

Empowered by Grace in Christ

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[0 : 0 0] I was 17 years old when I felt a call to become a minister, and it took me some time to process that before I actually responded to it or told anybody about it.

But of all the many, many, many reasons why I could find within myself why it was not a particularly good idea, there was one unifying theme, and it was this.

I haven't got it. What I mean by that was that every single reason that I could find was basically something that I felt that I didn't have. Not good enough.

Not confident enough. Not spiritual enough. Not holy enough. My knowledge of the Bible and Christianity isn't enough.

I just haven't got it. And it took me quite a long time to kind of process that and come to the point of realisation that not only have I not got it, nobody has.

[1 : 1 4] Nobody's got it. But God's got you. Firmly in his grip. And that's what it's all about.

And I actually kind of wonder whether fairly early on in my life as a Christian and a sense of being called into ministry, I don't know this, but I've often wondered whether just maybe, just maybe the possibility exists that God wanted me to go through that struggle in order to be able to perhaps present the Christian gospel as it's meant to be presented, namely that it's not about what we have got.

Rather, it is about knowing that God has got us firmly in his grip. And it's because we can know that we are in him that actually then strangely we can say, yes, we have got it.

Christ is in you, the hope of glory, as Paul puts it. The Holy Spirit is in you. But the reason for that is not because of some innate thing that you possess or that any of us can possess.

Rather, it is because being a Christian is about being in Christ. Now, I think this is so important.

[2 : 5 0] This is why we've been following this series right through these last couple of months. It's a recurring phrase that comes up time and time again in the New Testament, that we are in Christ.

Being a Christian is not just about something that you believe. It's not just about subscribing to a set of doctrines, although it is that. It's not about just living a morally good life, although it is that.

It's not about just worshipping God, although it is that. It's not just about praying, although it is that. It's about so many different things that we do, but most fundamentally, it's who you are. It's about identity.

It's about that sense of relationship of actually being in Christ. And that's so important to unpack, because I think probably, probably most of us, if not all of us, have this idea of what an ideal Christian should be.

And it's some kind of ideal that's up there, and what being a real Christian is about. And then we look at our own lives, and it's kind of down there.

[3 : 56] And there's this gap, this disconnect between the ideal of what we think we should be and the reality of what we are. Now, there's a sense in which, in Christian hope, there is an ideal which God sees, because he knows everything that we can become and will become.

And ultimately, that will be an eternity, but we don't have to wait until then. It's a lifelong process that begins right now, and he can make us into that person that he wants you to be. But all the while, you know, the reality is we're not there.

We haven't hit perfection. And we may be a really long way, and there's that gap in between. And it may well be that we carry around with us that continual sense of, well, yeah, I know that I should be that, but I'm not.

And it might be because it's something that we've done in our past that we just find so hard to let go of. Or it might be a present reality now, something that we know that we struggle with.

And if we're not careful, we can get this distorted idea that because we haven't hit that ideal yet, then somehow we're not in Christ.

[5 : 05] And that's blatantly false. Because as we come to the end of our series today, and the theme today is that we are empowered by the grace, by grace in Christ, we're going to be thinking a bit about what that specifically means.

Let's share with you an image. You might have heard this before, but if you imagine this piece of paper's you.

And this Bible I'm holding in my hand represents Christ. When you follow Jesus, you are in Christ.

That piece of paper is now in the book. It's not the book itself, although there's a sense in which it now forms part of it. Where that book goes, that piece of paper's going.

It's not a case of you take Jesus wherever you go, but rather wherever you go, Jesus is surrounding you, but in a sense is in you.

[6 : 19] But that's not because of something specific about you, but it's something amazing about Jesus. In other words, you know, where that piece of paper is now going, Jesus is there.

Because that piece of paper is encased. It's wrapped around. To be in Christ Christ is to know that you are in him.

And there's nothing, therefore, that can separate you from him. There is no situation in which you can go where he's not simply with you, but actually around you, because you are in him.

Inseparable. And yet we find this so hard to accept and to come to terms with, and so easily we become distracted and focused on stuff about ourselves, and all kinds of reasons why we can't really say that with confidence.

Let me tell you a story. There's a story years ago about somebody who was actually making a journey in the days of horses and carts. And this guy was on his cart, being towed along with his horse, on his long journey.

[7 : 37] And as he was making his way along the track, he saw a man walking along who was carrying this massive great big backpack, and he looked very tired. So he drew up on his horse and cart alongside him, and he said, do you want to climb on board?

The man looked absolutely stunned that he'd been offered to ride. I said, I can't pay you. He said, no, that's fine. Just jump on. So this man in this huge great big backpack climbed up onto the cart, and he sat down next to the driver.

And off they went. And they said nothing. There was no conversation or anything. And yet, all the while, this passenger kept this backpack on his back. And he looked very, very, very uncomfortable.

And after some time, the driver of the horse and cart said to him, look, you know, that backpack, he said, you don't have to keep that strapped to you.

Why don't you just take it off and put it in the back with my stuff? He said, I couldn't possibly do that. He said, what do you mean? Well, he said, it's kind and generous enough of you to just give me a free ride as it is.

[8 : 48] I couldn't possibly expect you to also carry this. When you're in Christ, you are completely in Christ, including all the baggage that you may carry.

Even those things about you that you don't really like about you and that you sense should not be you, they form part of you. And when you're in Christ, you are in Christ. That may sound like a bit of sloppy sentimentalism.

So let's turn to Scripture to be sure that actually that is not just sentimentalism. It's about grace. You see, the thing is, although Christ meets us where we are at, he doesn't necessarily expect us to stay where we are.

But he meets us where we are along with all our baggage and carries that, knowing that when we are in him, those things are dealt with. It may take a very, very long time.

Indeed, this is a lifelong process. But nevertheless, don't think for one moment that because you're carrying baggage, you cannot be carried. Let's go to these verses that we, these few verses from the opening chapter of Paul's first letter to Corinthians.

[10 : 05] Paul was, he planted the church in Corinth. We read about that in Acts chapter 18. And he was there for about 18 months. So this was not just a whistle-stop tour relationship that he had with these people.

He'd visited this place and it wasn't without its problems either, but he stayed there for 18 months. And this church was planted.

Some time later, Paul writes to the church in Corinth, knowing that there are an awful lot of problems to have emerged. Now, I want you to imagine that you were Paul and you had planted this church and the news had reached you that there were so many problems going on in this church that you had to write and you had to address the problems.

Here's just some of the problems. The church was divided. There was quarrelling as well as division. There was an awful lot of arrogance going on within that church.

There was idolatry. People were beginning to get mixed ideas about what they were worshipping, who they were worshipping. There was tolerance of sexual immorality. There was doubting the resurrection of Jesus upon which, the very truth claim upon which that church was set up.

[11 : 23] And there was general chaos and carnage in every direction in the relationships between people in that church. Where would you begin if you were going to write in order to engage with those issues?

Well, here's how Paul begins. I always thank God for you because of his grace given to you in Christ Jesus.

Not only does Paul begin by saying something warm and positive, he actually says that he thanks God for these people. In fact, he doesn't just say he thanks God for them, but he always thanks God for them.

And then he goes even further, he says, you do not lack any spiritual gift. Now, coming from Paul, that's quite a huge, positive thing to say.

Now, as Corinthians goes on, he doesn't pull any punches when it comes to addressing these massive issues. But that's not his starting point. When he looks at these people, he doesn't see the issues.

[12 : 34] He doesn't look at the baggage. He sees these people as God sees them. Yes, there's baggage. Yes, there's mess. But he starts with that blessing. And that's what grace is.

To know that we are in Christ, that we are empowered by grace, is to know that yes, there's the mess. Yes, there's the rubbish to be dealt with. But it doesn't stop God from loving you right now.

There was a brother and sister, Johnny and Sally, who years ago were invited to stay at their grandparents' farm. Upon arrival, Johnny was given a slingshot to play with.

He went out into the woods and as he was playing with this thing, he couldn't get it to work properly and he was really frustrated and he was in a bit of an angry mood. He was making his way back to the farmhouse where him and his sister were going to have lunch with their grandparents.

And out of frustration, he was messing with his slingshot and his grandma's pet duck was making its way along the farmyard and he struck this thing and it died.

[13 : 45] He went into a complete panic. He picked up this duck, didn't know what to do with it, so he hid it behind a pile of wood. Just as he went to run into the house, not quite knowing what he was going to do, he just saw his sister there and noticed she had seen everything.

Just as they walked through, she said, I saw that. He didn't know what to do, he didn't say anything during the meal. But afterwards, as grandma was clearing the dishes, she said, I think it's Sally's turn to help with the washing up, isn't it?

And she piped up and said, actually, Johnny was just saying that he'd like to spend some quality time with your grandma and he'd like to do the washing up, even though it's my turn. Isn't that right, Johnny?

Next day, they got up and grandpa came down the stairs and said, okay, kids, who wants to go fishing and taking the boat out today? They both got really excited and then Sally said, oh, Johnny said that he's not really into fishing much these days and he'd actually much rather stay at home and spend some more quality time with grandma and help out with perhaps some of the jobs around the house.

Isn't that right, Johnny? Sally went fishing and Johnny stayed at home. She kept this up for several days and the week that they were staying there was drawing to an end and young Johnny knew that he could not cope with this any longer so eventually he went down, found his grandma, burst into tears and confessed the lot.

[15 : 25] Before he even got to the end she put her hands on his shoulders and she said, look, I know what happened. I was standing at the window at the time and I knew straight away that I'd forgiven you.

I was just fascinated to know how long your sister was going to make a slave of you. Isn't there something similar that goes on in our own relationship with the mess and the baggage that, you know, we hear this message all the time, you know, that God loves you, that God forgives you, that he accepts you, that it's all about grace.

But that's the message we need to actually not just be part of our faith but know that that is the very thing that underpins our faith. It's about grace. To be in Christ means that every single one of us has the mess from our past and our present, stuff that we still struggle with, stuff that we wish wasn't there but we know is, stuff that we know makes us not that perfect person that is up there but the reality of the person down here.

But when you are in Christ, you are in Christ and you are held in Christ including the struggle, including the mess, including the baggage.

That is what it is to be empowered by grace in Christ. During the 1930s, the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco was being constructed.

[17 : 11] It took several years to construct. Progress was held back because there were numerous deaths of workmen working on the bridge who fell. It held back progress and the investors had to make a decision what to do and there was a very, very long discussion as to whether or not they could justify installing a safety net because it was going to be so expensive.

Eventually, they took the decision that they would do that and they did. There were one or two falls but actually after that safety net was installed, progress on the bridge continued more or less unhindered.

Why? Because although they were still working in the same conditions, that sense of confidence overtook the fear and those workmen could get on and do their job and live their lives.

Any analogy breaks down eventually and I'm not suggesting that Christ is just a safety net but he represents freedom from fear and to be in Christ is precisely that.

to be not driven or rather held back by fear and knowledge of ourselves that we know all too well and those struggles and the mess and all the stuff that we would rather wasn't there.

[18 : 55] To be in Christ means that everything, everything about us is in his hands. we are in him and because we are in him we may know that he is in us and there is nowhere where you can go, no situation that you can face where you are not held securely in him.

So let's pray together. Amen. Lord, over these last few weeks we have been thinking about what it means to be in Christ.

Lord, we know that we struggle and we know that there are so many things that hold us back from being the people that you long for us to be.

But Lord, we thank you that the message of Christ is not that it's just alright to have these struggles but that you accept us with those struggles and that we can know that even though we are far from perfect that you love us and accept us unconditionally that you meet us where we are so that we can come with everything that we carry and know that all of that mess that comes with us is picked up and held by you.

So Lord, we ask this day and in the time to come that whatever those things may be that we struggle with that we may not be afraid to bring those struggles to you to know that you are far bigger and stronger and greater and wider and deeper than any of those things that we may be empowered not by fear but by your grace.

[21 : 08] Lord, help us to know that, help us to believe that, help us to live by that this day and every day. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.