

Remember That You Were Hopeless

by John Piper

The sermon emphasizes the importance of remembering our hopeless condition without Christ to stay humble, cherish forgiveness, and love Christ more intensely.

Scripture: Ezekiel 20:42, Luke 7:36, John 4:22, Romans 9:24, Ephesians 2:11

Topics: "Salvation History", "Christian Humility"

Description

John Piper preaches on the importance of remembering our hopeless condition before salvation through Jesus Christ, emphasizing the need to feel and be gripped by the memory to deepen our devotion and affection for God. He highlights that salvation is only through Jesus Christ, making us fellow heirs of the promises and partakers of the gospel. Piper urges believers to guard against pride by remembering their former plight without Christ, cherish forgiveness more deeply, and exalt the righteousness of God as the foundation of our salvation and hope.

Transcript

December 27, 1981

Ephesians 2:11-12

REMEMBER THAT YOU WERE HOPELESS This is the word of God to us this morning. Let us obey it together and not resist its discomfort. This is the word of God: "Remember that at one time you Gentiles ... were without Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:11,12). It is a command, not a suggestion. "Remember that you were hopeless!" It is not something that Paul has found people doing, and then said "Stop doing that. It is bad for you." It is part of the Christian walk. It is important. It is not to be leapfrogged over so that we only begin reading at verse 13: "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near." That kind of leapfrogging has landed the church plop in the kettle of lukewarm Christianity, wondering what's gone wrong.

Why do we pray, but with so little fervor and affection? Why do so many sing but scarcely from the heart and with such blank expressions? Why are so few hearts breaking for the lost people around them? Why do not more of us say spontaneously and repeatedly with Dr. Bill Widen, "The greatest thing in the world is to be saved!" Why isn't the experience of salvation like the first morning of vacation with the sun rising over the lake and the air crisp and clear and the fish biting and the bacon sizzling and all the family healthy

and happy instead of being like a grey drizzly day with a hole in the tent and everyone grumbling? Why is lukewarm love for Jesus so common and white-hot devotion so rare? One of the reasons is this: You can't bring the burner of commitment and affection up to white-hot if you short-circuit God's heating element and jump the current from Ephesians 2:10 to 2:13. Part of God's heating element to intensity our affection and deepen our devotion is the command, "Remember! Remember! Remember, that we were hopeless!" I can think of no better Sunday to drive home this word of God to Bethlehem Baptist Church than the last Sunday of the year.

The doctrine for our consideration then is this: It is of great spiritual benefit to remember the hopeless condition in which we were and would yet be without salvation by grace alone through Jesus Christ. To make the doctrine plain and useful the questions we should answer are 1) What should we remember? 2) How should we remember? 3) What are the objections to such remembering? 4) Why is such remembering so beneficial?

First, then, what does the text teach us to remember. "Remember that (before Christ brought you near through his death on the cross) you were separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." The first thing to notice here is that salvation is of the Jews (John 4:22). For a non-Jew, a gentile like me, to have any hope at all, I must cease to be alienated from the commonwealth of Israel. I must become a fellow citizen of Israel (2:19) and a fellow-heir of their promises (3:6). There is no salvation outside the true Israel. When redemptive history arrived at the incarnation it did not split into two histories: one for the redemption of Israel and one for the redemption of the gentiles. Instead it opened and expanded so as to embrace all believing gentiles into the people of God, the true Israel. According to Ephesians 3:4-6 Paul teaches a mystery which had not been fully revealed in the Old Testament but is now heralded as the good news to us gentiles, namely (v. 6), that "the gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." As Paul says elsewhere, "If you are Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29). By faith gentiles join the "true circumcision" (Phil. 3:3), and become "sons of Abraham" (Gal. 3:9) and "real Jews" (Rom 2:29). Even though we are wild olive shoots, yet by faith we are grafted in to share the rich root of the cultivated olive tree (Rom. 11:17). Therefore, we must never boast as though somehow a gentile program has replaced a Jewish one. We are simply and graciously and freely granted to have a part in the promise to Abraham. There is only one people of God, the vessels of mercy, the true Israel, whom "God has called not only from the Jews but also from the gentiles" (Rom. 9:24; Eph. 2:15).

I count it the most precious of all things as a gentile to be saved by being joined to Christ, the seed of Abraham, and becoming an heir of all the glory promised to God's people Israel. I am excited that the true Israel's destiny is now my destiny and all the promises made to her are my promises. I feed on my heritage in the Old Testament day by day. I stand on tiptoe in expectation looking for my Messiah and the establishment of the glorious Kingdom of the Son of David. But if I am to love him as I ought, if he is to find faith on the earth when he comes then I must do what the text says and remember, remember, remember that once I was not joined to Christ but cut off from him in ignorance and unbelief. Once I was not a fellow citizen in Israel, but alienated from the commonwealth. Once I was not a fellow heir of the promises but a stranger to all God's covenants. And therefore I was entirely without God and without hope. In other words Paul says we ought to remember from what we have been saved. We ought to call to mind our condition before and without Christ.

If you, like me, trusted Christ as your savior when you were very young, you might be tempted to say here, "I have nothing to remember. I have only known faith. I have no great conversion story." I don't believe Paul wrote this text just for people with dramatic conversion stories.. He is writing it for all gentiles to urge us to reflect on what our plight would be apart from the mystery of Christ which makes us fellow heirs of grace. And the plight is simply and awfully being without God and therefore without hope.

What does it mean to be "without God"? This phrase comes after the statement that we were strangers to the covenants of promise. Therefore the opposite of being "without God" is probably found in some of the covenants in the Old Testament. For example, God says to Abraham in Genesis 17:7,

I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you ... to be God to you and to your descendants after you.

And in Jeremiah 31:33 the Lord says,

This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God and they will be my people.

You may remember from our study of the Covenant of Abraham that when God says he will be their God, he means he will be for them and not against them. It means they will be the beneficiaries of all that an infinitely powerful and loving God can give. This included justification (that is, the forgiveness of sins), the working of all affairs for their good, and the gift of a glorious eternal life.

Therefore, when Paul says to us, "Remember that you were without God," he didn't just mean, "Remember that you once lacked some knowledge about God." He meant, Remember that God was once not your God, and that he would not be yet, apart from the gospel. And if he was not our God then he was not for us but against us; he was not our justifier but our condemner; not eternal life but eternal damnation lay before us. And it's just this that Paul wants us to remember. Remember that apart from Christ, almighty God would be against us; apart from Christ we would be storing up wrath for ourselves on the day of the righteous judgment of God (Rom. 2:4,5; Eph. 2:3); apart from the free and unmerited mercy of Christ we would go away into "eternal punishment" (Matt. 25:46). Or, as Paul says in a single phrase, we would be utterly "without hope."

Therefore, in answer to our first question, what we are to remember, we are to remember the entirety of our hopeless condition apart from the mercy of God in Jesus' death and resurrection.

The second question was, How should we remember? And I mean "how" in two senses: what is the nature of this remembering and what are the methods to help us remember? Surely Paul does not mean remember merely in the sense of "have in mind," be cognizant of. Surely he means, let it grip you. Let the memory seize you and move you. Feel the memory. Feel the plight you have been saved from. An intellectual recollection of facts will be of no spiritual benefit if it does not move the heart. Almost all Christians can list what they have been saved from if you ask them. But they don't feel it. It does not move them. It's not real to them. It's like the lady in the circus who spins on the wheel while the knife thrower pretends to throw knives around her. If you ask her at the end, "Don't you feel glad that's over? Aren't you happy you're still alive?" she says, "It's just a trick. The knives pop out of the wheel. What's to get excited about? It's just a fake threat." And so it seems to be with many Christians: if they remember their plight without Christ at all, they remember it like a fake threat. They have never begun to imagine the horror of the reality from which they have been saved. But when Paul says, "Remember that you were hopeless,"

he does not mean, "Treat your plight without Christ like a fake threat." He means, "know it, feel it, be gripped by it."

And by what methods can we obey this command? I'll mention four practical means that I try to use. 1) Pray that God will make your heart soft and sensitive; that he will grant you to be moved by the truth. 2) Then ponder the realities of your plight without Christ--unassuaged guilt, meaningless existence, omnipotent justice against you, and eternal punishment in hell. Lay the Scriptures before you and skip no verses. 3) Then as you move through life and see the misery of the world, the physical suffering of disease and mutilation, the emotional suffering of depression and all manner of retardation and disturbance and abnormality, and the moral wickedness of hardened sinners--as you see every case, say, "There but for the absolutely free and unmerited grace of God go I." I don't mean that suffering people are without grace. I only mean that all the misery and corruption we see should remind us that our plight without Christ would in the end be worse than all. 4) The fourth means of remembering our former plight with feeling is to use our imagination. Create situations in your mind of being almost dead and then saved. Imagine the time when you couldn't swim and you stepped in a hole in the lake bottom and lost your footing and went under, and how you hugged your daddy's neck when he grabbed you just in time. Imagine being five years old with mom shopping at Christmas time in Dayton's downtown, and all of a sudden she's gone and you look around in terror and big tears well up in your eyes, and how you hug her skirt when she finds you. Imagine going rock-climbing and somehow maneuvering onto a sheer face without a safety rope and suddenly finding yourself in a position where you know that if you move you will fall. You can barely inhale without losing balance. Do you not kiss the rope that falls from above?

God has given us prayer, Scripture, living illustrations of misery, and imaginations that we might remember and feel how horrid it would be to have God against us and no hope forever.

The third question we asked had to do with objections to this doctrine. I only have time to deal with one. How can the command to remember our hopelessness be squared with Paul's statement in Phil. 3:13,14?

Brothers, I do not consider that I have already attained (perfection); but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

When Paul says that he forgets what lies behind, is he contradicting his command that the Ephesians remember what lies behind? No indeed. The context has in view something very different to forget in Phil. 3:13 than to remember in Eph. 2:12. In Phil. 3 Paul has just said that he counts all things as loss for the surpassing value of knowing Christ. His great aim is to share Christ's sufferings, be conformed to his death and attain to the resurrection of the dead. But then he cautions the church not to think that the strides he has made in this direction approach perfection. No. I don't consider that I have attained, but forgetting all this I press on to greater attainments. Paul is not interested in keeping a record of his spiritual attainments. He does not care much about remembering how far he has come with Christ. He cares about how much farther there is to go. Not how much of Christ he has, but how much there is yet to know. Remembering in Phil. 3 would be a threat to humility and a boon to pride. Remembering in Eph. 2 is a threat to pride and a boon to humility.

And that brings us to our final question. Why is such remembering as Paul commands in Ephesians 2:12 so beneficial? Why is calling to mind and feeling our plight without Christ such an important and valuable spiritual exercise? I'll mention just three of the benefits. The first one is illustrated in Ezekiel 16, namely,

remembering the days of our hopelessness guards us from boasting in our redeemed newness and from trusting in whatever small beauty the Lord may be resurrecting out of the catastrophe of our lives. In Ezekiel 16 God pictures Israel as a baby thrown out to die which he finds and rears and marries and decks with splendor. It's a picture of what God does with every one of us who trust him. Listen. Verse 6:

When I passed by you and saw you weltering in your blood, I said to you in your blood, 'Live and grow up like a plant of the field.' And you grew up and became tall and arrived at full maidenhood; your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare. When I passed by you again and looked upon you, behold you were at the age for love; and I spread my skirt over you and covered your nakedness: yea, I plighted my troth to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord and you became mine. Then I bathed you with water and washed off your blood from you and anointed you with oil. I clothed you also with embroidered cloth and shod you with leather, I swathed you with fine linen and covered you with silk ... (13b) You grew exceedingly beautiful and came to regal estate. And your renown went forth among all the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through the splendor which I had bestowed upon you, says the Lord God. But you trusted in your beauty and played the harlot because of your renown ... (22) And in all your abominations and your harlotries you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare, weltering in your blood.

Had they remembered, they would not have trusted in their beauty and boasted in their newness and played the harlot. They would have stayed humble and lowly. The beauty of being redeemed is always in danger of becoming self-righteousness and pride. But remembering our plight apart from Christ is a precious preventative of such pride. Let us use it!

The second benefit of such remembering is that it makes us cherish our forgiveness more. It makes us love Christ more intensely. It makes us feel the wonder of the justification of the ungodly by faith. It makes us say with Dr. Widen, "The greatest thing in the world is to be saved!" Do you remember what happened when Jesus went to eat with Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36ff). A prostitute, who had found unexpected forgiveness and cleansing from Jesus, came in and "weeping she began to wet his feet with her tears and wipe them with the hair of her head and kiss his feet and anointed them with ointment." The Pharisee objected and Jesus told him a parable: "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed 500 denari, the other 50. When they could not pay he forgave them both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon answers correctly, the one who owed most, and Jesus simply says, "That is why the prostitute is moved to tears and you aren't. He who is forgiven little loves little."

Now Jesus does not mean that Simon the Pharisee is not guilty of grave sins. He called self-righteous Pharisees sons of hell. He means that if we are aware of the gravity of our sin, if we remember how terrible our plight would be without him, we would be moved. We would cherish him. Words of affection to Christ would not hang in our throats like a foreign language. We would not sing with blank faces. Business men would speak endearingly of him. Teenagers would not blush to praise his name. We would not pray with rote mechanics, if we remembered and felt the misery from which we are saved apart from all merit of our own. If you feel you are forgiven little you will love little. Remembering is a great spiritual benefit because it will help us cherish our forgiveness more deeply. I do not believe it is possible to cleave to Christ with white-hot devotion if we do not remember and feel what our plight would be without him.

The last benefit of such remembering that I want to mention is illustrated in Ezekiel 20:42-44, namely, that it helps us exalt the righteousness of God as the great ground of our salvation and hope. If you have ever known the mingling of joy and shame when someone forgives you and treats you kindly in spite of your

sin, then this text may not seem so strange to you. It's a promise of salvation to Israel, but not without the memory of sin.

And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I bring you into the land of Israel, the country which I swore to give to your fathers. And there you shall remember your ways and all the doings with which you have polluted yourselves; and you shall loathe yourselves for all the evils you have committed. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I deal with you for my name's sake, not according to your evil ways, nor according to your corrupt doings, O house of Israel, says the Lord God.

The two things go hand in hand, the loathing of sinful self and the exaltation of God who does all things for the sake of his name. I want us to be a people who are utterly, thoroughly, radically God-centered; purged of all boasting in ourselves; and aflame with a white-hot love for Jesus Christ who loved us and gave himself for us.

Therefore, I beseech you, "Remember that you were once 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."

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