

STRANGERS IN DARKNESS

by Ray C. Stedman

In the second chapter of Ephesians, we are looking together with the Apostle Paul at mighty truths, fantastic statements, which make us aware of what it means to be a Christian. If we ever really grasp what it means to be a Christian, we will never again be envious of anyone who is not a Christian, will never wish we were back in the world, nor in any way be drawn toward its outlook or its pattern of life.

Of course, we learn to appreciate what has happened to us by looking back to what we were, and really beginning to understand what God called us out of in Christ. The opening words of this chapter tell us that we once were dead in trespasses and sins; we once walked according to the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the god of darkness; and we behaved according to the lusts of our flesh. We did what we thought was right, but found it was constantly getting us into difficulty and destroying our humanity -- and we never knew why. We were victimized by the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature, as Paul says, "children of wrath," i.e., suffering the degeneration of humanity, "like the rest of mankind."

And then, out of all this, Christ called us. Those of us who have believed in Jesus Christ have been made alive together with him. What a fantastic statement that is! A resurrection has occurred; we have become new creatures, a new creation, different than anything we ever were before. And we've been given a new power. We've been raised up with him, so that the power upon which we are to operate is not the power of a determined will, but the power of a trusting heart, reckoning upon resurrection life. And then we've been made to sit with him in heavenly places. We have been given a new attitude, have been delivered from striving, from pressure, and have been allowed to rest, to relax, to be confident that God is working out his purposes in our lives. All of this conveys to us some sense of what it means to be a Christian.

In Verse 11 of Chapter 2, the apostle takes up another view of our past life. He looks back upon what we were as pagans -- "Gentiles" is the word he uses -- and reminds us of our previous condition of ignorance. You see, not only were we dead, helpless, but we were also in darkness, in ignorance, apart from Jesus Christ.

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands -- remember that you were at that time 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. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. {Eph 2:11-13 RSV}

In this passage the apostle is dealing with the difference between the Jews and the Gentiles. He identifies the Gentiles for us. He says they are the ones who are called "uncircumcised" by those who are circumcised, i.e., by Jewish people. He indicates the distinguishing mark of the Jews, and he has a good reason for doing so. He says, "You Gentiles are uncircumcised. The Jews are the circumcised people." In being circumcised they were recognizing the fact that they were a special people, belonging to God in a unique sense. The mark of circumcision was what indicated this distinction. So when Paul said the Jews were circumcised, he was symbolizing by that fact the advantages the Jew had over the Gentile. We will see what those are in a moment. But he was also highlighting the fact that the Gentiles, the pagans, did not have these advantages.

Circumcision is made a great deal of in the Scriptures. It is referred to all through the Old Testament and the New. It began, you remember, with Abraham, who circumcised his son Isaac at the request of God. And it always indicated that here was a people who had a special access to God, a special relationship to him. The Gentile world was without this. All symbols in Scripture are very significant; they always mean something. Why do you think God chose this sign (for God himself chose it) and placed it upon the male sex organ? Why was this part of the body chosen to be the sign of a privileged people?

The answer, of course, is that we human beings are basically sexual. The Scriptures teach this very plainly. Oftentimes the church has not taught it, but instead has acted as though sex were something extraneous to human beings, as though our bodies ended at the waist and we needed to be concerned about nothing further. But the Scriptures always teach that sex is an integral part of our humanity, that we are basically and fundamentally sexual, not only at the physical level but in the soul and the spirit as well -- that there is a soulish form of sex, as there is a spiritual form of sex. The Scriptures teach this very plainly. Therefore circumcision is the recognition on God's part that, being sexual at our core, what we think about sex is a revelation of what we think about ourselves, of our self-image, and that how people act sexually is a dead giveaway of how they see themselves before him -- their identity, in other words.

This is why the Gentile, pagan world was called "uncircumcised" -- because it was characterized by two things, primarily:

1. First, sexual immorality. The pagans of Paul's day were oftentimes highly educated -- what we call "civilized," But intermixed with all their civilization was terrible sexual degeneracy. When you visit the pagan world, the ancient temples of Rome, of Greece, and other places, invariably you find tremendous emphasis upon sex symbols. The Greek philosophers, who are regarded as such advanced thinkers that in many ways they have never been surpassed, nevertheless were sexually degraded. For example, Socrates involved himself in homosexual practices. Homosexuality was widely accepted and very prevalent in those days, along with many other degrading sexual practices. So the pagan world of Paul's day revealed its lack of understanding of its own humanity by its sexual practices.
2. And, second, religious ignorance. They didn't know themselves, because they didn't know God. The Scriptures teach us constantly that you never know yourself until you know God. It is the knowledge of God which reveals man to himself. This is why those who have come into a knowledge of God, and grow in that knowledge, are always at the same time burgeoning in the understanding of man and of themselves. All this is implied in the classification of the pagan world as uncircumcised: sexually aberrant, religiously ignorant.

Yet Paul gives a hint in Verse 11 that the Jews, though they had many advantages, were oftentimes hypocritical. They weren't taking hold of their advantages; they were claiming what they did not actually possess. He puts it this way:

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands -- {Eph 2:11 RSV}

The Jews were called "circumcised," but they didn't always live like circumcised people, as Paul suggests here.

You say, "How does this affect any of us? That was in the 1st Century; here we are in the 20th. What does this have to do with us? They may have been pagans back in Paul's day, but we don't live in that kind of world." I hope you have already realized that such is not the case. We do indeed live in that kind of world. Paganism is rampant in our day, and it is exactly the same kind of paganism as Paul had in view. Most of us trace our ancestry to northern Europe. And it is healthy for us to remember that not too many centuries ago our ancestors were wandering through the forests of northern Europe, clad in animal skins, living in caves, and were in no sense "civilized" as we define it today. Our ancestors were known to the world of Paul's day as "barbarians." And we would have remained barbarians, had it not been for the influx of the gospel through brave missionaries who carried the Word to our forefathers in England and Germany and other places from which our Anglo-Saxon race has descended. It is good to remember that we would never have had what we enjoy in this country today were it not for the fact that the gospel penetrated these areas.

This week we observe Thanksgiving Day. It is good to remember our heritage. Our fathers, who landed on the shores of New England almost 400 years ago, were fleeing religious persecution, they were godly men and women. And we have reaped their heritage. Today many of us have been raised in a Christian environment,

having come from Christian homes in a so-called "Christian" nation. We are more in the position of the Jews of Paul's day than that of the Gentiles. We have been exposed to a great deal of truth. We have many advantages, just as the Jews had. They had the potential of knowing God, but many of them did not know him. Many of us are in that condition today.

Yet it is also true that many among us come right out of a pagan environment, such as Paul describes here. So we should look at how he describes this condition, because it is not only the condition many of us come from; it is also a condition toward which the world is returning as it grows more and more paganized and loses its Christian influence and teaching.

Verse 12:

remember that you were at that time 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. {Eph 2:12 RSV}

That is paganism. And Paul starts at its highest possible level. The one thing which can be said of all pagans, no matter what their background, is that they are "separated from Christ." If you haven't yet come to Christ, you are a pagan. You may have been brought up in a religious home. You may be trained in civilized approaches. You may have been exposed to the philosophies of the world. You may be highly intelligent, very artistic, and in many ways an admirable and enjoyable person. But the one great fact remains: you are separated from Christ. And without Christ you have no life from God. The life of God is not available to you. You may know that he exists. You may believe in him. There were pagans in Paul's day who did believe in God. They had turned from the empty worship of the gods of the Greek and Roman pantheons, had believed that there was a true God somewhere. But they didn't know him. And that is so true of many today.

So that the highest thing that can be said is this: You are separated from Christ. There is a gap. It may be only a small gap; you may be close to Christ, very close. You may understand and admire his teaching. But until you have come to know him, till you've received him, there is a gap which is a death-gap, and you still remain "dead in trespasses and sins," as Paul states it in the opening verses of this chapter -- bound under the course of the prince of this world, fulfilling the lusts of the passions of the flesh, a child of wrath, even as the rest of mankind. That is the highest thing which can be said of a pagan.

But for many it is much worse, as Paul goes on to describe: "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel." An alien is a stranger, a foreigner living in the midst of a country, who does not have the rights of citizenship. A commonwealth is a nation or a kingdom. Here Paul contrasts the position of the Jews with that of the Gentiles. The Jews had a nation over which God ruled. They gloried in the fact that God was the head of their nation. They had a sense of destiny, a sense of God's protection, a sense of belonging to a single people who were all under the oversight of God. They had a camaraderie, a sense of brotherhood which came from belonging to God, from being his people.

But the pagans did not know this. The pagan world worshipped a pantheon of gods. The Greeks had their list of gods, the Romans had theirs, the Persians had another, the barbarians to the north -- the Norsemen and others had yet another list. And all of these gods were as irritable and as undependable as men. Pagans lived in a world in which they were exposed to powers they recognized as being greater than themselves, but in which there was no consistency -- and never any love. Pagans never thought of God as loving them; pagans never thought of loving God. There is no suggestion of this in their writings at all. They never reached out to God, never felt themselves loved by God. They could only beseech kindness and mercy of their gods, and try to influence them. But there was no sense of belonging to God. The Jews had that sense; the pagans did not. They were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel.

You know that in time of crisis an alien is always treated differently than a citizen. When war broke out with Japan, people of Japanese ancestry here on the West coast were treated as aliens -- even though most of them actually were citizens. They were suspected and interred, and no one wanted anything to do with them for a time, because they had the look of aliens. Immediately, when a crisis breaks out, this line of demarcation is very evident. And Paul recognizes this of pagans. He says, "Since you weren't part of Israel you didn't have

that sense of belonging to God."

But it goes further than that: "strangers to the covenants of promise." These covenants were the promises, the agreements God had made with Abraham and Jacob and Moses and David and others that he would do certain things. He bound himself to obey certain provisions, if man would respond to them. And so every Israelite had a hope, had a way out, if he would take it. They didn't always do so, but they did have a way, if they wanted it. There were, for instance, the promises which had to do with the sacrifices. Every Israelite knew that if he were burdened with guilt, troubled by having done something wrong, there was something he could do about it: He could bring a sacrifice. God had bound himself that, if an animal were sacrificed under proper conditions, then the conscience of that individual would be eased. And furthermore the priesthood was provided to instruct them what was right and what was wrong, what was harmful and what was harmless. And finally, there were all the promises which had to do with the Messiah. Every Israelite knew that, no matter how bad things got, one day God was going to send a Messiah. And even though the nation forgot God, turned away completely and went off and "did their own thing" like the pagans around them, yet God would not cut them off. He would send a Messiah who, one day, would restore the people again. So the Jew always had the hope of the coming of Messiah.

But not the pagan. This is the contrast. They had no hope in their darkness. They belonged to their unreliable, irritable gods, and there was no certainty these would ever respond to them in any way. So when their spirits were oppressed, and they were filled with guilt and shame, and they fell into the violence, cruelty, and warfare which obsessed the pagan world, they had no promise of any help, no place they could turn, no hope in the future whatsoever, but were left strictly to their own devices.

Therefore, Paul goes on, their final condition was: "having no hope, and without God in the world." Archaeologists have dug up 1st Century cemeteries in various places in Greece and Rome and have found many tomb stones which bear upon them the Greek or Latin words for "No hope" -- no hope in their darkness, no light. As a consequence, in the Roman world of that day, despair reigned everywhere. If you read the writings of the Roman philosophers and thinkers of that day, you find always a philosophy of despair, of meaningless existence. There was no sense of purpose in life. Even the most hopeful indulged only in a kind of whistling in the dark. They looked out into the future and saw absolutely nothing significant. Their writings reveal the utter darkness, the emptiness, the hopelessness of pagan life.

You can even see this reflected in the Scriptures. Remember the wistful question of Pilate when Jesus stood before him and informed him that he had come into the world to declare the truth. Pilate responded, "What is truth?" There you can read the hopeless cynicism of an educated Roman who had learned to despair of ever finding reality. Remember burning curiosity of the Roman proconsul, Sergius Paulus, of the island of Cyprus, when Paul and Barnabas came there. He heard about these two men, sent for them, and inquired diligently of them what this teaching was regarding Jesus. He was longing to find a way out of the hopelessness of his pagan environment.

The result, of course, is that the pagans were without God, just as Paul says. There was no sense of any presence in the universe greater than man. The Greek thinkers, the scientists of that day, the Roman philosophers, the statesmen, the leaders of the Roman world, all looked out upon the universe and saw nothing but an enormous cosmic loneliness -- just as men do today -- man alone in a cruel and heartless universe, struggling along, trying to do his best in his feeble way, in his brief day, with nothing lying beyond. Therefore atheism was widespread in the Roman world. We look back and assume they were all worshipping gods. No, the largest proportion of the Romans and the Greeks did not worship gods; they worshipped nothing. They didn't believe in gods anymore. They went through the forms of worshipping, just as men do today in many churches, but there was no sense of the presence of God. To them God was dead, just as he is to many in our day. Now that is paganism; it is always that way.

Someone told me this morning about a project called "Cyclops" that some brilliant scientists have devoted themselves to. It involves the expenditure of large sums of money in an effort to explore the universe with telescopes and other means, to see if they can discover a higher level of civilization than we know here, with the hope -- the only hope in their darkness -- that they might possibly strike upon a civilization which has solved some of the problems we wrestle with, might make contact with it and gain remedies of the

insupportable conditions of our day. That is how pagan the world again has become -- drifting back into darkness, loneliness, hopelessness, so that men are grasping at straws, trying to find some way out of the abject despair that grips the hearts of people everywhere in the world today.

Think of that, when you think of your Christianity.

Think of what it is that God has called you out of in Jesus Christ.

And when you enjoy Thanksgiving Day in your home, with its Christian love and warmth, its hope, its meaningfulness in the midst of life, the gladness and joy of your family, remember what you would have been without Christ, in the darkness of the paganism to which the world is rapidly returning.

Every now and then we are told that this ancient world was a beautiful place. It was filled with great architectural achievements. We visit them as tourists and gaze in awe at the remarkable abilities of the Romans and Greeks and Persians and Mayans and others. Ah, yes. But if we could live back in those times we would see a people gripped with despair, hopeless, experiencing little enjoyment in life at all. And occasionally a travel folder will hold before us the image of some beautiful South Sea island, where happy savages lie around indolently all day playing their ukuleles, with fish ready to be caught right there at the edge of the sea, and coconuts and fruit dropping off the trees, where there is nothing to do but enjoy life. Such folders try to call us back to the happy, primeval, simple life of these primitive people. They are complete hogwash! There never has been an idyllic society like that, and never will be. Outwardly, superficially -- perhaps. But inwardly every one of them were in the grip of fear, hostility, hatred, superstition, emptiness, and religious mockery.

I read an account the other day of a South American Indian who told the missionary who led him to Christ, "When I was living in the jungle, we never knew a day without fear. When we woke up in the morning, we were afraid. When we went out of our houses, we were afraid. When we walked along the river, we were afraid. We saw an evil spirit in every stone and tree and waterfall. And when night fell, fear came into our huts and slept with us all night long."

That is what paganism is. And this is what the world is returning to. All around us on every side, as Christian truth begins to fade, as the nation becomes secularized and humanized, this pagan darkness settles upon the land once again.

We ought to give thanks for our Puritan fathers and the heritage they've left us. But we also ought to ask ourselves, "What are we passing on to the next generation?"

Thank God there has come a degree of spiritual revival. It is wonderfully hopeful to see how young people everywhere, and older ones as well, are rediscovering the great truths of Christian faith. But how thankful it ought to make our hearts this week, above every week, that God has given us these marvelous blessings in Jesus Christ, and has called us out of such darkness!

Paul goes on now to show us what has happened, Verse 13:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. {Eph 2:13 RSV}

Without Christian missionaries, without their knowledge of the Scriptures, without the instruction of those who came to know God and then brought the message to us, we would have been nothing but pagans, without any light in our darkness other than the natural light which came from our inner being, indicating that there is a God somewhere. We would be living like that still -- probably in skins in caves in the woods. But now, having once been far off, we have been brought nigh by the blood of Christ, by the death of Christ.

I must point out here that it isn't merely the death of Christ. Paul says that it is the blood of Christ. It is significant that he uses that term. Death, of course, is not always bloody. You can die without losing your blood. The Scriptures sometimes speak of the death of Christ, and more often of the cross of Christ. But still more often they speak of the blood of Christ. Why this emphasis? Many don't like this today. They don't like

to think of the cross or of the death of Jesus as being bloody. But God emphasizes it. God wants us to think about it, because blood is always a sign of violence. You see, the death of Jesus was not just a simple passing away -- dying of old age on a comfortable bed. No, no. It was a violent death, a bloody, gory, ugly, revolting scene -- a man hanging torn and wretched upon a cross, with blood streaming down his sides and running down the cross.

God wants us to remember that violent death, because violence is the ultimate result of paganism. It is the final expression of a godless society. Cruelty arises immediately when love and truth disappear from society. And God is simply reminding us that when humanity had done its worst, had sunk to its lowest, had vented its anger in the utter wretchedness and violence and blood of the cross, his love reached down to that very place and, utilizing that violent act, began to redeem, to call back those who were far off and bring them near -- in the blood of Christ.

And, in the blood of Jesus, all the advantages the Jews had were conferred upon the Gentiles. Ignorant, pagan, darkened, foolish, struggling, hopeless -- nevertheless, they had just as much access to God, in the blood of Christ, as any Jew ever had with his temple, his Law, his priesthood, and his sacrifice. By this the apostle is trying to emphasize to us the exceedingly amazing wonder of the grace of God, which laid all these liabilities aside and reached out to us and found us just as we were, and brought us near by the blood of Jesus Christ our Lord. What a gift to give thanks for!

From this point Paul is going to develop some more fantastic truth, to show us more of what it means to be a Christian, brought near by the blood of Christ. He is going to build, step by step and statement by statement, until we climb a tremendous height -- it is absolutely incredible that men should ever come to this position, but it is all by the grace and the glory and the love and the power of God.

I don't know what this does to you, but it makes my heart want to rejoice, to give thanks, and to praise God for what he has done in the death of his Son.

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