

A Man in Christ

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[0 : 00] I want us today to think of words of Paul, a very short expression.! If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation.

Or if any person is in Christ, he or she is a new creation. When confronted with the living Christ, one can never be the same again.

It's either acceptance or rejection. One writer said that when you're at the cross, you've only got two positions. You've got a bowed head or a turned back.

And as we think about Paul today, I want us to ask ourselves, what is my position at the cross? I want us also to remember that Paul was no superman.

This will come out as we think about this further. He was very dependent on the grace of God. And he felt intensely, nearly all of the time, his own weakness.

[1 : 08] So I want us to think today about a man in Christ. And we're going to do it with five points. And the first point is that the man he was.

Paul refers more than once to his former credentials. In fact, he was very proud of his credentials. He boasted a very fine heritage.

He had very fine qualities himself. And in writing to the church of Philippi, he gives one of his fuller lists of his credentials. He also refers to them in other parts of his epistles.

But the one in Philippians is perhaps the fullest. He was circumcised the eighth day. He followed the ritual, long-established ritual from the book of Genesis, right on circumcision by the eighth day. So in that sense, he had a very good background. And emphasizing more of his background, he said, I'm of the people of Israel and of the blessed tribe of Benjamin.

[2 : 19] Now, the tribe of Benjamin was known for its warrior skills. They were conquerors, and they loved it. And I think Paul loved to be a conqueror too.

He was of very fine stock, as I say, in the highlands. And then, to crown it all, he said, I'm a Hebrew of the Hebrews. Whatever that means, it means I'm a very, very, very special Hebrew.

And then, could you add to that? No, he could. He said, I'm a Pharisee. Now, the Pharisees were absolutely splendid guys in being well-versed in the laws of the Old Testament.

It didn't matter if they'd forgotten half of them and didn't apply them. But also, in addition to what you find in the Old Testament, they had added their own pile of laws, so that they were very, very powerful in legal matters, and they could check you out with their endless checklists.

That's the sort of person I am. I'm very, very learned. But not just that. I am totally committed to the cause of my heritage, and what I think this is.

[3 : 33] I'm righteous. I'm faultless. You could almost see Paul preening himself and saying, how good I am. He couldn't see beyond himself.

And so it was, his mission to eradicate, to cut out all possible opposition was supremely important. And those who followed the humble Jesus, this humble Jesus whose life was causing such ripples, not just ripples, but revolution throughout the Roman world, this Jesus and his religion must be a prime target.

So when it came to persecution, first mention of Saul, as he was called then, was at the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr.

The Bible tells us, it's an interesting phrase, they laid their clothes at the feet of a young man called Saul.

[4 : 39] The symbolism of what you call nowadays a supporting role. I wonder, did he feel himself too clean to do the really dirty work?

Perhaps he was that sort of person. As a Pharisee, that was very, very impossible. And then, so he pursued his cause.

And in Acts chapter 9, we read that he got letters from the high priest to give to the synagogues of Damascus for the arrest of anyone who belonged to the way, as Christianity was called, and to bring them back to Jerusalem.

Now, I've thought, and I puzzle this, were these priests, high priests, acting beyond their powers? I think there's every possibility in it.

Under Roman rule, do these high priests have powers of arrest and powers of taking people back to Jerusalem for a cause that was so very much a cause of the Jews?

[5 : 49] So there was dubious legality in his action. What authority did they have? Paul, Paul, the legalist, was probably acting out with the law, interestingly.

His judgment was flawed in so many ways. So that was the man he was. He was a man of extremes, extreme righteousness, extreme in power, extreme in zeal.

And there he rests. That's the man he was. So what do we come on to now?

We come on to the man he became. There was a huge change in Paul's life.

The man he became. Enthusiastically pursuing his wretched task, he was brought to an abrupt halt on the road to Damascus.

[6 : 55] With piercing suddenness, his entire worldview was upturned. He was persecuting Jesus. I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.

Now we're so familiar with this phrase that we lose the wonder of it. It immediately crashed on Paul. In persecuting these Christians, you are persecuting me.

Me, the Savior who bled and died for you. And the wonderful thing for us is this. When we suffer in Christ's name, Jesus suffers too.

Jesus has that intensity of feeling that brings us into his close care. And this is the wonderful Savior that we worship.

So brought to his knees, the Lord told him to get up and go. He was for three days in the house of one Judas. And to here it was Ananias was told to go.

[8 : 04] Ananias hesitated, but obeyed. He obeyed seeing the possibilities of the life in the hands of God, a life that could be used by God.

What possibilities for Christ do I see in impossible people? I say I write people off so often in my shame.

Ananias saw the possibilities of a life in Christ's hands, a life in a one who was following the way.

And then something even more surprising happened. Ananias came to him. And what did he say? Brother Saul, this is a man who days before had been persecuting and killing Christians, going out with formal instructions to kill the Lord's people.

And Ananias says to him, Brother Saul. I think apart from being struck down on the Damascus road, that must have been the thing that really hit Paul the most.

[9 : 22] How on earth could this man who I was being out to really kill, how could he call me brother?

But he did. And that was the wonderful, the amazing, the everlasting power of the gospel in our life. The power of endless forgiveness.

I call him brother. Ananias is one of the unsung heroes of the New Testament, but he would not want him to be lauded more than anything else.

He gave the glory to Christ. Now, days later, Paul was found in the synagogue preaching that Jesus was the Son of God. It's quite interesting that he must have had really considerable knowledge of the gospel message.

He must have had considerable knowledge of what Jesus had done. He was watching it so very closely, the miracles, the miracles, the healing, the ministry, the revolutionary message of Jesus, meeting the poor, giving the poor their place, making the disreputable reputable.

[10 : 39] Paul must have known a lot about that. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been persecuting, going out to persecute those who followed Jesus. So, a knowledge was, that knowledge, I believe, was now being applied to making the name of Jesus known.

There's no time to waste. There's a preacher, James S. Stewart, better known in the last century, but he wrote a book called A Man in Christ, and he wrote these wonderful words.

It's perhaps the longest sentence I've ever come across, but it's absolutely commanding. Can I read it to you? Speaking of Paul, possessed from that very first glorious hour of discovery, and with an overmastering gratitude to the Lord to whom he owed it, with an utter conviction of what had

happened to himself, could happen to everyone, and with a consuming passion to see it happening all over the earth, and to share his Christ with all mankind, he threw everything he had, everything he was, into his response to the gospel challenge.

So wrote James S. Stewart so very wonderfully. And so, there was puzzlement in Jerusalem. Isn't this the man who caused havoc in Jerusalem? But then in writing to the Corinthians years later, he gave the answer to that, the man who caused havoc, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creation.

[12:23] And so the glory of Christ's transforming power runs through every epistle of Paul's. It was strength in weakness, the very opposite of the world's view.

So, there was Paul in this very, very pivotal moment in his life. Strength in weakness.

Now, there are two kinds of weakness if you're trying to follow Christ. The first kind of weakness is the weakness most of us share. The weakness, the excuse type of weakness.

I am not able to do this, therefore, I'm not going to do it. I don't feel like doing it, therefore, I can't do it.

And then, there is Paul's kind of weakness. The weakness that depends on Christ. So, he said, made that wonderful contradictory statement.

[13:29] When I am weak, then am I strong. therefore, I boast in that kind of weakness. The man he became, as far as appearance was concerned, the word was contemptible.

The Corinthians said, in person, he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing. We all think about Paul as a great orator. Well, he wasn't. He's speaking amounted to nothing.

And then, writing to the Corinthians again, he says himself, I confess, I'm not a trained speaker. So, that was Paul. He's not a superman.

Because, everything was worthless compared to the greatness of knowing Christ. For his sake, he had lost all things.

And he uses extreme language in following Christ. You know, the authorised version brings it out most dramatically. You know, we've got the more pukka versions that say, I count all things but refuse.

[14:37] What does the authorised version say? I count them everything but dung compared to knowing Christ. Dirty, filthy, stinking, dung, fit for the midden.

The knowledge of Christ surpasses absolutely everything else in this world. he had made that glorious discovery of surpassing greatness of knowing Christ.

For his sake, he had lost all things. But having lost all things, he had everything in Christ. He lost everything.

He had nothing but he gained everything. And the challenge of Paul's attitude, not the superman, but Paul's commitment, Paul's nothingness, Paul's weakness.

What do we have? Am I, what am I clinging to as an individual today? What is my, what is the power that gets into my life?

[15:42] Because for Paul, religion, pride, pedigree came to be nothing. And that was the sort of person through which Christ works.

Then we come on, thirdly, to the world he faced. There are few better settings than the situation in Athens to show the challenge which Paul faced and which moved him so deeply.

And that's why we got Walter to read the whole of Acts 8 chapter 17. Paul and Silas were living very dangerously. They were in Thessalonica or Thessalonica and we read a few moments ago about the absolute reaction to the word there because the Jews in Thessalonica showed enormous energy in persecution and they were so enthusiastic that the dirty thing I don't know if you noticed these words that got some of the baser sort of people to stir up my knowledge.

They got hit men to go for the Christians the lowest form of committing a crime surely and they got the hit men and to cut a long story short Paul and Silas had to come out of Thessalonica and they were taken to the safety of Berea and there the Jews in Thessalonica news travelled fast even in those days the Jews in Thessalonica got stirred up Paul was preaching the scriptures examining them every day but it could not last and so he came to Athens they troubled him in Berea so he had to go to Athens and when Paul was in Athens the Bible tells us he was greatly distressed when he saw the city turned over to idols now Athens was the premier along with

Alexander the first seat of learning in the ancient world it was famous it was the Oxford and Cambridge of you might say of the ancient world but despite this it was a city that was because of

this perhaps it was a city that was full of idols full of idols Paul was distressed how am I distressed when I see contemporary idols Athens encapsulated the spirit of the age there was disillusionment with the classical gods of Rome and Greece there was disillusionment with politics people returning to sects and mystery pop up religions built around personalities and there were dubious standards of morality one could go on and on about life in Athens it was pretty unsavoury in the whole and pretty meaningless and there are striking similarities to our own day when it comes to sexual morality the Nike slogan just do it seems to fit perfectly to the

[19 : 07] Athens of that day and to young people today faced with permissive morality the challenge is exactly the same just do it I depart from my text here because just yesterday I read the most extraordinary thing about new things happening I don't know if many of you have heard of anti-natalism anti-natalism there's a group growing up that is discouraging people to have babies because babies are brought into the world and they've got no choice in the world they come into enough of that but that is a perfect example of the confusion utter confusion of our age and Athens with all our learning is a forerunner of what we face in many quarters today so what did Paul do about this it's interesting firstly he went to the synagogue and met with Jews and God fearing

Greeks now this is an interesting approach he met with people who knew about the word and who could be persuaded he hadn't got back to absolute basics then and that was the best place to start next step in his approach he went to the marketplace where he aroused the curiosity of the philosophers there were the stoics who practiced self-denial and there were epicureans who intended to get pleasure out of life and not in a nasty way at first but they came to be associated with just free living and they developed a nice pretty it was very nice at first through friendship but it was a free for all lifestyle and not unexpectedly there was debate in the marketplace this led to Paul being brought to the

Areopagus the Areopagus was a sort of debating court or chamber it's something like what you might call the royal society today but the royal society is infinitely more sophisticated but men would produce their learned papers and they would think over it so he was brought to the Areopagus and to a people completely at loss for answers he gave his answers and so we come to the message that Paul proclaimed what was his message then we have here a pattern for the promotion and defense of the gospel in the broader context of a Christian world view as we are looking at Paul's reasoning he would be the first person to say that what we are in Christ and how we live matters much more but he does give a rationale

Christians are living letters he said so let's never restart of that but how did he start with this learned society we call he started first of all interestingly in looking for common ground he said you see you're seeking for something and I see that you have an altar to the unknown God they put up an altar to the unknown God just in case they had missed any God out that was what they called a celestial insurance policy probably that there would be risk averse the Athenians and the religious observance so they had the altar to the unknown God and Paul wonderfully says he is the one I want to tell you about and so to these people in the center of the cultural universe that was given the message the truth could not only be discovered could be found in a person

Jesus Christ and these people it fitted perfectly into the wee verse it goes I saw them where the doctors meet to turn deep questions over but every answer tempted me to ask one question more and into that environment of perfection of doubt the clarity of the gospel in Jesus Christ shone in am I still groping for the truth so having established common ground he went on to tell them the message the message of the living God the creator the planner the sustainer the judge he is the maker of the universe this God so he doesn't dwell in the temples made by man's hands he cannot live in that he's too great his presence can't be found in any spectacular buildings and Athens had lots and lots of temples and from the beginning

[24 : 37] Paul stresses God's greatness and as an interesting sideline we do not believe in consecrated buildings because there's a danger if you've got a consecrated building you'll get the funny fuzzy feeling that you get vibes of goodness and vibes of nice and there's a travel writer who did something in Scottish Sacred Isles and he was getting vibes and Fiona well we're not a vibing people our buildings are not consecrated you can only find Christ in Crow Road Church if you come and face him face to face the building does not matter so that was one piece of demolition about their temples God is not served with human hands he does not need us we need him we need him why do we need God why do I need God why do you need God there's a source of life itself life breath everything else so Paul goes away beyond a concept of blind forces to one who orders and

sustains all and he makes this essential link between the nature of

God and our approach to belief and worship the link between what God is like and our approach to worship two very very important things am I seeking God through a mystical experience are you seeking him in some sort of environment some sort of feeling no it's something much more extraordinary than that Paul would say it's Christ in you the hope of glory he can be in me hope and transformation can only come through the indwelling a Christ so how am I when it comes to the creator God don't be brainwashed into a view of creation that diminishes the power of God it's so easy when we watch these wonderful things on television this marvellous photography nature photography a product of years patient years of work to say well isn't this marvellous but do we see the hand of God in it no I think we're brainwashed because those who present it seem to just promote a view that totally excludes divine power way back over a hundred years ago there was an extraordinary poet

Studdard Kennedy and he wrote many poems about the first world war very telling stuff but he also wrote dialect poems in the Cockney dialect and this is so important that's what he said forgive all the words but when I went for a walk of a Sunday morn on a nice fine day in the spring I could see the proof of the living God in every living thing for how could the grass and the trees grow up all along of their blooming cells might as well believe in fairy tales and think they were made by elves so I thought of that long-eared atheist was nabbit a silly sod for how did he count for my Brussels sprouts if he didn't believe in God you see God is an all of nature and if we make an awful mistake and an awful defeat perhaps as a

Christians if we do not sing the praises of God's creation but that's that's what Paul did he sang the praises of God's creation in stressing to the Athenians that God had a plan and the plan was this the assurance of the one Jesus who walked on the earth who healed who wept over Jerusalem who wept at Lazarus grave the Jesus who went to the cross this is the heart of Paul's message not primarily a philosopher the Athenian debate is the only other one recorded there is every likelihood there are others in a less formal context writing to the Corinthians he said we demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself against the knowledge of God time and time again he comes back to Christ often he bursts out in the most glorious expressions talking about how to give what does he say thanks be to God for this unspeakable gift he gives immeasurably more than we can ever imagine now we cannot go further like this discouraged one day every knee will bow to Jesus so finally and I forgive me if we've overrun final thing is the goal he strived for this one thing I do in the light of all that

God has done in providence and grace this is the final the only consistency everything else is shifting sands forgetting behind what is behind straining what is behind I press on towards the goal to win the prize to which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus this one thing I do and the one thing I do there are four verbs forgetting straining pressing winning no merit it's all because of what Christ has done and what he means to me a man in Christ am I in Christ is Christ in me the hope of glory that's a challenge that faces everyone today am I a man or a woman in Christ let's pray Lord apply your word to our hearts and help us to be truly people in Christ for his name's sake amen

[30 : 42] Thank you.