

The Missionary Hope of Christmas

Ephesians 2:11-18

Over the next few weeks as we study Ephesians 2, I want to focus on the Christmas season and on missions. So I have entitled this message, The Missionary Hope of Christmas.

Some of you have read the wonderful children's stories by C.S. Lewis called the Chronicles of Narnia. In the first book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, a young girl named Lucy finds herself in a magical world called Narnia. There she meets a faun, who invites her to his home for tea. The faun, Mr. Tumnus, tells Lucy all about the land of Narnia – where at one time there were great and glorious days of summer – with “rivers of wine,” dancing, joy and music. Those days are long gone, however, because of the evil reign of the White Witch. She claims to be the queen of Narnia, but Tumnus makes it clear that she is not the rightful ruler of the land. She has placed Narnia under a curse and as a result Narnia has become a place where it's “always winter, but never Christmas.”

That's a dreadful thought isn't it? For those of us in Colorado, winters are dark and cold – but the joy and warmth of Christmas makes it a very special time of year. Try to imagine, if you can, a world without Christmas. No Christmas trees, no gifts, no visits to grandma's house. No carols, no gathering with friends. No Rudolph or Charlie Brown specials on the television. None of those great holiday movies...

But more to the point of our text today – if we lived in a world that was always winter, but never Christmas – there'd be no Christ! What if Jesus had never been born? What if He had never lived, taught, died and risen from the dead? What would the world be like?

It might interest you to know that I'm not the first person to ponder this question. The apostle Paul also thought about the state of the world without Christ, and he left us some notes as to what it would be like.

In Ephesians 2:11-12, Paul describes a world without Christ. He says,

11 Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh; who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands;

12 that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

There's a pretty bleak picture. For a moment, ponder the weight of those words – **“aliens from God's people, strangers from His promises, no hope, without God in the world.”** I don't know if there could be any worse description of life than the words, **“no hope and without God.”** It sounds like a land where it's always winter, but never Christmas.

Each year, beginning on June 22, the number of minutes of sunlight we enjoy each day begins to shrink. From 14 hours and 55 minutes on that day, the time we have in the sun shrinks until December 21, when we have only 9 hours and 25 minutes. But as we approach that shortest day, it's nice to know that the days immediately start getting longer again – gradually building till that wonderful 15

hour day in June! We need that hope – that reminder that things will once again return to the warmth and light of summer!

But imagine if there were no hope – imagine if on December 23, the minutes of daylight kept getting fewer – and scientists told us that it would never get better – no hope! Imagine the despair of being hope-less! Of feeling there is no end to the misery, no light at the end of the tunnel – no reason or purpose to go on.

Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, “If you lose hope, somehow you lose the vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage to be, that quality that helps you go on in spite of it all.”

That’s how the world would be with no Christmas – and it is the way the world is today without Christ. Those who are without Christ have no hope.

In verse 11 Paul calls his readers to remember, “**Therefore remember that you.**” Remember what? We are to remember the hopelessness and separation of our life before we were saved.

So far in Ephesians 2 Paul has been describing for us what it means to be saved. In verses 1-3 he showed us why we needed to be saved, because we were spiritually dead in our sins, dominated by the world, the flesh and the devil, and doomed to face judgment from God as children of wrath. Verses 4-7 showed us what God did to change all that. Because of God’s love, mercy, and grace He made us alive together with Christ, raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places. Verses 8-9 told us how God saved us. He saved us by grace, through faith, not by works. And verse 10 showed us why God saved us. He saved us to make us new creations in Christ who live out their faith in good works.

Paul calls us to “**Therefore remember**” all of that. We must never forget what it was like to be lost. Even though I was raised in a godly Christian home, even though I began attending church while I was in the nursery, even though I was confirmed as a member of the church as a young teen, I remember the fear of being lost. Until I received Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and was born again as a young adult I remember the futility of my life without Christ.

When we fail to “**remember**” what it was to be lost, we forget the blessings of being saved! Whether you came to Christ at 7, 17, 27, or 77, never forget what it was to be lost!

Part of being lost for the Ephesian believers was tied to their identity as “**Gentiles**.” Today we can barely grasp the significance of the wall separating Gentiles and Jews in the 1st century. Jews hated Gentiles. They believed that God created them to “fuel the fires of hell.”

It was unlawful for a Jew to aid a Gentile woman in giving birth because that would bring another heathen into the world. Jews considered Gentiles to be worth less than dogs. On the other hand, the Gentiles considered Jews to be the homicidal enemies of the human race.

We like the Ephesians were “**once Gentiles in the flesh**.” We were “**called Uncircumcision by what is called [so-called] Circumcision**.” This was a kind of Jewish curse. Circumcision was a sign and seal of the covenant God made with Israel. Every male was circumcised when he was 8 days old. The Gentiles

were not circumcised. When they were called "**Uncircumcision**" [lit. "foreskin"] it was another way of saying that they were inferior. The Jews, in their way of thinking were accepted by God and therefore vastly superior to all Gentiles.

I don't believe this attitude of mutual hatred was God's idea. It is true that in the Old Testament God called the Jewish people to a separate people. They were to be His own special people. God separated the nation of Israel from the other nations of the world and called them to a holy life. God called Abraham to leave his country and even his family and go to a land that God would show him (Gen. 12:1). God promised to bless Abraham and to make him into a great nation. God renewed those promises to Isaac and to Jacob. Then after the Lord has saved the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt God said to them in Exodus 19,

5 'Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine.

6 'And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'

God made a covenant with Israel and gave the Jews a series of laws in the Old Testament that would make them very different from the other nations. One of those differences was the sign of the covenant, circumcision.

But why did God do it? Why did He separate the Jewish people? Was it because He only intended to save them? NO! God has always had a missionary heart. God was always concerned about all people, all the nations.

You can see it in God's covenant with Abraham, Genesis 12:2-3,

2 I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing.

3 I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

God always intended to bless all the families, all the nations of the earth. And He intended to do it through the Jewish people by sending the Messiah through them.

Listen to what the prophet Isaiah says,

"And in that day there shall be a Root of Jesse, Who shall stand as a banner to the people; For the Gentiles shall seek Him, And His resting place shall be glorious." (Isa 11:10 NKJV)

Indeed He says, 'It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob, And to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, That You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.'" (Isa 49:6 NKJV)

Matthew 12:18-21 also quotes from Isaiah 42:1-4 about Jesus' mission to both Jews and Gentiles,

18 "Behold! My Servant whom I have chosen, My Beloved in whom My soul is well pleased! I will put My Spirit upon Him, And He will declare justice to the Gentiles.

19 He will not quarrel nor cry out, Nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets.

20 A bruised reed He will not break, And smoking flax He will not

**quench, Till He sends forth justice to victory;
21 And in His name Gentiles will trust."**

In Him, that is in the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the Gentiles will hope. But the Jews had for the most part totally missed this missionary heart of God. Instead they took pride in their separation and hated the Gentiles. Now, in Christ, Paul is going to show, God has removed the barriers, the law, and the hatred that separated Jew from Gentile. And we will study that in more detail next time.

But, the truth is that before we came to Christ, as Gentiles our very nature and circumstances separated us from God. Gentiles were "**without**" many of the blessings inherent to the Jews.

The Gentiles were Separated in Five Ways (v.12).

Not only were the "**Gentiles**" of Paul's day separated in these ways, so were we before we came to Christ. We are called to "**remember**" this life "**without**."

1. *We were without **Christ**.*

Paul says, "**at that time you were without Christ.**" This means that at that time, the Gentiles had no hope of a Savior. They had no part with the messianic people of God. The Ephesians worshiped the false goddess Artemis or Diana. There was a great temple dedicated to her in Ephesus. They worshiped false gods and knew nothing of Jesus. Every unsaved person, Jew or Gentile is lost "**without Christ.**"

2. *We were without **Citizenship**.*

We were "**aliens from the commonwealth of Israel.**" Israel was a nation under God, a theocracy. God gave them His special blessings and love. They had God's law, priesthood, sacrifices, guidance and protection.

Ps.147:20 says, "**He has not dealt thus with any nation; And as for His judgments, they have not known them.**" Though Gentiles could become proselyte Jews, they were not born with citizenship.

3. *We were without **Covenants**.*

We were "**strangers from the covenants of promise.**" God never made special promises with Gentile nations. God made a special covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. God made a covenant with the nation of Israel at Mt. Sinai. God promised to be with them, to bless them. God promised that they would be His people and He would be their God. The Gentiles had none of these assurances from the Lord.

4. *We were without **Hope**.*

Paul says before Christ, we had "**no hope.**" In the pagan city of Ephesus there were statues and temples everywhere, gods upon gods. They all had one thing in common: they were false. They offered none of their worshipers any hope. There are many religions in the world today, but none of them offer hope either. The Assyrians, Babylonians, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans

had their many gods—gods of war, gods of industry, gods of agriculture, gods of cities, gods of towns, and various others. But in religion's entire galaxy of gods, there never was one called "god of hope." That is scarcely surprising. For in that ancient world, hope had become a despised delusion, long before Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The fact is, there is no hope for this sin-cursed world apart from the true God, the God of Creation and Salvation.

The 1st century was the "age of suicide." The Roman poet Catullus wrote: "**The sun can set and rise again but once our brief light sets there is one unending night to be slept through.**" Nothing has changed in 2000 years. Lost people still live in the darkness of hopelessness and despair.

5. *We were without God.*

We were "**without God in the world.**" The Ephesians had gods aplenty, but not the on true God. We were in the same boat. God loved us, called to us, but for a time we chose to live without Him in the world. We were lost. Aren't you glad He found us?

God Removed the Separation by the Blood of Christ (v.13).

In vv.1-3, we are told of how we were "**dead in trespasses and sins,**" how we were disobedient to God and totally depraved. V.4 begins with the great truth, "**But God...**" In a similar way, vv.11-12 speak of our former separation from God and the people of God. V.13 begins with the great news "**But now...**"

Is Paul a great encourager, or what? He's so great at drawing these dark, bleak images of defeat and hopelessness and uselessness, and bringing the reader right to the edge of utter despair, and then like opening the blinds to a beautiful mountain view, or flicking on the light to dispel what was complete darkness, he says "But now".

Oh, boy. This gives me a ray of hope. What is he going to say now? We were without hope, and without God... But now... and our heads lift a little and we strain to hear what comes next, because we sense that relief is on the way.

And what relief, indeed!

13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

The truth is all men both Jews and Gentiles were "**once far off.**" We were once separated from God by our sin. "**But now**" we have been "**brought near by the blood of Christ.**"

The only way we could be reconciled or "**brought near**" is by the "**blood of Christ.**" There is nothing in us that could save us. We were "**dead**" in our sins. Yet, through the death of Christ, the shedding of His blood, we have been "**made alive...brought near**" to God in Him.

Christ went to Calvary's cross for us, while we were far off...without hope...without God...excluded...alienated... He shed His blood there. He

poured it out as an offering for sin. He died there, while we were all far off, and by so doing, brought us near.

Near to God. Near to the throne. Near to the promises. Near to the commonwealth of Israel; partakers of all the blessings granted to her.

Invitation:

Maybe you are here today and you have been feeling like your life is hopeless. Is your life always winter and never Christmas? If you have never surrendered yourself to Jesus Christ, He calls you today to come in simple faith, recognizing that you are lost to Him, without hope and alienated from the life of God because of sin, and simply believe that Christ, by His blood, is able to bring you near. To give you full citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven, and full and free access to the very Throne of the Father; immediately and forever.

There is hope in the blood of Jesus. He shed it for you on the cross, even while you were a stranger and an alien. And it has the power to draw you near. Appropriate it to your life today; be cleansed in it. Washed whiter than snow ~ and made right to stand in the presence of God forever. Brought near.

And you who know that you have been brought near to God by His blood, you who have the settled conviction that you are a believer, justified and heaven-bound; let your rejoicing be made brand new today, as you contemplate anew what His blood has done for you. Don't ever let the message get old. Don't ever let yourself begin to take it for granted.

Consider how far off you were, and repeat to yourself, "But now." And realize that God did it for a reason, He had a purpose in saving you. He made you a new creation in Christ Jesus because He wants to work through you to bring others near to the cross of Jesus.

Remember, God is a missionary God. He is still saving people today who will be on-mission with Him to reconcile a lost world to Himself through the blood of Christ. If you have that hope, how does God want to use you this Christmas season to bring others that same hope?