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## Gentile Past and Christian Present Ephesians 2:11-13

**Intro:** In the first half of [ch2](#), Paul has spoken accurately and gloriously about the past, present and future of all who accept Jesus Christ as their Savior. In our natural state, man is spiritually dead in trespasses and sins, in bondage to sin and as such, we are objects of God's just wrath against sin. This is our hopeless, desperate situation. But God acts benevolently to reverse our circumstance and makes us alive in Christ, raises us up and seats us in heavenly places in Christ. God does all this because He wants to. We are now objects of His love, grace, mercy and kindness. He saves us by His grace and re-creates us to walk in the good works He has planned beforehand for us to do.

As Paul lays out this theological argument, we should understand that he is speaking about the human race in general and that portion of the human race that has been saved by the grace of God. Any person of any nationality, race, sex, or social status who has become a Christian fits Paul's description in the half of [ch2](#). Here in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the chapter, Paul again will contrast a past and present (and eventually also a future), but at this point in his letter he has in mind gentile Christians in particular. [Acts 19](#) seems to indicate that the first converts in Ephesus were Jewish but over time, the vast majority of the Christians in this church were Gentile converts. Now, before their conversion Jews were just like the Gentiles, "dead in . . . trespasses and sins." But the condition of the Gentiles was even worse, Paul argues. In their lost state they did not even have the unique advantages that the Jews possessed.

**11-12** – As I said, most of the converts in Ephesus were Gentiles and they knew that much of God's program in the OT involved the Jews. For centuries, the "circumcised" (Jews) looked down upon the "uncircumcised" (Gentiles) with an attitude that God never intended them to have. In reality, the fact that a Jewish male had received the physical mark of the covenant on his body was no proof that he was a man of faith in his heart. But all those who have trusted in Christ have received a spiritual circumcision of the heart made without hands ([Col 2:11](#)).

Still, since the very hour God called Abraham, God made a difference between Jews and Gentiles. He made this difference, not so that the Jews could boast and rub it in to Gentile faces but so that the Jews might be a blessing and a help to the Gentiles. God set the Jews apart so that He might use them to be a channel of His revelation and goodness to heathen nations. Sadly, Israel was hyper concerned to maintain this difference nationally and ritually, but **not** morally. It seems that, more often than not, Israel insisted on acting and becoming like the lost world around her. For this reason, God often had to discipline Israel because they refused to maintain their spiritual separation and minister to the nations in the name of the one, true God. There's a lesson and a warning here for the church today: the church will do the most for the world when it is least like the world.

When Paul introduced the contrast between Gentiles and Jews (11), he seems to make light of the labels the Jews themselves used for this distinction: Uncircumcision and the Circumcision. He calls this a Jewish designation and refers to circumcision itself as something done in the body by the hands of men. We can readily see that the Jews had almost always focused on superficial external distinctions, but at the same time, there existed real differences between the condition of lost Gentiles and lost Jews. The one word that best describes the situation of the Gentiles is "without." They were, in fact, outside in several respects. As Paul states it, they were disadvantaged in 5 areas:

1. Separated from Christ. The first thing Paul mentions is that the Gentiles were without Christ. If Paul were merely talking about the lack of a mystical union with Jesus, this would be redundant and not a particular disadvantage of any Gentile since the same thing could be said of any Jew in their unregenerate state. This is probably not what's involved here. The clue to Paul's thinking is the word "Christ," which means "the anointed one" or "Messiah." Paul's of the same frame of mind as he was in writing Rom 9:5, when he spoke of all the Jewish advantages. This means that the Messiah came to Jews and was perceived by Jews. Since they weren't Jews, Gentiles were cut off from this advantage.

The Gentiles in their fallen and alienated state were not united to Jesus by saving faith. Of course that was also true of the Jews. But unlike the Jews, the Gentiles hadn't even had a chance to know Christ. The Ephesians

worshipped the pagan goddess Diana and, before the coming of the gospel, knew nothing about Jesus Christ. Their religion was totally pagan. They didn't even have the expectation of a Savior. Those who claim that pagan religions are just as acceptable to God as the Christian faith will have a problem here, for Paul cites the Ephesians' Christ-less state as being a definite tragedy.

It's so wonderful that modern man has been able to move past the ridiculous fallacy of pagan idolatry! I say that facetiously and with a bit of sadness as I have on my phone an article from an ACLJ newsletter that reports that 5<sup>th</sup> grade students in a public school in Lexington, OH were forced to make an idol and participate in a pagan ritual in class. The students were instructed by their social studies teacher to make kachina dolls. These are religious dolls that certain Native American tribes would carve and paint to teach their children about different Hopi spirits. The tribesmen believed each spirit has special powers such as providing food and water for the tribe, healing the sick, offering individual protection and carrying dreams to heaven. The children were told to make the dolls in class, name them and then describe their special spiritual powers. 10-11 yr olds forced to make idols in class. Could it be that our current "modern" society is not that far from the ancient Ephesian paganism?

2. Excluded from citizenship in Israel. Paul wrote of the spiritual advantages of the Jews in [Rom 9](#) but the words of Jesus reveal even more clearly what exclusion from citizenship in Israel means. When He was with the Samaritan woman and she had asked Him where the correct place to worship was: "on this mountain" (Mt. Gerazim in Samaria) or "in Jerusalem"—Jesus didn't pull any punches. He replied, You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews ([Jn 4:22](#)). This wasn't a racial slur or an ethnic putdown; it was a sober fact of salvation history. God had chosen to be known in Israel as He had chosen to be known nowhere else. So in that day, (although not now) an individual had to become a Jew, a member of the commonwealth of Israel, to be saved. There are several examples of this in the OT. Rahab hid the spies that Joshua sent into Jericho. That act, along with hanging the scarlet cord in her window, saved her and her family from annihilation. But, it was only after she joined with Israel and was assimilated into the national religion that her relationship with God was established.

We see a similar example in Ruth, the Moabite; a foreigner, who'd been married to the son of Jewish Naomi. She met her husband in Moab, because Naomi and her family had moved there during a period of famine in Israel. The sons died, and when Naomi decided to return to Israel, Ruth was determined to go with her. Ruth had apparently learned from Naomi during the years they were together, and she had come to worship Naomi's God. Initially, Naomi tried to persuade her to stay in Moab, but Ruth refused. In effect, she said, "Don't ask me to leave you, or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God" ([Ruth 1:16](#)). These are beautiful words, but the beauty has kept many from noticing the far more important ordering of thoughts. Ruth wanted to join Naomi in the true worship of Jehovah. But notice, she couldn't say, "Your God will be my God" until she had first said, "Your people will be my people." In her statement Ruth confessed her need for a change in nationality before there could be a change in her God.

Another example of this truth is the story of Naaman, the Syrian from [II Kings 5](#). Naaman was a general of the most powerful state of his day. He was strong and respected but he was also pitied, for somewhere along the way he had contracted leprosy, and there was no known cure. Well, you know the story: his wife's Jewish slave girl told him there was a prophet in Israel that could cure him. Naaman packs up plenty of gifts and high-tails it to Samaria but Elisha won't even bother to go out and greet him. He just tells Naaman to go wash 7 times in the Jordan and he'll be fine. So, after all the back and forth drama that ensues, his servants finally convince him to "just do it" and he's healed.

What happens after this is the significant part of the story. Naaman orders his servants to fill several sacks with earth and then load them on 2 mules to carry the Jewish earth back to Syria. He explained, "For your servant will no longer offer either burnt offering or sacrifice to other gods, but to the LORD" ([2 Kgs 5:17](#)). When Naaman returns, the royal court must have rejoiced greatly to hear of his complete healing; there must have been a joyous reception. But later, when Naaman retires for the night, the Israelite soil is poured into a frame made to receive it, and Naaman takes his place upon the earth of Palestine to pray to Jehovah—a Gentile who was willing to come as a Jew, relying on the same grace that was shown by the Jews' God when He healed him.

In each of these stories, Gentiles were saved, but they're saved by becoming Jews first. Apart from that conversion they were, as Paul says, "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel" and as such, excluded from Jewish blessings.

3. Foreigners to the covenants of the promise. Mention of citizenship in the previous phrase leads Paul to consider the Gentiles as being strangers, or rather foreigners. But he moves a step further now, saying that they weren't just foreigners to Israel but they were foreigners to all of God's covenants with Israel.

Since Paul writes the word promise in its singular form he's apparently thinking of the first and original promise of God to Abraham from which the various covenants made with Israel came. God's original promise to Abraham is in [Gen 12:1-3](#). While the blessing of the Gentiles is included in God's covenant with Abraham ([Gen 12:1-3](#)); God didn't make any covenants with Gentile nations. Still, the promises of the OT were made on the basis of this covenant and the Gentiles had no share in them. In a certain sense this is still true of unbelievers. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes, "They can read their Bible and it does not move them. They can look at these 'exceeding great and precious promises' and say: To whom does this apply, what is all this about? They are strangers; they are like people from another country; they do not understand the language."

4. Without hope. There are few words in any language that are as terrible as those Paul uses right here: without hope. If there's no hope, all is lost. Without hope there's nothing. Historians tell us that a great cloud of hopelessness covered the ancient world like smoke from Canadian forest fires. Their philosophies were empty, their traditions were disappearing and their religions were powerless to help them face either life or death. People in the ancient world longed to pierce the veil and receive some hope from the other side, but there was no hope to be found.

In what ways were Gentiles without hope apart from Christ? In all ways! They are without spiritual blessing, without light, without any peace, any rest or any safety! Apart from being united with Christ, the deeper a man thinks the more pessimistic he becomes. Those who think—the great philosophers, artists, poets, and writers—all these are increasingly pessimistic without Christ—at least as they get older (Churchill). Without the



God of Israel none of us can have any real hope that things will ever be good or ever get better. And if this is true of our life in this world, how much more is it true of any good thing beyond the grave? Apart from revelation, apart from the resurrection of Jesus Christ, no one can have any true hope of anything beyond this life. We could only say, like Satan in John Milton's great epic *Paradise Lost*, "Our final hope is flat despair" (Book 2, Line 139).

5. Without God in the world. Paul's last despair summarizes the dilemma of the Gentile before Christ's coming, just as his first phrase introduced it. At the beginning Paul described the Gentiles as being without Christ. Now he depicts them as being without God. Sure, the heathen had gods aplenty but the pagan, no matter how religious or moral he may have been, did not know the only one, true God. Of course, the plight of the Gentiles was not caused by God; it was caused by their own willful sin. Paul says in [Rom 1](#) that the Gentiles knew about the true God but deliberately refused to honor Him. Religious history is not a record of man starting with many gods (idolatry) and then gradually discovering the one true God. Rather, it's the sad story of man knowing the truth about God and deliberately turning away from it! The religious history of the world is the story of devolution, not evolution!

But here's what makes this particular state of the Gentiles so bad. The one, true God; the God of the Bible, the God of the Lord Jesus Christ is the source of every good thing ([Jam 1:17](#)), including hope. So if we are without God, we are without everything, despite all appearances to the contrary. The story is told of a senior Pastor and a young minister in training going out on visitation calls. They arrive at the address of their first visit and it's a large, beautiful home with a well-manicured lawn and a new model vehicle sitting in the driveway. The young minister looks forlornly at the older pastor and asked, "What hope can we bring to him?" The only real hope he will ever have!

Before coming to Jesus, Gentiles were Christless, stateless, friendless, hopeless and Godless. But that was then and this is now...

**13** – The phrases in [v12](#) are as grim as those Paul began this great chapter with: "dead in trespasses and sins . . . [walking] according to the course of this world. . . by nature children [[objects](#)] of [God's] wrath." But now, just as he had done earlier, Paul indicates a change in the situation as a result of

God's intervention. Earlier he had said, "But God...made us alive with Christ" (4). Here he writes, But now... (13). Paul's talking about being brought near to God as a result of Christ's atonement for sin. It is the blood of Jesus Christ, the blood that was shed on the cross that paid the cost for us who were a far off to be brought near to the things of God. Many people imagine and suggest there are many ways to come near to God such as keeping the law or belonging to a certain group (Israel or Church). But the only way to be brought near to God is by the blood of Christ. What Jesus did on the cross, suffering as a guilty sinner in the place of guilty sinners, brings us near to God.

As far as the Bible is concerned, the need for sacrifice and atonement is primal. It goes all the way back to Abel's offering in [Gen 4:4](#) and likely even back to the sacrifice performed by God Himself in [Gen 3:21](#). It's significant that when God relocates from top of Mt Sinai to the newly dedicated tabernacle, His first communications to Israel through Moses from this new location have to do with sacrifice and atonement ([Lev 1:1-2](#)). These instructions, which make up the Book of Leviticus, emphasize the necessity of sacrifice in order that God may dwell among His people.

These sacrifices performed 2 critical functions: to expiate sin (remove it) and propitiate God (avert His wrath). Of course, the sacrifices of atonement were always substitutionary – the sacrificial animal died in place of the one offering it. In this way, God's wrath was averted, the offerer is ransomed and purified and their sins are atoned for and forgiven. While this was only accomplished partially under the OT sacrificial system, it was accomplished perfectly, completely and finally by Jesus Christ. It's only by His blood that we can draw near to God; this reconciliation only happens in Jesus.

It's important that we recognize and emphasize the connection between the ideas of the great love of Jesus Christ and His sacrificial death. Many people think preaching Christ crucified is all about a bloody, gory Jesus. But the point of Christ crucified is not gore, its love. Preaching Christ crucified means we preach about a Jesus full of love – sacrificial, giving, saving love. But, while Paul's definitely alluding to Christ's sacrificial work of atonement bringing us near to the things of God, he's also referring to God bringing together Jews and Gentiles to form a new unity: the church of Jesus Christ. To appreciate the gloominess of this truth we need to see the dismal condition of the Gentiles before they were brought near.

Before, the Gentile was without Christ or separated from Christ. He was cut off from all access to Christ. But now he's united with Christ, just as Paul said in chapter 1:13. "In Him" the Ephesians had all things. Before, the Gentiles were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel or excluded from citizenship in Israel. Now, as he'll say just a few verses later, "You are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints (God's people) (19). Paul will write a similar encouragement to the Philippian Christians (3:20-21).

Before, we were strangers (foreigners) from the covenants of promise. But now, as Paul will say in 3:6, through the gospel the "Gentiles should be fellow heirs, members together of the same body, and partakers together of His promise in Christ Jesus." Before, we were "without God." Now we're members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the chief cornerstone" (19b-20).

This is a tremendous change, which the Ephesians and all who have been brought to faith in Christ have experienced. But we must not take it for granted. Notice that Paul exhorts the Ephesians and us to "remember" in this section: Therefore, remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh . . . (11a) and he implies a remembrance in v12a with that at that time you were...

We too must remember. If we forget how God drew us near to Him, we can become insensitive to the lost and even begin despairing over God's ability to bring others to Himself. Someone was once talking with John Newton, the converted slave trader, whom God brought from a position of utter wretchedness to be a preacher of the gospel. They were talking about despair, and the person asked Newton if he did not despair of the salvation of some person. Newton replied, "I never did despair since God saved me." That is what it means to remember—to remember what we were and what we have become, and then expect to see that same change in others. ☺