

Ephesians 2:11–13 | “Remembering Our Past”

Preached on May 18, 2025 by Pastor Matt Brown

Please turn in your Bibles to Ephesians 2, verses 11–13, as we are back at it in the book of Ephesians, seeing what God says. *[pauseeee]*

There are different views of remembering the past. *[pause]*

Some are *constantly* looking back to the past.

They are the ones who regularly say things like, “Back in the good ol’ days...” or “Back in my day...” *[pause]*

It’s almost like they are still trying to live in the past.

They are trying to relive their glory days, and long to be back there. *[pause]*

When you talk to them, you end up hearing way more about what happened in the past, than what is happening now in their life.

For them, their mind is *too much* in the past. *[pauseeee]*

But there is another group who *never* wants to look at the past. *[pause]*

These are the people, who end up making a lot of mistakes, for they don’t learn from the past, due to never looking back to the past. *[pause]*

They recoil at the thought of bringing up the past...

Maybe their past was horrible, and so they don’t want to revisit it in any way, shape, or form. *[pause]*

Others merely view the past with suspicion, considering it all infused with bigotry, hatred, and ignorance. *[pause]*

For these people, their mind is *too little* in the past. *[pauseeee]*

We need to remember that the past is not something to live in, nor is it something to avoid entirely.

Yet there *is* a healthy way to look back, and Paul will show us that it is actually a good thing to look back at times. *[pause]*

We don’t live back there, but we do look back in order to see what God has done. *[pauseeee]*

Before we jump in, let’s *remember* where we are in Ephesians 2. *[pause]*

Paul has been recounting our past: how we were dead in our sins, but how God made us alive with Christ. *[pause]*

He highlighted that this is really a work of God, specifically, a work of God's grace—we have no room to boast.

And now in verses 11–13, Paul will continue that recounting of our past, and what God has done. *[pause]*

Listen to what he says as I READ it for you. *[READ]*

Looking at these few verses, we see first that you should...

I. Remember where you were *before*.

Paul says in verse 11, “Therefore *remember...*” *[pause]*

He is commanding us to remember, so this is not an option—we should remember where we were before. *[pause]*

You can't just use some past-forgetting device to wipe your memory clean—that's not how life works. *[pause]*

You shouldn't try to avoid your past like the plague, rather, you *should* remember certain aspects of your past before Christ. *[pause]*

Paul continually brought up his past before Christ in his writings.

He would recount his life of persecuting the church, and how God miraculously saved him. *[pause]*

So we should remember our past at times, but when Paul tells us to remember, he doesn't mean that we remember our past, in order to live in guilt and shame for it. *[pause]*

We don't moan and groan, slumping into unbearable guilt for our past because the good news of what Jesus did for us *frees us* from that! *[pause]*

He frees us from guilt and shame for our past before Christ, for it has been forgiven and wiped clean in Christ.

We stand righteous in God's sight, due to Christ's work on our behalf.

We no longer have guilt and shame before God in our standing before Him. *[pause]*

There are some in this room, who are looking to your past, but all you feel in guilt and shame. *[pause]*

When *you* think of your past, all you can think of is regret, and you dwell upon it. *[pause]*

Do not look to the past in that way!

Look to the past with eyes of faith, not dwelling upon it in guilt, but dwelling upon it with an eye towards what the grace of God has done. *[pauseeee]*

So why should we remember our past before Christ?

We'll think about a drug addict, who is now free from that addiction by the power of God.
[pause]

He never forgets his past, for his past reminds him of what God has done in his life. *[pause]*

Likewise, a person who was inches away from death, but was saved, never forgets that situation.
[pause]

Looking back reminds them of the miracle, so also, when we look back, we are reminded of God's miracle of grace in our life. *[pause]*

So remembering our past before Christ melts our heart with the grace of God once again.

Remembering our past helps us to be thankful for what God has done, and never to take things for granted.

Remembering our past inflates our heart with love for the Lord, and leads us to live for Him.
[pause]

And remembering our past leads us to renewed trust once again, for we reflect upon the power and faithfulness of our God. *[pauseeee]*

With arms pointed backwards, we can say, "Look at what God has done for me! Look at where I was! If God can do that, then what can He NOT do?" *[pauseeee]*

Throughout the Old Testament, we see God calling His people to remember. *[pause]*

He continually reminded His people of how he brought them out of Egypt and redeemed them,¹ in order that His people would be stirred on to gratefulness, faith, and worship. *[pause]*

Therefore, 'remembering' is a key aspect of renewed faith in the Lord.

But before you can remember the miracle of what God has done, you must remember the misery of your past state. *[pauseeee]*

In a hard-to-hear verse back in Ezekiel 16, God tells Israel...

¹ Some examples among many others include: Micah 6:4, Amos 9:7, Amos 3:1, Amos 2:10, Hosea 13:4.

“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.”² *[pause]*

They didn’t remember their past miserable state that God delivered them out of, and so weren’t living in light of His marvelous grace. *[pauseeee]*

You see, if you don’t remember your past before Christ, you can easily become like Israel, who forgot the God of their salvation, and didn’t remember their Rock of refuge.³ *[pause]*

No, we remember! *[pauseeeee]*

Paul says in verse 11, “Therefore remember that at one time...” and goes on to describe their lives before Jesus intervened. *[pause]*

A little later in verse 12, he says the phrase, “at that time,” and in verse 13 he states that they “once were far off.” *[pauseeee]*

A Christian reflects upon a time in their past: their pre-conversion state. *[pause]*

Every single believer has a “once were” testimony; a prior time in their life that is drastically different from the time now. *[pauseeee]*

History is divided in time with B.C. and A.D. which revolves around the arrival of Jesus.

Well like history is divided by the time before Christ and after Christ, so also, a Christian’s life is divided between ‘before Christ’ and ‘after Christ.’ *[pauseeeee]*

So remember your past before Jesus graciously and miraculously saved you, but what exactly does Paul highlight as things to remember? *[pause]*

They were to remember their past *identity*. *[pause]*

Paul seems to be writing mainly to Gentile believers, for he says that, “At one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision.”

And he mentions that they were “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise.” *[pauseee]*

Paul is basically pointing to their past identity as ‘outsiders’—they were outside of the people of God, and so outside of the promises of God. *[pause]*

They were looked down upon, for they were seen by Israel as ungodly pagans, and really, they were! *[pauseeee]*

² Ezekiel 16:22.

³ A paraphrase of Isaiah 17:10.

In the Old Testament time period, to be outside of Israel was to be outside of the people of God, and so without hope.

But now, through Christ, something drastically changed, for now they could be brought into the people of God. *[pauseeee]*

So they were to remember their past identity—they were outside of the people of God, and so were “outsiders.” *[pauseeee]*

Do you remember your identity before Christ? *[pause]*

Do you remember that you were outside of the people of God, and considered ‘the ungodly’? *[pause]*

You were a part of the lost, the unsaved. *[pauseeee]*

If you grew up in a Christian family, you may not see your past before Christ as like this, but it was true of you, too!

Your identity was outsider, and you were ‘without God in the world’. *[pauseeee]*

Now this identity was not just some meaningless label, for it came along with a horrible condition, and that’s what Paul points out here...

So they were not only to remember their past identity, but also their past condition that was attached to that identity. *[pauseeee]*

Paul says so many different things to make the same point—they were far off. *[pause]*

First, they were *separated from Christ*. *[pause]*

There is no worse situation to be in than to be apart from Christ. *[pause]*

It means that you do not have a Savior or Deliverer.

It means that you are separated from life and all of the spiritual blessings found in Him. *[pauseee]*

Since Christ is the way, the truth, and the life,⁴ then to be separated from Him is to be separated from the way to salvation, the absolute truth, and eternal life. *[pauseeeee]*

For those who are physically dead, a tombstone usually marks out that they are without life, but Christlessness marks out the spiritually dead.

Therefore, to be separated from Christ is the equivalent of saying that you are separated from life, and therefore separated from hope. *[pauseeee]*

⁴ A reference to John 14:6.

One cannot think of themselves in a good condition and reject Jesus, for it's Jesus who turns our life around because He is the Savior. *[pauseeee]*

So we look backwards to our life without Christ, and see no true life there.

We look backwards at our Christless existence, and marvel that in grace, our separation from Christ wasn't a permanent separation, but only a temporary one, until He came to us in love. *[pauseeee]*

For those who never turn to Christ, they do not realize the horrific condition they are in without Him. *[pause]*

To be without Christ is to be condemned in your sins, and that's the situation that we were in before we were graciously saved. *[pauseeeee]*

Next, Paul points to their far-off-ness by emphasizing that they were *alienated from Israel*. *[pause]*

As I mentioned earlier, this put them outside of the people of God. *[pauseeee]*

To be alienated here is to be a foreigner, estranged, and excluded, so they did not belong to the people or community of God. *[pauseeee]*

If you went to another country and lived there, you might be around the people there, but you wouldn't belong to that country as a citizen.

And if you weren't a citizen, then you wouldn't possess the benefits and blessings of being a citizen. *[pause]*

You would be on the outside, so to say.

In the eyes of that country, you would be a foreigner or stranger. *[pause]*

Likewise, that's how the Gentiles were before Christ—they were excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and as a result, “strangers to the covenants of promise.” *[pause]*

They weren't associated with the promises of God, for in the Old Covenant, they were given to Israel.

So the promises didn't belong to them at that point. *[pause]*

At that point, the great promises to Abraham, David, and others didn't include them, for they were alienated from Israel.

There was a great gulf between them and Israel, and so there was a great gulf between them and the promises of God. *[pauseeee]*

We all want to belong. *[pause]*

As we grow up in our family, we want to feel like we belong, and we don't like it if we are considered the black sheep of the family. *[pause]*

When we are school-age, we want to belong, and not be the outcast in the class.

Well before Christ, we didn't belong to the people of God, and therefore the promises of God didn't belong to us. *[pauseeee]*

What a bad condition to be in!

Imagine not being able to claim the promises of God—what a sad state! *[pauseeee]*

The promise of life and resurrection didn't once apply to us.

The promise of God always being with us in favor didn't belong to us before.

We were once strangers to all of the good, gracious, great promises of God! *[pauseeee]*

We look back and see that horrible condition that we were once in, but now there's a different story. *[pauseeeee]*

Our hearts hurt when we are far away from a loved one, or far away from home for a very long time.

Well before Christ, 'far off' was all we knew. *[pause]*

We were far away from Christ, far away from God's people, and far away from God's promises.

And so what was the result?

Paul says that we were those "having no hope and without God in the world." *[pauseeee]*

We had no hope, for we had no salvation, no life, no relationship with the Creator God...

Now that's a bleak picture, but that's the accurate picture of our life before Christ—NO HOPE. *[pauseeee]*

If you do not trust in Christ, you have no hope. *[pause]*

What hope could you have, since you have rejected God and the one and only place of eternal life, Jesus Christ? *[pause]*

What purpose could you have in this life that has *any* eternal significance? *[pause]*

What assurance can you have for anything that goes beyond the grave?

Turn and trust in Jesus today, and find hope by finding forgiveness and life in Him! *[pauseeee]*

Paul calls on us to 'remember.' *[pause]*

Remember where you were before—you were once far off from God, and therefore, far off from all hope. *[pause]*

Never forget where you once were, and that's the key, we "once" were there—it's not the end of the story. *[pause]*

The book of our life didn't close with hopelessness or alienation.

If you have trusted in Jesus, then your life won't have a sad, bad, or depressing ending. *[pauseee]*

The chapters of our life may have started out with titles like: separation, alienation, hopelessness, and without God, but they drastically move into terms of: Jesus, life, and hope. *[pause]*

That's where Paul goes next when he says in verse 13, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." *[pause]*

So yes, look back and remember, but secondly, you are to...

II. Rejoice in where you are *now*.

We don't look back to our past in order to dwell there forever, but it's for a purpose...

The purpose is to see the amazing difference between the past and the present. *[pauseeeee]*

Someone who is trying to lose weight sometimes takes a picture of their body when they first start trying to lose weight.

And they don't do this to be constantly depressed about it, rather, they take it so that they can see the progress they make over time. *[pause]*

Likewise, if someone seeks to completely renovate an old house, they will do the same...

They will take 'before' pictures and then 'after' pictures, in order to see the transformation. *[pause]*

So also, Paul is calling us to remember our past and then rejoice in our present, in order to see the dramatic transformation that Christ has accomplished in our life. *[pauseeeee]*

So far, we have seen the "picture" of our past selves, but now we will see the "picture" of our present, and we will get to marvel at the difference. *[pauseeee]*

Paul just told us all about "at one time," "at that time," and "once," yet in verse 13 he says, "but now." *[pause]*

Everything that he just talked about is the opposite *now*! *[pause]*

Those things may have been our identity and condition before, but now our identity and condition is different...

That horrible state of affairs before has been reversed, flipped, turned over into something radically different. *[pauseeee]*

Every Christian's testimony is one that includes the idea of, "but now."

That is, every Christian's story is one of dramatic contrasts. *[pause]*

I once was lost, but now I'm found. *[pause]*

I once was blind, but now I see. *[pause]*

I once was a rebel, but now I'm a child. *[pause]*

I once was condemned, but now I'm no longer condemned.

I once bore my sin and guilt, but now it's gone.

I once was dead, but now I've been made alive.

Oh, the glorious "but now" of the gospel! *[pauseeee]*

Our 'but now' is only possible, but for the grace of God.

In fact, the passage says, "But now *in Christ Jesus* you who once were far off have been brought near." *[pauseeee]*

Ever since Paul began the book of Ephesians, he has highlighted so many blessings that we have 'in Christ'. *[pause]*

It is only 'in Christ' that we can have forgiveness, life, inheritance, etc.

So once again, it's only 'in Christ' that there has been a massive shift in our past versus our present. *[pauseeee]*

Jesus is the difference-maker of our lives. *[pause]*

Do we talk about Jesus that way when we talk to others? *[pause]*

Do we make it clear that anything good we have in our lives is because of Jesus? Because it's true! *[pauseeeee]*

So what changed? How are we brought near? Jesus and His shed blood. *[pauseeee]*

Verse 13 says, "But now *in Christ Jesus* you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Jesus." *[pauseeee]*

You see, our sin estranged us from God—there was separation, alienation, and distance between us and God. *[pause]*

We were those “far off” from God, and there’s nothing more tragic.

We couldn’t bring ourselves near to God, for our sin was the problem. *[pause]*

God is holy, and He can’t just have a close relationship with one who has sin on their account, or else He wouldn’t be holy.

And so if it wasn’t for Jesus, we would have forever been alienated from God, and without hope in this world. *[pause]*

So what did God do? *[pause]*

He sent Jesus to come to this earth, and so He was born of a virgin, taking on human flesh.

But why do that? *[pause]*

He did it so that He could take our place as our representative, substituting His life for ours. *[pause]*

By shedding His blood on our behalf, He dealt with our sin problem, for our sin was credited to Him in that moment, and He paid the penalty for it all.

And that’s why we have been brought near to God now—because Jesus shed His blood for us! *[pauseeee]*

He dealt with our sin before God, providing us forgiveness through His blood.

Therefore, now, we can stand before God forgiven, but also, we have the righteousness of Christ credited to our account. *[pauseeee]*

So for those who trust in Jesus, what changed?...

We have been brought near. *[pause]*

Who did it? Jesus, through His blood. *[pauseeee]*

There’s a reason why this text says that we have been “brought near,” for it’s reminding us that *we* didn’t accomplish this, but *Christ* did for us. *[pauseeee]*

We have access to God—what good news! *[pause]*

We can be ‘near’ God, and this means that we can have a loving, close relationship with the Almighty, Creator God, who is over all. *[pause]*

We no longer have to fear God as Judge, but we can approach Him as Father.

That’s why Hebrews 4:16 says, “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” *[pauseeee]*

Oh, what blessed “nearness”!

We no longer have to feel the loneliness of alienation, for we know that He is always with us, and He’s there with His comforting presence. *[pause]*

We no longer have to feel distance or separation, but we can know that our God is near. *[pause]*

We no longer have to feel the estrangement that came with being condemned in our sins because by Christ’s blood we are no longer condemned! *[pauseeee]*

This is a wonderful truth, and a wonderful promise for all...

All who repent and trust in Jesus Christ can be brought near to God. *[pauseee]*

When Peter preaches at Pentecost in Acts 2, the people are cut to the heart and ask, “What shall we do?”

And listen to how Peter responds...

He says, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

For the promise is for you and for your children and for all *who are far off*, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.”⁵ *[pauseee]*

The promise of forgiveness, the Spirit, and ‘nearness’ to God are held out to all who are far off.

And so if you have never repented and believed in Jesus, do that today, and you will be a beneficiary of this blessed promise. *[pauseeee]*

As we consider what we learned this morning in these few, powerful verses, we see that...

Remembering our past leads us to rejoice in where we are today—it’s all because of Christ!

We don’t live in the past, nor do we ignore it.

No, we don’t do those things, but we are those who look back to the past at times. *[pause]*

We don’t stay there in guilt and shame, rather, we look back in order to see the radical change that has taken place in our lives. *[pause]*

We look back in order to be able to say, “Look at where I was, but now look at where I am now,” and the difference maker is the Lord’s grace shown to us through Christ. *[pauseeee]*

We were once separated from Christ, alienated from the people of God, and without hope in the world. *[pause]*

⁵ Acts 2:38–39 (italics was added by me).

You couldn't get any worse than the situation that we were in, for it meant no forgiveness and no life.

But that's our past, for by Christ's blood, it's a totally different story *now*. *[pause]*

We have been brought near to the Lord, we have forgiveness, life, and hope now...

What a truth that we can and should rejoice in! *[pause]*

So look back and then forward and rejoice in what God has done. *[pause]*

Look at where He has taken you, and what He has given to you—take joy in it!

Let His grace-filled, joy-inducing work stir your heart on to love for Him, and also, love for others, who were in the same spot you were in. *[pauseeee]*

And may you live in gratitude and thanksgiving for it all. *[pauseeeee]*

I end this morning with a wonderful quote by John Newton that reflects what we learned this morning...

He wrote, "I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am."