

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND
THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL:
A STUDY OF EPHESIANS

(LESSON FIFTY-NINE)

“ALIENATED FROM THE LIFE OF GOD”

EPHESIANS 4:17-24 (KING JAMES VERSION)

17 This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind,

18 Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart:

19 Who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.

20 But ye have not so learned Christ;

21 If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus:

22 That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts;

23 And be renewed in the spirit of your mind;

24 And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.

EPHESIANS 4:17-24 (NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

17 So I say this, and insist in the Lord, that you no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking.

18 They are darkened in their understanding, being alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardness of their hearts.

19 Because they are callous, they have given themselves over to indecency for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.

20 But you did not learn about Christ like this,

21 if indeed you heard about him and were taught in him, just as the truth is in Jesus.

22 You were taught with reference to your former way of life to lay aside the old man who is being corrupted in accordance with deceitful desires,

23 to be renewed in the spirit of your mind,

24 and to put on the new man who has been created in God's image — in righteousness and holiness that comes from truth.

In the first **16** verses of **Ephesians** chapter **4**, which we have already examined, the Apostle Paul deals with the nature of the Church, and the role of each believer in the growth and development of the Church. In these verses, he expounds on how believers are to operate **internally**, with their brothers and sisters.

In verse **17**, he begins to expound on how believers are to operate **externally** — how they should relate with the unbelieving world in which they live. He writes, *“This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind.”*

He urges believers not to *“walk... as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind.”* The word *“walk,”* is the translation of a Greek word which literally means, “to walk about.” Eventually, it came to mean, “to order one’s behaviour, or to conduct one’s self.” The word is in the present tense in the Greek, indicating a habitual action. In other words, Paul is saying to the Ephesian believers, “Do not fall back into the **habitual** practices of those who do not know Jesus Christ as Lord.”

Before the Ephesians were saved, they had ordered every aspect of their behaviour, and regulated the totality of their lives, within the sphere of trespasses and sins. The same is true of every one of us. Paul identifies the influencing factor which caused them and us to do so, as *“the vanity of their mind,”* or *“the futility of their thinking.”* The word *“vanity,”* is the translation of a Greek word which means, “emptiness, nonsense, nothingness.” It refers to that which is devoid of truth and appropriateness. It describes the inability to reach a goal or achieve a purpose.

Paul exhorts the believers in Ephesus not to think like unsaved people do; not to adopt the world’s philosophy of living, or follow the world’s value system, because the world lives in vanity, futility and emptiness of mind. All their thoughts, words, and deeds are enveloped in an atmosphere of sin and vanity. All that they try to achieve is ultimately futile in giving them complete satisfaction.

Unsaved people walk *“in the vanity of their mind.”* The word *“mind,”* is the translation of the Greek word **Nous: (nooce)** which refers not merely to the intellectual faculty, or understanding, but also to the faculty for recognizing moral good and spiritual truth. It is not merely reason but conscience.

According to **1 Corinthians 2:16**, believers have a new mind, *“the mind (nous) of Christ.”* According to **Romans 12:2**, this new mind is renewed as believers intentionally and consistently choose not to be conformed to this world’s way of thinking but to be radically transformed.

The *“renewing of the mind”* may be defined as the gradual conforming of the believer more and more to that new spiritual world into which he or she has been introduced, and in which he or she now lives and moves. It is the gradual restoration of the divine image and likeness of God in which human beings were originally created.

How are we changed *“from glory to glory?”* How does the Holy Spirit make us more and more like Jesus? For this to be accomplished, we must be active co-workers with God. The change of the outward man is entirely dependent upon the renovation, the complete change for the better of the inward man. This is accomplished through the ministry of the Holy Spirit who dwells in the Christian. The Spirit, when He is definitely, intelligently and consistently yielded to, puts sin out of the Christian’s life and produces His own fruit. **He does this by controlling the mental processes of the Christian.** As we yield to the Spirit, our mental processes will be affected in a positive manner. Ultimately, our outward expression will be affected, for whatever the mind dwells on will be revealed by our words and deeds.

Brothers and sisters, this process requires great effort on our part. We have the responsibility and privilege of yielding ourselves to the Holy Spirit’s dominance more and more, until it becomes habitual for us to do so.

We say again, the believer is not to imitate the lifestyle of the unsaved persons around him or her. Unsaved persons are *“dead in trespasses and sins,”* according to **Ephesians 2:1**.

Believers, on the other hand, have been raised from the dead and been given eternal life in Jesus Christ. Believers **think** differently from unsaved people. The first evidence of the work of regeneration in the life of a person is repentance, which is a **change of mind**. The whole outlook of a person changes when he or she is saved by believing in Jesus Christ, including his or her values, goals, and interpretation of life.

Believers cannot pattern the lifestyle of unbelievers, because believers have experienced the miracle of being raised from the dead. Their lives are not futile, but purposeful. Their minds are filled with the light of God's Word, and their hearts are flooded with the fullness of God's life. Their bodies are to be given to God as instruments of righteousness. In every way, the believer is different from the unbeliever, and therefore, Paul urges them to *"walk not as other Gentiles walk."*

In verse **18**, Paul moves on to analyze more closely this problem of faulty thinking. He explains why human thinking is so pointless and without ultimate significance. He writes, *"Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart."*

The understanding of unsaved persons is darkened. The Greek word translated *"darkened,"* literally means to be, or to become dark, to cover with darkness. Figuratively, the word means to darken or blind the mind. It means to become unable to perceive and thus, unable to understand. It is in a construction in the Greek which indicates that the effect of darkening comes from outside. In response to lost humanity's consistent rejection of Him, God gave to it a mind which cannot stand trial. God gave lost humanity up and over to a "trial-less" mind, a mind which was incapable of discharging the functions of a mind with respect to the things of salvation.

Unsaved persons cannot think straight about spiritual matters. Since they do not know God, they cannot truly understand the world around them, nor can they truly understand themselves! **Our world today possesses a great deal of knowledge, but very little wisdom.** As **Dr. Melissa Royal** told us recently, **"Wisdom is seeing things the way God sees them."** The American naturalist and philosopher, **Henry David Thoreau**, summarized the vanity and futility of lost humanity beautifully when he said that we have, *"improved means to unimproved ends."*

The word *"darkened,"* is in the **perfect tense** which speaks of a process completed in the past, but which has present results. Paul uses the perfect tense here to show the finished and permanent result of the blinding of the mind by the "sin virus" which all of Adam's descendants have inherited. The believers in Ephesus had all been in this enduring state of darkness before they were regenerated by the Gospel of grace.

Brothers and sisters, **only God can open the human understanding to spiritual truth.** Only He can reverse the long-term effects of a darkened understanding. Only an inner transformation of the entire human personality, which is accomplished by a work of God alone, can open the mind and understanding of a person to the Lord.

The American theologian, **Wayne Barber**, commenting on this passage, made the following remarks: "Think about this when you think of the world. When you go to school next week, when you go to work next week, you are walking out into this. The Gentile nations, the world, has no ability on their own to understand spiritual truths because their ability to understand has been darkened. As a result, they live totally unacceptable lives. So, when we go out into darkness, among people with darkened minds, we are not to allow our flesh to pull us back to the way we used to live. They are living a detestable lifestyle. They are a generation after generation after generation of people who don't have a capacity to even understand God... *'Being darkened'* has the idea that God darkened them, but remember this, they would not, so therefore, they could not. It is not a matter of God being a mean God, and just darkening them. No, He knows the hearts of all men and nations who have turned against Him.

He knows that. It began with Adam and filtered down through the nations and because of that, they have been unwilling to bow to Him. Therefore, God has darkened their minds. In reality, it is their own unwillingness that has brought the darkness upon them.”

Paul proceeds to give us a further description and explanation of the vain and futile “walk” of the Gentiles. He informs us that their lifestyle is what it is, because of the condition of moral darkness into which they were born, and in which they have continued to live and operate. He writes, “*Being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart.*” Paul is making the point that it was absolutely just and right that they were alienated, or excluded from “*the life of God,*” because their ignorance was not accidental but willful! Paul himself tells us this in **Romans 1:18-23**. The **New Living Translation** renders the passage as follows:

18 *But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness.*

19 *They know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them.*

20 *For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature. **So they have no excuse for not knowing God.***

21 *Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused.*

22 *Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools.*

23 *And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people and birds and animals and reptiles.*

The words “*being alienated*” are the translation of a Greek word which means, “To alienate, exclude, estrange.” It means, “To be shut out from one’s fellowship and intimacy.” To alienate always implies a loss of affection or interest. Paul is informing us that unsaved persons are at a great distance from God. They are shut out from fellowship and intimacy with Him.

The word is in the **perfect tense** in the Greek which indicates a past completed action with ongoing effect or results. Because of Adam’s transgression, all of his offspring are naturally born sinners, alienated from the womb, from the life of God. The **New English Translation** renders David’s statement in **Psalms 51:5** as follows: “*Look, I was guilty of sin from birth, a sinner the moment my mother conceived me.*” David’s point is that the corruption of all the descendants of Adam is not a development of later life but can be traced to their birth. Their lawlessness and rebellion are inborn, so that as men begin to talk, they begin to lie! They do not have to be taught to sin; they sin naturally because they are sinners by nature! They are alienated and estranged from birth. This alienation persists all their life, unless God intervenes and saves them by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Unsaved persons are alienated, excluded, estranged from “*The life of God.*” The word “*life,*” is a translation of the Greek word **zōé: (dzo-ay’)**, which in the New Testament is used of the absolute fullness of life, both essential and ethical, which belongs to God. The life of God is the life that God has in Himself and that which He imparts to the believing sinner. It is the eternal life conferred by God to men and women who are otherwise dead in their trespasses and sins. Unsaved persons have no concept of **zōé**, the life that God possesses, the life of which He approves and the life whereby He lives in believers and they in Him. It is of this life that Paul speaks in **Galatians 2:20**. The **Passion Translation** renders the verse in the following way: “*My old identity has been co-crucified with Christ and no longer lives. And now the essence of this **new life** is no longer mine, for the Anointed One lives **his life** through me — we live in union as one!*”

*My **new life** is empowered by the faith of the Son of God who loves me so much that he gave himself for me, dispensing **his life** into mine!”*

Ray Stedman, in his commentary on this passage, made the following remarks: “Because their understanding is darkened, shadowed, incomplete, in their ignorance they reject the life of God and therefore cut themselves off from the one thing man needs to be man! Both nature and Scripture concur that man is incomplete without God. Man was made to be the dwelling place of God. **It is God in man which makes man a man.**

This was fully demonstrated by the Lord Jesus Christ. It was because he was so fully indwelt of the Father that he was able to be fully and wholly a man, man as God intended man to be. Therefore, the life of God is essential to manhood and without it man is blinded, weak, and ignorant.”

Paul goes on to tell us that unsaved persons are alienated or excluded from the life of God through, or because of, *“the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart.”* The fact that lost humanity is excluded from the life of God is because of their ignorance of God, and their ignorance of God is in turn, due to the hardening of their hearts, or their insensitivity to God and His ways. The word *“ignorance,”* is the translation of a Greek word which refers to a lack of knowledge, especially of divine things. It is ignorance which is inexcusable and involves moral blindness. Paul speaks here, of this *“ignorance”* not simply as “their ignorance,” but as an ignorance *“that is in them.”* This phrase describes their ignorance not as something external, or superficial, but as something **in themselves**. This is an ignorance for which they themselves are responsible! It is an ignorance in their own nature.

The Apostle Peter, in **2 Peter 3:5**, speaks of such persons as being “willingly ignorant.” The word *“willingly,”* is the translation of a Greek word which expresses a desire that comes from an active decision of one’s will and clearly implies choice and purpose. The word is in a construction in the Greek which indicates these persons are habitually willful and that their willfulness is the result of a personal choice which they have made. In other words, they persistently ignore the obvious facts.

Paul speaks of this “willing ignorance” in **Romans 1:18-21**, which we looked at earlier. Again, we will consider the translation provided by the **New Living Translation**:

18 *But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness.*

19 *They know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them.*

20 *For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature. **So they have no excuse for not knowing God.***

21 *Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn’t worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused.*

Brothers and sisters, the problem is not that human beings started out by not knowing God. They did know Him, but they refused to glorify Him as God. They were darkened in their understanding because they rejected God and hardened their hearts in respect of what He had revealed of Himself. Ignorance is not necessarily sinful, but willful ignorance certainly is. The light that God had given men in nature became darkness in them. Their faculty of reason becomes impaired because of its abuse. The ignorance that was in them was caused by *“the blindness of their heart.”*

The word *“blindness,”* is a translation of the Greek word **pórosis: (po’-ro-sis)**, which literally describes a **callus** — the bony healing tissue which forms around the ends of broken bone, or the hard formation of tissue formed over a wound.

For example, persons who are engaged in manual labour, especially the type that requires them to use their hands over and over again, usually develop callouses. In this verse, Paul is using **pórosis** figuratively to describe the moral or ethical hardness, callousness, blindness or insensitivity of the hearts of the Ephesians in their former unregenerate state. He is, of course, describing the heart condition of every human being in his or her natural, unregenerate state. **Pórosis refers to** the deadness that inevitably occurs when the heart is no longer sensitive to the urgings of the conscience.

Brothers and sisters, the great danger of sin is its hardening effect. The process of sin is quite discernible. No person becomes a “great” sinner all at once. At first, we regard sin with horror. When we sin in the early stages, we experience remorse and regret. But if we continue to sin, there comes a time when we lose all sensation and we can do the most shameful and wicked things without any remorse or regret at all. Our conscience becomes hardened.

We will conclude this **Lesson** with a lengthy quote from **“Exploring Ephesians and Philippians,”** written by **John Phillips**. Concerning the passage that we have been looking at in this **Lesson**, he writes the following:

“What a collection of words and phrases Paul used to describe the heathen and humanistic thought of his day! Never were his words more graphically illustrated than in our day. People who are outside of Christ simply cannot think straight on moral and spiritual issues. They may articulate the issues, but they leave out the spiritual dimensions because they are blind to them. Therefore, they cannot come to any true conclusions... Their lack of understanding results from “being alienated from the life of God.” The opposite of life is death. Men without God are spiritually dead. No wonder they are unable to think straight in matters of faith and morals.

Man was created to be inhabited by God. God intended for the human spirit to be inhabited by the Holy Spirit. The indwelling Holy Spirit was to enlighten the intellect, ennoble the emotions, and energize the will. Thus, the life of man would express, in human terms, the life of God. The fall ruined all that. Sin entered and the Holy Spirit left. Without the life of the indwelling Holy Spirit, the natural man is spiritually dead, “alienated from the life of God.”

The genius of the gospel is that when we accept Christ as Savior, we are cleansed by His blood and regenerated by His Spirit. The Holy Spirit takes up residence in the human spirit, making it possible for the saved person to have fellowship with God, cooperate with the Holy Spirit, and begin to live the kind of life God intended man to live - a life governed by the Spirit of God...

No wonder Christians should not walk as ‘Gentiles walk.’ We must never copy the beliefs, thought patterns, convictions, and codes of conduct of unsaved people. Even the most brilliant of them are blind leaders of the blind.”