

I am in Christ

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 24 September 2023

Preacher: Keith Knowlton

[0:00] In Jesus' name, amen. So I was able to choose this text a few weeks ago, and I was kind of happy in doing so because this is the phrase being in Christ.

If you are in Christ, if you've been around the church, this may be a familiar phrase to many of you and thinking, ah, this is two words. This is an easy sermon to prepare for. The more and more I studied, the more and more I got into this text, the more and more I realized how expansive of a topic this is.

I felt like I'd been handed like this bottle of Coke that had been shaken up with the task of pouring out a glass for someone. It's not an easy task. The more you more go into it, you realize the significance that's crammed into these two little words in Christ.

And so we see this word in Christ, it repeats again and again in many of Paul's letters that are included in the New Testament. Here in the book of Ephesians, in Christ is listed 35 times it's included in this book.

A total of 73 times in all of Paul's letters. And if we include other similar forms to this word, in Jesus Christ, in him, through Christ, with Christ, over 164 times we see this repeated by Paul in the New Testament.

[1:16] And so when we study this text tonight, it's not because necessarily this term or this phrase is vague, but the sense that it's so comprehensive in nature. You know, I think we're going to try to start, trying to be a clear path here, but we're going to start branching out in different directions.

So this is just a disclaimer. We're not going to be able to cover this topic in its entirety tonight, but I hope we can do so in a clear and concise manner as possible. And so what I want to start with is just thinking about this term.

What does this phrase mean, being in Christ? When we talk about being in Christ, we're not just talking about a single step in working out our salvation. We're really talking about a whole environment in which our salvation takes place.

And so there's one commentator that I read that explained it this way that I liked. He said, And so when we think of being in Christ, it's this all comprehending reality into which believers enter.

It sums up all that Christ has done for us and all that we do in living for Christ as believers. And so we don't see the word Christian anywhere in Paul's letters, but to be in Christ is the equivalent of saying to be a Christian and all the implications that come from it.

[2:40] And so it's interesting, as much as Paul uses this phrase in the New Testament, it's hardly seen at all outside of his letters. And so that doesn't mean that Paul is making up his theology here, but he's rightfully expounding upon what he has experienced in the gospel.

And so if we take a step back, even though we're going to look into this text, take a step back just for a second to look back to the gospel to see where we see this idea of being in Christ mentioned. Jesus, during the Last Supper, this is John 15, before he's arrested and before he's crucified, he speaks to his disciples, a familiar verse to many of us.

He says, I am the vine and you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit, but apart from me, you can do nothing. And so we see right here this connection that Jesus is making with his disciples.

And just a few chapters later in John 17, we see this high priestly prayer, this prayer that Jesus prays right before he's arrested. And he's praying to the Father for his disciples and for those who will come to know him through the ministry of his disciples.

And he says this in John 17, verse 20, I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.

[3 : 59] May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one, I in them and you in me, so that they may be brought together in complete unity.

And so we see again this idea that Jesus himself talks about, of this unity that he has with the Father, the unity that he has with believers. And so while this might have been impactful for Paul, he doesn't mention this directly, the one thing that likely would have been impactful for Paul is when Jesus speaks to Paul himself.

If you're familiar with the ministry of Paul, you know before Paul became a believer, he was a persecutor of the church. His name was Saul. And he was on that road to Damascus where his conversion happened, where he witnesses and has met with Jesus himself.

And it says in Acts 9 that suddenly there was a light from heaven flashed around him and he fell on the ground and he heard a voice calling out to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

He said, who are you, Lord? Saul asked. I am Jesus who you are persecuting, he replied. So Jesus, he doesn't ask the question, why are you persecuting my disciples?

[5 : 16] He doesn't ask, why are you persecuting these new converts? He asked, why are you persecuting me? And so Paul is confronted here with this reality that Jesus identifies with his followers, that there is this union that Christ has with his people.

And so that kind of provides us with a background for why Paul would use this phrase over and over again in Christ. And the three things I want us to focus on then tonight, as we think about this phrase, what does it mean for us?

Is what does it tell us about first our condition? What does it tell us about our conduct? And what does it tell us about our community? And so let's think about our condition.

We look back at Ephesians 1. Paul's beginning this letter to the church in Ephesus with this long, elegant doxology, this theologically rich praise to God for all that he has done in our salvation.

So in English, we break this down, right? It's 12 verses, it's five sentences, but this in Greek is one long sentence. It's one of the longest sentences of the Bible, over 200 Greek words used here.

[6 : 27] So we see that this is thick, this is dense. You might even recognize it in reading it, even in English. So we're going to try to do what we can to see if we can make this as clear as possible, starting in verse three, where we see this phrase used right off the bat, in Christ.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. And so when he's talking about this blessing, he's talking right off about the blessing that comes from salvation.

He's not talking about physical, worldly blessing. It's not a health and wealth blessing. It's the blessing of having Christ, and Christ being our source for all other spiritual and heavenly blessings.

And so as he launches into this praise, he's giving this really an explanation to us of what it means to be in union with Christ. And he really focuses on the work of the Trinity. The Trinity, we believe, one God in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

And so as Paul writes to us here, he's explaining that all the resources of the Trinity, all the resources of the Godhead are involved in securing your salvation.

[7 : 39] And so when we think about union with Christ, it's really done in three dimensions. We think about it as what the Father, the work of the Father, and the work of the Son, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

It's the past, it's the present, it's the future. So I want us to, as we move through this text, think about each one of those. The work first of the Father in verse four. It says in verse four, He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight.

In love He predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ in accordance with His pleasure and will. And so this is what this verse is saying to us, that if you are a believer, God chose you in Christ before the creation of the world.

And this is where things can kind of get complicated for us, because this is hard for us to wrap our minds around, especially when we get into deep theology about election or predestination. But I want us, what I'd like for us to take away from this text is when we recognize that God has chose us, He chose us in Christ before the creation of the world, it doesn't mean that God at the beginning of time looked forward to see who would have the good sense to believe in Him.

And then He chose to save them. That's not how God operates here. We see Paul even explains this at the very beginning of the next chapter, Ephesians 2, because he says, as for you, you were

dead in your transgressions and sins.

[9 : 10] Verse 4, and because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ, even when we were dead in transgressions. It is by grace you have been saved.

And so the reality is that a dead man cannot save himself. A dead man cannot make himself alive. And so it is the Father who chose you in Christ.

And it tells us why. So that we should be holy and blameless before Him. And so again, it's not that Jesus looked into the future and saw that you were worthy of salvation, and so He chose you.

No, He chose you that He might display the glory of God. And so this was God's plan from the very beginning of creation. The chief place where His glory was going to be displayed was in His people. And so we see how this sin corrupted this image. But we see that the Father's plan remained unchanged. He predestined us for adoption through Jesus.

[10 : 15] God chose us for salvation in eternity past, solely based on the merit of Jesus, so that we may display the glory of God.

And so if you're familiar with John Calvin, he's a church father from 500 years ago, the time of the Reformation. This is what he says about this text. It's a long quote, but I think it's worth thinking about.

He says, When Paul teaches that we were chosen in Christ before the creation of the world, he takes away all consideration of real worth on our part. For it is just as if he said, Since among all the offspring of Adam, the Heavenly Father found nothing worthy of His election.

And so He turned His eyes to His anointed to choose from that body as members those who He was going to take into the fellowship of life.

And so let this reasoning then prevail among believers. We are adopted in Christ into the eternal inheritance because in ourselves we were not capable of such great excellence.

[11 : 27] And so this is where we can take heart. Those of you who are believers, who are in Christ, that your identity in Christ has always been. And not because of anything you have done, but because of what God has done, that He has chosen you in Christ from the beginning of time.

And so we are chosen by the Father in Christ. Look at the second dimension, the work of the Son, Jesus, verse 7. In Him, speaking of Jesus, we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that He lavished on us.

And so here, Paul is talking about the work and the ministry of Jesus while He was on earth. His life, His death, His resurrection, His ascension.

And so the question may be, if we have been chosen in God, then what is the need for Jesus to come to earth? Wasn't God's choosing sufficient enough? Why did Jesus have to shed His blood? But this takes us back to what we read in Romans 5 earlier in the service, where it describes really two men. It describes Adam, and it describes Jesus.

[12 : 39] We are either in Adam, or we are in Christ. Martin Luther said this, that there are but two men, Adam and Christ, and all other men hang at their girdles.

And so we know from the book of Genesis, the very first book of the Bible, that Adam was the first man, and he was created in the image of God. He was brought into this covenant relationship with God.

But we saw that he broke that covenant. And as a result, sin and its penalty death entered into the world. And so by this act of Adam's disobedience, we were all made sinners.

And so even though God chose you, if you are in Christ, even though God chose you, there is still a penalty to be paid, because we recognize that God is a holy and just God, and that he cannot overlook our sin.

And so this is why the work of Jesus is so essential. Christ came not only to fulfill the law that Adam could not keep, but also to pay the penalty for our sin.

[13 : 45] And so Christ took our sinfulness, Christ took our guilt, and he gave us his righteousness. Just as Adam was our representative, that led to corruption and death.

Christ serves as our representative, bringing us life. And so this is why we read Romans 5, to recognize that death came through Adam, that life comes through Christ.

And so when we look back at Ephesians then, it says these are the two things that Christ has given us. He has given us redemption, and he has given us forgiveness. The penalty for sin has been paid, and the prisoner has been set free.

Christ's life is our life. Christ's righteousness is our righteousness. And so we have been chosen by God in Christ.

We have been redeemed by Christ in his sacrifice. And thirdly, we see the work of the Holy Spirit in securing our inheritance. Verse 13. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession, to the praise of his glory.

[15:05] So think about a time, if you can, maybe not too long ago, that you were sick. Maybe you had to go to the GP, or maybe you were even in hospital. And the doctor diagnoses you.

He says, well, it's no problem. There's a medicine. There's a cure for your illness. And you're grateful for that. But the fact of the matter is that that medicine, the fact that that medicine exists does not make you feel better.

That medicine has to be prescribed, and it has to be administered to you so that you can feel the benefits of that medicine. And so that's what the Holy Spirit does for us here.

He takes the riches of God's grace. He takes the truth of the gospel, and he applies it to our hearts. And so when he does that, we become God's inheritance, it says.

It says we obtain the inheritance that can never be removed. And so recognize how wonderful this is when we think about the work of the Trinity in securing our salvation.

[16:00] You are in Christ from eternity past. You remain in Christ to eternity future. You are united with Christ forever. This is our condition, chosen, redeemed, and sealed in Christ.

And so that's our condition in Christ. Let's consider then our conduct. And most of you know that I have four children. Our youngest is Crawford, who just turned two.

And just like any two-year-old, they're very keen on observing many things and then mimicking much of what they hear. And so if your household is like anything like mine on a school morning, it's this mad rush to finally get everything together and get out the door.

And if they're not reminded over and over again, children may forget certain things that are important to do before they leave. And so it was a few weeks ago that we were getting ready to the door, and these common commands are being told to the kids.

And Crawford walks up independently and says, shoes on, coats on. Because he's heard over and over again this instruction to put your shoes on, to put your coats on. And now he is mimicking Rachel and I in giving these commands to his older siblings.

[17:11] And so the same is true for us as believers. You may be familiar with this phrase or this term called sanctification. It's a term that describes how we live once we are saved.

Not only are we saved by Christ, we are sanctified in Christ. Christ. And that's why Calvin, again, he talks about this double grace, because it's Christ who saves us, and it's Christ who then continues to work in us to make us more and more and more into his likeness.

And so then if we are in Christ, when we think about our own conduct, we are to mimic his life. Just as Christ was crucified and buried and resurrected, this too is the model for our living.

And so we could look all over the New Testament, all over Paul's letters to see this play out. I want to highlight a few of them for us. And we can't go through all of them. We can't come on every one, but I think these are a few vital texts for us to read through.

First is Romans 6. Romans 6 and verse 3. Recognize this modeling of Christ's life that we assume ourselves as believers. Don't you know that all of us were baptized into Christ Jesus?

[18:28] All of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

Galatians 2.20. If I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me, the life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

2 Corinthians 5.17. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone, the new is here. Lastly, Colossians 3, starting in verse 1.

Since then you have been raised with Christ, set your heart on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things, for you died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

Over and over again, Paul uses this new creation language. We are no longer dead in Adam. We are alive in Christ. And therefore, we put to death the earthly desires that are within us in order that we can put on what is holy and what is good and what is Christ-like.

[19 : 54] And so we need to ask, does this define your life as a believer? If you are in Christ, do we live out this resurrection life? Do we desire to put to death our sin?

Or are we more keen to just be complacent with it? Are we willing to confess and expose our sin? Are we more likely to hide it or justify it?

Paul says this later in the book of Ephesians. He says, we must daily put off the old man that corrupts and put on the new man that leads to righteousness and holiness. And so this is where the work of the Holy Spirit is so important.

When we think of being in Christ, this involves the work of the Holy Spirit because we can't bring about this change on our own. Maybe if you're a new believer or this is something you may still think about, that when you came to faith, you recognize, yes, this is the work of Jesus.

But then you consider, well, I better now, now that Jesus has saved me as a heart of gratitude, I better demonstrate this gratitude to him. I better give assurance to God that he made the right decision in saving me.

[21 : 06] It's the wrong way to think about it, right? We need the Holy Spirit. It is the goal of the Holy Spirit to bring believers in union with Christ, to form us more and more into the likeness of Jesus.

And so to be in Christ means to have Christ's Spirit. So another text to look at, Romans 8. Romans 8, 9 through 11. You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh, but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you.

And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness.

And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.

And so we recognize, we need to recognize just how special and incredible this verse is, that if we are in Christ, Christ's own Spirit is in us. And so this echoes what Jesus said, what he was praying in that high priestly prayer.

[22 : 20] In John 17, he prays for unity. He says, he prays that I will be in them and you in me, speaking of the Father. And so notice then this security.

Those of us who are believers, Christ is in the Father, we are in Christ, and Christ's Spirit is in us.

Do we marvel at that sense of security that we have in our salvation through the work of Christ?

And so the reality is, though, that we still struggle with sin. Paul calls us later in Ephesians to stand firm in Christ. He ends our passage here by saying that we are sealed with the promise of the Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance.

And so this is what we do. If we are in Christ, we continue to fight sin through the power of the Spirit because we have the confidence to know that the penalty for sin has been paid, that the power of sin has been defeated, and that the presence of sin will be destroyed forever.

That's what he's talking about in our inheritance. We recognize that Christ will come again, that there will be a day when we live in perfect unity once again with Christ.

[23 : 40] And so we model that life now. We long for that day to come. And so lastly then, when we think about our identity in Christ, what does that mean and how does that impact our community?

One of my favorite sports is American football, particularly college football, which is going on right now. But in the three years that we've been in Scotland, I've watched very little football.

And it's not because I don't enjoy football. I still love it, but it isn't as enjoyable watching it because it's a very different setting, right? When I watched it in the States, I was watching with friends or family, good food on a beautiful autumn day.

If I choose to watch it here, it's usually in a cold, dark room in the middle of the night with my laptop.

And so it's an entirely different experience. It's not nearly as fun or enjoyable to watch the game.

And so the same is true for our lives as believers. Although the gift of grace must be received individually by each one of us through faith, being in Christ, our salvation, it's meant to be experienced corporately, with one another, in community.

[24 : 55] And so that's part of the blessing of being in Christ. Not only are we in union with Christ, but we are in union with one another. And so just a few metaphors that we see all over the New Testament that describe this unity that Jesus calls us to.

We think again of John 15, what Jesus says to his disciples. He says, I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit. Apart from me, he can do nothing.

Now we know that this is, it's illustrating our connection to Christ. That's what we already mentioned. But it also illustrates to us our connection to one another. Because when we think of a vine, we recognize that a vine has more than one branch.

And we recognize that Jesus, he was speaking to his disciples here. And when he's speaking in the Greek, it's in second person plural. He's saying, you all are branches. Y'all are branches.

To use my American-ness. And so he's saying that while he's the vine, we are the branches. We are part of that same plant. We are connected to him. We are connected with one another.

[26 : 03] Paul then talks about the church as a body in 1 Corinthians 12. Starting in verse 12, he says, Just as the body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.

For we were all baptized by one spirit, so as to form one body, whether Jew or Gentile, we were all slave or free, and we were all given the one spirit to drink.

Even so, the body is not made up of one part, but of many. Skipping to verse 27, it says, Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And so just, he goes on in this passage, he talks about different body parts.

Certainly the foot wouldn't say to the hand, I don't need you, right? Each body part is essential and important, not better than the other. Same is true of the church.

But lastly, I want to look at what Peter says. Peter, in his letter, 1 Peter 2, verse 4, he says, As you come to him, the living stone rejected by humans, but chosen by God and precious to him, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

[27 : 20] Peter is saying that together, collectively, we are the temple of God. We are built on Christ. We are filled with the Spirit. And we collectively display his glory.

And so this is why we see Paul over and over again in his letters talking about the need for unity. Later in Ephesians, he's talking about being humble and gentle, being patient, bearing with one another in love.

And so when we think about how does this play out for us in the church today, we recognize, yes, the church is a messy place. This is not necessarily an easy thing to be united to one another.

We can think, maybe we see some sort of value in being united to Christ. Yes, that's what I want. But being united to them, that's a whole different story. But the blessing of our salvation is both.

We are united to Christ and we are united to one another. This should not be a choice. It is not an either or. We are united in prayer with and for one another.

[28 : 21] We are united in serving the body together and serving our community together. We are united in living life together. We are united in encouraging one another. And so how can this practically be played out in our church?

There's numerous opportunities to live in unity with one another. We know we have community discipleship groups to be a part of. What a blessing it would be to see greater participation in these groups that we may live life together with one another.

That we may encourage one another. That we may pray with one another. Wednesday night, we'll be meeting here for prayer. What a joy it is for God's saints to pray together, to praise Him together. Numerous opportunities to serve the church. To serve with the church in serving our community. And even individually. How can we serve those around us well?

How can we love those in our midst that are hurting and suffering? That cup of coffee. That encouraging letter. There are countless ways to display unity in Christ.

[29 : 30] And so is that a mark in our own lives? And yes, we recognize it's going to be awkward. It may be inconvenient. But this is the truth that we as Christ's people, as the body of Christ, are on union, are on mission together, united as one.

And so this is where I want us to close tonight. To recognize our mission. Because it parallels God's mission. And we see God's mission repeated over and over again in this passage in Ephesians. We might have missed it. But I want to look back on it. Because in this passage, it repeats. At the end of each section where it talks about what God the Father has done, what God the Son has done, what God the Spirit has done, it ends in the same way.

