

Ephesians 2:11-13

I. “Therefore remember that at one time”

“Therefore” points us back to all that we’ve just seen in the first ten verses. Paul has been celebrating the amazing change and transformation that God worked in us. We were dead in sins, and now we’re alive with Christ. We were walking according to the world, the flesh, and the devil, and now we’ve been raised up and seated with Christ in the heavenly places. We were sons of disobedience and children of wrath, and now we’re a new creation.

Therefore, in light of what we once were and now are, ***remember that at one time***. Isn’t that what we’ve just been doing? It is – but now Paul wants us to appreciate this amazing change and transformation in light of something else that used to be true about us.

“Therefore *remember...*” Paul isn’t worried that the Ephesians have forgotten – like we might forget something on our shopping list. “Remembering” is really just a part of worship. To remember, is to call something to our minds for the purpose of meditation, and worship, and obedience.

- ✓ Exodus 12:14 — “This day shall be for you a memorial [“remembering”] day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD.
- ✓ 1 Corinthians 11:25 — In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

So in light of what we once were and now are, and in order that we might be even more amazed, and even more moved to obedience and worship in light of these things— “Therefore, *remember that at one time...*”

II. “you Gentiles in the flesh, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands”

The key to what Paul is about to say—the key to truly remembering—is for the Ephesians to remember first of all that they are Gentiles. They are non-Jews. “They are Gentiles in the flesh, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by what is called the circumcision.” And so we see a separation of people into two groups.

In the Old Testament, circumcision was the sign of God’s covenant promises to Abraham and to his descendents.

- ✓ Genesis 17:1, 7, 9-11, 13 — The LORD appeared to Abram and said to him... “I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you... This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you... So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.”

So it was circumcision that marked out the Jewish nation of Israel as separate and distinct from the surrounding Gentile nations.

Now even in the Old Testament, it wasn't the physical circumcision in the flesh (the being *Jewish*) that ultimately mattered. More important than a circumcision in the flesh was a circumcision of the heart.

- ✓ Deuteronomy 10:16 (cf. Jer. 4:4) — Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.
- ✓ Deuteronomy 30:6 — 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.

That's why Paul says, "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*." Paul wants to make it clear right from the start that he's talking about something that no longer really matters. It's not the circumcision made with hands that really makes the ultimate difference, but the circumcision made without hands – the circumcision of the heart.

- ✓ Romans 2:28–29 — For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.
- ✓ Colossians 2:11 — In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ.

But still, the promise of a *heart* circumcision was first given not to the Gentiles, but to the Jews. And so there *was* a very real *difference*, as we're about to see. We *are* Gentiles in the flesh. We are not the physical descendants of Abraham – to whom God gave His promises. Even today, we might be called "the uncircumcision" by some orthodox Jews. And I wonder how we'd respond to this? Would our pride be offended? Would we roll our eyes in disgust? Would we just smile and be amused? Or would we instead become immediately reflective and humbled as we remember how things used to be? "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*..."

III. "remember that you were at that time separated from Christ"

Obviously, Jesus did not live in the Old Testament. But the Messiah was still in some way present to Israel through the promises, and through all the types and shadows that pointed to Him (cf. Lincoln). We can think of the animal sacrifices at the temple, and the priesthood, and even the temple itself. In the whole temple worship Christ was present with His people in the sense that here He was foreshadowed, and anticipated, and even described. And then, of course, there were all the prophecies of Christ, the Messiah – prophecies that spoke of His sufferings, and death, and burial, and resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of God, and His righteous rule over all the world. Christ was *present with* the Jewish people through the prophecies, and types, and shadows that all pointed to Him.

But the Gentiles were separated from Christ because they were not given the temple or the temple worship, and they were not given the prophecies. Now the point here isn't that all Jews were saved. But it was only the *Jews* who had been given the promises and the foreshadowings of Christ. There was only one temple, and that temple was in Jerusalem. There were no Gentile prophets who were given messages about a Messiah to bring to their countrymen. Paul says in another place:

- ✓ Romans 9:4 — They are Israelites, and to them belong... the [temple] worship, and the promises.

And so *to be a Gentile* was to be separated from Christ – or we could say, “without Christ,” “apart from Christ.” “Therefore,” Paul says, “**remember** that you were at that time separated from Christ...”

IV. “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise”

The commonwealth of Israel wasn't just any old political state. The commonwealth of Israel was the nation that God had chosen out of all the nations of the earth to receive His covenants of promise.

- ✓ Amos 3:2 — You only have I known of all the families of the earth.
- ✓ Deuteronomy 33:27–29 — The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms. And he thrust out the enemy before you and said, “Destroy.” So Israel lived in safety, Jacob lived alone, in a land of grain and wine, whose heavens drop down dew. Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD!

God *created the nation of Israel* specifically so that He could make His covenants *with them*.

- ✓ Romans 9:4–5 — They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law.

The Gentiles were naturally excluded from God's covenants because they weren't part of the covenant people, Israel – because, very simply, they weren't Jews. It's true that the covenants spoke of a day when the Gentiles would eventually be included in some way, but for many hundreds of years that day didn't come. “[Israel's] covenants marked out the pathway of God's saving purposes. Gentiles, because of their position outside Israel, had... therefore no... access to the saving purposes of God.” (Thielman) As the Psalmist writes:

- ✓ Psalm 147:20 — He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his rules. Praise the Lord!

The Psalmist isn't praising God because no other nation knows His rules, but because Israel does, even though they had no more right to know God's ways than anyone else on the face of the earth. To be a Gentile was to be alienated from the chosen people of Israel, and therefore a complete and total stranger to God's covenants of promise. “Therefore,” Paul says, “**remember**

that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise...

V. **“having no hope and without God in the world.”**

We might want to downplay the significance of these privileges to which the Gentiles were excluded. We might say – “Well, these were just *outward* privileges, and they didn’t necessarily say anything about true salvation.” After all, just because you were a Jew didn’t mean that you were truly saved. There were numerous unsaved Israelites. This is true, and Paul is going to point out this very thing in just a few verses.

However, it was only *through* the outward privileges associated with being a Jew (temple, law, covenants, etc.) that one could ever come to the inner, “heart” privilege of knowing God and His salvation. That’s why Paul can sum everything up by saying that the Gentiles were those who had no hope. “Their future held only ‘the wrath of God’ that ‘comes upon the sons of disobedience’” (Thielman). It *had* to, first of all because they were sons of disobedience, but second of all because they were Gentiles – they were “without Christ... and strangers to [God’s] covenants of promise.” They had no hope and were without God in the world.

The Greek word for “without God” is “atheos” from which we get our word “atheist.” The Gentiles were not atheists like we think of atheists. This word can also refer to those who are “God-forsaken.” The Gentiles, Paul is saying, had no hope because they were “God forsaken.” We could think of those who are God-forsaken as those whom God leaves, or gives over to walk in their sins.

- ✓ Romans 1:24, 26, 28 — Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity... For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions... Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

In Romans 11:32 Paul says that during the Old Testament period, God had “consigned” the Gentiles to “disobedience.” The Gentiles were all righteously and justly “God-forsaken.” We *know* this was the case because they were Gentiles – because they were “without Christ... and strangers to [God’s] covenants of promise.”

Being a circumcised Jewish citizen of the nation of Israel didn’t mean that you were automatically saved, but it did mean that you could *be* saved. To be a Jew was to have in your very midst the daily, living promise of Messiah (through the temple worship and the Jewish prophets). To be a Jew was to know God’s saving purposes (because of His covenants made *with Israel*). To be a Jew was therefore to know what real hope really was because you were not, as the Gentiles, God-forsaken.

- ✓ Deuteronomy 33:27–29 — The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms. And he thrust out the enemy before you and said, “Destroy.” So Israel lived in safety, Jacob lived alone, in a land of grain and wine, whose heavens drop down dew. Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD!
- ✓ Amos 3:2 — You only have I known of all the families of the earth.

- ✓ Psalm 147:20 — He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his rules. Praise the Lord!

This Jew praised the Lord because of His undeserved mercy. Because it was only through the outward privileges associated with being a Jew (temple, law, covenants, etc.) that one could ever come to the inner, “heart” privilege of knowing God and His salvation.

To be a Gentile, though, outside of the nation of Israel, was to have no hope, because you had been justly and righteously forsaken by God in the world. Paul does not say that “most of you” were without hope and without God in the world. *All* of those Gentiles who remained outside of the boundaries of Israel were ultimately without hope and without God in the world.

“Israel was God’s people and the repository of God’s Word. Prior to the coming of the gospel, only those within the boundaries of Israel had hope for salvation from the wrath that God would pour out on the disobedient. As uncircumcised Gentiles, however, Paul’s readers were by definition excluded from this people and this hope and were therefore in [a] position of hopelessness.” (Thileman)

And so even today, we know that *all* who remain outside the boundaries of the proclaimed Gospel are without hope and without God in the world – they remain children of wrath because they remain sons of disobedience. The only way to come to God and be saved is through His own appointed revelation of Himself. In the Old Testament, this was through the Jewish temple and the writings of the Jewish prophets. In the New Testament, what is it? It’s the Church’s proclamation of the message about Jesus Christ. And so we have a very clear answer to the question about the Gentiles who live on unreached islands – whether they lived in the Old Testament period or now after the coming of Christ (cf. Rom. 2:12-16). They remain without hope. They remain because of their very nature, children of wrath. We know this, because they have not heard the Gospel, and this is what should give us a powerful sense of urgency to bring the privilege of having access to the Gospel to all the languages and people groups of the world.

- ✓ Romans 10:14–15, 17 — How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” ... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

But in pointing these things out (because they *need* to be pointed out), we’re getting way ahead of ourselves. Now we need to go back to that time before Christ when all Gentiles, by virtue of *being Gentiles* who were alienated from the commonwealth of *Israel*— when all such Gentiles were without hope and God-forsaken in the world. One thing we know is that Paul doesn’t tell us to “*remember*” these things so we can question the rightness and the justice of what God does. Paul tells us to *remember* these things so that we can be even more strengthened to give worship, and honor, and thanksgiving, and praise to God for His undeserved mercies. “Therefore,” Paul says, “***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.”

VI. “But now in Christ Jesus”

Paul exhorts us to “*remember*” so we can fully rejoice in the words “*but now*.” Not only were we dead in sins, slaves to the world, the Devil, and our own flesh, sons of disobedience, and by nature children of wrath, but we also had no access to the way of salvation. We were without even the foreshadowing of Christ, we stood outside of the chosen people of Israel, we were excluded from God’s covenants of promise, we had no hope, being rightly and justly God-forsaken in this world.

“*But now...*” — “*But now* in Christ Jesus...”

VII. “you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

Paul is going to explain this “bringing near” very beautifully over the next nine verses. But even before he’s explained it, we can know and feel what wonderful good news it is. In the Old Testament, it was Israel who was “near” to the Lord.

- ✓ Psalm 148:14 — He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his saints, for the people of Israel who are near to him. Praise the LORD!

But the Gentile nations were often described as “far away” (cf. Acts 2:39; 22:21; Deut. 28:49; Isa. 5:26; Jer. 5:15). We read, for example, in Deuteronomy of “the *foreigner* who comes from a *far land*” (Deut. 29:22). These Gentile foreigners were far away from Israel, and if you were far away from Israel, you were far away from God – with no hope at all of salvation.

The only way to salvation for a Gentile was to become a proselyte to Judaism. The word for proselyte comes from a Greek word meaning “to approach” or “come *near*” (Lincoln). So as a Gentile received circumcision and observed the Law of Moses, he was received into the people of Israel. And by being received into the people of Israel, he was able to draw near to *God*, who *dwelt among* the people of Israel (cf. 1 Kings 8:41-43). So we can see how this language of being “far” and “near” would be naturally used in discussions about proselytes. Listen to what one Jewish teacher says:

“As it is said, ‘I am a God that *brings near*, says the Lord, and not a God that *repels [keeps far off]*’ (Jer. 23:23). ‘I am He that *brought Jethro near*, not *keeping him at a distance*. So also you, when a man comes to you wishing to become a convert to Judaism, as long as he comes in the name of God for the sake of heaven, do thou likewise, *befriend him [bring him near]* and do not *repel him [keep him far off]*.’”
(Quoted in Lincoln)

In the Old Testament, the way for a “far off” Gentile to draw near to God was to leave behind his status as a Gentile and convert to Judaism as a proselyte. Only then, as he was received into the people of Israel, was he able to draw near to *God*, who *dwelt only among* the people of Israel. And yet now Paul borrows this same language of “near” and “far” and uses it in a brand new “*but now*” kind of way.

“But now in Christ Jesus, you [Gentiles] who once were *far off* have been *brought near* by the blood of Christ.” Here it’s not Gentile *proselytes to Judaism* who are brought near, but Gentiles *as Gentiles*. How this *crazy, preposterous, and seemingly impossible* thing can *possibly* be will be explored by Paul in the coming verses. For right now he just summarizes by saying that we who *once* were far off (“*remember*”) have been brought near (“*but now*”) *by the blood of Christ*. The point isn’t that now we are *externally* near to God (like the Jews in the Old Testament). We Gentiles have been brought near by the blood of Christ, and as we’ll see, that means that we have been fully *reconciled* to God. We’ve been granted full *access* to the very holy of holies in God’s heavenly temple.

Conclusion

What a miraculous transformation and change of affairs has been brought about by the blood of Christ. I think of what Peter preached on the day of Pentecost:

- ✓ Acts 2:39 — For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.

And then we remember what God said to Paul:

- ✓ Acts 22:21 — Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.

Ephesians 2:11–13 — 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. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

To paraphrase Paul in Romans 11:30, “We Gentiles were at one time abandoned by God to our disobedience [cf. Rom. 11:32), **but now** we have received mercy.”

- ✓ Romans 11:33, 36, 12:1-2 — Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ... For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.