



Remember the "Before" Conversion

Text: Ephesians 4:17-19

Often when Paul wrote to or talked with gentiles, he referred to (a) their past views as idol worshippers and (b) the impact those views had on their behavior. Their objective in becoming a Christian was **NOT** to embrace a new form of religion, but to become a different person. Gentile converts were [as far as the majority were concerned] religious before they accepted Christ. Never was the basis of the call to Christ a plea to be religious. The plea was to come to know the true, living God and His son Jesus Christ.

Consider, as an example, Paul's statement in Romans 1:18-32. Paul said there were a group of people that invited God's wrath on themselves. They were ungodly, unrighteous [note: not non-religious] people who opposed the truth [about God]. These people ignored the obvious. They knew God existed, but they refused to acknowledge the nature of God Who was bigger than they, bigger than creation.

Then Paul used two of his favorite words in this discussion: **futile** and **darkness**. Rather than acknowledging the obvious, they became futile in their speculations and darkened in their foolish hearts. Futile referred to an inner condition produced by idolatrous thinking that resulted in wrong views of God. Instead of these wrong views producing the light of understanding, these views had the opposite effect. They produced darkness rather than light. What idol worshippers thought was a form of ignorance that ignored the obvious. Thus, though they declared themselves wise, their convictions and the behavior produced by those convictions made them fools. They substituted the forms of men who died and decayed, of birds that died and decayed, of four legged animals that died and decayed, and of reptiles that died and decayed for an eternal God. They worshipped the created instead of the Creator.

The result was terrifyingly destructive! God abandoned them (a) to their own lusts, (b) to degrading passions, and (c) to a depraved mind. In their idolatrous convictions, they were their own worst enemy, and they never realized it! The behavior resulting from their foolish worship of the created rather than the eternal God Who created included every destructive form of excess known in human attitudes and acts! They without hesitation endorsed the practices that destroyed them!

Paul's use of the approach to gentiles who worshipped idols can be seen in Acts 17:22-31. (a) He used their ignorance to appeal to their curiosity. He noted their acknowledgment of the Unknown God, and said, "What you worship in ignorance, I proclaim to you." He then discussed God as the Creator that was not dependent on human beings. He declared God was close and knowable. He then declared God's nature should not be reduced to a human form presented by human thoughts in art work. While ignorance was excused in the past, repentance was then [and now] expected. God acted, and people were accountable for their decisions.

In Ephesians 4, Paul urged gentile Christians to remember what it was like when they knew nothing about Christ. "Remember when your life was guided by futile thinking like godless people presently are? Remember how such thoughts darkened [not enlightened] your understanding? Remember when ignorance about the true nature of the living God caused your heart to be hard [you were people incapable of being compassionate]? Remember what it was like being people with an insensitive, callused heart? Remember when you had no conscience, put no restraint on yourself? Remember when your lifestyle and objectives were motivated by impure goals and greed?" Remembering again contrasted what they had been to what they were.

Sometimes a person has to remember from what he or she was delivered to appreciate who they are and where they are after deliverance! They were morally and spiritually dead when they lived the idolatrous lifestyle (Ephesians 2:1, 5). Even worse, when they were in that condition they had no awareness of how awful their condition was or what consequences they faced! They could take no credit for what God did for them in Christ. The solution to their problems arose from God's mercy expressed in Christ, not from any deservedness on their part.

The impact of their former convictions in idolatry made them (a) an uncaring people (b) who existed in the darkness of ignorance about the true nature of the living God Who created. The combined influence of these two forces ruled them prior to their being Christians. It made them selfish people who were insensitive to the injustices and sufferings of others. Was that now who they really wanted to be? Was that the existence they once again wished to embrace? Sometimes you have to remember what you were to be committed to being different.

The decision of faith to belong to Christ involves a "becoming," not merely an acknowledgment. One is converted to Jesus Christ in order to become something he or she was not. For the person who is completely alienated from God, there is an awareness of what I was without God in my life. For the person who was blessed by the influences of a godly home and Christian environment, there is the desire to give God complete control over his/her continued development as a person. In both situations, there is the inner, personal desire to allow the eternal God to determine (a) who I am and (b) how I live as I mature and develop. It involves a conscious choice! It involves a leaving as well as a becoming!

Who would you be as a person, a spouse, a parent, a friend, or a worker if all influences of God were removed from your life? If Jesus Christ was not at work in any aspect of your life, who would you be and what would you do?

For Thought and Discussion

1. Often when Paul wrote about idolatrous gentiles, to what two things did he refer?
2. The call to Christ in the New Testament was never a plea to be what? What was the plea?
3. In Romans 1:18-32, what group did Paul say existed?
 - a. What two words did Paul often use when talking to or about idolatrous gentiles?
 - b. To what does futile refer?
 - c. What substitution did idolatrous people make?
 - d. To what three things did God abandon them?
 - e. What were these people?
4. How did Paul use idolatrous ignorance in his sermon in Acts 17?
5. What did Paul encourage gentile Christians to do in Ephesians 4?
6. Sometimes a Christian has to do what to appreciate deliverance?
7. Faith's decision to belong to Christ involves what?