

Pulpit Ministry Mount Merrion Free Presbyterian Church. Lord's Day am 25th Jan 2009

Scripture Reading 1 John Ch4:17

"Union With Christ our

Hope of Survival."

First John was written for believers. There are at least two primary reasons as to why the Apostle John penned this first epistle, firstly that Christians by taking the truths and doctrines that he would lay before them would be brought into an experiential understanding of them, and that this knowledge would be transformed into joy, **Ch1:4**, "*That your joy may be full.*" The second reason as to why John writes his epistle is so that Christians would understand that this world in which they live is lieth in the lap of the evil one! "*the whole world lieth in wickedness.*" These things of which John speaks in Ch1:4 transpire to be the pre-eminent themes of the entire epistle, *fellowship with God, with Christ, spiritual adoption and sonship.* These things which John writes of are the source of joy to the Christian, however, this world is 'resolute' on destroying the joy of the Christian, therefore John writes in order to have God's people see these truths as being vital to their survival in this world! As John writes of these things he expects that they would be brought into unspeakable joy. The joys of knowing that I am a child of God, that I am in a relationship whereby I can have fellowship with Christ and with God. Yet underlying all of these great truths is the one overarching doctrine upon which the Christian's relationship to God, fellowship with Christ and adoption rest, and to which joy unspeakable is attached; that is the truth of the believers Union with Christ. The word of God reveals that Christians are in an eternal Union to Christ. As His Church we are said to be chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph Ch1) - there is an eternal dimension to this union. There is also a present personal dimension that affects the believer now, intense practical application.

The verse to which I turn you to is Ch4:17, a verse that brings out the experiential aspect of being in a vital, saving union to Christ. John speaks of Christians being in this world, that is where we are, it is true to say that it is in this world that the Christian seeks for the practical application of doctrine. We are told in v17 that in this world presently we are as Christ is, that can only be said of those who are in a saving union with Christ, the benefits of understanding that statement can only be enjoyed by those who are in Union to Christ. Those words will cause much searching of heart, even by a mere reading of this statement, the theology and content are overwhelming. Just how do you begin to explain such an expression "*as He [Christ] is, so are we in this world.*"

1) A Union Initiated and Maintained by Grace.

We need to understand that this relationship is ours because of Grace! The union between Christ and His people is gracious in nature when we understand that the partakers of this union with Christ had no input or contribution in two key areas (a) The Initiation of this union (b) The Maintaining of this union. One passage that particularly highlights the gracious elements of this union is **John Ch15**. Here the union of Christ and His people is set forth under the imagery of the '*vine and the branches.*' v5 demonstrates that it is Christ who is the vine, and His people who are the branches.

a) This union was initiated by Grace. In John Ch15 Christians are in view as the branches. The vine is seen as being the controlling factor, the branches are viewed as being subservient to and owing their existence and position within the vine to the vine. In relation to the Church of Christ, no one is entitled to a place within the *body of Christ* except by grace. We observed a few weeks ago, that the motivating or initiatory cause of the Christian's adoption into the family and household of God is the sovereign Love of God, that is why John states, Ch3v1 "*Behold (take note of, meditate thereon) what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the Sons of God...*" This union into which we have been brought is sovereign and undeserved. There was nothing in us or about us that could move God to adopt us or to Love us. 1 John Ch4:19, "*He loved us before we loved him.*"

We have been placed as branches in the vine by grace. We did not decide to unite ourselves with Christ, it was not by their own power, that is a most unnatural thing, **Romans Ch8v7** tells us that the natural man's heart, mind and thoughts are all at enmity with God, he desires not union with God. Furthermore man naturally cannot seek God. He is by nature incapacitated spiritually, Paul states in **Rom Ch5v6**, that man is "*...without strength...*" Man is helpless to bring himself to Christ, many are the examples of scripture that are used to depict this pitiful condition of man, the cry of the impotent man in **John Ch5**, "*I have no man to put me into the pool.*" The palsied man in **Mark Ch2**, who had to be borne by four friends, the blind man in **John Ch9**. Yet graciously Christ comes to men, by His spirit He calls men to Himself. Union to Christ is an act of grace! It is grace that first contrived a way to save rebellious man!

b) This union is maintained by Grace. John Ch15:5 "*Without me ye can do nothing (are nothing)*"

The life of the branch is fully dependent upon the vine, from the vine all life, vitality and sustenance is drawn. In the same way the spiritual life of the Christian is dependent upon Christ. Christ says in v4, "*...The branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine.*" what we are being shown is that the branch (the Christian) in itself has not the resources to sustain itself. Sustenance comes alone from Christ. **Rev Ch1**, the Church resembled as a lampstand, not a light (*the instrument*), yet in other places the Church is said to be a light...Christ walking as the light in the midst of her draws its light, without the light it is only a lampstand. Without Christ it is only a collection of dry branches. The Church cannot function without Christ, "*Ye can do nothing, ye are nothing.*" because the Church is united to Christ there ought to be the production of fruit (v4).

However, because we are in Christ then our lives are to be marked by an expectant yielding of fruit, i.e. spiritual fruit. Fruit is evidence of our union to Christ, as spiritual fruit is seen on the branches, so are they demonstrated to be joined to the vine. Christ expects fruit of His Church, furthermore His Father is glorified by a fruitful Church (v8). Spiritual exercises such as prayer, study of the bible, form the basis of communion with God. This fruit will be there in some degree! It must be, because the life of Christ was one of communion with God, therefore that same life must be present. The life of the vine is the life of the branches, take away the life from the vine and the branch dies.

There are times the Christian lives outside of the vine (*understand me, you cannot be separated from the vine, but you can behave and live as if you were not part of the vine*). Fellowship and communion with Christ can be interrupted. Trying to be

independent of Christ, is like squeezing/restricting the lifeline. We leave the home without prayer, we feel that our families can go all week without assembling for family worship in the home, it's not too long before the heart begins to dry up, communications in the family are dry and fragile, the vitalising sap that the word and prayer gives is absent. Without Christ we are dead and dry. Grace has placed me in Christ, and it is grace that keeps me there. It is not by works that I keep myself in Christ, so many Christian's beat themselves up over their failures, we should mark our failures, but we should run with them to Christ! Paul felt the failures of the flesh [Rom Ch6 and Ch7], the good that I would do, I do not, yet later he could say. I live yet not I but Christ that liveth in me!

2) **A Union that is Unchangeable.**

Grace has brought us into union with a person, that person being Christ. The amount of our understanding of what it is to be joined to Christ, cannot exceed our knowledge of who and what Christ is. What we know of Christ we will know of our being joined to Him. This requires our minds to focus upon the person of Christ, surely there must be an interest in the heart of the Child of God to think and to ask the question, "Well who is this one to whom I am united by love and grace?" What we know of Christ affects our relationship to Christ...it is to Christ we are joined.

As we look to the word of God we discover that one of the pre-eminent attributes of Christ's person is His immutability (unchangeable). The most well known text is **Heb Ch13v8**, "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever." Heb 1v12, "...Thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail." Turn to **Rev Ch1v8**, here is a title of Christ, "I am Alpha and Omega" The reference is to the first & final letters of the Greek alphabet. The alphabetic characters 'Alpha' and 'Omega' are unchangeable the first and last initials. Yet Christ applies this description to His person and says, like the unchanging Alpha and Omega 'I am.' There's so much in that title our saviour. Again we have the appearance of the "I AM" same as John Ch15 'the vine.' v8 along with v11 are really amplified/extended statements of **Exodus Ch3v14**, "I AM that I AM" The voice that spoke from the bush was none other than the second person of the Trinity (Christ) that can be proven also from **Acts Ch7v35-38**. Essentially the words of Exodus Ch3v14 read, Moses 'I will always be what I always have been.' I am the unchanging God! Unchanging in my nature/essence, in my attributes, promises, in my covenant dealings with my people, unchanged towards the objects of my love. **Malachi Ch3v6**, "I am the Lord, I change not..." As I am with Christ I am with you my people!

The Christian finds himself in an ever-changing environment, he discovers that his own affections, his love, his zeal alters and fluctuates because of this world, and the pull that it has on the heart. Yet the Christian can focus upon that which is unchanging, we are as Christ is in this world, loved as Christ is loved!

3) **A Union that is practical in its application.**

Turn to Malachi Ch3:6. The expression "Son's of Jacob" is a title used to depict the (elect) children of God, those whom God foreknew from all eternity and foreordained to salvation. The Son's of Jacob are those in union with God the Son. As such they now possess certain rights and privileges. Privileges that they did not inherit by natural birth, but only flow freely from a possession of this title 'Son of Jacob.' **John Ch1v12**. They have a right to now call themselves the sons of God. They have a right to enter in through the gates of the everlasting city. Those are future benefits, but what about now, in this world, what can I draw from this statement "As Christ is so are we in this world", this saving union must have application for me now! The Lord relays through the prophet Malachi one signal benefit and privilege that the saints of God enjoy, that rests upon the unchanging union that exists between them and God, "We are not consumed." The Lord here is not so much referring to being consumed in Hell, although that is true, the Lord could have cut us all off, damned all humanity, Spurgeon, "I should have been a faggot in the fire." there is such a thing as being consumed in this world, there is being condemned before we die, alive but dead and damned...left to ourselves. Christian (Son of Jacob) can you recall times when sin and temptation has taken hold of you by the two arms and you have felt in your soul that God should have cast you headlong into the flames of Hell. Then there are those times when you look over you experience as a Christian, you see those times of which I speak, (the wicked thoughts that cross our minds, the wicked deeds, yet here I am this morning, why because of an unchanging union to Christ) knowing how God should have dealt with you, but remembering how God did deal with you, and you heart is turned to God in prayer, 'Thou art God, thou changest not, thou hast not dealt with me according to my transgressions praise be to thy name.' Why does God not consume his people? We believe he should, but he doesn't, he may chastise them, but destroy them he can never do; here is why, because God sees his son and then he sees me, I am in the beloved therefore accepted and free!

We have not been consumed, we are not consumed and we will not be consumed, why? Because of who He is? John says that the Christian will have boldness in the day of judgement, the day of consummation, why? Here is why, "because as He is so am I...", "because as He is, so I will be..." When facing the judgement day Christians will have in their possession a boldness like unto Christ...Union with Christ is the foundation of the Christian's boldness on the judgement day. 'One with himself I cannot die, my sinful soul is counted free, for God the just is satisfied to look on him and pardon me' You see it is 'as Christ is, so are we' The Father looks first at Christ, and then he sees me.

We have outlined the confidence that the Christian possesses, a confidence that will ensure a blessed passage through this world and into the ethereal world to come. Yet many there are who possess a presumptuous confidence that is absent of Christ, yet there is that insipid trust that somehow things will be okay when the judgement of the world arrives.

I remind you of John's opening words Ch1v4, "These things I write unto you that your joy may be full." I ask you Christian, does that bring joy to your soul?

Bold shall I stand in Thy great day;
For who aught to my charge shall lay?
Fully absolved through these I am
From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.

When from the dust of death I rise
To claim my mansion in the skies,
Ev'n then this shall be all my plea,
Jesus hath lived, hath died, for me.