

NEW YEARS SUNDAY - REMEMBER YOU WERE ONCE WITHOUT HOPE - Sunday, January 1st, 2023, 10:00 a.m.

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IPAD TEXT - Ephesians 2:8-12 - “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, [9] not a result of works, so that no one may boast. [10] For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. [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— [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.*”

Aren't these fascinating words? There are two direct commands to “***remember***” something in our text. That, in itself, ***isn't*** strange at all because the Bible is constantly calling us to remember points of theological truth. This is because God knows our culture tends toward its natural drift away from objective truth absolutes. Our worship of acceptance and tolerance makes remembering revealed truth feel loveless. So our Creator and designer constantly calls us back to remembering revealed divine truth.

The surprising aspect of our text isn't the **command** to remember, but **what** we are commanded to remember. And what we're commanded to remember (twice!) **isn't** that we have been saved by grace through faith and not by works. No. What we're commanded to remember is we were once "**separated from Christ,**" "**strangers to the covenants of promise,**" "**having no hope,**" and "**without God in the world**"(12).

As we enter this new year the Scriptures seem to be pressing our lives in the wrong direction! We're focused on the days ahead. We're pressing into the future with dreams and aspirations and resolutions and Paul is calling us, not into our **future** - at least not directly - but back into our **past** - and for many of us, a very **distant** past at that. What is Paul doing here? Isn't this all quite negative? Why, when Paul brings our horse into the starting gate of this new year, does he **back** him in, facing the wrong direction?

Clearly, Paul sees it to be of great spiritual benefit for all of us to remember that we were once hopeless. He doesn't see this as being depressing or morbid. It's not futile or empty to consider where we were without Christ. This remembering, according to Paul, will keep us from singing worship songs with cold hearts. It will keep us from praying without passion or fervor. It will keep us joyfully sacrificing for the reaching of those perishing around us. In other words, the truth that we have been justified by God's grace through faith in Christ Jesus will be made more alive and hot in our blood if we don't skip over the call to remember that we were once hopeless and without God.

So let's hear the Word of God to our hearts this morning. Let's not resist this call to our past. Let's allow the Holy Spirit, in His wisdom, to do something we may not have expected Him to do. Let's allow Him to brighten the hope of our **present** and **future** by rewinding our minds carefully to our **past**.

1) **WE ARE TO REMEMBER THAT WE WERE ALL WITHOUT GOD AND WITHOUT HOPE**

I think Paul is being very careful here. I want to call your attention to ***two specific descriptions and the reason for each.***

No doubt there are many of us here today who can't recall a dark, dysfunctional past from which we turned when we were converted. This is certainly my case. I was raised in a wonderful Christian home that knew nothing of even the worldliness that today most Christians would smirk at. We never smoked or drank. To this day I've never tried either one and am still personally very happy with that choice.

Other than in television shows, I've never seen the inside of a nightclub or a bar and never intend to. And there's nothing in that whole scene that I'm even remotely interested in. I never once dated a non-Christian girl. Going to church three or four times a week was mandatory and never left as optional. Before I could read the Bible for myself my parents read Bible stories to me every day.

If all of that sounds rather idyllic (perhaps even sheltered - depending on your perspective) it may well be. But it's also a huge problem. It's hard for a person like I to **remember** that I was once without God and without hope in this world. Which is why Paul frames his words the way he does, in **verse 11** especially: **"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..." - IPAD TEXT**

The reason Paul frames his discussion about what we were apart from Christ in such strongly **Jewish** terminology is to keep us from thinking that he's just referring to people with a sordid past - who **did lots of bad things**. These aren't the **only** people who were without hope and without God.

This is so important. We're bringing Paul's main point to the surface here. He's talking about people who were without God and without hope simply because they were **Gentiles**. That's us. We were people who were **outside** the covenant of God with a particular people - a covenant that made those people, and those people alone - His covenant people - Israel.

So when Paul says I was without God and without hope he doesn't mean I was a bank robber or a child molester so God wanted nothing to do with me. He means, apart from the door being opened from God's side through the rescue mission of Jesus Christ, there was no future for me to be a part of the people of God. I don't even have to be able to remember the day I was saved to know how, on Paul's **covenant** terms, I was without God and without hope in this world.

In expanding on this powerful thought, Paul says, in **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.*” - IPAD TEXT

He says there were **“covenants of promise,”** and that we Gentiles were **“strangers”** to them. That means they didn't apply to us. We weren't a part of them. They weren't initially for us. And the covenant was a wonderful covenant of promise:

IPAD TEXT - Genesis 17:7 - “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, *to be God to you and to your offspring after you.*”

Or **Jeremiah 31:33** - **“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”** - IPAD TEXT

These are truly wonderful promises but, apart from Christ, they had nothing to do with us. Only *in Christ Jesus* were those who were **“afar off”** (that’s the Gentiles) **“brought near.”** This is what we’re to consider over and over again. The Scriptures constantly frame my redemption in Christ Jesus in these terms. Something wonderful happened for us Gentiles through Christ Jesus. The Jewish Messiah is also the Savior of the Gentiles - **Galatians 3:29** - **“And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.”** - IPAD TEXT

Without Christ we are all outsiders without hope, no matter how morally good we try to be or how religious. Remember this, says Paul. Are you ever made complacent when you think back on your faith story and realize you’ve never truly messed up your life? Don’t ever allow your lack of an outwardly messed up life to deceive you that you were ever anything other than **“without God”** and **“without hope.”** Let that remembrance make Jesus freshly precious to you.

I said earlier that Paul gives **two descriptions** of our past for **two reasons**. First, as we've just seen, he frames our hopelessness in very **Jewish terms** so we will realize our hopelessness isn't due to a particularly immoral life from which we turned at conversion. We were simply **by our physical birth** outside of the covenants of promise.

The second way Paul describes our hopelessness is by saying that we were **"without God in this world"**(12). And here again Paul means something very specific. He doesn't mean we were without God in the sense that we were **atheists**. He doesn't mean we didn't **believe** in God. He doesn't mean that we lacked some **information** about God and then He made us aware of it. Neither of these is the sense of Paul's words that we were **"without God in this world."**

He means that we were without hope because **apart from Jesus Christ** God was **against** us and not **for** us. He means that, without Jesus Christ, we had an **enemy** in God rather than an **ally**. That this is **exactly** what Paul means is already made clear in this very chapter of Ephesians:

IPAD TEXT - Ephesians 2:3 - "...among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."

Without Christ, this is how we were all related to God Almighty. And that's a huge problem. When Paul says that we were what we were "**by nature,**" he means what we were ***apart from special intervention by God.*** Without God's divine reach in Christ we get nothing but justice from God. And we can't survive that.

Remember, being Gentiles we were ***not*** part of the covenant. So this was a huge problem for all of us. Without God means living under His justice rather than His love and grace. That's why Paul says we were without ***hope*** because we were "***without God in this world.***" Without Christ I have no ***natural alignment*** with a holy God, regardless of my best moral efforts.

2) **DOESN'T PAUL SAY HE FORGOT THE THINGS THAT WERE BEHIND? HOW CAN HE NOW TELL US ALL TO REMEMBER THAT WE WERE WITHOUT HOPE?**

The text we all think of here is **Philippians 3:13-14 - "Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, [14] I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."** - IPAD TEXT

Don't these verses contradict Paul's words in Ephesians 2:11-12? No, not at all. But you need to take careful note of what Paul is talking about in Philippians 3. When Paul says he labored to live life **"forgetting what lies behind"** he's not talking about forgetting his **alienation** from God. He's talking about forgetting the **accomplishments** he was relying on to make himself **right** with God. Specifically, he's talking about the things he did to **cover up** his hopeless - the things he did to **reinforce and secure** his life without Jesus Christ:

IPAD TEXT - Philippians 3:4-10 - "If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: [5] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; [6] as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless. [7] But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. [8] Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ [9] and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— [10] that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death...."

So what Paul says he forgets from his past is the ***covering up of his own natural hopelessness***, which fits in exactly with his call to remember our hopelessness in Ephesians chapter 2. He's forgetting his religious accomplishments so his hopelessness without Christ will ***shine*** and ***stand out*** and be all the more easily ***remembered***. He's killing spiritual pride so a humble, grateful remembering of Christ can bloom in his religious heart.

Paul is doing himself, in Philippians 3, that he's calling us all to do in Ephesians 2. Paul is saying ***“Put to death anything that makes you forget your hopelessness before Christ.***

3) **WHAT PRACTICAL DIFFERENCE DOES REMEMBERING OUR PAST HOPELESSNESS MAKE? WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT?**

I think it's best to close by letting the Scripture answer that question for itself. I have three examples:

- a) ***Remembering our past hopelessness protects us from immorality and carelessness before God.***

The first passage is a long, graphic one. It really must be read right through for its full effect. God tells a backslidden Israel that when He found her she was like a baby that someone had cruelly thrown by the side of the road to die. God picked her up and raised her to health and beauty. Listen with your whole heart:

IPAD TEXT - Ezekiel 16:6, 8-17, 22 - “[6] And when I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’ I said to you in your blood, ‘Live!’[8].... “When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord GOD, and you became mine. [9] Then I bathed you with water and washed off your blood from you and anointed you with oil. [10] I clothed you also with embroidered cloth and shod you with fine leather. I wrapped you in fine linen and covered you with silk. [11] And I adorned you with ornaments and put bracelets on your wrists and a chain on your neck. [12] And I put a ring on your nose and earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown on your head.”

[13] “Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen and silk and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour and honey and oil. You grew exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty. [14] And your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through the splendor that I had bestowed on you, declares the Lord GOD. [15] *“But you trusted in your beauty and played the whore because of your renown and lavished your whorings on any passerby; your beauty became his.* [16] You took some of your garments and made for yourself colorful shrines, and on them played the whore. The like has never been, nor ever shall be. [17] You also took your beautiful jewels of my gold and of my silver, which I had given you, and made for yourself images of men, and with them played the whore.....[22].... *And in all your abominations and your whorings you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare, wallowing in your blood.”*

Note the logic of God in this extended, blunt text. **Verse 15** describes the **unfaithfulness** of God's people. The New Testament picks up this image of **adultery** when it describes unfaithfulness to God. But it's **verse 22** that tells us **why** Israel failed God so miserably. It states the **reason** for her horrible decline.

Had the people only remembered their past hopelessness they would have stayed humble and pure and beautiful and blessed by God. They forgot that they were once so hopeless they couldn't wash or clean themselves up. Because they forgot, they tried to live the rest of their lives on their own terms. The results were disastrous.

- b) ***Remembering our past hopelessness helps us treasure the love and forgiveness of God.***

IPAD TEXT - Luke 7:41-42 - "A certain moneylender had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. [42] When they could not pay, he cancelled the debt of both. Now which of them will love him more?"

Many of you will know the background to this little story from Jesus. He addressed these words to Simon the Pharisee when Simon was indignant that Jesus allowed a prostitute to anoint His feet and Jesus pronounced her forgiven. Simon showed none of the same passion for Jesus that this sinful woman did, but it wasn't because Simon wasn't just as great a sinner. It was because Simon had ***forgotten*** he was just as hopeless and sinful apart from the undeserved grace of Christ.

Most of us know the story of one of God's choicest trophies of grace, ***John Newton***. The hymn we call "***Amazing Grace***" was actually music he wrote to accompany a New Year's sermon based on **1 Chronicles 17:16 - "Then King David went in and sat before the Lord and said, 'Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, *that you have brought me thus far?*'"** IPAD TEXT

To this day we sing those words, "***T'is grace hath brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home.***"

John Newton's godly mother died when he was only six. He was raised by a coarse and godless sea-faring father and thought nothing of sins that would make Christians blush. After years of profiting from the trading of slaves he finally experienced God's amazing grace in his own heart. He pastored two churches in London for 43 years, and became close friends with William Wilberforce, Charles Simeon, Henry Martyn, William Carey, John Wesley, and George Whitefield. He died at age 82, but not before he penned the words for his own epitaph:

**“John Newton,
Clerk,
Once an Infidel and Libertine,
A servant of Slaves in Africa,
Was,
by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior
JESUS CHRIST,
Preserved, restored, pardoned,
And appointed to preach the faith
He had long labored to destroy.
He ministered
Near 16 years as curate and vicar
of Olney in Bicks,
And 28
as rector of these united parishes.”**

“Remember that you were once without hope.” Cling to the precious memory of your hopelessness before Christ. It will keep the words of praise from getting clogged up in your throat. It will keep your songs of worship from being thoughtless and boring. It will keep your prayer times hot and vital. All year long, remember that you were once without hope. It’s the fast track to joy unspeakable.

Thinking of John Newton leads me to the concluding point:

- c) ***Remembering our past hopelessness helps us keep a burning love and patience with lost souls.***

They say John Newton was most famous, not for his preaching or hymn-writing, but for his tender heart for the lost. He put it like this in his own words not long before he died:

“A company of travelers fall into a pit: one of them gets a passenger to draw him out. Now he should not be angry with the rest for falling in; nor because they were not yet out, as he is. He did not pull himself out: instead, therefore, of reproaching them, he should show them pity....A man, truly illuminated, will not anymore despise others, than Bartimaeus, after his own eyes were opened, would take a stick, and beat every blind man he met.”

What powerful words. Newton is saying ***nothing tests our understanding of grace like our patience with lost and stubborn sinners.*** I wonder how many times, in God's eyes, I've looked like a healed Bartimaeus, beating those still blind with a big stick. Could anything defy the logic of grace more? Could anything show the moral darkness of my own soul? No wonder Paul pleads for us all to allow humble remembrance of our past hopelessness to fuel a proper, holy, merciful passion for those still bound in sin.

Divine grace is not only amazing, but sweet. And the ***effect*** of grace is to ***sweeten*** all those whose eyes it opens. We keep our souls humble and receptive when we remember we were lost and without hope or God in this world. Remember, whenever you see a turtle sitting on top of a fencepost you know he didn't get there by himself.

And all the fellow rememberers said....