

Life in Him: What Does It Mean to Be United with Christ?

Selected Scriptures

Introduction

Believers in Christ

- 1 Corinthians 1:30 – “By His doing you are in Christ Jesus...”
- 2 Corinthians 5:17 – “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature...”

Christ in Believers

- Romans 8:10 – “If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness.”
- Ephesians 3:17 – “...so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...”
- Colossians 1:26–27 – “...the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is: Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

Believers in Christ *and* Christ in Believers

- 1 John 4:13 – “By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.”

Importance

- “There is no truth . . . more suited to impart confidence and strength, comfort and joy in the Lord, than this one of union with Christ” (John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 171).
- But that confidence, strength, comfort and joy cannot be ours if we are ignorant of this truth. And therefore, we must turn to what Scripture teaches concerning our union with Christ.

I. The Pervasiveness of the Believer’s Union

Union with Christ is not merely another step in the order of salvation; it pervades all aspects of our salvation—from the Father’s election, to the Son’s atonement, to the Spirit’s regeneration and beyond.

Ephesians 1:3–14

- vv. 3–6 – The Plan of Redemption: God the Father’s eternal, unconditional election.
- vv. 7–12 – The Accomplishment of Redemption: God the Son’s sin-bearing atonement for those the Father has chosen.
- vv. 13–14 – The Application of Redemption: God the Spirit’s sealing the saving blessings (planned by the Father and purchased by Christ) to each individual believer.
- v. 14 – The Consummation of Redemption: God the Spirit’s bringing every saving blessing to completion in the glorification of the believer.

Salvation “in Him”

- Eph 1:3 – God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places *in Christ*.
- Eph 1:4 – The Father chose us *in Him*.
- Eph 1:6 – He freely bestowed grace on us *in the Beloved*.
- Eph 1:7 – *In Him* we have redemption through His blood.
- Eph 1:9 – The Father’s good pleasure was purposed *in Him*.
- Eph 1:10 – All things are being summed up *in Christ*.
- Eph 1:11 – *In Him* we have obtained an inheritance.
- Eph 1:13 – You were sealed *in Him* with the Holy Spirit of promise.

Union with Christ is “the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation.”
(John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 161)

A. The Plan of Redemption

Election is a choice that constitutes a union between Christ His people.

- Ephesians 1:4 – God’s choice of believers was made *in Christ*. Not: “He chose us *to be* in Christ,” but “He chose us *in Him*.”
- 2 Timothy 1:9 – Grace was granted to us from all eternity, before we had ever existed. And such grace was granted “*in Christ Jesus*,” i.e., in union with Christ.
- The Father’s election is a choice to save His people by the work that Christ would accomplish on their behalf, that is, by giving them to Christ as their Mediator and Redeemer.
 - John 10:27 – “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.”
 - John 10:29 – “My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all.”
 - John 17:6 – He prays to the Father, “They were *Yours*, and You *gave* them to Me.” He will grant *eternal* life.

B. The Accomplishment of Redemption

God reckons the elect to be united with Christ throughout every act of the Son's mission.

- Ephesians 1:7 – “In Him,” that is, in union with Christ, “we have redemption through His blood.”
 - Not merely: When we believe in Christ we are counted to be redeemed.
 - Rather: That union between the elect and Christ that was established in eternity past remains established during Christ's entire life.

The elect were united to Christ at every point of His saving mission on earth.

- Matthew 3:15 – Jesus was baptized in order to “fulfill all righteousness.” Jesus had no sins to repent of, but we did. He was amassing a record of human obedience that would be credited to those united to Him.
- Galatians 3:27 – “For all of you who were [immersed] into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” Cf. Isaiah 61:10: the “robe of righteousness,” the “garments of salvation.” To be clothed with Christ is to be credited with the obedience that Christ accomplished on earth.
- Romans 5:19 – “...through the obedience of the One [man] the many will be constituted righteous.”
- 1 Corinthians 1:30 – “By His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us . . . *righteousness.*”
- 2 Corinthians 5:21 – The Father made Christ “to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”
 - The union between Christ and His people that functions as the “connective tissue” of the imputation of sin and righteousness.
- Died with Christ (Rom 6:8; Col 2:20; 3:3)
- Crucified with Christ (Rom 6:6)
- Buried with Christ (Rom 6:4; Col 2:12)
- Raised with Christ (Eph 2:6; Col 3:1)
- Seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Eph 2:6)

Everything that Christ did while He was on earth with respect to the accomplishment of salvation, His people are said to have done in Him.

C. The Application of Redemption

Though our salvation was made doubly certain by the election of the Father and the redemption of the Son, we are not put into actual possession of salvation until we come to saving faith—until the redemption that has been designed for us in eternity and purchased for us on Calvary is applied to us in conversion.

- Regeneration (Eph 2:5; 2 Cor 5:17)
- Repentant Faith (Gal 2:16)
- Justification (Rom 8:1; Gal 2:17; Phil 3:9)
- Adoption (Eph 1:5)
- Positional Sanctification (1 Cor 1:2)
- Progressive Sanctification (Rom 7:4)
- Perseverance (Rom 8:38–39)
- Death (1 Thess 4:16)
- Glorification (Rom 6:5; 1 Cor 15:20, 22)

When Were You Saved?

- “When I believed.” Yes, because that’s when the Holy Spirit opened your eyes and put you into actual possession of all the blessings that had been designed for you by the Father and won for you by the Son.
- “On the cross, when Christ paid for my sins.” Yes, because that is when redemption was accomplished (cf. Eph 1:7; Col 1:14).
- “In eternity, when the Father chose me.” Yes, there is a sense in which this is true also, because the Father’s election is determinative of salvation.

II. The Nature of the Believer’s Union

What does it mean that believers are united to Christ? Scripture answers, in part, by illustrating this union with several **metaphors**.

A. Building and Foundation (Eph 2:19–22)

- The growth, the edification, unity, and stability of the church all depend on being united to Christ, our Cornerstone and Foundation.

B. Vine and Branches (John 15:4–5)

- Just as the branches depend on the vine for life, strength, and sustenance, so also does the believer depend on union with Christ for all spiritual nourishment and growth (cf. John 1:14).

C. Husband and Wife (Eph 5:22–33).

- Intimacy. The union of husband and wife is the most intimate relationship among mankind, and Paul says this union exists to be a picture of the mysterious union between Christ and His church (Eph 5:32–33).
- Organic. This one-flesh union of husband and wife (Eph 5:31; cf. Gen 2:24) portrays the mutuality and vitality of the church’s union with her Husband.

- Legality. Marriage *legally* joins the husband to the wife, so that all that is his is hers and all that is hers is his. So also does the believer's union with Christ enable Christ to act as the legal representative in our stead.
- Unbreakable. For a man to be "joined to his wife" (Eph 5:31; cf. Gen 2:24) is to be "glued" or "cemented" together (*proskollaō*). God designs marriage to be life-long (Matt 19:6). Neither will Christ divorce His bride (Matt 28:20; Heb 13:5).

D. Head and Body (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:27; Eph 1:22–23; 5:23, 29–30; cf. 1 Cor 6:15)

- What happens to the head happens to the body, and what happens to the body happens to the head.
- There is no element of Christ's earthly life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension in which we do not partake on account of our being united to Him.

III. Implications of the Believer's Union

A. Union with the Trinity

- Since God the Son is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit, those united to Christ are also united to the Father (John 17:21; 1 Thess 1:1; 1 John 4:15) and the Spirit (Rom 8:9; 2 Tim 1:14).

B. Communion with the Trinity

- Union with Christ is the foundation for communion with Christ.
- Understanding the glories of your union with Him ought to compel you to fellowship with Him through daily Scripture reading and prayer, through weekly participation in corporate worship, through regular fellowship with the saints, and through a life of obedience.

C. Union and Communion with the Church

- Those united to Christ are united to everyone else who is united to Christ. Christians do not merely have a personal relationship with Jesus but a corporate one.
- To suggest that one can be genuinely united to Jesus apart from actually joining ourselves in membership to a particular local expression of His body is to tear the head from the body. There is no union with Christ that does not issue in fellowship with His church.
- The unity of the Trinity is the ground of the unity of the church (John 17:21). We would not dare divide the persons of the Trinity, and so we must not be a stone in that living building that gets out of joint and causes the rest to topple (Eph 2:19–22; 4:3).

D. Spiritual Blessing Only in Christ

- Union with Christ “is the cause of all other graces that we are made partakers of; they are all communicated unto us by virtue of our union with Christ. Hence is our adoption, our justification, our sanctification, our fruitfulness, our perseverance, our resurrection, our glory” (John Owen, *Exposition of Hebrews*, in *Works*, 21:150).
- It is only as we share in Christ that we have a share in what is Christ’s. If we are to have an interest in Christ’s blessings, we must have an interest in His person. The gifts are wrapped up in the Giver.

Conclusion

- Unbeliever: Come to Christ in repentant faith alone to be united to Him.
- Believer: Search the Scriptures to meditate on your union with Christ. Rejoice over the great salvation lavished upon you through union with your Savior. Live lives consistent with being the recipients of such privileges.