

Ephesians 2: 11-13; “Remembering What We Once Were”, Message # 15 in a series entitled – “The Exceeding Greatness of His Power”, A Bible Study prepared by Pastor Paul Rendall on September 18th, 2019, for those gathered at his home.

Having for the last one and a half chapters taught us that our salvation is not of ourselves, that it is of God, and that it has come to us on the basis of God’s grace which has been given to us in Christ, and applied to our hearts and minds by the Spirit, Paul now wants to open up the fact that those who are saved, both Jews and Gentiles, are one spiritual body through Christ’s work. He is going to take many verses opening this blessed truth up, and so it will be best for us if we can look at the various aspects of this great truth as they come to us from Paul’s inspired analysis of it. Tonight I would like us to focus on the truth that we as Gentiles should remember what we once were. 1st – We Gentiles were once aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and thus knew no saving mercy. 2nd – We Gentiles were strangers from the covenants of promise, and thus we had no hope. And 3rd – We were far once afar off, but now we have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

1st – We should remember that once, we were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and thus knew no saving mercy.

“Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh – who are called uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel.” Paul is saying that we should remember that all Gentiles were once aliens from the commonwealth of Israel. The term commonwealth relates to Israel’s being a nation separated unto God from the beginning of their being a recognized ethnicity and from the beginning of their being a nation in God’s sight. The apostle Paul knows that it will be a good thing if we as Christians will understand these important distinctions of Biblical truth, in terms of the ethnic distinctions which God Himself has made in the past, before Christ came. There were certain particular spiritual implications which those ethnic implications had, in times past, for all those persons who were not Jews.

It was the Hebrews who were commanded by God to circumcise their sons because they were in covenant with God, as we shall see in just a few minutes. But they became an ethnic people and a nation before they were circumcised, and this was by the command which came to Abraham who was the first Hebrew. Before Christ came there was only one ethnic people and nation that God chose to be His own special people, and those people were the Jews or the Hebrews as they were called from early on. This was God’s choice according to His electing love and mercy. Turn with me over to Genesis 12, verses 1-3. “Now the Lord had said to Abram: ‘Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you.’ “I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing.” “I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Here we have God choosing Abraham, the first Hebrew, to receive the blessing of his being called of God, and chosen by God, to be the father of a nation of people. At this time though, he has not yet been formally called a Hebrew. He is still an uncircumcised heathen, but we should notice here, by the strength of this sovereign definitive language, that God in His electing love and mercy, had singled Abram out, and set him apart, to receive these great blessings. He would become both an ethnic people and a great nation. Notice that these words are mainly related to God’s commanding him to get out of his father’s household, and go to a particular place, a particular land that God would show him. And God then tells him, that in that place, he would be a blessing to a number of people, and in general, to all of the families and the peoples around

him. Those families of people who would joyfully receive Abram, and bless him, God would bless, and those who would not receive Abram, and would curse him, God would curse. And so, in this way, with God ordering all things in relation to Abram, all of the families of the earth would be blessed.

Why was this? It was because God made a distinction between Abram and all other men, sovereignly and unconditionally. He was a man who was called of God, to show all men, both those who would become Jews, and those who would be Gentiles, what saving faith would be like; believing God and His promises of Christ; living in obedience to His word, and living as a representative example of God's electing purposes among the nations and kingdoms and peoples of this world. And further, since those who were descended from Abram would become an elect nation; that nation, under God's promise and providence, would be instrumental in being a witness for God to all the other nations of the world, both before and after Christ's 1st Coming. Turn with me over to Genesis 14: 8-20 – "And the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) went out and joined together in battle in the Valley of Siddim against Chedorlaomer king of Elam, Tidal king of nations, Amraphel king of Shinar, and Arioch king of Ellasar – four kings against five." "Now the Valley of Siddim was full of asphalt pits; and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled; some fell there, and the remainder fled to the mountains."

"Then they took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions, and went their way. They also took Lot, Abram's brother's son who dwelt in Sodom, and his goods, and departed." "Then one who had escaped came and told Abram the Hebrew, for he dwelt by the terebinth trees of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and brother of Aner; and they were allies with Abram." "Now when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his three hundred and eighteen trained servants who were born in his own house, and went in pursuit as far as Dan." "He divided his forces against them by night, and he and his servants attacked them and pursued them as far as Hobah, which is north of Damascus." "So he brought back all the goods, and also brought back his brother Lot and his goods, as well as the women and the people." "And the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley), after his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him." "Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High." "And he blessed him and said: 'Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand.'" "And he gave him a tithe of all."

Now, you may be asking, why I have had us look at these verses? Well, it is because of verse 13 which is set right in the midst of it. "Then one who had escaped came and told Abram the Hebrew, for he dwelt by the terebinth trees of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and brother of Aner; and they were allies with Abram." This is the first time that the word "Hebrew" is used in relation to any person whatsoever in the Bible. And Abraham the Hebrew is a title referring to his race and his nationality in the sight of God. This is how God wants us to see the Jews, as Hebrews. And the Scriptures tell us that Abraham is the father of the Hebrew race, or the Jews. And he is the father of their nation as well. In this case, we find that the four kings who came up against the five kings prevailed in their battle, and that the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah were in a bad situation altogether; having fled and fallen into pits. These four kings so prevailed that they took all of the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions and went their way. They also took Lot, Abram's brother's son, who dwelt in Sodom, and his good, and departed. This was what caused Abram to rise up and get involved in this war.

God would have Abram get involved in it, even though he was just starting to become a nation. And God would distinguish him in this battle, as he took his 318 men who he had "trained" in his own house, and went after the forces holding Lot, and he divided his forces

against them, and he defeated them, and brought back all of the goods, and also brought back Lot and his goods, as well as the women and people. I want you to see that the Lord was the one who granted that Abram would be wise in this situation; that he would be bold and decisive as a commander, and the leader of his small people and soon to become, nation. They were not a force of many people. But they were trained, they were “catechized” in his own house. They were instructed not only the art of war, to the best of Abram’s ability, but they were trained up in the principles of his living and true religion. And God Himself was watching over them to bless them, and guard them, and prosper them in war and in peace, so that they would fulfill His purposes, and become a great nation of Hebrew people; the people who would eventually bring forth the Christ, who would be the Savior of all elect Gentile sinners, as well as those who were Hebrews.

You can see this in Genesis 18: 17-19. God says here – “And the Lord said, ‘Shall I hide from Abraham what I am doing, since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him?’” “For I have known him, in order that he might command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him. This is a blessed passage in relation to what we are studying here tonight. The Lord has great purposes in relation to the Jews and the Jewish nation. He has from the beginning, and He will all the way through this church age until the end of it. And we need to see this. Because it says “All the families of the earth shall be blessed in him.” Not just some of them, but all of them. And whether you take that to mean individual families and households, or whether you take it to mean families of peoples, still the meaning is the same.

It does not mean that somehow or another that the Jews are going to cease to exist as a nation or an ethnic people until the end of the world. That’s what we are looking at here in this promise. And you can see in the language of our Lord, here. Because He shows it right out, and right forth, because it says – “Surely Abram is going to become a great and mighty nation.” And – “All the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him.” “For I have known him”, that is spiritually, in every aspect of his being, this man Abraham, in order that he might command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord to do righteousness and justice that the Lord might bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him. We can apply this to ourselves in this way: That even though we were, before our conversion to Christ, nothing but uncircumcised Gentiles, physically uncircumcised in some cases, and spiritually uncircumcised in every case. And we were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel. We were not physical descendants of Israel. Nevertheless, through Christ, it is God who has called us by means of the gospel and His effectual call, to inherit great blessings of salvation in Christ, according to all of the blessings of God’s rich purpose of grace towards us in Christ.

His purpose has been to bring us into the spiritual commonwealth of Israel; the spiritual Israel of God. He drew us to Christ, so that through the gospel we might spiritually live before Him according to His power, and the principles of His word. He has made us through Christ to be a part of the covenant nation of spiritual Israel by the great things that He has done to fulfill the law of commandments contained in ordinances. Christ fulfilled the ceremonial law, and He fulfilled the moral law of God. He fulfilled all righteousness so that God might circumcise our hearts, and bring us into the commonwealth of spirit Israel. And so, He will most surely bless us, along with faithful Abraham, because according to His purpose, He identifies us in His mind with Abraham the father of all the faithful if we believe in Christ. We are a part of God’s spiritual Israel because of Christ’s New Covenant because Abraham was our father in faith just as much as any believing Hebrew has been in Old Testament times.

2nd - We should remember that we Gentiles were strangers from the covenants of promise, and thus we had no hope.

We were “strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” Not only were we strangers from the commonwealth of Israel, but we were strangers to the covenants of promise. Notice the plural here: “covenants”. Notice also that if you are a stranger to the covenants of promise, that you do not know the Lord. For without God’s promises, there is no hope for any person; Jew or Gentile. All salvation of any person from their sins, depends upon their being in covenant with God through His making and keeping His promises to you. But I want you to see that Abraham received these precious and magnificent promises that He received, in the context of both the eternal covenant of grace, when he first believed in God, and He also received precious and magnificent promises in the covenant which God made to Him in relation to his being the father of the nation of the Jews. Turn over with me first, to Genesis chapter 15, verses 1-6.

“After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, ‘Do not be afraid, Abram I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.’” “But Abram said, ‘Lord God, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezar of Damascus?’” “Then Abram said, ‘Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!’” “And behold the word of the Lord came to him, saying, ‘This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.’” “Then He brought him outside and said, ‘Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.’” “And said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’” “And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.” Now, these verses have related for us how Abraham was justified by faith in what Christ would do for him in relation to his having descendants, a seed who would come from his own body. He believed in the promise which God gave him, and he was justified. He was justified by believing in the promise that God would do what He said that He would do. It was God’s promise to him that he should have these many descendants, as many as the stars in the heavens for number, and this was the basis for His being saved by faith.

Indeed, we should understand that it was God’s faithfulness to do what He had promised which was the basis of both the Old Covenant with the Hebrew people, and the New Covenant which He has made with our Lord Jesus. God saves those who believe in Jesus in both Old Testament and New Testament times. He does not save through the Old Covenant, which was in many ways connected with the covenant of works: Do this and live. But God was faithful to give Abram confirmation of his personal faith in the promise that he would give him the land of Canaan. In Genesis 15: 18 it says – “On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram saying, “To your descendants I have given this land.”

Further, in Genesis 17, verse 4, we find God giving Abraham the promise that he would be the father of many nations. “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many of nations.” You see, this is not the law; this was given before the law. “No longer shall you name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations.” This promise was made to him, once again based upon what He would do for Abraham, His asking that Abraham would walk before Him and be blameless.” Not sinless, but that he would be walking with God in accordance with both His promises and His commandments; to be living righteously and godly by faith in the things which God was telling Him to believe and to do.

The covenant of circumcision in chapter 17 was a covenant of promise, that Abraham would enter into by faith; believing that God would faithfully perform all that He had promised. God said in Genesis 17: 7 – “And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.” Also I give to you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.” And we also find God giving to Abram and Sarai new names, Abraham and Sarah, because He would faithfully give them the

child that they could not have, and make that one child into a whole nation in the following thousands of years, even to this very day. The reason that God would do all of these things for Abraham and Sarah was because He was intending to send His only begotten Son in the fullness of time to be the Savior of all the elect among both Jews and Gentiles and make them into one new people. He would do this using them to fulfill His promises, literally. None of this depended upon their works, but it all rested on God's work. The conclusion that we should come to is that without God's promise of His own faithfulness for the one who trusts in Him, there is no hope and we would be without God all through this life and into eternity, and especially since we were Gentiles, and did not have the covenants of promise.

And 3rd – But now, we should remember that we who were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” How then did the Gentiles who were afar off, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, come to have hope? It was the blood of Jesus Christ. They have received mercy from God based upon His great and loving purposes in Christ. Turn with me over to Romans 4: 1-12. “What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh?” “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.” “For what does the Scripture say?” “ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS ACCOUNTED TO HIM FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS.” “Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.” “But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: ‘BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS ARE FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS ARE COVERED; BLESSED IS THE MAN TO WHOM THE LORD SHALL NOT IMPUTE SIN.’”

“Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also?” “For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness.” “How then was it accounted?” “While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised?” “Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised.” “And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised.” “For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.”

So this is what we Gentiles should remember. Abraham is the spiritual father of all who believe. We Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by those Jews who will not believe in Jesus, are not kept from coming by faith to the Lord Jesus for salvation. To them, being circumcised according to the Mosaic law, is one of the main reasons that they believe that they are on their way to heaven. They have received circumcision according to the law, and therefore, according to the promise of God given to Abraham, they think that they will inherit eternal life. But not so fast. What is it that they are missing? They are missing faith in Christ; their saving righteousness. So it is not enough to have a ceremonial righteousness. It is not enough to have ceremonies performed over you, whether circumcision or baptism.

All of the covenants of promise only have their fulfillment in the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the One who shed His blood for sinners like you and me. Even when you talk about the covenants of promise in the Old Testament, even when you talk about the law, who is it who fulfilled the law? It was Christ who fulfilled it completely. And that is why the Old Covenant is abrogated; that's why it is set aside, in this Church age. It is not as though the moral law is of

great value to the Christian; as a rule of life, or to bring conviction of sin where it is needed. It surely is, for it shows us the standard of God's holy righteousness. And for that it ought always to be remembered by us, and to be treasured and stored up in our hearts. But we are not under the law, we are under grace. And so, if we are Jews or if we are Gentiles, if we believe in Jesus, we are saved by the application of His death and life to our souls and bodies; and this all comes to us by faith in Him, not one ceremonial things that we do.

Abraham is the father of all those who believe who have not been circumcised, it says in these verses that were read, because he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still a Gentile. Since Abraham had faith before he formally became a Hebrew, he was not saved by His being a Hebrew. He was saved by believing in all the promises that God gave to him. And so then, we as Gentiles ought to glory in this; that we who were once far off, have been brought near by the blood of Christ. We have been brought near to God, but also to our brothers the Jews. Those saved Jews, those elect Jews, but we are part of the commonwealth of God's spiritual Israel. That is an important distinction to make. Because both of these things are important to understand in their proper places.

The real problem with dispensationalism or separating Israel and the Church is right at this point; that Christ has broken down the barrier between Jew and Gentile and made them into one people; His spiritual Israel. We are no longer strangers to the covenants of promise, for we enter into the covenant of grace by faith, both Jews and Gentiles, and praying and asking for Christ to save us. There were many proselytes in Old Testament times, and they were saved, and they prefigured the future of the New Covenant Age, and the ingathering of the Gentiles into the Church. We need to see the Church as one; that we are not separated from Israel. That is what Dispensationalism is all about.

But we can go the other direction as well, and we might think that physical Israel has no part in the fulfillment of prophecy yet to come in these New Testament, New Covenant times. The Jews were an elect nation from the beginning of their being called, from the time of Abraham. And they will be an elect nation until the end of the world. They have been temporarily cast off, but they will be grafted in again to their own olive tree, as it says in Romans chapter 11. So, we can't be haughty and say that this salvation is for Gentiles and a few Jews, when in the Old Testament it was for the Jews and some proselyte Gentiles. It was just reversed in the New Covenant Age. But in the Millennium it will all be brought together, Jews and Gentiles, by multitudes coming to Christ.