near**.

The only people who are brought near to God, are those who put their faith in Jesus and what he accomplished for them *through his blood*. Paul has already told us, "**for by grace you are saved through faith**" (2:8). It is only those who believe in what Jesus did in shedding his blood on the cross who are brought near to God.

When Paul mentions Jesus' blood, he is thinking of his crucifixion and death. Salvation happens only because of the blood of Christ. "*Without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness of sins.*"⁶ If there is no shedding of blood, then there is no salvation of any one. It is only those who look to Jesus' atoning sacrifice as effective for them who are brought near to God. *Apart from Jesus there is no nearness to God.*

John 14:6 (ESV)

⁶ *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father except through me."*

Jesus is the doorway to God (Jn 10:1-3, 7). There is no other door. If anyone would draw near to God, then he must go to God through Jesus. Jesus says that anyone who tries to enter heaven any other way than him is "a thief and a robber" (Jn 10:1). Thieves and robbers aren't allowed in heaven.

⁶ Heb 9:22.

Praise God for Passive Verbs

Jesus is the Good Shepherd⁷ who goes after the lost sheep⁸ of his Father's people and brings them to salvation. Christ seeks those who are far off, in order to "bring them near." "Brought" is a passive verb. You should praise God for passive verbs. You don't bring yourself near to God. Someone else has to bring you. This is what Jesus does. It's up to him to "brought" you near to God. If he don't "brought" you, then no one else can "bring you."

How can we experience nearness to God?

But how can we experience this nearness to God in our lives? How do we experience a sense of nearness in our daily lives. How do we subjectively experience the objective truth of this fact?

First, we have to realize that we are not near to God by nature. We do not naturally enjoy spiritual intimacy with God. Because of our sinful nature, we are separated from God. This leaves us in a desperate need of a new nature, a holy nature. You must feel the reality of what you don't have before you ever yearn for what you're missing. You must be gripped with the value of what is to be had before you ever seek what you lack. We need a miracle of transformation. In order to experience nearness to God, we must first have God's Holy Spirit within us. This is what Jesus does for us.

Secondly, we need faith. You need to believe that God wants you near him and that it is good to be near him. The Bible tells us,

(Hebrews 11:6 ESV)

⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

Third, we need to receive the gift of salvation by receiving His Holy Spirit. In order to be brought near to God, you must first receive the gift he has for you - salvation. You must first exercise faith in Jesus - it's a gift. God has a gift for you = salvation. You can receive it only by faith in Jesus.

(Acts 2:38 ESV)

³⁸ And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

⁷ Jn 10:11-14.

⁸ See Lk 15:3-7.

The only way to enjoy intimacy with God is by receiving his Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus. He desires for you to be brought near. He does this by giving us the gift of his own Holy Spirit.

Fourth, forsake sin. Peter said “Repent.” This means forsake your sins. Stop toying with sins. Remember nearness to God only happen “by his blood.” Recognize the seriousness of sin. Sin separates all men from God. Sin is not to be toyed with—even just a little. God is holy. You will not enjoy true intimacy with God if you are clinging to some “little” sin.

(James 4:8 ESV)

⁸ *Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.*

If you want to draw near to God and truly experience intimacy with him, then cleanse your hands and purify your hearts. Examine your life today and forsake any sin you’re playing with. Put it away from you. Decided today, through the power of God, to make war on the silly little sin which keeps you from enjoying the goodness of God.

You can’t be both a friend of God and a friend of the world. You must choose. Whose friendship do you most desire, friendship with the world or friendship with God?

(James 4:4 ESV)

⁴ *You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*

If you belong to God, then you cannot flirt with the world. Make up your mind today. If you want to be a friend of God, then you must forsake your sin.

Fifth, Pray. Talk to God. Alone. In private. Intimacy does not grow out of casual conversation but out of deep commitment. You must make time for dedicated time with God through solitary prayer. Every wife needs a date night. You need a date night with God. Jesus got up early to go off alone to deserted places to spend time alone with God in extended times of prayer. If you want to enjoy nearness to God, then you simply must make time for uninterrupted prayer with him.

Sixth, humble yourself before God and cry out for his grace. James 4:6 tells us “*God is opposed to the proud, but he gives grace to the humble.*” Rid yourself of all pride. Fight against the secret infusions of spiritual pride which ever so subtly sneak into our lives. Keep yourself humble and cry out to him to give you grace. Ask him for his grace. Beg with him to allow you to experience a sense of the nearness of his presence.

Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.

Conclusion

Don't forget what God has done for you through Jesus. Remember from what you have been saved.

Remember that at one time you were separated from Christ, alienated from God' people, a stranger to his promises, having no hope, and without God in this world. But now, through Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near to God by the blood of Jesus.