

## Sermon 21, The Cure for Alienation, Ephesians 2:11-13

**Proposition:** We have been brought from our natural condition of the total alienation sin brings and into blood-bought intimacy through Christ's work.

- I. Because You've Been Saved by Grace, Remember Your Alienation, vv. 11-12
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### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, "One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in his bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug."<sup>2</sup> So begins one of the most famous short stories of the 20th century. First published in 1915, the story is titled "The Metamorphosis" and recounts how Samsa, a traveling salesman from Prague, finds himself transformed into a giant dung beetle, apparently for no reason at all. His parents and his sister are quite unsurprisingly stunned by this transformation, and the story recounts Samsa's progressively deeper alienation from his family, his decline and eventual death. After he's dead, the other three members of the family take a drive out into the country and have a refreshing picnic. No doubt some of you read the story in a high school or college lit class. Why do I bring it up here and now? Because, like Edward Hopper's painting *Nighthawks*, Kafka's story perfectly encapsulates the same theme that our text today discusses — the theme of alienation.

Gregor Samsa just didn't fit in anymore. Instead of being a normal young man getting his start in the world while living at home, he became a giant dung beetle, and no one knew what to do with him. He had absolutely no idea how to communicate, how to resolve the situation, how to let his family know that he was still in there. In fact, his overtures of friendliness are regarded as demonstrations of hostility by his family. Samsa stands over the 20th century as a model of alienation, as a human being cut off from everything human and struggling in vain to find connection, relationship, intimacy. Indeed, the closest he gets to these things is his pornographic vision of sexuality, in which he crawls on top of a picture of a lady in furs that he had cut out from a magazine before his metamorphosis. Obviously, such "intimacy" is no intimacy at all.

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<sup>2</sup> Translated by Ian Johnston.

Kafka's point, of course, was that we are all Gregor Samsa. We are all alienated, all far away from each other, all striving in vain for some genuine connection, for some genuine relational intimacy. We live next to each other, but we do not know each other. And brothers and sisters, according to our text this morning, Kafka's vision of the world is not so far off. One could say that Kafka and Paul approached the question from two different sides. Paul speaks here in Ephesians 2 about the alienation of the Gentiles. Kafka, as another Jewish author, might be talking about the alienation of the Jews. But both alike recognize that the alienation of Jews and Gentiles without Christ is profound and irremediable. Cut off from the life of God, Jew and Gentile alike wander, hopeless. Paul insists that we remember what that alienation was like, and that we remember how different it was from the newfound intimacy we have as believers. Through Christ's work, we have been rescued from alienation, brought near to one another and to God, in an intimacy far more profound than the deepest alienation.

### **I. Because You've Been Saved by Grace, Remember Your Alienation, vv. 11-12**

Our text this morning begins with a "therefore," reminding us that this statement is a conclusion to what went before. It also contains the first imperative verb in the letter. Finally, after all that he has summarized about our riches in Christ and our salvation in Christ, Paul reminds us to remember. Since you have been saved by grace, remember what life was like before you were saved by grace!

How does that make sense? Well, if you were saved by works, if you were a self-made man, it might very well be uncomfortable for you to recall what you used to be. If the whole ground on which you are accepted is that you're good enough, then it probably wouldn't do to talk about the bad old days when you weren't good enough! "Thanks so much for hiring me to paint your portrait. Boy, I remember the first portrait I painted. The sitter ended up looking like a creature from *Star Wars*. Ha ha ha!"

That sort of comment is how artists lose commissions, right? But because we have been saved by grace, we don't have to pretend that we were always good. We don't have to scrub from our memories and from our lives the truth about where we used to live and what we used to be. In fact, Paul says, we must do the opposite. Precisely because we have been saved by grace, it is our duty to recall from time to time what our lives used to be like. Precisely because God saved you not because of what you were in yourself, but because of His own decision to show you favor, you need to recall what you were in yourself when He saved you.

Now, as we go through these things, it is important to remember that they apply directly to ethnic Gentiles who were born into paganism. They apply as well to ethnic Jews who were born into contemporary Judaism, and to ethnic Gentiles who were born into Christian homes, but not always so directly. We'll talk about that as we go. But the key thing to remember is that these apply ultimately across the board to all non-believers. Everyone who is not a Christian is objectively alienated, far away, not in relational intimacy. That applies equally to the drunk on Skid Row and to the cultivated elite person who is very knowledgeable, very polite, very sophisticated, and very politically connected. Paul is not trying to say that before salvation,

everyone was a homeless vagabond. Rather, in the most important matter of all, in the matter of relationship to God and thus in the matter of obeying the Great Commandment, every last person was at one time just like what he is about to describe. All of these symptoms of alienation were a result of the underlying disease called sin.

So remember what it was to be like this. Remember.

#### **A. Your Uncircumcised Status, v. 11a**

The first aspect of alienation Paul highlights is the fleshly ethnicity of his readers. They were Gentiles by birth, Gentiles in the flesh, Gentiles because they obviously lacked the sign of God's promise in circumcision. They were far from God's promise of a coming Redeemer, signified and sealed through the sacrament of circumcision. Just by looking at them, in a sense, you could tell that they were not recipients of God's promises.

Have you ever felt that your ethnicity is a problem, a liability, not only in worldly terms but even in spiritual terms? More importantly, was there ever a time when you were not the recipient of God's covenant promise? For everyone here, the answer is yes. Maybe you were baptized as soon as you were born. Maybe you weren't baptized until you were 40 years old. Either way, there was a time in your life when you had not yet received the sign of God's promises. To Paul's Jewish contemporaries, you were a "foreskin," a circumcised Gentile. Yes, if you were born to Christian parents there's a sense in which God's promises accompanied you from the very beginning of your existence. Yet until such time as you embraced them for yourself, you were, at least in part, in this condition. You were "uncircumcised" because circumcision (and baptism, for that matter) is a condition of the heart, not of the body. A true recipient of God's promises is one who has them internalized, who has salvation in the heart, who has been washed in baptism not simply of dirt on the body, but cleansed in the conscience.

So remember! Even if you can't remember a time in your life when you did not know Christ, there was such a time. If there was not, if you really and truly were converted from the moment of conception, then remember that such is not the condition of the human race, and that you did nothing to earn or deserve this grace. By nature, you would have been born uncircumcised, unbaptized, unable to claim the saving promises of God.

Notice, too, though, that even those who were born into Christian families, even those who did receive the outward sign of God's promise of salvation through Christ, are capable of totally abusing and misusing that sign. The Jewish people took their status as recipients of God's promise and rather than making it an occasion for good works, as Paul mentioned in the previous verse, they turned it around and made it a racial slur. Despite the fact that they had only received the outward sign of God's promise, not the thing signified (Paul is clear about that when he calls the circumcision hand-made), they looked down on others because those others hadn't received the promise either. This condition cuts both ways, of course. The Jews are not the only guilty ones here. I've been reading Simon Schama's *The Story of the Jews*, and the history of Christian arrogance and mistreatment of the Jews is heartbreaking. For centuries upon centuries, highly placed Christians have hated, persecuted, and robbed Jews just because they were Jews. The

Christians claimed to be better than the Jews because they were baptized, because they had received the outward sign of God's promises! Brothers and sisters, this is the legacy of humanity outside of Christ. This is the kind of alienation from which you and I came. We pride ourselves on our descent, on our special outward rites, on the size and shape of our genitals! Remember what it was like to define yourself that way? Remember when? Maybe you defined yourself by your civic philanthropy, or by your manly vehicle, or by your cute clothing, or by your having undergone some rite. But according to Paul, all of those things are simply signs of alienation, signs of the fact that you were cut off from Christ and thus cut off from true human intimacy.

### **B. Your Christless Condition, v. 12a**

You see, you have to remember that Christ is not your birthright. God didn't owe Him to you. At one time, you were without Him. This is the real rub. This is the ultimate issue. The Ephesians, and really all of us, at one time were without Christ. You may or may not have lived for a time without the sign of God's promise applied to your body. But all of us lived for a time without Christ!

Now, commentators tie themselves in knots over the fact that John says that Christ enlightens every man who comes into the world, but Paul says that we all are by nature without Christ. How, they ask, could Christ enlighten all these people who are without Him? The answer, my friends, is ludicrously simple. Christ as Logos, as the rational principle, enlightens every human being. Every human being who has rationality (which is all of us) also by definition has the Logos as the giver of that reason. But to have the Son of God as Logos furnishing you with intellectual power is not at all the same thing as having Him as God's Anointed Mediator, bringing you salvation. You were without Christ — not as Son of God, Creator, and Logos, for without Him nothing was made that was made and those without the Logos in any form are also no longer human and indeed, no longer exist. Man is a rational animal, as Aristotle said, and those completely without Christ are also completely without reason and existence. But you were without Him as Savior. You were without His mediating work. You were without His sacrificial death in your place. You were without His gift of the Holy Spirit, whom He purchased for you. You were without all of the spiritual blessings listed in chapter 1, without the salvation described in the first half of ch. 2. You were without Christ.

Now, you might say, yes, I remember that! I remember what it was like to be without Christ. Or you might say, "You know what? I don't remember that. As far as I can remember, I have always known Jesus as Savior and Lord." Either way, objectively speaking, there was a time when you were without Christ, and you need to remember that time. If you can't remember what it was like, at least remember that it was so. You weren't conceived in salvation; you were conceived in sin. It was God in His mercy who reached down and gave you Jesus. It was God who gave you all the spiritual blessings of ch. 1. You used to not have those things. Do you remember?

We all know that there is nothing more odious than a person who forgets where he came from. Someone from around here who goes off to the big city and decides that coal and oil are

evil, and that ranchers are know-nothing hicks, and that anyone who knows anything lives in Manhattan, is simply hateful to us. Someone who came from nothing, who was treated like dirt by rich people, and then becomes rich and starts to treat poor people like dirt himself — there are no words for that kind of arrogance, that kind of hypocrisy. Or someone who was born, who was an awful baby, who was a nasty child, and then grows up to dislike children and be very offended by their childish ways — again, that person is a blot on the human race.

Well, Paul says, Christian, don't you dare forget where you came from! Yes, you have the sign of God's promise now. But you didn't always! Yes, you have Christ now. But you didn't always! He is not a given; He is a gift. Don't take Him for granted. Don't take salvation as something that's just naturally yours. It isn't! It is the gift of God. And the minute you forget that at one time you didn't have it, you have also forgotten that it's a gift, not a given.

### **C. Your Alienation from Israel, v. 12b**

But furthermore, you were an alien from the commonwealth of Israel. You didn't have citizenship among the people of God. You didn't live the lifestyle of the people of God. You weren't part of the group to whom God had shown favor.

Now, those of you who grew up outside the church best know what this is like. You as an American were no more at home in the church than you were in Nepal! You had no more idea of what a Christian was than you do of what a Japanese person is. That's alienation from Israel. Paul uses the actual word "alien," "stranger," here to get across the point that these Ephesians gentiles weren't from within the community of Israel. They had no Jewish identity or background at all. Remember what that was like? Remember seeing buildings with steeples and wondering what they were all about?

But what about those of us who grew up in the church? Those of us who have been worshipping God, or at least present at His worship, every Sunday of our lives? Does this apply to us? Yes, in the same way that it applied to Paul when he was still Saul, or in the way that it applied to the Judaizers of Galatia. Paul was born a Hebrew of the Hebrews. He knew all about Israel's manner of life. He had citizenship in the covenant community, because he had been circumcised the 8th day and was from the tribe of Benjamin. He lived like a Jew from the day he was born.

But something was missing. Let me put it this way. If you were to fly to New York and visit a synagogue in Brooklyn this Saturday, would you find the Judaism practiced there to be just like the Judaism of King David? Would you find it similar to the Judaism of Abraham, or of Isaiah? I think our friends from the synagogue would freely admit that the way they practice Judaism is very far removed from the way that King David practiced it.

Now, how about Saul the Pharisee? Was his Judaism identical to that of King David? He still had the Temple. He still had sacrifices. He still had the Hebrew Bible, and he knew it very well indeed. But clearly, by his own account, something was missing. That something was the knowledge of Christ. When Jesus spoke to him, he responded, "Who are you, Lord?"

In other words, not all those who are from Israel are really of Israel. Circumcision is a matter of the heart, and so is membership in the commonwealth of Israel. There are people in this room who grew up going to church every Sunday, but having no idea what it was really all about and simply waiting to turn 18 so that they could quit wasting their Sunday mornings on church. There are millions of Americans who used to go church, who were brought up in church, and who now never go and never even miss what they used to have. Why? Because they didn't have anything! When Paul talks about alienation from the commonwealth of Israel, he is saying that whatever your racial or religious background, you are an alien from the commonwealth of Israel.

I talked with a man from Libya a few months ago. He now lives in Minneapolis, and sells books on Amazon. I was talking to him about my return of a purchase, and I asked him whether he would ever go back to Libya. He said no; there was absolutely nothing there for him or his children. Brothers and sisters, that man is 100% Libyan. But he is alienated from the commonwealth of Libya! He has an external tie, but in his heart, he's an American.

Our Jewish friends, including people like Franz Kafka, would fall under Paul's description here. They are aliens from the commonwealth of Israel. They don't have what King David had. They don't have what Zechariah and Elizabeth had. They have an external tie, but they are not Jews inwardly, not circumcised in the heart. Like Paul, they say to Jesus, "Who are you?" And that is similarly the condition of everyone who grew up in church but has not personally embraced it from the heart. Do you remember what that was like? Remember.

#### **D. Your Ignorance of God's Covenants of Promise, v. 12c**

Remember, too, that you were once a stranger to the covenants of promise. Every covenant God made contained a promise. "Don't eat, and live. Be my people, and I will be your God. I will put my laws in your heart and write them in your minds. I will give land and a seed to Abraham, and in his Seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed." These are some of the covenant promises God made! Yet at one time, you were a stranger to them all. When you first started to read the Bible, for instance, you did not yet know these things. Even now, many of you do not know the Bible well enough to remember where the major covenants are or what things were promised in each one. You are ignorant of the covenants of promise! But Paul doesn't mean merely intellectual ignorance of them, though that's bad enough. He means experiential ignorance. To be a stranger to the covenants of promise means not being included in them, not being the recipient of those promises! Imagine, if you would, being the grandchild of grandparents who play favorites. One day, you find out that your grandparents are going to take your brother to Disneyland for a week, but that they have no plans to take you — ever. You are a stranger, of sorts, to their promises. You know they've promised this special treat to your brother, but that you are excluded from it. Well, that's the condition of everyone outside of Christ. You are cut off from every one of the covenants of promise. Every time God made a deal with human beings, you were excluded. The promise is for others, but not for you.

Do you remember that? Do you remember that at one time, God's promise of salvation in Christ was of no value to you? Do you remember that at one time, you were excluded from the

church, excluded from circumcision and baptism, from the Passover and the Lord's Supper, and you didn't even care? You were a stranger to these things. In fact, to extend our metaphor, it's not just that your brother got taken and you didn't; it's more like you never even heard of Disneyland, and all you knew was that brother was gone for a week somewhere — and you were glad to be rid of him! You had absolutely no idea what you were missing out on.

#### **E. Your Hopelessness, v. 12d**

To be this kind of alien from Israel, this kind of stranger to the covenants, this kind of Christless individual, also means that you are hopeless. One idiot commentator (I call him an idiot, but he's really too smart for his own good) pointed out that most Gentiles, most alienated people, would not describe themselves as hopeless, though they might admit that they had no transcendent hope. What a stupid comment! To have no hope beyond "I hope we get donuts for breakfast tomorrow" is effectively the same thing as being hopeless. The very idea! (Do any of you want a free Ephesians commentary? I'm not sure how much more of this one I can take!)

To be hopeless is to have no solid ground of expectation looking toward the coming of something good. Remember, hope is the same thing as faith, but it looks to the thing promised rather than to the one promising. To have no hope is to have no expectation of any ultimately good thing being given to you. To have no hope is to see nothing beyond earthly pleasure and then the long nothingness of non-existence.

What do you live for? If you are alienated, if you are Gregor Samsa the dung beetle, your only honest answer is "Nothing, really." To live for mountain climbing, to live for your next hit of meth, to live for your next dose of porn, to live for your next boyfriend or your next consumer purchase, is not really to live at all. It is to try to fill the relational hole in your heart with things that are far too small. You were made for God, and without Him, you have no hope. Do you remember that? Do you remember the existential dread, the despair, the hopelessness of being far from Christ? If not, then you really need to watch a few movies and talk to a few people who can sum up that feeling for you. Better yet, read "The Metamorphosis." You will see hopelessness writ large.

#### **F. Your Godlessness, v. 12e**

Paul rounds off this description of the non-Christian's alienated condition with the staggering conclusion that he is without God. Again, God's eternal power and deity were plain to you even when you were a non-Christian. But to be without Christ is to be without God. You have God only as ruler, but not as deliverer, Savior, or Father. You were adrift in the world with no ultimate helper, no one to look to, nothing beyond yourself. You were Gregor Samsa, dung beetle, rejected by everyone and rejecting everyone, having no hope of any change in your condition.

Maybe you felt that way as a non-believer. Maybe you didn't. But objectively speaking, that's what you were. You were alienated.

You see, Paul wants us to realize that salvation is not just an individual matter. Yes, you personally have to be saved. But part of what you're saved from is this kind of alienation from God's people.

## II. Because You've Been Saved by Christ's Blood, You're Now Made Intimate, v. 13

What is the solution to the problem of alienation? It is union with Jesus Christ. In Him, those far off are brought near. Everyone united to Jesus by faith, in other words, is

- the recipient of the covenant sign and all that it promises
- A partaker of Jesus Christ
- A true child of God, who is one inwardly and thus one who belongs outwardly to the community of God's children
- A true citizen of Israel
- A true participant in all God's covenants of promise
- A hopeful person
- A godly person

You have been brought near if you're in Christ. You not only have God for your God and Jesus for your Jesus; you have a community. You belong to true Israel, that is, to the one people of God from every age. As N.T. Wright put it, the broad river of Gentile humanity has begun to flow into the narrow river of Jewish humanity, and the joined streams are called the Church. It is a new river. The Jews go on, and the Gentiles go on, alike separate from Christ, alike alienated and hostile in mind toward one another and toward Christians, through the course of history. But we Christians are freed from alienation. We are no longer giant dung beetles. We have been restored to God and thus to one another.

Notice how this alienation was solved. It was through the blood of Christ. Only through His sacrificial death on your behalf could all these benefits come to you. It took a death to solve the problem of alienation — not a death in the *Romeo and Juliet* sense, where the deaths of the star-crossed lovers bring together two feuding families — but a death in a more important sense, where the sin that produced alienation was taken away and punished in Jesus. Sin tears us apart from one another and from God. But now, in Christ, your alienation is cured. He died to rescue you from sin and its consequences, including its social consequences. You don't have to be like Gregor Samsa, squatting atop the picture of a woman in furs, looking for love and finding none. In Christ, you have intimacy.

So remember where you came from. Remember how you used to be. Remember how impossible genuine intimacy with God and therefore with your fellow men used to be. And remember the difference that began as soon as you were in Christ. Don't let yourself forget. And as you walk in memory, walk in gratitude too. Cultivate friendships here in the church. Welcome newcomers into the covenant community. Make it clear by your friendliness that you are no longer alienated. Show the world that in Christ and among His people, you have a home. Amen.