

Life in Christ

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[0 : 00] There are many ways by which we can describe what it means to be a Christian. We could say someone who believes in Christ, someone who follows Christ, someone who is saved.

One way which we don't always talk about so much is being in Christ. And yet, when we read the New Testament, especially the letters of Paul, this description of the Christian comes up time and time again.

And it's a description that comes from the fact that Christians are united to Christ. Paul memorably said this about himself in his letter to the Christians in Galatia.

He said, 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.

For Paul and the other writers of the New Testament, this is essential for understanding just what it means to be a Christian. To be a Christian is to be united to Christ.

[1 : 12] To be a Christian is to live a life whereby it's no longer you who lives, but it's Christ who lives in you by faith, because you have been supernaturally united to him.

And this is what we're going to be thinking about over the next few weeks. Working through some key text in Paul's letter to the Roman Christians, we're going to think about what union with Christ is, how it happens, what it looks like, and what the implications are.

Because if it's true that Christians are not just followers of Christ, but are somehow actually united to him, that's going to affect the way in which we understand the Christian's identity, the Christian's faith, and the Christian's life.

And I hope that as we think about what really is quite a staggering idea, that you'll be excited by what Jesus offers those who believe in him, which is union with himself.

In our time today, we're going to work through that part of Romans 5 that Jonathan just read to us. Paul here explains basically what it means to be united to Christ, and why, without any hint of exaggeration, it is the greatest gift that has ever been offered to anyone.

[2 : 32] He shows us firstly what life apart from Christ looks like, and that is the reign of death in Adam. That's going to be our first point. And then secondly, he explores and unpacks the solution, which is the gift of life in Christ.

That'll be our second point. So our first point, the reign of death in Adam. Paul begins this section of his letter, not with Christ, but with Adam. As Paul develops his argument, and you might have noticed this as we read through it, there's a constant comparison between Adam on the one hand and Christ on the other.

The one man who brought death and the one man who brought life. Because union with Christ is very much not our natural condition. All men and women are, by nature, not in Christ, but in Adam. And the telltale sign of this is the presence of sin in our lives and the reign of death. And this goes all the way back to really the very beginning of the story.

This begins on that fateful day in Eden, the day that Adam made the fruit that was forbidden. Fateful because it had repercussions for all humanity.

[3 : 42] The Pope summarizes the dreadful impact of it in verse 12. He says, sin entered the world through one man and death through sin. Adam, the one man, disobeyed God and so sin entered the world.

And death then followed. A spiritual death which cut mankind off from God, their creator. And a physical death as a result too that means all of us will one day return to the dust from which Adam was first created.

Death exists because of sin. And it's fundamentally unnatural. I think it's rather common today when speaking or thinking about death to see it as part of the natural cycles of the world.

We live, we die, we return to the soil and become part of creation. It's all one big circle. But really that fails to take account for the tears that death pulls out of us.

How many of us have been at the graveside of a loved one and felt that emptiness, that chasm that death creates and leaves behind. Whether death comes to someone who has lived to be a hundred or to a child that enters the world stillborn.

[4 : 59] When the heartbeats stop, there are always tears. Death and life are not part of a cycle. They are not two sides of the same coin. Death is anathema to everything that is good.

Death's gateway into the world was the very first sin. Sin and death are in fact the two sides of the same coin. They are the two towers of evil which wage war against the world.

The two towers which looked really rather unshakable. The reign of death seems so secure that I suspect that we probably have a hard time imagining what a world would look like without death. And because of Adam's sin, will all of us now sin. And so consequently death will get us all. Paul says, therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man and death through sin, in this way death came to all people because all sinned.

Adam was the fountainhead. When he sinned, sin became part of humanity's genetic makeup, if you like. The moment sin entered the world, every human being was therefore destined to be born in sin.

[6 : 16] Sin is both an action and a status. We are in Adam as his descendants, and therefore we are in sin. And therefore we engage in sin.

We are all, as the Bible says, sinners. Now I accept that sin is really quite an odd concept in our current cultural climate. Consider, for example, Russell T Davies' recent drama about the 1980s AIDS crisis called *It's a Sin*, after the song by the Pet Shop Boys.

The title is really quite a powerful, subversive statement. But one which I think quite accurately reflects the way in which people in Britain today see this idea of sin.

Because it raises the question, how can someone in this day and age call something sinful? The very idea that we might call something a sin is, it's either backward, archaic, or, more dangerously, potentially hateful.

And yet, the Bible says that all humanity is sinful. Everyone sins. And everyone indulges in thoughts and actions that go against God the Creator Himself.

[7 : 34] But how can we say that desires and behaviors, whatever they might be, are sinful? Is that not, in effect, denying my right to exist? My right to an authentic identity?

Here's the thing. According to Paul, there are two types of identity. The first is there's being in Adam, and the second is being in Christ. In Adam, our identity is wrapped up with sin, and sin is wrapped up with death.

I wonder, is that really the sort of identity that we want? The Bible's understanding of what constitutes a sin is often completely repellent to our culture.

It's true. And every Christian knows that they have to put to death certain desires, behaviors, instincts, inclinations. And these will differ for every one of us.

The reason is because these desires, these behaviors, these instincts, these inclinations, they're fundamentally associated with death. In a world that finds identity inside ourselves, what's really quite sobering about what Paul says is that ultimately, that identity is wrapped up with sin and death.

[8 : 49] Which means that we need to find both life and identity somewhere outside of ourselves. And that's where union with Christ starts to come in. And that's why Paul begins with these two towers of sin and death.

Because in order to understand union with Christ, well, we need to understand the problem that it addresses. Our culture doesn't see sin as a problem, at least for the most part.

It does recognize evil, but not the fact that evil or sin exists inside all of us, I don't think. But for Paul, sin exists within us all like a terminal cancer that we can't escape from and that we can't treat.

It's in our very blood and it's in our very bones. And because of it, we will die. Our culture doesn't see death as a problem, certainly not in the same way the Bible does.

The Bible is refreshingly honest in a way that culture isn't. It sees death as an aberration. Anyone who sugarcoats the darkness of death is living in denial.

[9 : 55] And our culture certainly doesn't make that link between sin and death. But there is, according to Paul, a very clear cause and effect. It began with Adam and it has played out in the

lives of every human being throughout history.

All people sin and therefore all people die. And that's really the point that Paul's making in verses 13 and 14. He's dealing with the anticipated objection from Jews concerned about the place of the Old Testament law.

The Roman church was plagued by a bit of a Jew, non-Jew schism within the Christians there.

What Paul says is that death reigned from Adam until the law was given, which proves that sin is not just breaking commands like Adam did, but it's actually within our very being.

Death proves that sin was present in all people from Adam onwards. I've labored this point despite its heaviness because without understanding where humanity stands without Christ, we cannot properly understand what union with Christ actually achieves.

What's really interesting is that Paul ends verse 14 by calling Adam a pattern, or sometimes translated a type, of the one to come. This is where union with Christ really comes in.

[11 : 19] Because Adam's failure anticipated the one who would restore everything and deal with sin and deal with death. Someone like Adam, after Adam's pattern, who would come to make it right.

And so although we started with some pretty heavy reflections on sin, death, and the state of humanity, this is all setting the stage for the arrival of hope in the one to come, Christ.

To appreciate Christ, it's useful to see with clarity and precision the tragedy of humanity. Sin and death have brought humanity to its knees.

Humanity made in the image of God has been corrupted. The tragedy of humanity has led to the atrocities at Auschwitz and Buchenwald. To the cruelty of slavery born out of racism.

To acts of violence and sexual trauma experienced by women in every culture across history. To the countless children aborted before they can experience even the first breath of life.

[12 : 26] To every act of selfishness that leads to the suffering of others. And so many more travesties across history. These things have not happened in a vacuum.

They happen because humanity is broken and enslaved to sin and death. That is our tragedy. As Shakespeare wrote in Richard II.

Woe, destruction, ruin and decay. The worst is death. And death will have his day. But one day, death didn't.

The day that Christ rose from the grave and triumphed over death. Was the day that death didn't have his day. Which is why we can now talk about the gift of life in Christ.

That's our second point. So the first thing Paul notes about this gift. Is that it's not like Adam's first sin. It is so much more powerful.

[13 : 24] Paul writes, All people died and do die because of the one man Adam's trespass.

But God's gift of grace in the one man Jesus overflows to all who believe in him. Now Paul doesn't underline that faith element here.

But it is present earlier in Romans. He said earlier, Since we have been justified through faith, We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

So here he's taking faith as a given. Adam, he ruined what was good and beautiful, making it bent and crooked. But Jesus sets it straight.

It's rather easy to ruin something beautiful. Imagine a beautiful statue standing in a garden. If you take a sledgehammer to it, You'd be able to destroy it in such a way that it would be no longer possible to see what the statue was ever depicting before.

[14 : 44] The art of destruction is really rather easy. And that's what Adam did whenever he sinned. The art of creation is harder. And harder even than that is the art of restoration.

No one could possibly put that statue back together. It's been ruined beyond repair and recognition. But what Jesus does is he puts the statue back together.

And he makes it even better than it was before. And that's the point that Paul's making in verse 16. Nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of one man's sin.

The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation. Condemnation and justification are very theological words.

Condemnation is basically where all humanity stands before God because of their sin. Imagine a law court. God sits as judge.

[15 : 43] And all of us are guilty. As we said before, sin is in our very bones. Every selfish thought, every cruel word, every time we reject God, our creator, we sin.

Adam's sin and our sins which have then followed mean we are under condemnation. And God is the absolutely perfect judge. The rules are clear and there are no exceptions.

Where a crime is being committed, there must be justice. I think that's something we probably all agree with. And as the all-knowing, all-seeing creator, well, no one gets away with their sin.

And all have sinned. And actually, when you think about it, wouldn't it be great if all judges were like that? Actually administering justice fairly and properly.

But God is also merciful. And that's why Paul speaks of grace as a gift. The gift of grace followed all our sins and all our trespasses and bestows on us justification.

[16 : 45] A word which, in other words, means we become righteous in the eyes of the judge. Our list of sins is washed away. Even the vilest crimes are wiped from the record when you receive God's grace.

I think it's probably fair to say we live in a rather unforgiving time. One ill-advised tweet and even the most heartfelt apology. It's just not going to cut it, is it? But if one joke that's in bad taste is enough to condemn us in the eyes of the world, what hope is there for those who've committed far worse crimes?

We mentioned some of the terrible things that sinful humanity has done. But here's the remarkable thing about God's mercy. Murderers, rapists, abusers, slavers, all can be forgiven when they receive God's gift of grace.

The gift is greater than the trespass because every sin, even the vilest sin, is washed away when a person believes in Jesus and follows him.

And because the gift deals with the sin problem, no matter how repellent, no matter how disgusting the offense, the gift also is able to deal with the reign of death because sin and death are linked.

[18 : 06] So when Jesus deals with sin, death too will be dealt with. Paul writes in verse 17, For if by the trespass of the one man death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ?

When your sins are forgiven, death no longer has a hold on you. That seems to be Paul's logic. Death no longer reigns in the life of the one who has received God's grace and the gift of righteousness.

Instead, that person will reign in life through Jesus. And this takes us right back to God's original plan for humanity. Before things got screwed up in Adam ate the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve were supposed to rule in creation alongside God himself.

What happens when grace takes hold of a person is that they are promised a future where they will reign alongside Jesus when the chaos and darkness that pervades this fallen world has been vanished forever.

The Christian will reign in life and indeed receives life through Jesus. We will die physically. That effect of the fall we can't escape.

[19 : 24] But we will rise to new life and have a new perfect body that will never wither or grow old. And it's because we are no longer spiritually dead that we will receive physical immortality.

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, describes those who are without Jesus as dead in their transgressions and sins. But in Christ, we are alive. In Christ, we're no longer separated from God. And we can actually know him and call him Father. And this is the key thing. Grace and life come through Christ. Union with Christ is the mechanism by which the gift comes to those who believe. Union with Christ is that essential link in the chain. Without Christ, you remain dead in your sins. But when united to Christ, you will reign in life through him.

As Paul says, As Paul says, Consequently, Just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, So also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people.

[20 : 38] For just as through the disobedience of the one man, the many were made sinners, So also through the obedience of the one man, the many will be made righteous.

Adam's disobedience brought sin and death. Christ's obedience makes sinners righteous and gives them the gift of eternal life.

Adam's act of disobedience, that was when he ate the fruit of the forbidden tree. Christ's act of obedience, with him hanging and dying on a rather different tree.

Tree of execution, the cross. When Paul wrote to the Philippian Christians, he said this about Jesus' crucifixion. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

Adam had to obey one simple command, not to eat the forbidden fruit. He failed. And we, all of his descendants, fail time and time again to keep even the simplest commands, just in the same way Adam did.

[21 : 48] But Jesus was perfect and obedient to the point that he died for every sinner who trusts in him. Now we said earlier that God is the perfect judge.

No one escapes his justice. Grace works because Jesus took the punishment that sinners deserve. My punishment, your punishment, it was taken by Christ on the cross.

The cross was far more than just an excruciatingly cruel physical punishment, although it was certainly that. But on the cross, Jesus drank the full cup of God's wrath.

He drank it to the dregs. God himself bearing the wrath of God. God the Son willingly taking the judgment administered by God the Father.

And so my sins and yours are covered by Jesus. He did that for you and for me, even though the cost was agonizingly high. That's why John Newton called it in his hymn, Amazing Grace.

[22 : 54] Because it is amazing. Where faith comes in is because in order to receive this gift of grace, you have to open out your hands. It's the same as basically every free gift that we receive and get in life.

If you're given a gift, but you decide not to open the wrapping paper and you decide you're not going to accept it, you're not going to touch it, you're just going to set it on a corner and kind of ignore it. Well, you're not going to be able to use it.

You're not going to be able to enjoy it. Grace is a free gift, but it has to be received. As Paul wrote earlier in Romans, When you believe in Jesus and when you follow him, you become united to him. No longer are you in Adam, but you are in Christ. And so the sin and death, which were associated with Adam, no longer have a hold on you. Instead, it's Christ's life and Christ's righteousness that are the ruling realities in you and in your life.

And this is nothing short of miraculous. I love The Prince of Egypt. It's a great film. Mariah Carey sings at the end of it, There can be miracles when you believe.

[24 : 09] In The Prince of Egypt's story, there are quite a lot of miracles. You can watch the film or even better, you can watch or read the book, which you'll find in Exodus. But none of those miracles come even close to the miracle that happens when we believe in Jesus.

And the miracle is that we are united to him. It's not the most visible miracle, but don't let that fool you. It's a miracle of resurrection. It's a miracle of forgiveness.

And it's a miracle of grace to dead and condemned sinners. Christ's perfect righteousness becomes our perfect righteousness. His death for sin becomes our death for sin.

His eternal life becomes our eternal life. In verse 20, Paul addresses any lingering questions that his Jewish readers would have had about the role of the law in all this.

For some of them, their understanding was that the law dealt with sin. Paul makes it clear that the effect of the law was actually to uncover the depths of sin in humanity. Instead of sorting the sin problem, it actually led to more sin because more commands were broken by sinful people.

[25 : 20] The rules of the Old Testament law were kept perfectly by no one except Jesus. And so the whole Old Testament, and the Old Testament law in particular, highlights the need for grace.

Indeed, Paul ends on a grace note, if you like, where he says, Just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness, to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

The only solution, the only solution to the tragedy of humanity and the presence of sin and death is union with Christ and his gift of grace, which gives us righteousness and eternal life.

So what then does this mean for us all? Once we're reflected on the tragedy of humanity, I want to spend our last few minutes thinking about the wonder of grace and the gift of union with Christ.

Whether you are united to Christ or not, union with him is the only solution to the two towers of sin and death that reign over humanity. What our world and our culture can offer in the face of evil is really rather ineffective.

[26 : 33] Take, for example, organizations like the United Nations. They extensively exist to ensure that evil isn't able to run amok on a global scale. But it hasn't done much for the persecution of various people groups in a vast array of countries across the world.

Nor has it effectively dealt with wars. Take the Syrian civil war, for example. That began in 2011 and it's still going on. Ultimately, human efforts to stop sin and evil are rather impotent. And it may be that you don't think of yourself as a sinner. As we said, our culture mocks the very idea of it. But here's the thing. To say that you don't have sin in your bones is actually a massive claim to moral perfection.

And deep down, we know that none of us can make that claim. But there's nothing in the world that can actually bring us closer to any kind of moral perfection. There's nothing in our culture that can heal our brokenness.

There's nothing in our world that can forgive that deep-seated guilt that we all feel. And there's nothing in our world that can give us a real hope that everything's going to be all right.

[27 : 45] And at the moment, I suspect that's a hope that we all need. But union with Christ can. And union with Christ does. And it's perfectly clear that our culture has no satisfactory answers about death.

Its best strategy is to ignore it and basically kind of brush it under the carpet as much as possible. It has nothing to fill that chasm that death creates in families and communities.

Nothing to really explain the horrors of death. And certainly nothing to solve the problem of death.

But union with Christ does solve it. When the world fails, as it often does, Christ succeeds.

Nothing else compares to Christ. The challenge for the Christian is that we're often drawn back to the world. We're often drawn back to its values. But doing that, according to Paul, is basically like leaping headfirst back into your own coffin.

It's madness. But choosing Christ and being united to him is the first step towards life. We could say it's life, but not as we know it.

[28 : 55] Until we're united to Jesus, the only life we know is in Adam. And life in Adam is death. But Jesus said, I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.

And in him, we can know real life. And so as we close, I'm reminded of the famous line from Trainspotting. Choose life.

The characters in Trainspotting choose heroin instead of life. And it doesn't really work out for them. And it's just the same in the world. The world chooses sin instead of life. And that doesn't usually work out.

Choosing Jesus is choosing life. Choosing anything else is choosing sin and therefore death. So what this means if you're not following Jesus is that there's a stark choice to make.

And there's no middle ground. Death or life. Sin or Christ. Well, this means if you're united to Jesus. It means that there's nothing that the world offers can ever compare to the gift that you already have.

[30 : 01] It might not always feel like it. But you have life because you have Christ. And Christ has you. And so I close with a question.

Have you chosen life?