

TOGETHER WITH CHRIST

Ephesians 2:5-6

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Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, July 20, 2008

Even when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved – and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:5-6).

One of the best summaries of Christianity comes from the 19th century Scotsman, Hugh Martin. Martin wrote that Christianity can be summed up in two expressions: “Christ for Us”, and “We with Christ”. This perfectly sums up Paul’s thought in Ephesians chapters one and two. Chapter one tells what God has done for us in Christ, apart from which we cannot be saved. The New Testament proclaims this over and over: Christ was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21); he was made a curse for us (Gal. 3:13); he died for us (Rom. 5:8); he rose from the grave for us (Rom. 8:34; 2 Cor. 5:15); and he ascended into heaven and rules in power for us (Eph. 1:22). Everything Jesus did, he did for us, that we might be saved.

But, as Martin points out, “Christ for us” must be joined to “We with Christ.” We must receive Christ and trust him for our salvation and become his disciple. Therefore, the New Testament says, we were “crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:19). And as Paul says in Ephesians 2:5-6, “we were made alive with Christ, and raised with Christ, and seated with Christ in heavenly places.” Martin explains, “If he lived for us, we now live with him, for as he was, so are we in the world.”¹ Jesus’ experience has become our experience. Just as he died for our

¹ Hugh Martin, *Christ for Us* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998), 50.

sin, we now die to our sin with him. Just as he was resurrected to live with God forever, so we now also live a new life in service to God.

UNION WITH CHRIST

This is the great doctrine of the believer's union with Jesus Christ. Arthur Pink wrote, "The subject of spiritual union is the most important, the most profound, and yet the most blessed of any that is set forth in sacred Scripture." But then he lamented, "Sad to say, there is hardly any [subject] which is now more generally neglected. The very expression 'spiritual union' is unknown in most professing Christian circles."²

What then does it mean to be united with Christ? Paul explains it with three statements found in verses 5 and 6. He says in verse 5 that believers are "made alive together with Christ." He adds, in verse 6, that we were also "raised up with him" and "seated with him." These three expressions sum up Paul's understanding of what it means to have union with Christ through faith.

It is helpful to know that Paul coined three new words in this description. The union with Christ of which he speaks was a new reality that had not previously been known, so there were no suitable words available to Paul. Just as people today come up with new words as needed, such as *internet* or *networking*, Paul too invented new words. His new words here each involve a combination using the Greek prefix *sun*, which means *together with*. For the first, he combines the verb for *to live* (Greek, *zoein*), with the verb for *to make* (Greek, *poiein*), and adds the prefix *with*. His new word is "made alive together with." The second and third words are simpler ones: Paul adds *with* to the word for *to raise up*, and also to the verb that means *to be seated*: made alive with, raised up with, and seated with.

With these three words, Paul expresses the believer's union with Christ. But what kind of union is it? Our union with Christ is obviously not a physical one; we were not physically dead and we have not physically been raised up to heaven.

² Cited from James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 59.

The Bible speaks of our union with Christ in two senses. The first is a covenant or representative union. It is often called “federal headship”. When we receive Jesus as our savior, we become the beneficiaries of all that he did; our sins are credited to him to be put away on the cross and his righteousness is credited to us. This is what the expression “Christ for us” gets at – believers are joined to Christ in God’s saving covenant so that we receive the benefit of what Jesus did. Jesus came into the world with a work to be done, and as he died upon the cross, he cried out in satisfaction, “It is finished” (Jn. 19:30).

But that is not the only kind of union of which the Bible speaks. There is also the believer’s spiritual or experiential union with Christ. This is Paul’s emphasis in these verses. He means that the experience of Jesus in his death, resurrection, ascension and heavenly reign sets the pattern for our experience on earth and then in heaven. God’s Son became like us so that we might become like him. This is what Paul meant when he wrote, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:19-20).

This is what defines a true Christian. A Christian is not merely someone who comes to church and who even assents to certain doctrines. A Christian is one in whom Christ is living, and whose life is increasingly taking on Christ’s pattern of death, resurrection, ascension to heaven and eternal reign. Everything Paul speaks of in these verses is described in the past tense: having died with Christ, a believer is made alive with Christ, is raised up with Christ and is seated with him in the heavenly realm.

Verses 5 and 6 involve ideas that are difficult to understand, until we realize that Paul is contrasting our present experience with his description of our past in verses 1-3. There is a parallelism that unlocks the meaning of Paul’s three invented words. Paul said we were “dead in trespasses”; now he says we have been “made alive together with Christ.” He said we were in bondage to the world, the flesh and the devil; now he says we have been raised up into a heavenly citizenship. He said we were “by nature children of wrath.” But we are no longer under God’s condemnation and have been seated with Christ in the heavenly realms.

MADE ALIVE TOGETHER WITH CHRIST

The first of these terms describes what has happened to us in our conversion to Christ as a spiritual resurrection.³ We were “dead in trespasses,” but God has “made us alive together with Christ.” We were uninterested in the things of God; now we find them exciting and important. We were unresponsive to God’s promptings and repulsed by the Bible, but now we find ourselves being molded by God’s Word and eager to learn more of the Bible’s teaching. We never used to pray, except out of desperation; now we talk with God all the time. What has happened? Just as God raised Jesus from the dead, he has made us spiritually alive. We were living as if God did not exist, or, like Adam and Eve after their sin, we were trying to escape from God. But now we not only know that God is there, but we trust him as our Lord and Savior.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones uses the illustration of a flower that is closed up at night, its pedals turned inward and its face closed to God. That is how our hearts and minds were with respect to God. But the sun comes up in the morning and its glorious rays strike the flower’s pedals. What happens? The pedals open toward the sun and soak in its life-giving rays. That is what God has done with us.⁴ Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:6 that God “has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” We are now alive to God and our lives are turned to him for light and salvation in Jesus Christ. That is what it means to be born again, to be made alive to God together with Christ.

RAISED UP WITH CHRIST

According to Paul, the life that was dead in sin had two chief features. There were two sides to our problem: our guilt and our bondage in sin. Speaking of sin’s bondage, he said we were “following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air... in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind” (Eph. 2:2-3). If the life in sin involves that kind of bondage, then salvation in Christ means deliverance and liberation.

³ See the more extensive treatment of our spiritual resurrection in the previous chapter.

⁴ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God’s Way of Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 89.

Paul refers to this in his second description of our union with Christ, writing in verse 6 that God “raised us up with him.”

This refers to Jesus’ ascension into heaven and its significance for believers. Jesus was taken out of this world and entered into his heavenly life. Likewise, we who are still physically in this world are no longer of it. We are no longer slaves to the thoughts and desires of the world. We are no longer in bondage to the prince of this present, evil age – that is, the devil. We are no longer powerless before the temptations of sinful desires. Just as Christ ascended into heaven, we, too, are no longer ruled by worldly powers but are under authority of the kingdom of God.

In Philippians 3:18-21, Paul explained this by contrasting those who belong to this world and the Christian, whose citizenship is now in heaven. Of worldly person, he wrote, “Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.” But of the Christian, he says, “Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

This is the difference between a Christian and the man or woman of the world. The worldly man worships “his belly”, Paul says; that is, he worships those things that satisfy his fleshly cravings. Furthermore, he glories in things that are shameful, having his mind set on earthly things. That is a perfect description of the values and ideals of this present world, along with those who belong to it. But a Christian is one who has been spiritually taken out of the world. His citizenship is in heaven and the things he hopes for are there, safe and secure with Christ. He does not look forward to worldly riches or glory or fame or pleasure, but has set his hope on a heavenly reward. Paul adds that he awaits the return of Jesus Christ and the final resurrection; that is the salvation he seeks.

This is something God has done to and for everyone who is joined to Christ in faith. This is not just a qualification for top Christians, but is the basic description of everyone who is truly joined to Christ and is saved. It is not optional, but fundamental to Christianity. For sure, the implications are still being worked out in our lives. This is what

Christian growth and maturity look like, that we think less and less like the world around us. Worldly affairs and pleasures occupy less of our attention and we think more about Christ and heaven. We are like a person who has his home address and his business address on his calling card. Heaven is our home; this present world is just our place of business for the time being. Our thoughts, our desires, our affections, are increasingly to be with Christ in heaven. We are in the world, but no longer of it. The apostle John therefore writes:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world (1 Jn. 2:15-16).

People complain about this kind of Christianity. You hear the expression, “That person is too heavenly-minded to be of earthly good.” I have found that that statement has it exactly backward. It is the heavenly-minded people who are the most earthly good, who are most merciful and who give sacrificially to others and to God’s work. Instead, it is the earthly-minded person who is of little heavenly good! It is the man or woman whose heart is still attached to worldly status symbols and worldly entertainments, to worldly boasting and worldly ambitions who has little or no time to serve the kingdom of God and to sacrifice for the blessing of other people.

The true Christian, Paul says, “has been raised up together with Christ.” There is no other way to serve and worship God. We cannot look up and down at the same time. We cannot serve both God and money. We cannot live for this present life and also store up treasures in heaven. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt. 6:21). We can either live as if this present life is our ultimate destination, seeking to enrich and fill ourselves with everything we desire, as if there is no God and as if eternity is but a mirage. The Bible says to such a person, “You fool!” Or we can believe the Bible’s teaching that this life is not our destination, but only preparation for eternity to come. The Christian’s destination is in eternity, in heaven, and we must live now as those whose hopes have been raised there together with Christ.

God makes us alive from the death of our sin, and then delivers us from the bondage of a worldly life to live as citizens of heaven and eternal sons and heirs.

SEATED WITH CHRIST

Third, Paul says God “seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (v. 6). This refers to Christ’s reign in power, seated in heaven at the right hand of God the Father. Believers partake of this and its effects become real in our present experience.

Following the contrast with verses 1-3, we see that this corresponds to our condemnation in sin as “children of wrath.” In Christ, we are no longer condemned, but are seated with him in the presence of God. The opposite of condemnation and judgment is not just acquittal or forgiveness. We aspire to too little if we think this is all we want from God. The opposite of condemnation is acceptance into God’s inner circle, adoption into his family, and embrace close to his side, to be seated at his right hand together with Christ. God has “seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

This idea would have been more familiar back in the days of kings and queens. A king would take someone into his favor and allow the man or woman to ride next to him while traveling. The favored person would have intimate fellowship with the king, sharing his thoughts and observations. He would be blessed with the king’s attention and affection. This is what it means for us, who were condemned in our guilt, to be made alive with Christ, raised up with him, and then seated with him in the heavenly places.

A helpful example from medieval times is King Arthur’s round table. There he gathered his loyal knights to his cause. They sat together for fellowship and council of war, profiting from Arthur’s wisdom, and sharing with him his burdens and his triumphs. The Bible says that believers will “reign with Christ” (2 Tim. 2:10); we will be his band of brothers, his mighty men and maidens, his trusted comrades in arms.

There is a scene early in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Return of the King* that makes me think of Paul’s teaching. The hero of the story, the mighty wizard, Gandalf, arrives at a great city just in time to help defend it

from attack. With him is one of the hobbits, the small and insignificant people who play so important a role in the book. When Gandalf and the hobbit arrive, the ruler of the city is fascinated by the small creature, who in turn is awed by the ruler and the glory of his city. A bond between them is forged and the hobbit offers his fealty to the lord, who takes him into his service as his personal squire. He seats the hobbit beside him on his throne and during the day the ruler tells him the lore of the kingdom and recounts the great triumphs of his realm. The hobbit, meanwhile, shares with him the story of his adventures and sings songs from his native land.

This is a lovely picture of the great privilege that has been granted us by God as he takes us into his service and favor and even into his intimate presence. It reminds me of the apostle John seated next to the Lord Jesus at the Last Supper, resting his head upon Jesus' breast. When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we should realize that we likewise have been seated at the table of Christ's fellowship, to partake of the glorious grace of God. C. Austin Miles expressed this wonderfully in a hymn:

He walks with me, and he talks with me,
And he tells me that I am his own;
And the joys we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.⁵

Do you know anything about that? Do you know what it is to be seated in the heavenly realms with Christ? Has God disclosed to you something of his glory through his Word? Have you felt the warmth of his interest and fellowship in prayer? This is the Christian life. God opens up his own heart to us and makes our cares his own.

Furthermore, Jesus' sitting down was a sign of his total victory. The Bible says God seated Christ above every name and power and placed all his enemies beneath his feet. The same is true for us, being seated with him. As Paul says in Romans 6:14, "Sin shall have no dominion over you."

⁵ C. Austin Miles, *Title*, year.

Christians sin, but no longer because we must. The world, the flesh and the devil may tempt you, but they can no longer rule you. Paul wrote in Romans 8:2, “The law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” Just as God raised our Lord Jesus into heaven and seated him at his right hand, so also shall God deliver you from the power and persecution and condemnation of this world. As John wrote, “The world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 Jn. 2:17).

Moreover, being seated with Christ, Christians have full assurance of salvation. God receives us with the promise of his gospel: “For I will forgive their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more” (Heb. 8:12). Jesus adds, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Mt. 11:28). God’s Word asks us, seated as we are in Christ, “Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” (Rom. 8:33-35). Because we rest on Christ’s finished work, safe and secure, Paul concludes, “We are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Rom. 8:37).

BY GRACE YOU HAVE BEEN SAVED

Paul is describing true Christianity, something far more than mere attendance at church and knowledge of doctrine. This is an exalted life in total and fundamental contrast with the life we have known before. We were dead, but God has made us alive. We were slaves to sin, but God liberated us to live in righteousness, peace and joy. We were condemned in our guilt, but God elevated us to the inner circle of his intimate fellowship, to rest and assurance of eternal blessing and life.

Many of us present will have to admit that we know little or nothing of what Paul is saying. This is why we need to remember the exclamation he makes right in the middle of this carefully crafted teaching. You can always tell when Paul has something burdening his mind, because he simply cannot hold it in. Here, it slips out at the end of verse 5: “By grace you have been saved.”

How important this is for us to remember. When Paul says that God made us alive together with Christ, raised us up with Christ, and seated us with Christ in the heavenly realms, he is not talking about something we have to do. He is not challenging us to get our acts together. He is talking about a gift that every Christian has received, yet how few realize the extent of God's grace for us in Christ. Paul's point is not to show you how you are failing and how disappointed God is with you, but rather to open your eyes to how dear you are to God and all that he has made available to you in Christ. This is all past tense. It is accomplished. If you are in Christ through a living faith, then you have been made alive with him, you have been raised up a citizen of heaven, and you have been seated with Christ in God's presence, clothed with forgiveness and favor and fellowship with God.

William Barclay tells of a Scottish woman who lived in squalor in the cellar of her large house. Shortly after George Matheson arrived as the new pastor of her church, a man stopped by to find that she now lived in the bedroom on the top floor and that all was neat and clean. He commented on the change, and she replied, "Ay, you canna hear George Matheson preach and live in a cellar."⁶ So it is with Paul's teaching here. Are you living in the cellar of the salvation God has provided to you in Christ? Then move up into the rooms God has long since prepared for you and begin to live the life he has made possible for you in Jesus Christ.

If you are not a Christian, then this is what you are missing. You are dead in trespasses, alienated from God and his love, held fast in the bitter chains of a loveless, cruel and evil world. Even worse, whether you know it or not you stand condemned in the courts of God's eternal judgment. Here is good news, for if you will confess your sin and look to Jesus Christ for salvation, if you will cry to heaven, where he is seated with God, you will not only be completely forgiven but completely saved. You may be transformed and renewed, liberated from the bondage of your old, rotten life and granted a share in the eternal inheritance of glory.

⁶ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 103.

If you are in Christ, if you have long since believed on Jesus and called upon his name, then start receiving by faith the riches that God proclaims to you from this text. You are no longer dead, so start living to God. You are no longer a slave to sin but a citizen of heaven. Start living for things that will never fade away. And you are nearer to the heart of God than you ever imagined, seated with him in Christ. Give him your heart and take his in return. Partake of his glory and then start reflecting his light into a world that is dead in sin, so that others might be saved by the same grace that gave this matchless gift to you.