

**United in Christ: Remembering our Past**  
Ephesians 2v11-13

*“Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ...But now...”*

**Introduction:** About 10 years ago, my sister who spent over 20 years with her husband and 6 kids in Asia as a missionary (China and Korea) recommended a book called *“The Heavenly Man: The remarkable true story of Chinese Christian Brother Yun”*. It recounted the life and ministry of Brother Yun in the 80’s and 90’s during the explosion of the house church movement in China, where hundreds of thousands were saved despite the tight control and persecution of the government. It was a stretch to my thinking and experience since he told of unexplainable experiences, like walking out of a maximum-security prison unharmed and unnoticed, except for the providential hand of God. He gave memorable quotes like:

"We shouldn't pray for a lighter load to carry but a stronger back to endure! Then the world will see that God is with us, empowering us to live in a way that reflects his love and power." ~ p. 229

"You can never really know the scriptures until you're willing to be changed by them." ~ p. 236

"The world can do nothing to a Christian who has no fear of man." ~ p. 343

But one of the things that stood out in this book was the fact that Brother Yun spoke of the unity of the mission of the church, since the only thing they had was **God’s Word and suffering**. He would go on to say that when other outside organizations came into the picture, they contributed their versions of curriculum, denominational bents, and tribal influences, but with all of the help came division. Unity is a powerful tool, but incredibly difficult to maintain and easy to lose. Today in our churches, we have tension with vast differences in theological approaches, philosophical drifts, and ever-changing movements. Whether it is “woke-ness”, social justice, critical theory, or good old-fashioned desire for relevance, unity within God’s church is tenuous. Yet, UNITY is imperative to maintain, since the health and effectiveness of the church is at stake.

- **Jesus prayed for it** (John 17:11, 20) – On His way between the upper room and the Garden of Gethsemane on the night He would be arrested and hung on the cross, Jesus prayed for His disciples, both those who were alive at the time, and for those for all time. “And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that **they may be one, even as we are one.**” (V. 11 – for the 12); “I do not ask for these only, but also for those **who will believe in me through the word, that they may be one, just you, Father, are in me**, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (V. 20 – for all believers). Not only does this show that God holds unity as a high value, but the things Jesus prays for will absolutely come to pass!

- **Churches are prone to DIVISION** (1 Cor. 1:10) – We all tend to drift away from unity, since we are all prone to division. “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there are **no divisions among you, BUT that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.**” We tend to follow personalities, or strong leaders, or people we like, and that naturally causes factions and quarreling. In Corinth, it was those who followed Paul, Apollos, Cephas, or Christ, as if Christ was somehow divided! When we have greater loyalty to a person, we no longer are operating in the power of the cross of Christ but in the wisdom of men.
- **Our Witness demands it** (Phil. 1:27) – The church should be different because we have such a transformative gospel. We are to be blameless and innocent, without grumbling and disputing as we shine like lights in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation (Phil. 2:15). How do we do that? *“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come to see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are **standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for faith in the gospel.**”* Not only do we need each other, but we must strive to have focused, intentional, and purposeful directions born out of the gospel, for the glory of God alone. Any winning sports team knows that they are the most effective when every person on the team is willing to sacrifice, play their role, and move forward as ONE. This is the goal and hope of the church.

Perhaps there was no greater gap of unity that could have existed than that of Jews and non-Jews, called Gentiles. There were historical reasons why there was such a gulf, but as God brought both together in a new way in the church, these most unlikely partners would not only need to REMEMBER who they were in Christ, but model the power of the gospel. If Jews and Gentiles could overcome their entrenched differences in Christ, it also gives us a template for all unity with the differences we face today.

Ephesians 2:11-22 is pivotal to the rest of the book, sourcing the unity in the Body of Christ, the church, in the work of Christ on the cross. Today we’ll look at the statement of that union, and next week we’ll look at the explanation of how Jews and Gentiles become a new humanity (14-18), with the results of that union being a new description of the church (19-22). This statement of unity is sourced in **the poignancy of remembering, the plight of the past, and the power of redemption.**

### **The Poignancy of Remembering (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, **remember...***

There is great benefit to remembering, since we are all prone to forgetfulness. Jesus even left us vivid practices that we would engage in often so that we would actively remember His work on the cross, His shedding of blood, and anticipate His return. Each time we celebrate Communion together, we remember Jesus. Each time we see a baptism, we remember His work in our life and how we were raised from death to life. We remember our past so that we are encouraged in the present and hopeful for the future. Here there was a particular group in

the church at Ephesus that was being addressed: *YOU GENTILES*. The church at Ephesus was made up by a majority of non-Jews, though they had a mixture of both for sure, even as Paul differentiated himself, he himself being Jewish. He then pointed to a particular Jewish practice in circumcision which was a SIGN of the covenant between God and Abraham and his offspring (Genesis 17:1-14). It was intended to be a distinguishing mark that identified God's people from other nations.

But these marks, practices, and kinds of ordinances became sources of tension and division, not as distinguishing marks to show the light of the Lord. Abraham was given a covenant by God (Gen 15:1-6) to both bless his people but also to bless all the nations of the earth. God made Israel, or the descendants of Abraham and Jacob, ***“as a light for the nations that my salvation may reach the end of the earth.”*** (Isa. 49:6). Israel was used by God to be a conduit TO God, not as an end in themselves. They were the path, not the destination, the guide, not the goal. God gave Israel many Laws, from moral to ceremonial, dietary, and sacrificial to set them apart, since it took commitment, and as they kept these by faith, God would be put on display for the rest of the nations around. The point was to shine light on the greatness of God, to be the moon reflecting the light of the sun back down. But what happens to so many happened to the Jewish nation: they looked at the signs or distinguishing marks or their practices AS THE END, and focused on them rather than faith in the One who gave them. They worshipped or loved the gifts more than the gift giver, and this led to much discord.

Instead of being a light to the nations around, most Jews had flourishing hatred for non-Jews. The thought was that Gentiles were created as fuel for Hell, Jewish doctors were not to help a Gentile woman give birth since that would bring one more wretched Gentile into the world, and if a Jewish male had the audacity to marry a non-Jewish girl, no wedding would be attended but rather a funeral service. We see this angst in the prophet Jonah, when he tried to stay away from Nineveh, a Gentile city, and who was ANGRY when God granted that wicked city with repentance (Jonah 4:1). Now, when we read the NT, we see the disdain was returned, as everyone from the people at Philippi (Acts 16:20) to Pilate did to have a high view of the Jewish people. This mindset had continued on into the church. When Paul pointed out “The circumcision” made in the flesh by hands, he pointed to two things:

- 1) **There were Jewish factions within the church** – In Galatians 2, Paul had to confront his friend and fellow worker in Peter. Peter had come to the church at Antioch and was eating with the people at the church, enjoying his ham sandwich wrapped in bacon with pulled pork on top. Peter had received a vision from God in Acts 10 where God showed Him that the ceremonial law was no longer in play and he could eat what he had avoided his whole life because of these OT standards. God was reaching the Gentiles by faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ alone, so not only did Gentiles not have to keep the ceremonial law, but Jews did not either! BUT when a group called the “circumcision party” (not the best gang's name!) he was **afraid and stopped hanging out and eating with Gentiles** (even Barnabas was lead astray in the hypocrisy). (Gal. 2:12-13). Paul said they were not acting in step with the gospel. There were Jewish people in the church who believed Gentiles had to **first keep the ceremonial parts of the law** (i.e dietary

laws, circumcision, etc) and THEN they could enter the church through Christ. This was a false gospel, and the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 wrote letters to the churches that Gentiles DID NOT need to keep that law, but were to stay away from idols, sexual immorality and from bad meat.

It's good to pause right here. We must make sure that when we share the good news of the gospel with others, we are NOT putting up barriers like these early Jewish converts. People do not need to dress a certain way, know the protocols of the church, or certain lingo to be qualified to be saved. Most of the stuff in the church WON'T make sense to unbelievers, until their eyes are opened by faith. But they should see that there IS a difference in our lives, from our time commitments, financial realities, and even who we spend time with that will be attractive or at least intriguing. We do not put any barriers in front of people, but only Christ, which is Who they must come to grips with.

- 2) **True circumcision was always about the heart** – This sign was never the point, but only what it pointed to. *“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 souls, that you may live.”* (Deut. 30:6; cf. 10:6; Jer. 4:4) *“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.”* (Rom. 2:20) This points to the change in our heart, from stone to flesh, that happens in salvation. *“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”* (Col. 2:11). The gospel always changes us from the inside out, not the outside in. When God transforms our heart, our external practices and obedience WILL change, but that is never the basis of salvation.

### **The Plight of the Past (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.*

Again, Paul reminds the Gentiles in the church about their past, but new in a corporate way, not merely an individual look. The look is not only before they individually heard the gospel and repented through belief, but how the whole system worked. There were **5 areas of separation or hopelessness before Christ**.

- 1) **Separated from Christ** – There was no messianic hope for non-Jews, since all supposed messiahs have always required something FROM people, that they had to climb a ladder of morality to GET to God, instead of a Messiah who comes TO us.
- 2) **Alienated from the citizenship of Israel** – God chose Israel as its conduit (Deut. 7:6-11) through whom He showed His glory. A person would have to join the nation to enjoy citizenship, becoming a proselyte, but never a full member
- 3) **Strangers to the covenants of Promise** – Though Gentiles were recipients of the results for the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-6), it was not given directly to them, just

as the Davidic (2 Sam 7) and New Covenants (Jer. 31:31-34). These were given directly to Israel and enjoyed directly by them

- 4) **Without hope** – There is no article in front of the word “hope” here, which means that Gentiles were not only without THE hope of salvation in Christ, but were characterized by hopelessness, or the quality of hopelessness. Hope is only as good as the object that one hopes in. We can put our hope in horses and chariots, in governments or portfolios, but when it comes to the future, those bound by this world have no bankable assets of assurance in the future
- 5) **Without God** – Not in an atheistic way, but an ignorant way. Though they knew God through His attributes and nature itself, they still refused to worship Him but became futile in their thinking and darkened by their foolish hearts (Rom. 1:21).

Quite a list. Now, we have to understand WHY Paul gave this list, since it was not simply to beat up and beat down his Gentile brothers and sisters. What was Paul trying to get them to remember? How was that remembrance helpful? Let me give you a few:

- **Appreciation in the Present** – If Gentiles would understand that they came from such a hopeless start, that they had none of the advantages that the Jews had, they should grow in appreciation of God’s sovereign choice and work of salvation. This enhances our ability to worship and thankfulness for the gospel in our own lives. Each day we live and each time we gather to worship, we should remember who we truly are: wretched sinners saved by grace alone, by faith alone, through Christ alone, so we can glorify God alone.
- **Humility toward God, grace toward others** – The Gentiles, who made up a majority, could easily forget their history and begin to look down or arrogantly toward their Jewish brothers (or anyone for that matter). Subtly, we can begin to think that the gifts we have are somehow earned or deserved over time, and forget where others start from. I’ve thought about this in terms of remembering that many do not have the blessing of growing up with faithful fathers, or intact families, or a model of Christian values, so they often act out of ignorance or reaction to it. That does not mean I’m ashamed of the advantage, but it reminds me its GRACE, not about me, and thus grace much be extended to others lavishly.
- **Perspective** – What we will see is that all of the areas in which we Gentiles were shut out of have now been given to us in Christ and His church. We had no hope, no belonging, no mission, but in the church, we are new citizens, part of a new family, and a new Temple (Eph. 2:19-22).

We are so prone to forget, so we must proactively REMEMBER these things. Which is what Paul explains next....

### **The Power of Redemption (13)**

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

Jesus' payment price of His own blood shed on the cross to satisfy God's wrath on our behalf is the answer, and the answer alone. We were brought near by something incredibly dear. We cling to **"But now.... Christ Jesus"**. We are not brought to God or made acceptable by anything that we did or could do, and we don't point to anything in ourselves when we talk to others about Christ. It's all about Christ Jesus, who took hopeless, alienated, separated, shut out, godless, sinful, and hard-hearted people like us and made us His family, His nation, His people forever.

Ministry and life are not complicated. We stand firm in the Word of God, allowing it to change us. We withstand persecution that comes when we stand firm, since we never leave our faith, love, and hope in Jesus Christ, the One who will never leave or forsake, who is the same yesterday, today and forever. The One who shed His blood to pay the greatest price to redeem us from death.