

## STUDY 7

# Possessed by Christ

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The English word ‘possessed’ can have distasteful associations. The Gospels use it to describe demonic control (Mark 1:32; 5:18; Luke 8:36). In general conversation, some people ask: ‘Whatever *possessed* you to do that?’ A bowerbird compulsively accumulates *possessions* (Luke 12:15; Matt. 19:22). To be *possessed by Christ*, however, is to be chosen for his purpose, secured in a forgiven, reconciled and robust relationship, and empowered by grace, to conform our lives to his good and gracious will. It sets things in place: ‘My beloved is mine and I am his’ (Song of Sol. 2:16).<sup>1</sup>

### A TREASURED POSSESSION

The apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth to help correct some serious moral and doctrinal issues in their midst. He approached his task, not by adopting the stance of a moral crusader, but by highlighting this matter of being *possessed by Christ*. These sanctified saints of cosmopolitan Corinth had been baptised into a new fellowship with God, through the gracious ministry of Jesus Christ. His death and resurrection purchased for them a new freedom from sin, of unprecedented magnitude. This freedom arises from a security in knowing ‘Jesus is Lord’, and so from being under his Lordship. As such, adoption into Christ’s Sonship with the Father, through the Spirit, means—among other things—that we are *not our own*:

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own.<sup>20</sup> For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

Rejoicing in freedom, Paul describes himself as a *slave* of God (Titus 1:1; Col. 1:7). Having the same mind as Christ, we are to look not to our own interests, but to the interests of others (Phil. 2:4–8), and to those of the Father (John 5:30).

Christ’s desire for a people of his own rich, treasured possession has a long and purposive history. It first appears in Exodus 19:5 and then in Deuteronomy 7:6:

Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be *my treasured possession* out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine,<sup>6</sup> but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites (Exod. 19:5–6).

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless shown otherwise. Italics are mine.

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For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his *treasured possession* (Deut. 7:6).

The NASB translates Titus 2:14, by adopting the rich meaning of the words derived from Deuteronomy 7:6, namely *a people for His own possession*:

[He] gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify *for Himself a people for His own possession*, zealous for good deeds.

Peter draws upon this rich understanding of God's purpose for Israel, as he describes the new situation of the New Testament church—*God's own people*. God's purpose in choosing, calling, cleansing and equipping them as his own special possession, is in order that they may proclaim the gospel of God, his mighty acts in Jesus Christ:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9).

This treasured possession (Heb. *am segullah*), then, is Israel in the Old Testament,<sup>2</sup> and now the church in the New Testament. They are an abundantly gifted people with a highly significant role within creation. The notion of being a rich, treasured, prized or special possession should not be thought of in merely *sentimental* terms, nor should it be limited to the notion of being God's *property*. It is far more than that:

To be God's people is to be in possession of all His gifts, and this accords with Romans 9:4–5 where the gifts are given to Israel, not only for her own benefit, but for her worship—service to God in the world and among the nations (cf. Gen. 12:1ff.). In the sense of the Abrahamic covenant, it is a people who will inherit the earth (Rom. 4:16).<sup>3</sup>

Being gathered as such a people was fiercely resisted during Jesus' three-year ministry (Matt. 23:37). His redeeming, costly love in the cross only breaks through in power from Pentecost onwards. The invitation to come, believe, drink, belong to Jesus, and so find live-giving qualities flowing from one's own heart, issues from Jesus' own mouth (John 7:37–39). It continues as—risen and ascended—he speaks through the voice of the apostles and the apostolic church:

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and <sup>5</sup> like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:4–5).

How does one come to him? Through faith, repentance . . . and through baptism.

### **TO BECOME THAT TREASURED POSSESSION**

In order to be included in the security of being God's rich possession, the male members of the covenant community—in Israel—were to be circumcised:

God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. <sup>10</sup> This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup> You shall circumcise

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<sup>2</sup> See also Deut. 14:2; 26:18; Ps. 135:4; Mal. 3:17.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey C. Bingham, *The Beautiful City of God*, Redeemer Baptist Pr., Castle Hill, 2001, p. 21.

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the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.<sup>12</sup> Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring.<sup>13</sup> Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.<sup>14</sup> Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant' (Gen. 17:9–14).

The prophets envisaged that many nations, foreigners and aliens (Lev. 19:34; Ezek. 47:22–23) would join themselves to the Lord (Jer. 50:5; Zech. 2:11). To join the covenant community, circumcision was mandatory (with one exception: Isa. 56:6).<sup>4</sup>

In Acts 8:36–38 we read of a foreigner—the Ethiopian eunuch—secured into fellowship with Jesus Christ through faith and baptism. Acts 15:1–21 and Galatians 5:6 show the early church coming to see that circumcision was no longer mandatory in order to join God's people. In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; *the only thing that counts* is faith working through love.<sup>5</sup> However, baptism became the new entrance into the covenant community.

It would be inaccurate to say that since the coming of Jesus Christ, there is a direct replacement of the rite of circumcision with the rite of baptism. Their inter-relationship is quite varied, often ambiguous within the New Testament. Baptism into Christ does however have significant *parallels* with circumcision, as follows:

- (a) Circumcision was an act of *initiation* into the covenant community.<sup>6</sup>
- (b) Circumcision was *commanded* for Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 17:11).
- (c) It was as a *sign* of the covenant of grace, through faith alone (Rom. 4:11).
- (d) It was a *seal* of the righteousness that Abraham had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, *and* likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the *faith* that our ancestor Abraham had *before* he was circumcised (Rom. 4:11–12).
- (e) It represented the *removal of impurity* (the word for 'uncircumcised' is closely associated with 'unclean' in Isa. 52:1).
- (f) It was observed as an ordinance of divine origin, and—interestingly—was considered to be an occasion for *joy and rejoicing*.<sup>7</sup>
- (g) A *spiritual* circumcision of the heart was always intended and expected.

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<sup>4</sup> George A. F. Knight, *The New Israel: A Commentary on the Book of Isaiah 56–66* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1985, p. 6), says of 'joiners': 'all that might be expected of them would be the keeping of the Sabbath; their doing so would motivate pagans around them to ask about Israel's faith'.

<sup>5</sup> A similar outlook has at times been taken towards a pedantic, divisive, 'grace-plus' type of approach to baptism. It has evoked this somewhat paradoxical statement: 'baptism is a something-nothing'.

<sup>6</sup> J. P. Hyatt, 'Circumcision', in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1 (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1962), pp. 630–1.

<sup>7</sup> J. P. Hyatt, 'Circumcision', p. 630, says:

A passage in the Babylonian Talmud says: 'R. Simeon b. Gamaliel said: Every precept which they accepted with joy, e.g., circumcision . . . they still observe with joy' (Shab. 130a). The ceremonies accompanying the rite include many expressions of joyfulness.

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So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul,<sup>13</sup> and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being.<sup>14</sup> Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the LORD your God, the earth with all that is in it,<sup>15</sup> yet the LORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today.<sup>16</sup> *Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer.*

We note that, unlike Abraham, Isaac was circumcised as an infant (Gen. 21:4). He was secured as part of the covenant community—before it could be seen if he had faith. He was included, belonging to God, on the basis of Abraham’s faith. The expectation of faith was upon him. He undoubtedly grew to be a young man of great faith (Gen. 22:6–9). Isaac’s twin sons Jacob and Esau were a story of struggle, striving and strife (Gen. 25ff.).

It was a command that was stubbornly resisted, through much disobedience. Many hearts became *uncircumcised*, and the curse kicked in according to the covenant:

When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you<sup>2</sup> and return to the LORD your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today,<sup>3</sup> then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, gathering you again from all the peoples among whom the LORD your God has scattered you.<sup>4</sup> Even if you are exiled to the ends of the world, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you back.<sup>5</sup> The LORD your God will bring you into the land that your ancestors possessed, and you will possess it; he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, *the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live* (Deut. 30:1–6).

Circumcision, then, was no mere outward token of nationhood. Leviticus 26:41 reveals that a *circumcised heart* was linked with *obedience* to the covenant with Abraham. *Uncircumcised hearts* in Israel were the result of continual *disobedience*, indeed *hostility* towards God. Severe judgements were meant to awaken obedience (Lev. 26:13–16, 18–20, 21–24, 39–42). Prolonged disobedience did not thwart the purposes of God however, for he promised to *circumcise the hearts* of his own people, himself (Deut. 30:6). Jeremiah indicates that the circumcised heart is the primary concern:

Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, remove the foreskin of your hearts, O people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, or else my wrath will go forth like fire, and burn with no one to quench it, because of the evil of your doings (Jer. 4:4: cf. Ezek. 44:7).

Other references—often lost in translation—speak of uncircumcised *lips* (Exod. 6:12, 29) and *ears* (Jer. 6:10); not indicating cut body-parts, but covenant deeds. Faithfulness to the Abrahamic covenant required repentance and turning from disobedient ways, to love God with full hearts. This never altogether happened.

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### **SPIRITUAL CIRCUMCISION**

In Romans 2, Paul highlights the inward character of real circumcision:

For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical.<sup>29</sup> Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God (vv. 28–29).

If we ask, ‘what was it that happened to circumcision in New Testament days?’ the answer will depend upon where you look. Even if one confines the search to the writings of Paul, there is a varied approach. In some instances he spoke of circumcision in quite neutral terms (Phil. 3:5; Gal. 2:7–9; Eph. 2:11; Col. 4:11), while in other places it seems to be quite unimportant (Rom. 3:30; 1 Cor. 7:18–19; Gal. 5:6; 6:15; Col. 3:1). And again, there are instances where Paul views circumcision ‘absolutely negatively (Gal. 2:12; 5:2–12; 6:11–13; Phil. 3:2)’.<sup>8</sup>

It appears from Acts 21, that there was dual practice of circumcision *and* baptism by James and the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, well after the resurrection of Jesus:

After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.<sup>20</sup> When they heard it, they praised God. Then they said to him, ‘You see, brother, how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the law.<sup>21</sup> They have been told about you that you teach all the Jews living among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, and that *you tell them not to circumcise their children* or observe the customs.<sup>22</sup> What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.<sup>23</sup> So do what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow.<sup>24</sup> Join these men, go through the rite of purification with them, and pay for the shaving of their heads. *Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself observe and guard the law.*<sup>25</sup> But as for the Gentiles who have become believers, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication.’<sup>26</sup> Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having purified himself, he entered the temple with them, making public the completion of the days of purification when the sacrifice would be made for each of them (Acts 21:19–26).

Paul lovingly honoured the Jewish practices here, *as a Jew in order to win the Jews* (1 Cor. 9:20) to Christ. But events still culminated in Paul being seized and dragged out of the temple. Luke’s description in Acts 21:30 signals this as perhaps a significant turning point (maybe one of a number of similar events), when *the doors were shut* not only to Paul but probably also for the gospel within the temple in Jerusalem—as Jesus had predicted (Luke 21:6):

Then all the city was aroused, and the people rushed together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and immediately *the doors were shut* (Acts 21:30).

### **The Circumcision of Christ—Made without Hands**

Paul links *circumcision* with *baptism*, and both with *the cross* of Christ:

In him [Christ] also you were circumcised with a *spiritual circumcision*, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ;<sup>12</sup> when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead (Col. 2:11–12).

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<sup>8</sup> Adrio König, unpublished book on baptism, sect. 4.2, ‘Circumcision and Baptism’.

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How were these Colossians circumcised in him?<sup>9</sup> The RSV does not say, ‘with a spiritual circumcision’, but translates as ‘a circumcision made without hands’. Firstly, this is something that God does—not we (2:13)—thus fulfilling Deuteronomy 30:6:

Moreover, the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.

Secondly, Paul’s prime interest is not really circumcision at all, but the *fullness* of deity dwelling in Jesus Christ, and the fullness of the lives of the Colossians now dwelling in Christ. Use of this circumcision terminology:

- (a) Refers to various other verses exhorting them to fully resist any imposition of Jewish traditions requiring circumcision, or the observance of days, or veneration of angels (2:16–18), as well as any deceptive philosophical syncretism (2:8). This would weaken the all-sufficiency of Christ alone.
- (b) It links up, too, with baptism, in that what follows (especially 3:5, 9, 12, 14) involves putting off the old humanity, putting on the new.

Physical circumcision was not required for Gentile believers (Gal. 2), but spiritual circumcision certainly was, and is; this was the removal of the *flesh* (Gk: σαρξ, *sarx*), namely our old humanity in rebellion (Rom. 6:6). Baptism was almost immediate for all new believers receiving the Holy Spirit, inducting them into the new humanity.

This participation in Christ causes one to walk in newness of life:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3–4).

In Christ’s great work, into which through faith the Colossians and we ourselves have entered, and of which baptism marks *the entry point*, God has acted decisively:

And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses,<sup>14</sup> erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.<sup>15</sup> He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it (Col. 2:13–15).

Adrio König notes that theologians writing against infant baptism do still concede that there is a strong link between circumcision and baptism.<sup>10</sup> After much discussion of alternate positions, G. R. Beasley-Murray has helpfully noted:

More than one exegete has pointed out that the most likely point of contact between circumcision as a rite and baptism is their joint character of being rites of initiation; circumcision was the mode of

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<sup>9</sup> The ‘circumcision of Christ’ may mean either: (i) that undergone by Christ in his flesh as he was stripped in the crucifixion; or (ii) that effected by Christ in an inward cleansing by his death and resurrection; in which case ‘stripping off the body of flesh’ refers to new birth—and baptism. The old clothing comes off in baptism, as does the old humanity conditioned by sin, and believers are clothed in a new humanity by sharing in Christ’s resurrection power (therefore live in it, as Col. 3:5, 12).

<sup>10</sup> Adrio König, ‘Circumcision and Baptism’; see also P. K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1978), pp. 85ff.

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(male) entry into the Israel of the old covenant, baptism the mode of entry into the Israel of the new covenant.<sup>11</sup>

### **BAPTISED INTO THE NAME OF JESUS**

The New Testament is replete in its use of the phrase ‘the name of Jesus Christ’, especially in relation to being baptised (see also Acts 10:48; 8:16):

- ‘Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”’ (Acts 2:38).
- ‘On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus’ (Acts 19:5).

The *name of Jesus* was authoritative in ministry for the disciples and apostles:

- ‘If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it’ (John 14:14).
- ‘But Peter said, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk . . . And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you”’ (Acts 3:6, 16).
- ‘. . . let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead’ (Acts 4:10).
- ‘There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved’ (Acts 4:12).
- ‘So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus’ (Acts 4:18).
- ‘As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name’ (Acts 5:41).
- ‘But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women’ (Acts 8:12).
- ‘But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel”’ (Acts 9:15).
- ‘So he went in and out among them in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord’ (Acts 9:28).
- ‘She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour’ (Acts 16:18).

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<sup>11</sup> G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1976, p. 160.

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- ‘Then some itinerant Jewish exorcists tried to use the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, “I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims”’ (Acts 19:13).
- ‘Then Paul answered, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus”’ (Acts 21:13).

An early use of *the name* as an authoritative phrase is found in 2 Samuel 12:28, where Joab recommends that King David should complete his battle and conquest of the city of Rabbah, so that the city be called by David’s *name* (not by Joab’s name). It happened, and David wore the king’s crown. The city now *belonged* to David’s *name*.

When we are baptised into the *name* of Jesus Christ, we are *captured* by his grace, and brought under his conquering Lordship and personality (Rev. 3:12; 14:1). We become his possession, and submit to his Lordship, because we have seen by faith the *fact* of his resurrection power: he *is* Lord! Then, daily, we continue to meet him as Sovereign Lord, in the many thoughts we think, things we say and choices we make.

### **OUR HELP IS IN THE NAME OF THE LORD**

‘Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth’ (Ps. 124:8). It is not insignificant that John Calvin—ever an expositor of God’s Sovereignty—chose this verse to commence the Sunday liturgy. As those possessed by Christ, and under a new regime, it was this Lord, *who made heaven and earth*, to whom they would look for *help*, and from whom they would receive power for life.

In an important book, *Possessed by God*, David Peterson highlights the pastoral implications of being claimed by Christ, and of knowing we *are sanctified* now. This must be to the forefront of teaching, to strengthen all who seem slow to change.<sup>12</sup> A person tempted to homosexual acts, for example, can find great help in God’s assessment of them:

And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified *in the name* of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 6:11).

Look to Christ, never inward. Peterson says: ‘when we overwhelm people with conditions which they must fulfil to prove that they are making progress as Christians, we distort the gospel. We must learn to accept them as those already sanctified in Christ Jesus.’<sup>13</sup> Many cultural norms in Corinth were out of place for those who belonged to Christ—fornication, adultery, sodomy, theft and greed. In our culture we must continue to live in that love which constrains us to live for and unto him, the holy Christ, to whom we now belong, amidst a world enslaved to gods—gods that are not.

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<sup>12</sup> David Peterson, *Possessed by God*, Apollos, Leicester, 1995, p. 49.

<sup>13</sup> David Peterson, *Possessed by God*, p. 49.