

THE BOOK OF EPHESIANS

"Spiritual Bankruptcy"

Ephesians 2:11, 12

Introduction

1. The opening chapter of Ephesians takes one back to the counsels of God. God has purposed from eternity to call out a people for Himself--new, redeemed, sealed by the Holy Spirit.

2. This second chapter tells how God's purpose (chap. 1) is worked out in time. Paul outlines our pre-conversion state (vv. 1-3). He records God's great love toward us (vv. 4-7). Then he tells of God's design to save by grace and gain good works through His redeemed people (vv. 8-10).

3. With that background, the concern of the epistle now changes to the composition of the new redeemed body of believers. The burning issue is that old barriers between Jews and Gentiles are gone. To have these two national groups one in Christ is the greatest triumph of the Gospel of Christ--then and now.

4. This entire section (vv. 11-22) falls naturally into two divisions marked by the words "in times past" (v. 11) and "but now" (v. 13). This is similar to the previous section (cf. vv. 2, 4). So, here is the picture "before" for Gentiles:

1. PAST CONNECTIONS v. 11.

a. Gentiles

The cleavage between Jews and Gentiles was more acute than one would think (cf. v. 5). Jews were not expected to render aid to a pregnant woman at childbirth. Indeed the marriage of a Jew to a Gentile was answered by the death penalty. The link here with God's view in Romans 1:18-32 must not be overlooked. The pit from which Gentile believers come is deep (Isa. 51:1).

b. Uncircumcision

This is a term of contempt. The prepositional phrase "in the flesh" shows the Gentiles to be entirely irreligious and debased. Circumcision was the sign of a covenant relationship (Gen. 17:9-14). This made a profound distinction between Jews and Gentiles (Matt. 15:22-28; Phil. 3:2, 3). Hence, "in the flesh" is not merely external, but of "religious" consideration (cf. Rom. 2:17-29).

2. PAST DEPRIVATION v. 12.

The verb "remember" (v. 11) is complemented here with "at that time." Five descriptive phrases sum up the case:

a. "Without Christ"

This means no connection with the Messiah. That was really a Jewish hope. Even in their darkest hour, Jews expected Messiah to come. From this they drew strength and courage. Not so Gentiles! This Jewish hope goes back to early Israel (national) history (1 Cor. 10:4), without means "apart from" and is used with the ablative case, the case of "separation."

b. "Aliens from the commonwealth"

The corporate life of Israel in which God was Israel's lawgiver and king were all outside the Gentile's experience. That is what is meant by "commonwealth." That society in which God's sovereignty took earthly shape and expression did not include Gentiles. "Aliens" is a perfect passive participle expressing separation and estrangement.

c. "Strangers from the covenants"

The covenants of the Old Testament belonged to Israel (Rom. 9:4). Gentiles had no part in them. The plural of "covenants" shows there were many in which God pledged Himself (cf. Abrahamic, Palestinian, Davidic, New). "Strangers" means Gentiles have no share in these. This is a major dispensational distinction which should not be overlooked. To contend that dispensational theology is "relatively new" (with John Nelson Darby) is quite erroneous from this context.

d. "Having no hope"

This is related to having no part with the covenants. This does not mean they had no aspirations, no desire for spiritual deliverance, but their future was a night without a star. The blight of Gentile darkness is described (Rom. 1).

e. "Without God"

This is unspeakably tragic. Gentiles were not athiests for they had many gods, but no knowledge of the one true God. "World" is contrasted with "commonwealth." There is a stress and tension here: The Gentiles in the sin, sorrow, and shame had no God to befriend, bless, guide, and save them. Their despair was unthinkable.

On that hard pagan world disgust

And secret loathing fell;

Deep weariness and sated lust

Made human life a hell.

--Matthew Arnold

Conclusion With such a dismal despair, there is only hope when God intervenes. This is the message of Christ and the Gospel. There is no other remedy nor antedote (v. 13). Thank God true salvation and biblical new creationism brings Gentiles and Jews into one body. Hallelujah.