

“Remember You Were Once Separated from God’s People” | Ephesians 2:11-13

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Ephesians 2:11-13 | Remember You Were Once Separated from God’s People | Posting Draft

For the rest of May through June, we return to our slow walk through Ephesians chapters 1-3, picking up today in the middle of chapter 2.

Ephesians 2 breaks into two sections. Verses 1-10 focus on a vertical problem, that sin has separated us from God. This is overcome by Christ work on the cross, where he purchases for us forgiveness of sin. The individual goes from “following the course of this world” (2:2) to “being raised up and seated with Christ in the heavenlies” (2:6). From low to high.

Verses 11-22 focuses on a second dimension of salvation, the horizontal problem. Sin not only separated individuals from God, it separated people from one another. Through Christ’s work, this too is overcome—exemplified by the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile: “[Jesus] himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ... that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two” (Eph 2:14, 15). Those who “were far off have been brought near” (2:13).

We will spend the next few weeks considering this second emphasis: that Christ’s work creates a new people through a better reconciliation, nurtured by a better unity.

This morning, we look at Eph 2:11-12 and considering two things: **(1) The New Birth Creates a New Bloodline**—that the work of Christ creates not only new birth, but a new people, the church. **(2) The New Bloodline Calls for New Family Memories**. By the end we’ll see better how these two relate.

I. The New Birth Creates a New Bloodline

The power of the Gospel centers around the forgiveness of sins. And this is a miracle only God can do. When a paralytic man was brought to Jesus, recall that Jesus said, “Son, your sins are forgiven” (Mark 2:5). To which onlookers responded, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mk 2:7).

Sin, at its root, is our rebellion against God. It is upstream from every other problem we have—including mortality and death: “the wage of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). Only God can fix this problem. God does so through the work of His Son, when Jesus dies on the cross, paying the penalty for our sins. This is what Ephesians 2:1-10 is all about: “You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked” (2:1); “But God, being rich in mercy ... even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ” (2:4).

Jesus calls this “the new birth” (Jn 3:3), and it is accomplished by his blood: “we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins” (Eph 1:7).

What is especially striking about how Paul's thought develops as we enter Ephesians 2:11-22, is that we see *a second miracle* that the blood of Christ achieves—not only vertical reconciliation (man with God), but horizontal (Gentile with Jew):

now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.... [Christ came that he] might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace,¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross (2:13, 15-16).

The blood of Christ reconciles us to God, and to one another. It creates a new race, a new people, a new bloodline—"one new man." The New Birth creates a New Bloodline—and out of people otherwise divided by race, nationality, and walls of animosity.

Jew and Gentile

The ancient world was filled with divisions—disunity is not a modern problem. One of the most glaring was between Jews and Gentiles. It is this divide that Paul faces head on in his ministry. He brings up with the language of verse 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 (2:11)

From the perspective of the Jews in Paul's, this division went back over one thousand years—back to the calling of Father Abraham. It was the case that God chose this people out of all the peoples in the world to work upon.

But they were not chosen because they were greater and holier than other nations:

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples (Deut 7:7).

Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people (Deut 9:6).

And Israel was always set apart for the sake of being a blessing to all the nations: As God said when he called Abraham, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Isa 12:3).¹

But over time—and in no small part due to how other nations treated Israel—their election grew into pride and a posture of being closed off. When a Jew entered the holy land from travel, he would "often shake the dust off his sandals and clothing in order not to contaminate the holy Land with Gentile dust."² The Samaritans were considered part-gentile and deemed so unclean that Jews avoided traveling through Samaria (Jn 4). This tension was so strong that the Jewish

¹ And later through the Prophet Isaiah, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6).

² John MacArthur, *Ephesians* in *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, page 70

born Peter, well after becoming a Christian, separated himself at one point from types of fellowship with Gentiles—for which Paul had strong words for him (see Gal 2:11-13).

But the animosity ran both ways. The Greeks could be quite arrogant. As statesmen Cicero wrote, “As the Greeks say, ‘All men are divided into two classes, Greeks and barbarians.’”³ The Greek language, so they said, was the language of the gods. Theirs was the superior culture, buildings, philosophy and systems of governance. Greeks were not impressed with the Jews.

Paul had been given by God a unique mission to the Greek-speaking Gentile world. Whereas Peter and James ministered largely to Jews who were becoming Christians in Jerusalem, Paul had dual challenge of not only making the Gospel clear to gentiles but then building new communities out of this combustive mixture of Jews and Gentiles. The challenge was tremendous.

Here in verses 11-22, we see that Paul understood the nature of this new community as the miraculous work of God—in no way a secondary matter to the work of the Gospel.

I want to pause at this point and make a few observations about these dual miracles of the Gospel—the blood of Christ reconciles individuals to God *and also* to one another—the new birth creates a new bloodline, a new people.

Reflecting on the Miracle of a New People

First, the nature our community—at this church and any true church—is **supernatural**. It transcends natural bonds. It is not developed because we think that community or diversity are good things. It is created by the blood of Christ. The new community, as one author notes, is marked by

a togetherness and commitment we experience that transcends all natural bonds—because of our commonality in Jesus Christ... Of all the ways that the gospel changes this world, the community of the local church is the most obviously supernatural....”⁴

Second, it cautions us against **two errors**: a view of Christianity that focuses *only* on how individuals are saved from sin and not the new community is narrow. But also, a few of Christianity that focuses *only* on community without making clear the need for forgiveness of sins is shallow. As Ephesians 2 makes clear, there is neither forgiveness of sins nor true Christian unity apart from the blood and cross of Christ.

Third, the **challenge of cross-cultural work and building churches from otherwise divided people is as old as Christianity**. Much of the flavor of early Christianity involved Jewish Christians ministering to Gentile converts. This requires translating the story God was telling through the Old Testament into the world of Gentiles who knew nothing about it. Crossing cultural barriers to make the Gospel intelligible is as old as our faith. And the communities that grow out of this require great care to build and nourish.

³ John MacArthur, *Ephesians in The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, page 66.

⁴ Mark Dever & Jamie Dunlop, *The Compelling Community: Where God's Power Makes a Church Attractive* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 13.

Apply: In light of this, let me pose a question: what is *community* at The Falls Church Anglican? Is it merely people coming together because they share interests? Is it people coming together because they like to sing, or serve, or care about the local neighborhood? Put another way, if you took God out of the equation, what would change about our community? Are there relationships here that would not exist apart from the work of God in Jesus Christ?

[T] With the remainder of our time, I want focus on the command given in verse 11 and unpacked in verse 12—that the gentiles are to *remember* who they were apart from Christ. Here we see that the **New Bloodline is nurtured by new shared memories.**

II. The New Bloodline Creates New Shared Memories

Remembering Is a Must

The word “remember” in verse 11—“**Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh....**” (2:11)—is an imperative, a command. There are 41 imperatives in Ephesians and 40 of them fall in chapters 4-6. This is the lone command in chapters 1-3. And we overlook it at our detriment. Apparently, memory—or a particular way of remembering—is key to Christian life.

We see the impact of remembering and memory in our natural lives.

Two Aprils ago I was in Kigali, Rwanda, when they began the 100-day observance of “Kwibuka,” commemorating the victims of the genocide in 1994. My driver took me by places where many had been killed. This was a way not only to honor those who lost lives, but to teach the younger generation about their shared-past—to cultivate a humility before the grave potential for evil in us. Remembering is crucial to keeping us connected to our shared story, and humble before human nature.

My two closet friends both saw their mothers go into memory care recently. Dementia is eating their brain. Their moms forget where they are; they even forget who their family members are. Memory, remembering, is crucial to our identity and relationships.

We could go on—nations and families and individuals go to great lengths to help remember their stories. I want us to see why this is important for Christian faith.

Across Scripture God’s people suffer from what we might call **spiritual amnesia**. This is on display as the people of Israel wander in the wilderness after being delivered from slavery in Egypt. Again and again, they forget what God did for them. They mis-remember life in Egypt to the point of believing they had it better as slaves.

So, in the Old Testament the call to remember sounds again and again,

You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm (Deut 5:15).

then take care lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Deut 6:12).

you shall **remember** the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. (Deut 8:2).

The theme continues as Jesus inaugurates the new covenant, the new people of God, the church.

At the last supper Jesus “took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in **remembrance** of me.” (Luke 22:19).

When life is hard, when waiting seems unbearable, we tend to forget what God has already done for us. What God has done for you, in your life, is something you should think on often, and talk to your children and friends about.

This is the first thing to notice about Paul’s command here—**Remembering is a must for God’s people.**

Second, remembering requires re-remembering our stories in the light of God’s story.

Remembering for the Christian is more than merely recalling memories of our own stories. It involves re-remembering our stories in light of God’s story. Verse 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 (Eph 2:12).

Paul spells out **five things** about their former life, always stressing apartness, outsideness: they are *without Christ, without citizenship in God’s people, without the promises of God, without hope, without God in the World.*

There is a lot here, but it is making this point: The Greek and Roman people, so proud of their history and pantheon of gods, could not remember accurately their past if they relied only on their historians and experiences. What Paul enumerates in verse 12 is *not* the story gentiles would have remembered if they only used their own recollection.

They wouldn’t have read their past as a time without Christ—they wouldn’t even have known who or what a “Christ/messiah” is. They certainly wouldn’t have viewed the people of Israel as a nation they wanted citizenship in—far from it. And they had hope aplenty, and gods aplenty.

We all know that we can forget things—especially what God has done for us. We also know that we can mis-remember—looking back on an incident with rose-colored glasses, forgetting that it was not so great in the moment. But what the Bible teaches us is that the problem of remembering runs even deeper: we can remember our past exactly how it happened, and exactly how we experienced it, and not be remembering what was ultimately happening.

One challenge in evangelism and discipleship is to help a person re-remember their own story—in the light of Divine Revelation.

This, Paul tells the Gentiles, is your shared story—the real story of your nation, your family. What Paul is doing with the Gentiles here is something he wants to do with all of us. No matter where you are from, and what your story seems to be when you think about it. The most important facts about your past are these:

There was a time when you were *separated from Christ*. Because of your sin, and because of the sin of all the humans who came before you, you were born *apart from Jesus*.

Being apart from Jesus, meant you were *separated from Jesus' people*. You had no citizenship in the kingdom of God. You were a stranger.

Being apart from the kingdom of God, you *lived outside of God's promises*: his promises to bless his people, to give them new heart, to forgive them their sins, to fill them with his spirit, to raise their dead bodies from the ground one day and give them everlasting life with Him in his kingdom.

Even if you were born into the best of families, with all the money to inherit in the world. If and when you were without Christ, Paul would tell you that you were in the most wretched of conditions: “*without hope and without god in the world*” (2:12)

I want to close by making a final point—connecting the power of remembering with the new bloodline.

Third, Shared memories bond people together. Often at family reunions older members of the family will re-tell the stories of grandparents and great grandparents—often helping the younger generation know who they are. This will serve to bind the family together: *remembering strengthens social bonds*.

Sometimes people here at the Falls Church remember our years without a building, tabernacled; or some of you remember things from long before that. We might remember living through other things together.

But going back even further, when we kneel together to say our prayer of confession, when we sit together in the communion liturgy and come forward together to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, we are remembering together the days when we were dead in our trespasses and sins—all of us, no matter how noble or meek our birth, or our race, or our pedigree. And we remember, together, that weekend in Jerusalem, when Jesus Christ, God's own Son, died for us.

That is *our story*, it binds us together. This is our family's story.

And notice that Paul calls us to remember the tragic parts—we were without Christ, without participation in Christ's people, without hope and without God? Our culture trains us to think that our health depends more affirming thoughts about ourselves.

I think remembering that there was a time we were separated from Christ's people will make us all the more thankful for our Christian friends; our new family.

And I think the more we ponder what we lose if we lose Christ—that we lose belonging to His people—the more we will be blown away by the Christian friendships and Christian mentors He has given us.

Friends, never take for granted what Christ has done for you. Before he came into the world to die for you, you were utterly hopeless and completely separated from the one family that will last into eternity—the people of God.

Let's pray.

Small Group Questions

1. In Ephesians 2:11-22 Paul focuses on the “household of God” (2:19), the new community created out of Jews and Gentiles. He says in verse 13 that it has been created “by the blood of Christ.” Why was Jesus’ death necessary for creating this new community?
2. What are barriers to Christian community in our own day? How might the blood of Christ impact the way we think about working through these barriers?
3. The only command in Ephesians chapters 1-3 is here in 3:11, “remember....” It calls the Gentiles to remember who they were apart from Christ. Read 3:12 and notice the five things Paul says about their former life. What stands out to you in this list?
4. Take some time to list out the things that would be true of you, if Christ never came into your life? What might it mean to “remember” these truths from time to time? How would remembering this impact your life in the present? How might remembering these truths *together*—as a community—deeper our social bonds?