

# WITHOUT CHRIST

## Ephesians 2:11-12

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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).

“Remember!” That has been the rallying cry of many a statesman and orator. “Remember the Alamo!” was the motto that led Sam Houston’s Texas Rangers in their war with Mexico. “Never forget” is today emblazoned on t-shirts and bumper-stickers over photographs of the World Trade Center towers and the numbers 9-11-01.

“Remember” is also one of the most important commands in the Bible. Our Lord Jesus, speaking from heaven to the churches in the Book of Revelation, commanded, “Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent” (Rev. 3:3).

When Israel entered into the Promised Land, remembering was given to them as the key to future faithfulness. The people had just come through the exodus – a great deliverance from bondage into freedom. Moses warned them, “Take care, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your children’s children” (Dt. 4:9). Remember! When the people failed to remember, the Book of Judges tells us that a generation grew up that fell into sin and judgment.

I know of a mother who sends her children out the door each morning, saying, “Remember who you are, and whose you are!” That is what Paul has to say to us. Having given some of the clearest and most glorious teaching about salvation, in Ephesians 2:1-10, he commands us in the next verse, “Therefore remember!”

This is the very first command that Paul gives in Ephesians, which indicates its significance. Before he gets to any of the practical instruction that will follow, he first commands us, “Remember!” This is how the Christian life is lived, by remembering what God has done for us and living in light of those truths.

## TWO KINDS OF PEOPLE

Verse 11 of chapter 2 brings us to a point of transition in Paul’s letter, and it would be wise now to review where we are.

Chapter 2 presents Ephesians’ theme of peace through grace in Jesus Christ. Verses 1-10 present the peace we have with God as he reconciles us to himself. We were objects of wrath but now are objects of his mercy. We were in bondage to the world, the flesh, and the devil, but now we are God’s workmanship. The rest of the chapter, starting in verse 11, speaks of peace on earth as God reconciles believers one to another in Christ. At the end of the chapter 1, Paul prayed that we might know the riches of our salvation; in chapter 2 he spells these out as peace with God and peace with one another, all by God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

Paul begins this new section by recognizing the division among us. It is said that there are two kinds of people – those who think there are two kinds of people and those who don’t. Paul is the kind of person who thinks there are two kinds of people. He wants us to remember what we were before and what kind of person we now are in Christ. He writes, “Therefore remember that at one time you [were] Gentiles in the flesh, called ‘the uncircumcision’ by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands.”

Whenever there is division there is always name-calling. Children learn this at school. Adults know this in politics, in our family squabbles, and sometimes even in the church. The ancient world knew about this as well, and Paul points to the chasm that most

divided the ancient world, that between Jews and Gentiles. This division between them was highlighted by circumcision, the practice of removing the flesh of the male foreskin. Writing to the Ephesians Christians, people living in Asia Minor, Paul notes that by and large they were Gentiles, whom the Jews ridiculed as “the uncircumcision”.

God gave circumcision to mark the Israelites as separate from the world and holy to God. The Israelites were to use their holiness to attract the pagan nations to the true God. Instead, the Jews used it as a mark of superiority and contempt for others. Far from caring for the spiritual state of the Gentiles, the Jews rejoiced in their belief that Gentiles were created only to stoke the fires of hell. They would not converse with Gentiles. They even passed a law forbidding a Jew to help a Gentile woman in childbirth, since that would bring another Gentile into the world.<sup>1</sup>

Sadly, some Christians look down on irreligious people in a similar way. They consider them more to be shunned than to be won by the grace of Christ. That spirit is as offensive now as was the Jews’ attitude toward the Gentiles. By referring to Gentiles as “the uncircumcision,” the Jews were rejoicing in their ignorance of God.

For their part, the Gentiles weren’t wild about the Jews either. They threw the insult back, calling them, “the circumcision.” Proud in their possession of Greek culture, the Gentiles looked down on everyone who did not participate in their way of life.

What mattered was not circumcision but the division, hatred, and warfare among men. Human beings will divide and fight over practically anything; for all our supposed progress in the centuries since Paul lived, the world has found no solution for this problem.

## WITHOUT CHRIST

Notice what Paul says about circumcision, namely, that it was only something “made in the flesh with hands.” Galatians 6:15 gave his clearest opinion, saying, “Neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.” The same is true with all religious traditions and rituals today, that they have no

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<sup>1</sup> Wm. Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 107.

value apart from their spiritual reality. In the case of the Jews, the physical circumcision was always meant to symbolize an inward devotion, not to serve as an outward source of pride. “Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart,” Moses commanded them (cf. Dt. 10:16).

If the Jews lacked an inward correspondence to circumcision, the Gentiles’ uncircumcision accurately depicted their spiritual state. Thus Paul wants the Christians to realize how impoverished was their former position. Verse 12 says, “Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise.” That is more than ancient history; it also depicts people today who live apart from God.

First, Paul says, “Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ.” His point is not merely that before becoming Christians they were without Jesus Christ; that much is obvious. But when speaking of Christ he means “Messiah”. They lacked any savior.

This was true of the Greek religion and worldview, as it is true of secular humanism today. If you read the ancient Greeks you find that they had no hope for a savior. The Ephesians, for instance, lived in a city where the hideous goddess of fertility, Diana, or Artemis, was worshiped. If you purchased her favor, she supposedly might lend you the help of her power, but she offered no salvation from the great problems of life. Likewise, Greek philosophers had no idea of salvation. They viewed history as an endless cycle, with no purpose, no plan, and no destiny. In contrast, the Jews had a positive outlook on the future, despite their troubles. “Even in their bitterest days the Jews never doubted that the Messiah would come,” says one writer.<sup>2</sup>

Sadly, the Gentile worldview has become dominant in our society; we need to realize that today’s new thinking is anything but new. A worldview asks questions that shape reality for us: What and where am I? What is the problem? What is the solution? Today’s secular worldview, imported directly from the pagan ancient world, says that we are products of chance living without purpose on a random orb in space. The problem is how to just get by with as much pleasure and

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 107

as little pain as possible. The answer is to look out for yourself. What could be more bleak and ignoble than that? But what our society ignores is that this rampant individualism and selfishness is not working. This is why our cities are littered with the human refuse of an increasingly bankrupt society. This is why our most affluent suburbs are often scenes of the darkest despair and emptiness.

The Christian has a totally different worldview. He says, "I am made in the image of God, placed in the world of his making for his glory. The problem is sin, with its fruits of misery and death. But we have a real solution. We have a Savior, Jesus Christ, who has conquered sin and death on the cross. His resurrection is our victory and we live in the power of his triumph. Unbelievers have no Christ, no salvation, no victory. The best they can do is try to avoid reality. Christians have victory in Christ Jesus, our Savior.

Paul next points out that the Gentiles were "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel." In the time before Christ came and the gospel spread throughout the world, the little nation of Israel was alone the people of God. However great the Greeks and Romans might be, however much power or wealth, learning or glory they might acquire, they were still outside the circle of God's special love and care. Their days were numbered. To be saved, you had to be an Israelite in accordance with God's plan at that time in salvation history.

This is illustrated by the relationship between Ruth and Naomi, told in the Old Testament. Ruth was a foreigner who married into Naomi's Jewish family. After a famine killed all the men, Naomi decided to go back to Israel to live in God's care. Ruth apparently had learned much about Israel's God during her time of marriage. When Naomi prepared to depart, Ruth appealed to her: "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ru. 1:16). Notice how Ruth put this. In order to say, "Your God shall be my God," she first had to say, "Your people shall be my people." She knew that she could not enter into God's salvation without entering into God's people.

Much has changed in light of the gospel, mainly that you do not have to be part of one nation or ethnic group. But you still cannot be saved without God's people becoming your people. Countless converts to Christ have learned that you cannot maintain all your old associations when you come to Christ and that you must enter into new ones. Above all if you find the church a dull, unappealing society for which you have little interest or affection, you should reconsider the reality of your salvation.

We are living in a time when the church is held in low esteem, even among Christians. This is, I think, in part an overreaction to the religious formalism of a prior generation, and due also to the worldliness of so many professing believers. Our society is individualistic and consumeristic, so people think of the church in those terms. Christians have no fear of belittling or dividing the church, even though it is the commonwealth of God's own people. Our low view of God's household is evidenced by our church shopping, church hopping, and, for many, church dropping.

But one of the greatest tragedies of being without Christ is being outside of his church. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes:

By being 'without Christ'... you are outside that circle in which God is peculiarly interested. You do not belong to the covenant people.... Today it is the Christian Church that corresponds to the commonwealth of Israel. The most terrible thing about a man who is not a Christian is that he is outside that circle and does not belong to the people of God.<sup>3</sup>

Third, Paul says the Gentiles were "strangers to the covenants of promise." At different times in history, God made covenants with his people: covenants made through Abraham, Moses, and David. But, interestingly, Paul mentions *promise* in the singular. There were many covenants, but one promise, one salvation, that God had always proclaimed. Geoffrey Wilson explains that the Gentiles "were ignorant of the *one* promise of salvation which God had confirmed to

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<sup>3</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God's Way of Reconciliation: An Exposition of Ephesians 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 169

Abraham and his seed in several covenants.”<sup>4</sup> That promise looked forward to and was fulfilled by the coming of Jesus Christ.

It is God’s Word that records his covenants, but the Gentiles did not know or understand God’s Word, just like people today who never come to church. That is why they were ignorant of God’s promise. Lloyd-Jones points out that unbelievers today “can read their Bible and it does not move them... They are strangers, they are like people from another country, they do not understand the language.”<sup>5</sup> Does that describe you? Are you a stranger to the promises of the Bible, so that it all means nothing and makes no sense? Then you need to cry out to God that by his Holy Spirit he would give you eyes to see and a heart to understand.

## WITHOUT HOPE AND WITHOUT GOD

**T**his, Paul says, is the kind of person the Gentiles were, as are their modern-day unbelieving counterparts. Christians are to remember that this is the kind of person we were before God’s grace came to us. He wants Christians to realize what a blessing it is to be part of God’s church and recipients of God’s covenant promise of salvation in Christ.

Paul completes verse 12 by detailing the kind of life people lead apart from Christ. People may not mind being Gentiles or strangers to God, but the kind of life this produces is not so good. Paul memorably describes them as “having no hope and without God in the world.”

Possessing no idea of a savior, the Greeks suffered an epidemic hopelessness. The same is true of today’s secular culture, which is increasingly overwhelmed by despair. This lack of hope relates to our attitude to both life and death.

People today lack hope in life, which is why so many lead a mindless pursuit of pleasure and entertainment. Neil Postman aptly chronicled this in his book titled, “Amusing Ourselves to Death.”<sup>6</sup> What is most depressing is that the few people who do think deeply are the most

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey B. Wilson, *Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1978), 53.

<sup>5</sup> Lloyd-Jones, 170.

<sup>6</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1986).

pessimistic people of all. Not all of these are highly educated. *Life* magazine ran an issue on the meaning of life. Jose Martinez, a taxi driver, offered this: “We’re here to die, just live and die... Life is a big fake. Nobody gives a damn. You’re rich or you’re poor. You’re here, you’re gone. You’re like the wind. After you’re gone, other people will come... We’re gonna destroy ourselves, nothing we can do about it.”<sup>7</sup> For all our arrogant claims to achieving heaven on earth through materialistic progress, the reality is that, as Ravi Zacharias writes, “never before in history has such hopelessness enshrouded so many people, as the heart’s deepest longings remain unmet.”<sup>8</sup>

If secular people have no hope about life, things get only worse when it comes to death. The Gentiles of Paul’s day had no hope for life after death, expecting only to lie in the ground, as one of their philosophers wrote, “bereft of life, voiceless as a stone.”<sup>9</sup> The same is true of people in every age. It is those who flout God most in life who most despair in the face of death. Napoleon cried out on his death bed, “I die before my time, and my body will be given back to the earth... What an abyss between my deep misery and the eternal kingdom of Christ.” The famous unbelieving philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, died saying, “If I had the whole world, I would give it to live one day.... I am about to take a leap into the dark.” Then there is the French writer, Voltaire. Teachers today love to have young students read his arrogant dismissal of Christianity. But they don’t tell them about Voltaire’s desperation in death. He cried out, “I am abandoned by God and man! I will give you half of what I am worth if you will give me six months’ life.”<sup>10</sup>

Compare that to the peace and joy Christians experience in death. One of the countless examples is Rowland Taylor, one of the English Reformers who could easily have avoided being burned at the stake if he had only been willing to deny his faith in Jesus. A few days before his martyrdom, Taylor wrote to his family:

I believe that they are blessed which die in the Lord. God careth for sparrows, and for the hairs of our heads. I have ever found Him more

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God?* 58.

<sup>8</sup> Ravi Zacharias: *Can Man Live Without God*, p. 51.

<sup>9</sup> Theognis, cf. Barclay, 110.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in James Montgomery Boice, *The Heart of the Cross*, 13.



faithful and favourable than is any father or husband. Trust ye, therefore, in Him by the means of our dear Saviour Christ's merits. Believe, love, fear, and obey Him: pray to Him, for He hath promised to help. Count me not dead, for I shall certainly live and never die."

That is hope! Taylor concluded the letter by citing Psalm 127: "The Lord is my Light and my Salvation, whom then shall I fear?"<sup>11</sup>

Paul concludes by telling us the reason people live and die without hope, describing the Gentiles as "without God in the world."

It was not strictly true that the Greeks had no religion and no gods. But you can be very religious and not have God. The Greeks had legions of gods, but none of them were true. None of them could save. None conveyed hope.

So it is today for all who trust the false god of success. Best-selling novelist, Jack Higgins, confessed, "When you get to the top, there's nothing there."<sup>12</sup> The same is true of those who trust the false god of money, which cannot buy joy, peace, or satisfaction; or the false god of beauty, which exacts a tyrannical service; or the false god of romance, which so often fades or betrays; or the false god of fame, fleeting and unfaithful. Only the true God, revealed in his Word, who saves us through Jesus Christ, can give the hope for which we long. Only of him can it be said, "You are my fortress, my strong salvation."

With Christ we have hope because we have the true and saving God, who entered the world to conquer sin and death. But, as Charles Spurgeon sums it up, "Without Christ, though you be rich as Croesus, and famous as Alexander, and wise as Socrates, yet you are naked, and poor, and miserable, for you lack him by whom are all things, and for whom are all things, and who is himself all in all."<sup>13</sup>

## NEVER FORGET

**P**aul reminds us of these things because he wants believers to remember. "Never forget!" he says, what you were and what you

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<sup>11</sup> Cited in J.C. Ryle, *Light from Old Times* (Moscow, ID: Charles Nolan, 2000), 134.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Zacharius, 56.

<sup>13</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, "A Solemn Deprival" in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 2:366.

have now in Christ. Because of God's grace, you have a Savior, you are a blessed member of the people of God, with the Bible's promises signed and sealed for you. This appeal to remember yields at least three applications.

First, the reason for us to remember these things is to stir up our gratitude to God. Cicero rightly said that "gratitude is the mother of every other virtue." If you are thankful to God your heart will want to live for him. Remember what you were before God came to you in grace. Realize what you would be now and what would be your future destiny, were it not for God's gift in Jesus Christ. This is why Christians so greatly need the Bible's teaching on sin and judgment – not to put us down, but because if we do not realize what we were and what we deserved we will never praise God as we should.

Second, unlike the Jews in their contempt for the hopeless, godless Gentiles, we are to look with mercy on those without hope and without God. We are no better; we are objects of God's mercy. Therefore, let us devote ourselves to that greatest of all mercies: a living, speaking witness about the salvation God offers to everyone through faith in Jesus Christ.

Lastly, never give in to despair if you are a Christian. Never let resentment take hold of you when you suffer or have unfulfilled desires. Never let temptation be your master. Never forget the grace of God. Remember what God has done for you already and at what cost to himself. Never doubt his saving love. And therefore live with courage and resolve, with hope and joy, knowing that you are part of a grand design to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Remember who you are and whose you are. Remember, and do not forget.