

Ephesians 2: 11-13; “Remembering What We Once Were”, Message # 15 in a series entitled – “The Exceeding Greatness of His Power”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on February 18th, 2024, in the Morning Worship Service.

Having for the last one and a half chapters taught us that our salvation is not of ourselves, that it is of God, the apostle Paul now wants to open up this great truth that those who are saved, both Jews and Gentiles, are one spiritual body through Christ’s work. In order for us to see the greatness of this work of Christ, I would like us to focus on what we as Gentiles should remember in relation to what we once were.

1st of all – We were once aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and thus we knew no saving mercy. 2nd – We were once strangers from the covenants of promise, and thus we had no hope. And 3rd – We were once afar off, but now we have been brought near by the blood of Christ. I hope that each of us will see how very merciful the Lord has been to us to bring us into covenant with Himself.

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 in His sight. For it was God would set them apart to be the only elect nation in His sight, before Christ came.

Paul knew that it would be a good thing if we as Christians could understand these important distinctions of Biblical truth. That is, the ethnic distinctions which God Himself made in the past, before Christ came. There were certain particular spiritual implications which those ethnic distinctions 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 were 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.”

So, here we have God choosing Abraham, the first Hebrew, to receive the blessing of his being called of God unto salvation. He was also appointed to be the father of a nation of people. At this time, though, he had not yet been formally called a Hebrew. He was 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. He had set him apart to receive these great blessings.

He would become both the head of 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 then God tells him, that in that place, he would be a blessing to a number of people. And in a general sense, then, he would also be a blessing to all of the families of the peoples around him. Those families of people who would joyfully receive Abram, and bless him, God would bless them. And those who would not receive

Abram, and would curse him, God would curse them. 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. Saving faith was then, and it is today, believing God and His promises of Christ. It was his living in obedience to His word, and his living as a representative example of God's electing purposes among all 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. In Genesis 14: 13 we find this statement: "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, 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. The context of this verse is that four kings came up against five kings of the neighboring nations to Abraham. The four kings so prevailed against the five that they took with them all of the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions, and they went their way.

They also took Lot, Abram's brother's son, who dwelt in Sodom, and his goods, 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. 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. He would be a strong leader of this small people who were soon to become a nation. These men with Abraham were not a force of many people. But they were trained, they were "catechized" in his own house. They were instructed not only in the art of war, to the best of Abram's ability, but they were also trained up in the principles of his living and true religion.

And God Himself was watching over them to bless them. He would watch over them in this war. And He would watch over them in peace, so that they would fulfill His purposes, and become a great nation of Hebrew people. For they were the people who would eventually bring forth the His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who would be the Savior of all elect Gentile sinners, as well as those who were Hebrews.

You can see this further explained in Genesis 18: 17-19. "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."

We can apply what took place with Abraham, to ourselves in this way: That even though we were, before our conversion to Christ, nothing but uncircumcised Gentiles, nevertheless, through Christ, it is God who has called us by means of the gospel. It is through God's effectual call, that we inherit the 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 spiritual 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 grace, which He purchased for us by His righteous life and by His death on the cross. We are redeemed to God by His blood and righteousness. Therefore, Abraham is 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 show 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 covenant of 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 based upon what He would do for Abraham. He was asking Abraham to 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 by faith. He would have Abraham to be living righteously and godly by faith in the things which He, God, was telling Him to believe and to do. But 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. We have received mercy from God based upon His great and loving purposes in Christ. Paul words it this way in Romans 4: 9-13 – “Does this blessedness (of salvation) 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. 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. This is why it is set aside, in this Church age.

It is not as though the moral law is not 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 righteousness. And it is for this reason that it ought always to be remembered by us. This is why it ought to be treasured, and stored up in our hearts. God's commandments are for our good and our doing them, to His glory. 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, so that we will be forgiven of all of our sins. And we are saved by His life being given to our souls and bodies. And this all comes to us by faith in Him, and not by any one of the ceremonial things that we might do. Abraham is the father of all those who believe who have not been circumcised, it says in these verses that I just read to you. This is 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 his 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 we have also been brought near to our brothers the Jews, those who have believed in Christ. We are therefore a part of the commonwealth of God's spiritual Israel. These are important distinctions to make. For Christ has broken down the barrier between Jew and Gentile, and made us into one new people. I hope that you will rejoice with me at the greatness of God's purposes in regard to His church. That God would save us Gentiles as well as the Jews – It is marvelous!

