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## REMEMBERING THEN, BUT NOW!

Ephesians 2:11-13

By

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November 4, 2007

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Ephesians Lesson 16

Remembering Then, but Now!  
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P. G. Wodehouse (*America, I Like You* [Simon & Schuster], in *Reader's Digest* [July, 1984], p. 113) told about a member of the British Parliament who was once standing in the lobby of the House when a tall, distinguished looking old gentleman came up and begged for a moment of his time. He had a sad story to tell.

By hard work and thrift he had amassed a large fortune, and now his relatives had robbed him of it and, not content with that, had placed him in a mental home. This was his day out. "I have put the facts down in this document," he concluded. "Study it and communicate with me at your leisure. Thank you, sir, thank you. Good day."

Much moved by the man's exquisite courtesy, the Member of Parliament took the paper, shook hands, promised that he would do everything in his power and turned to go back to the debate. As he did so, he received a kick in the seat of the pants that nearly sent his spine shooting through his hat.

"Don't forget!" said the old gentleman.

Sometimes we need a kick in the seat of the pants to help us remember something important that we tend to forget. In our text, the apostle Paul gives us that needed kick. In a way he is repeating himself. In 2:1-10, he has rehearsed our dreadful past when we walked in our sins (2:1-3), followed by that glorious contrast, "But God," leading to the amazing blessings that we now enjoy in Christ (2:4-9). Then he spells out the consequence of God creating us anew, that we now should walk in good deeds (2:10).

Then he repeats the same progression in 2:11-22, but with the focus not so much on our blessings individually, but rather, corporate. He reminds us of our spiritual past (2:11-12), when we were alienated from God and His covenant people. Then he comes in again with the glorious contrast, "But now," followed by our present corporate blessings of being reconciled to God and His people (2:13-18). He concludes (2:19-22) with the consequence, that we

are now being built together into a holy temple where the Lord Himself dwells in the Spirit.

Paul is elaborating on and driving home the point of Ephesians 1:10, that God's purpose for the ages is to sum up or reconcile all things in Christ. This is a mystery that had not been revealed in previous ages, that God would make "the Gentiles fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (3:6), all in accordance with His eternal purpose in Christ Jesus (3:11).

In our text, Paul kicks us in the pants to remember our hopeless past so that we will always thankfully rejoice for what Christ did for us on the cross.

Remember your desperate situation before God saved you so that you will rejoice in what Christ did for you on the cross.

"Therefore" (2:11) refers back to 2:1-10. Paul is saying, "In light of the fact that you have been saved by God's grace through faith unto a life of good works, remember the place from which God brought you.

1. We are commanded to remember our desperate situation before God saved us (2:11-12).

First, note that...

A. "Remember" is a command, not a suggestion.

Paul doesn't say, "If it grabs you, you may want to try it." Rather, he commands us, "Remember," and goes on to specify what it is that we are to remember, namely, our lost, hopeless condition before God saved us by His grace.

Paul is writing these things to the Gentiles as a group. For 2,000 years, from Abraham to Christ, God chose to work almost exclusively with the Jews. If you were a Gentile, the only way that you could know God and have your sins forgiven was to be circumcised and follow the Jewish rituals and sacrificial system. Even then, the Jews considered you a second class citizen. There was a special court in the temple, the court of the Gentiles, where you could worship from a distance. But you could not go beyond the dividing wall, at the threat of your life (Acts 21:28-29). But now, in Christ, that barrier of the dividing wall has been broken down

(Eph. 2:14). Christ has reconciled the Jews and Gentiles to God and to one another through the cross.

Behind Paul's command was a long history of animosity between the Jews and the Gentiles. As you know, when people get saved, they don't leave all their baggage at the door of the church before entering. So there was a very real danger that the early church would split into separate Jewish and Gentile churches, even by a friendly mutual agreement. They easily could have rationalized the split by saying, "We have different customs and preferences as Jews and Gentiles. We Jews like the ceremonies and feasts from our old way of worship. The Gentiles think that all of these things are meaningless rituals. So, we'll just worship separately."

Besides the religious differences, there were deep cultural and racial divisions. The Jews viewed the Gentiles as unclean "dogs." Jewish men prayed every morning, "Lord, thank You that You didn't make me a Gentile or a woman." They would never eat with a Gentile (Acts 11:2-3). They derisively spoke of them, as Paul here mentions, as "the uncircumcision." Paul ridicules their view by pointing out that it is only an external difference, made by human hands. But he brings it up to show that the division between Jew and Gentile was deep. The Jews despised the Gentiles.

And the Gentiles returned the favor. The Greeks saw their culture and language as superior to all others. They called others, "barbarians," a term that made fun of the way that foreign languages sounded to the Greeks. It was as if these unsophisticated foreigners went around babbling, "bar-bar." They couldn't even speak Greek, the language of the gods!

But Paul saw that the very mystery of Christ and the goal of the gospel centered on this new man created by God, consisting of Jews and Gentiles as fellow members of the body on equal standing before God. All of this relates to the eternal purpose of God, that His manifold wisdom would "now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places" (Eph. 3:10). So Paul wanted the Ephesians to know that their reconciliation to God necessarily entailed their reconciliation to one another as Jews and Gentiles. Thus they must strive to "preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:3).

At the root of all racism is the sin of pride. Even though God had made it clear that He did not choose the Jews because of anything in them (Deut. 7:7-8), they became proud over their special status and despised the Gentiles. And, even though Paul has made it clear that God chose the Gentiles by His grace alone while they were dead in their sins, they were in danger of becoming proud of their new status (Rom. 11:17-21). So Paul is quick to command them to remember where they were as a people before God saved them by His grace, so that they will not become arrogant. Rather, we should always be amazed that God's grace came to us.

This applies to us as American Christians. We have a great privilege that few peoples around the globe enjoy, that our nation is saturated with the gospel. We have Bibles and Christian books and good Bible teaching in abundance. We could easily take these things for granted. But the truth is, if we become arrogant or complacent, in 100 years America could be like Afghanistan today, where the gospel is hardly known at all. God could justly remove the light that we enjoy and America would be cut off from the gospel. So, "remember" is a command. What are we to remember?

B. Remember your desperate situation before God saved you.

Paul describes the condition of the Gentiles before the cross as one of utter hopelessness and despair. We now live in an age of God's blessing on the Gentiles. Our churches are largely made up of Gentile believers. But this has not always been so. Paul reminds the Gentiles of five facts of their past before God saved them:

(1) Before God saved you, you were separate from Christ.

That word "separate" should jar you! You were cut off from Jesus Christ! Before the gospel came to Ephesus, these Gentiles had not heard the name of Jesus. They had no idea how to have their sins forgiven and be reconciled to God. They worshiped the idol Artemis, and feared the evil spirits, trying to keep them at bay through magic. But, they were separate from Christ, with no way of knowing Him.

I was in my thirties before I learned that my great-grandmother on my father's side was a full-blooded Cherokee Indian.

Since then, I've often thought, "What if I had been born a few generations earlier, before the Pilgrims came to this land? I would have been born into a pagan culture with no knowledge of the living God and no way to come to know Him. I would have been separate from Christ!"

That term, "separate from Christ," ought to burden our hearts with compassion for those around the world who have yet to hear the gospel! We ought to pray and give and go to these yet to be reached groups with the good news of Jesus Christ!

- (2) Before God saved you, you were excluded from the commonwealth of Israel.

Israel could rightly say, "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord" (Ps. 33:12), and they could refer to God as "the God of Israel" (Ps. 72:18). But that was not true of any Gentile nation. They were excluded from the people whom God had chosen as His own. If you've ever traveled in a foreign country, you feel a bit excluded, like you don't belong. The people treat you as an outsider. You don't speak the language, so you are excluded from conversations. You don't know their customs, so you often feel stupid or unable to do things that you know how to do in your own country. You're excluded. Remember that you once were excluded from the people of God and go out of your way to make any new person at church feel welcomed and included.

- (3) Before God saved you, you were strangers to the covenants of the promise.

The Greek text has the definite article before "promise." "Covenants" refers to the several covenants that God had made with Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:7-21; 17:1-21), Isaac (Gen. 26:2-5), Jacob (Gen. 28:13-15), the nation (through Moses, Exod. 24:1-8), and David (2 Sam. 7). "The promise" refers to the underlying promise of all of these covenants, to send the Savior (Gen. 3:15; Rom. 9:4-5). Before God sent the Savior, many generations of Gentiles had lived and died without any knowledge of God's covenant promises. That could have been us today, had we been born in a place where the gospel is not yet known! Remember!

- (4) Before God saved you, you had no hope.

Without God's covenant promises, there is no hope! His promise to send the Messiah was "the hope of Israel" (Acts 28:20; Jer. 14:8; 17:13). But the Gentiles had no hope, at least, no hope based on the sure promises of God. The tombs of the Pharaohs show that they had some hope of an afterlife, but it was an empty hope. Only the Jews had hope in the living God (Ps. 71:5).

Sometimes, unbelievers look at the suffering in the world, especially the suffering of little children, and scoff, "If there is a God, why does He allow these terrible things to happen?" But what they don't realize is, if you remove God from the picture, you just made the situation utterly hopeless! Without God, you may be born as an unwanted child, sold into prostitution, be abused by wicked men, and die of AIDS. There is zero hope there. But if that girl or the brothel owner hears the gospel and gets saved, there is hope that brightens the darkest corners of the earth! But, it gets even worse:

- (5) Before God saved you, you were without God in the world.

Those may be the saddest words in the Bible, "having no hope and without God in the world." The world is a wicked, cruel, violent place. The world means robbery, injustice, slander, hatred, warfare, disease, and death. Even if you live a relatively comfortable life, the best you can hope for is expressed in a bumper sticker I saw recently: "Eat healthy, exercise, and die anyway!" But to face all of life's trials without God and without the hope of eternal life is a terrible thing!

Paul wants us to remember these things so that we never forget where we would be if the Lord had not snatched us from the pit that we were in because of our sins. Why? Because if we forget, we will grow lukewarm and apathetic about the things of God. If we forget, we will lose the joy of our salvation. If we forget, we will lose our hunger and thirst to know God more deeply through His Word. If we forget, we will lose our motivation to take the gospel to the lost. So, remember your desperate situation before God saved you. It's a command!

2. Rejoice that in Christ Jesus, you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ (2:13).

I realize that the word, "rejoice," does not appear in verse 13, but it is the dominant emotion that hits me when I read it: "But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." I want to shout, "Rejoice!" Four brief observations:

- A. Rejoice that God's salvation resulted in a glorious contrast in your life.

"But now!" What wonderful, glorious words! We saw the same thing in verse 4, "But God!" As Martyn Lloyd-Jones asked in a sermon on that verse, "Is there a 'but God' in your life?" Before the gospel, we were separate from Christ, excluded from the people of God, strangers to God's covenant promises, with no hope and without God Himself. "But now!" Hallelujah! When God breaks into your life with the gospel, you simply cannot be the same person that you were before. All things become new (2 Cor. 5:17).

- B. Rejoice that formerly you were separate from Christ, but now you are in Him.

"In Christ Jesus" is Paul's favorite phrase. He has used it (or some variation, such as "in Him") at least 13 times so far! It means that we are totally identified with Christ in His death, resurrection, and present position at God's right hand. As we saw (1:3), we now have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.

- C. Rejoice that formerly you were far off, but now you have been brought near to God.

"Far off" and "near" are Old Testament terms that refer to the Gentiles and Jews respectively. In Ephesians 2:17, Paul cites Isaiah 57:19, "And He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near." (See, also, Acts 2:39; 22:21). "Brought near" is a passive verb, meaning that God acted upon us to bring us near to His presence. Even though as Gentiles, we would have been kept away from the worship that the Jews enjoyed, now God has brought us near to Himself. The term implies the intimacy of a personal relationship with the living God.

- D. Rejoice that formerly you were a guilty, condemned sinner, but now you can draw near by the blood of Christ.

Under the Old Covenant, only the priests could enter the holy place, and that only with the blood of the sacrificial victim. But only the high priest could enter the holy of holies, only once a year on the Day of Atonement. But now, Jesus' shed blood has cleansed us from all of our sins, once for all (Heb. 10:10, 14) so that we can draw near to God! Paul's mentioning Christ's blood reminds us of the great price that He paid to secure our redemption. Rejoice that His blood covers your guilt and condemnation, once for all!

## Conclusion

What are some practical benefits of obeying Paul's command to remember our desperate, hopeless past in contrast with our glorious present situation of having been brought near by the blood of Christ? Chew on these five:

1. Remembering "then, but now" curbs our pride.

There was absolutely nothing in us that prompted God to send His Son to die on the cross to save us from our sins. We were not seeking God or longing to know Him before He began to work in our hearts (Rom. 3:10-18). Even though I grew up in a Christian home, except for His gracious providence that kept me from many sins, I would have been just as wicked as the worst sinners in the world. There is no basis for any pride when we remember where we would be had we not heard the gospel.

2. Remembering "then, but now" deepens our love for Christ.

In Luke 7:36-50, Jesus was dining with Simon the Pharisee when a woman of ill repute came in and anointed Jesus with expensive perfume. She wet His feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair as she kissed them. Simon was shocked that Jesus would allow a sinner to touch Him in this manner. But Jesus told Simon that this woman loved much, because she was forgiven much. He added (Luke 7:47), "but he who is forgiven little, loves little." He did not mean that the Pharisee had fewer sins than this woman. Simon was filled with pride and self-righteousness, which are abominable to God. But, he didn't see himself as a sinner, and so he didn't love Jesus much. Remembering your past sins deepens your love for Jesus, who gave Himself for you.

3. Remembering "then, but now" deepens your compassion for the lost.

Do you ever look at the faces of people and see the hurt that sin has brought into their lives? Jesus saw the crowd as distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd, and He had compassion on them (Matt. 9:36). Even people who seem to be happy are heading for death and eternal judgment. Remembering that you were once there will give you the compassion of Christ for these hurting people and motivate you to do all you can to get the gospel to those who have not yet heard.

4. Remembering “then, but now” fosters racial reconciliation.

In Paul’s day, it was Jew against Gentile. In ours, it may be prejudice between blacks and whites, or other racial or cultural groups. It goes both directions, of course, because we’re all sinfully proud of things that we had absolutely no control over! But there is no place for any racial prejudice in the body of Christ. At the cross, He broke down all the barriers that wrongly divide us.

5. Remembering “then, but now” results in praise for God’s abundant grace.

If your heart has grown cold toward the Lord, remember where you were when He saved you and where you would be today if He had not. It will thaw out your frozen heart. The Puritan preacher, Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680) wrote to his son (*A Frank Boreham Treasury* [Moody Press], compiled by Peter Gunther, p. 72),

When I was threatening to become cold in my ministry, and when I felt Sabbath morning coming and my heart not filled with amazement at the grace of God, or when I was making ready to dispense the Lord’s Supper, do you know what I used to do? I used to take a turn up and down among the sins of my past life, and I always came down again with a broken and a contrite heart, ready to preach, as it was preached in the beginning, the forgiveness of sins. I do not think I ever went up the pulpit stair that I did not stop for a moment at the foot of it and take a turn up and down among the sins of my past years. I do not think that I ever planned a sermon that I did not take a turn around my study table and look back at the sins of my youth and all my life down to the present; and many a Sabbath morning, when my soul had been cold and dry, for the lack of prayer during the week, a turn up and

down in my past life before I went into the pulpit always broke my hard heart and made me close with the gospel for my own soul before I began to preach.

Don't forget! Remember where you were without Christ and praise God for where you are now!

### Application Questions

1. How do you square Paul's command here to remember your spiritual past with his comments in Philippians 3:13-14 about forgetting the things behind?
2. How is it that the truth that God has chosen us for salvation can lead either (rightly) to greater humility or (wrongly) to sinful pride? How can we avoid becoming proud about this?
3. A person from a Christian upbringing may remember his past and not identify with a person with a sinful background. How does Luke 7:36-50 help correct this skewed perspective?
4. Why is racial prejudice always sinful? How can we as a church guard against it?

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