

SRM14102

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“Union with Christ: Its Eternal Foundation”
Ephesians 1:3-6

There are many partings from others that we experience in life: A child going off to school for the first time, a teenager going off to College, a good friend moving away to take a new job. As difficult as these are, we know they are necessary passages of life, and they are mitigated by the enduring relationships we depend upon throughout life.

When you fear being separated from someone you are close to, what gives you solace, to what do you look for peace?

This morning I want to begin a series of messages on one truth that has given me, and many others the ability to make it through many losses, disappointments and experiences of brokenness.

We as Christians may and do suffer many painful partings in our lives, but we are solaced in them all by the knowledge that we have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ that cannot be broken.

In the next few weeks, I invite you to consider with me the teaching of scripture about the possibility, promise and prospect of a person coming into a relationship with God so close, so intimate, that we can become one with God Himself.

I’m not speaking in terms of a philosophy of Monism or Pantheism, but the teaching of the Bible that tells us we can relate to God as closely as Jesus did with the Heavenly Father by coming into a relationship with Jesus Christ where we become one with Him. Christians call this Union with Christ.

James S. Stewart wrote that “union with Christ, rather than justification or election or eschatology, or indeed any of the other great apostolic themes, is the real clue to an understanding of Paul’s thought and experience” (A Man in Christ [Harper & Bros., 1955], vii).

John Calvin said that union with Christ has “the highest degree of importance” if we are to understand justification correctly (Institutes 1:737).

John Murray wrote that “union with Christ is . . . the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation. . . . It is not simply a phase of the application of redemption; it underlies every aspect of redemption” (Redemption—Accomplished and Applied [Eerdmans, 1955], pp. 201, 205).

Lewis Smedes said that it was “at once the center and circumference of authentic human existence” (Union with Christ [Eerdmans, 1983], xii).

Anthony Hoekema wrote that “Once you have your eyes opened to this concept of union with Christ, you will find it almost everywhere in the New Testament” (Saved by Grace [Eerdmans, 1989], 64).

The New Testament uses two interchangeable expressions to describe union with Christ:

1. We are in Christ.
2. Christ is in us.

This morning I’d like to open a passage in the Bible that tells us about the Eternal Foundation of the Union with Christ that God invites you and I to experience: Ephesians 1:3-6.

In these opening words of a missionary to a church he had started, I hope you will discover with me a gift of God that will make you want to fall on your face in worshipful gratitude, pull someone closer with whom you can share, and reach out to someone who is sad and unloved and bring them peace.

In these words, the gospel is described as the Heavenly Father’s choosing to extend to guilty sinners a love that calls them to Acceptance, to Adoption and to Adoration.

The passage begins and ends with worship: v. 3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,”

This is one of nine Trinitarian expressions in Ephesians: Father blesses, Son secures the blessing, and Holy Spirit delivers blessings.

God the Father is God to Jesus as a man, and Father to Him, not in a Natural sense, but in a Trinitarian sense, as the Divine Word, as eternal co-equal in relationship.

God blesses us with "every possible blessing for time and eternity, which the Spirit has to bestow" (so "spiritual" means; not only "spiritual," as the term is now used, as opposed to bodily, but “Spirit given”).

“Spiritual” (Gk. pneumatikos) here communicates that the saving gifts of God are conveyed by the Holy Spirit (Gk. Pneuma), whose personal presence throughout this age is the guarantee of future heavenly blessings.

So these blessings are “in heavenly places”, since that is the Christian’s future imperishable home in glory when he is resurrected in a spiritual body through the “last Adam,” the “life-giving spirit”.

In v. 4, Paul mentions the first of three things to which the Father calls people.

1. The Father calls you to Acceptance. V. 4

“even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.”

He chose us before we chose Him. We choose Him, but ours is human, while His is Divine.

The Father chooses us “in Christ”. The Foundation of the church, and of salvation from start to finish, including the Father’s choosing, is Christ.

The choosing took place “before the foundation of the world” —This assumes the eternity of the Son of God as well as of the election of believers in Him.

God calls Christians to “be holy”. The first meaning of this is “set apart” for God, as His own.

The “holiness” to which you are called is first imputed, then imparted. First, it is a gift: 2 Timothy 1:9 (ESV) “who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began,”

God’s initiative in redeeming the believer from sin and death was not an arbitrary or whimsical decision but something God had planned all along “in Christ.”

Since God chose his people in his love, they can take no credit for their salvation. God was determined to have them as his own.

But holiness is also imparted. God chose His people with the goal that they be holy and blameless before him. This goal is not optional for Christians—it is the purpose of election.

Holiness here expresses moral purity, while “blamelessness” expresses freedom from the guilt of trespasses and sins in which the Christian formerly walked.

Deuteronomy 14:2 (ESV) “For you are a people holy to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.”

He calls us to be “blameless”. Freedom from guilt can only be a gift. Ephesians 5:27 (ESV) “so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”

It involves a change that goes to the heart of you. 1 Thessalonians 3:13 (ESV) “so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.”

It is the Acceptance of holiness “before him”, in His eyes. It is to Him the believer looks, walking as in His presence, before whom he looks to be accepted in the judgment day.

Trans: The Father calls you to Acceptance.

2. The Father calls you to Adoption. V. 5

“In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will”

The words, “In love” may go with either verse 4 or with verse 5. It’s application to verse 4 would compare with 1 Thessalonians 3:12-13 (ESV) “and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.”

But “In love”, at the end of 1:4, also might belong to v. 5, describing predestination.

Versification was introduced into Bibles in the sixteenth century A.D. for convenience and is not part of the original inspired text.

I prefer to see “in love” with v 5. God's plan for sinners to be reconciled to Him was the most supreme act of love ever known in the universe.

We are "chosen" out of the rest of the world; "predestinated" to all things that secure the inheritance for us. -- JFB

“predestined” means Previously ordained or appointed to some position. God’s election of Christians (v. 4) entails his predestining them to something—in this case to adoption as sons. So, election and predestination in this context refer to God’s decision to save someone. All Christians, male and female, are “sons” in the sense of being heirs who will inherit blessings from their Father in heaven.

ALFORD explains the “Adoption” as "adoption... into Himself," that is, so that we should be partakers of the divine nature.

This is no “natural” adoption. God decided to make sinners part of His own family, but this adoption surpasses anything that takes place on earth.

It gives the adopted children, “not only a new name, a new legal standing, and a new family relationship, but also a new image, the image of Christ... When God adopts, He imparts His Spirit!” (Hendriksen). In this adoption, the child’s very nature is transformed!

Then Paul qualifies and stresses God’s plan and initiation of redemption with the phrase “according to the purpose of his will”.

Here and elsewhere in the passage (v. 9, 11), God cannot be constrained by any outside force, and his unstoppable will for believers is to pour out his grace and goodness on them in Christ Jesus.

Trans: The Father calls you to Acceptance, the Father calls you to Adoption, and ...

3. The Father calls you to Adoration v. 6

“to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.”

God’s ultimate purpose is not redemption as such but the praise of his glorious name through redemption. This theme is repeated at key junctures in the argument (see vv. 12, 14).

“blessed us” a kindred Greek word to "grace": “chariots”, meaning “endued with special honor”.

And again we see the theme of Union with Christ appearing: “in the beloved”, in the Greek, "Son of His love."

ESVSB – “It is only "IN HIS BELOVED" that He loves us.” 1 John 4:9-10 (ESV) “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

If that does not lead you and me to Adoration, I don’t know that anything can.

The Father is calling you and me to Acceptance, to Adoption, and to Adoration.

Action: Repent of any confidence you have in your own feeble attempts to think of yourself as worthy of salvation by your own efforts at righteousness.

Ask, “Am I an acquaintance of Jesus Christ, or a member of His family?”

Either ask God to adopt you, or write Him a note of thanks for adopting you.

If you are adopted, what will you do this week to show your family resemblance?

What extraordinary expression of worship can you do this week in gratitude for God's grace to you?