

## **“In Christ”** **By David Pyles**

One cannot think of a prepositional phrase having more potency than “*in Christ*.” This phrase occurs 77 times in the New Testament, 74 of which are stated by Paul. It occurs 10 times in the book of Ephesians alone, and a careful analysis of that book will show that the phrase is a central theme of the first three chapters. It occurs with profound meaning and power in the famous introductory words of that book:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved. – Eph 1:3-6*

When this verse speaks of “*heavenly places*,” the meaning is “heavenly things,” as is explained by the translator notes. The verse says that all blessings in things pertaining to heaven are given to us *in Christ*. Many Christians stumble in their doctrinal conclusions because they take this statement as being merely approximate or as being somewhat overstated for the purpose of magnifying praise. However, the remainder of Ephesians, and other parts of the Bible, will show this statement was intended as an absolute, unqualified truth. Once this truth is realized, the importance of Jesus Christ will escalate to new highs in our spiritual understanding.

The claim that all spiritual blessings are in Christ does not slight other Persons in the Godhead. Indeed, even the quote above directs praise to the Father. However, when scriptures are more carefully examined, it will be found that the roles of the Father and Holy Ghost in our salvation are to account us, place us, preserve us and bless us *in Christ*. This is why Paul elsewhere said of Christ, “*For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell*,” (Col 1:19).

The beliefs of many Christians are not in strict compliance with the claim that all spiritual blessings are in Christ. Many think they were once altogether outside of Christ, but then certain spiritual blessings befell them, moving them from outside to inside Christ, whereupon even more spiritual blessings were received. Hence, they have spiritual blessings happening both in and out of Christ. Paul obviously did not think in such terms. While it is true that saved people were once outside of Christ in a certain sense, there is another crucial sense in which they never were. This sense will be presented by Ephesians as being foundational to the entire system of salvation.

### **The Legal and Vital Aspects of Salvation**

Before considering the various ways in which we are blessed *in Christ*, it is helpful to delineate the various parts of eternal salvation into classifications. We can begin these classifications with a handful of prepositions. In particular, eternal salvation entails things that God does *for* us,

things He does *in* us, things He does *to* us, and things He does *by* us. We can broadly classify His saving works in these four ways. One important distinction of Primitive Baptists is that they deny that the things God does *by* us are causative or instrumental in securing the eternal benefits of His saving plan. Rather, these things are purposed to *confirm* the eternal benefits, to secure other *temporal* benefits and to produce proper praise to God for His saving work. The things that God does *for*, *in* and *to* us can be further grouped under the terms *legal* and *vital*. While all parts of the plan are by grace, it is important to distinguish between what is legal and vital. Significant error has been caused by confusing them, or by teaching one to the neglect of the other.

To illustrate the necessity of these two parts of the plan, consider what we must do to conscientiously set a condemned criminal free from capital punishment: First, we must cancel the demands of the law against him. The law says his offence is punishable by death, so he will surely die unless there is some legal avenue that can be taken to deliver him. Second, the hardened heart of the criminal must be changed so that he will not repeat his offence if freed. He must essentially be made a new man with a new nature. The first action is legal. The second is vital. The Bible teaches that our eternal salvation required these same two actions. The first action, or the legal one, is covered by the doctrines of imputed righteousness and justification. The second action, or the vital one, is covered by the doctrines of regeneration and resurrection.

The importance of distinguishing these parts can be seen in the roles that faith plays in the doctrines of justification and regeneration. The Bible teaches the principle of justification by faith. This principle pertains to the legal side of our salvation. But many Christians confound this with the vital side when errantly inferring that regeneration is by faith. The Bible does not teach regeneration by faith. It teaches the reverse, or faith by regeneration. A man must be regenerated, or born again, before he will ever have faith. As Jesus famously said, “*Except a man be born again, he cannot see (i.e. perceive) the kingdom of God,*” (Jn 3:3).

Many Christians also err by teaching the legal side of salvation to the neglect of the vital. This is especially true of those who deny the doctrine of eternal security (i.e. “once saved, always saved”). They complain that this doctrine could not be true because it would then dispose saved men to sin with impunity. This complaint fails to consider that a saved man is a changed man. Not only has something been done *for* him but something has also been done *in* him. The man’s state has been changed both *legally* and *vitally*. The complainer only considers the legal side. To him, salvation is strictly a matter of being written in a heavenly book (i.e. the Lamb’s Book of Life). One is either in the book or else they are not, and might be written in and erased out of the book multiple times in their natural lifespan. This clearly cannot qualify as *eternal* salvation. Indeed, it has so-called “eternal life” being more precarious and transient than natural life.

The vital side of salvation is also largely dismissed by those who say that men are regenerated by means of their own decisions or actions. This is because “regeneration” carries the idea of being made new, but this errant thinking really has nothing being changed. It says that a man can make spiritual decisions and actions before he is regenerated, and that he, of course, can make them

afterward, so what is new? Nothing has really been “regenerated” in the proper sense of the word. The Bible compares regeneration to a birth. The intent is to convey the idea that, whereas a man cannot perform natural action until he is born naturally, neither can he perform spiritual action until he is born spiritually.

One common variant of this error claims that a man is regenerated by being dipped in a baptistery. This doctrine of “baptismal regeneration” is really a denial of regeneration. It cannot be seriously thought that a man’s heart is changed by dipping him into water. All must concede that millions have been so dipped with no change whatsoever, as demonstrated by their subsequent decisions and actions. This doctrine might claim adherence to some legal side of salvation, but it effectively denies any vital.

There are also Christians who misunderstand the legal side of salvation. The error here is usually about *when* the legal terms were *set* and when the legal terms were *met*. As to when they were set, the Bible confirms our intuition in saying this was done from the very beginning, even before the foundation of the world. The reason we should expect this is that, in almost any transaction, the legal terms are resolved before any commitments are made. For example, a man and woman are not supposed to cohabit and then later marry. Rather, they are to legally commit by marriage and then cohabit. A man is not supposed to occupy a house or an apartment and then decide to sign a contract; rather, he must sign the contract before he occupies the dwelling. A couple cannot kidnap a child and then agree to adopt it. They must adopt the child by way of legal agreement and then they can take the child into their care. The same pattern is seen in the Bible. Before Abraham buried his wife Sarah, he made legal arrangement to acquire the cave in which to bury her. Before Boaz married Ruth, he first made legal arrangements to transfer right of redemption from the near kinsman to himself. The point is that in almost any transaction the legal business is settled *first*.

The same principle holds in eternal salvation. The first part of this great transaction was legal. All legal aspects of the transaction were settled before any of the vital aspects were done. The legal terms were *set* before the foundation of the world and were *met* with Christ’s death on the cross (Rom 5:10, 2Cor 5:18-20, Eph 2:14-17, Col 2:13-15, Heb 10:10, 10:14). This then carries to the first respect in which we were and are *in Christ*.

### **In Christ Legally**

The opening verses of Ephesians imply that all legal terms of our salvation were set by God before the foundation of the world. The exact words were:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will... – Eph 1:3-5*

These legal arrangements had the end effect of *predestinating* us unto the adoption of children. This is a very telling claim. It implies that the essential arrangements were complete and settled. Had any determinative part of the plan been undecided or otherwise uncertain, then predestination could not have been the effect. Accordingly, the plan was also settled as to its beneficiaries. They were a people chosen “*in him before the foundation of the world.*” Christ Himself explained that God the Father had given Him a people (Jn 6:37-39, 10:25-29, 17:1-2), and that He would most surely save them. As is well known, all men, including those given to Christ, fell into condemnation and death with the sin of Adam. However, the ones given to Christ were chosen to be the objects of *redemption*, or of being bought back from their fallen state. Happily, these are a great multitude that no man can number, being from “*all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues,*” (Rev 7:9). Nearly all Christians agree that the terms of this plan were that Christ would lead a sinless life for the benefit of His people and that He would make Himself a sacrifice for their sins. These provisions would not only make restitution for their offences but would carry them to even greater blessings than possessed before (Rom 5). Now all of these bountiful blessings were and are bestowed through the same legal conduit, namely, that the beneficiaries are to be accounted as *in Christ* in even more ways than before. This common conduit is the reason Paul said that God has “*blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.*”

Because the beneficiaries are accounting as *in Christ*: His death is accounted as their death; His resurrection implies their resurrection; His righteousness is their righteousness; His glorified body implies their glorified body; His eternal life is their eternal life; His access to the throne of God implies their access to the throne of God; His inheritance is their inheritance; hence, His kingdom is their kingdom. Further, all these blessings were certified by His bodily resurrection.

Multiple scriptures serve to prove these assertions, but I will quote two for each:

### **His Death is Our Death:**

*I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me. – Gal 2:20*

*It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him... – 2Tim 2:11*

### **His Resurrection Implies Our Resurrection:**

*I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die... – Jn 11:25-26*

*But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and*

*rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. – 1Thes 4:13-14*

### **His Righteousness Is Our Righteousness:**

*For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. – Rom 8:3-4*

*Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith... – Phil 3:8-9*

### **His Glorified Body Implies Our Glorified Body:**

*The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from heaven. As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy: and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly. – 1Cor 15:47-49*

*Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure. – 1Jn 3:2-3*

### **His Eternal Life is Our Eternal Life:**

*For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory. – Col 3:3-4*

*Yet a little while, and the world seeth me no more; but ye see me: because I live, ye shall live also. At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you. – Jn 14:19-20*

### **His Access to God is Our Access to God:**

*For through him we both (i.e. Jew and Gentile) have access by one Spirit unto the Father. – Eph 2:18*

*And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it. – Jn 14:13-14*

### **His Inheritance is Our Inheritance:**

*The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. – Rom 8:16-17*

*In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will... – Eph 1:11*

### **His Kingdom is Our Kingdom:**

*And the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the most High, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him. – Dn 7:27*

*Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. – Lk 12:32*

These claims are so sensational that no sensible person would believe them unless these claims came directly from the word of God. This is why true Christians stand resolutely on the full inspiration of the Bible. They realize that any so-called “Christian” who makes such claims for himself, while denying the full inspiration of scripture, has a deranged mind that is deluded with conceit.

When one examines this list of gifts, it includes everything Christ possesses except His lordship and praise. Any so-called “Christian” is also deluded with conceit when he is not content with these blessings but also wants any part of the praise belonging to Christ.

So the first sense in which we are *in Christ* is a legal one wherein we were united with Christ by covenant before the world began. This is the most important sense of all because it is the necessary and sufficient condition for all else. The legal conditions for our salvation were *set* before the foundation of the world and were *met* by the obedience and death of Christ alone, thereby securing “*all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.*”

### **In Christ Vitally**

This brings to the next sense in which we are *in Christ*. This is to be in Him *vitally*. This did not happen before the foundation of the world. Rather, it happened when we were born again by the Holy Spirit of God. This event is also called “regeneration” or “spiritual quickening” or “effectual calling.” While many tend to think of it as a *condition* of eternal salvation, it is more accurately considered as a sure *benefit*. Our spiritual quickening was bought by the obedience and death of Christ and certified by His resurrection. This is why Paul said of it:

*But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And*

*hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus... – Eph 2:4-6*

This does not mean that we were actually spiritually quickened at the time Jesus was raised; rather, it means that our quickening was *guaranteed* at that time. It was also *portended* by the event because our spiritual quickening is by the same power and means whereby the body of Christ was resurrected. These facts were expressed earlier with:

*And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to usward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places... – Eph 1:19-20*

This verse says that our belief in Christ, occasioned by our regeneration, is the effect of the same power that resurrected Christ from the dead. This is because we were spiritually dead, even as Christ was bodily dead, so it took the resurrecting power of God in both cases. This is why Paul will say only a few verses later:

*And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus... – Eph 2:1-6*

When he said “*And you hath he quickened,*” his meaning was that you *also* have been quickened, or that your quickening was in addition to a quickening he had already mentioned, namely, the quickening of the body of Christ. These two things are done by the same power and means; consequently, the first portended the second. Of course, nothing that is dead can quicken and resurrect itself. This can only be done by God. Jesus corroborated this when He said:

*Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live. For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself; And hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man. Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation. – Jn 5:25-29*

These verses speak of two kinds of quickening. One is ongoing and the other is yet to come. The ongoing quickening refers to our regeneration, which happens in time. The one to come is our bodily resurrection, which happens at the end of time. These are alike in that regeneration

does to the inward man what resurrection does to the outward man. Both are accomplished by the power of Christ's voice. The latter entails no human means, so neither does the former.

We are placed in Christ vitally entirely and directly by an act of God. Paul said this in:

*But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord. – 1Cor 1:30-31*

Here the phrase “*in Christ Jesus*” means to be in Him vitally. When we are placed in Him vitally, we are given a new spiritual mind that believes on Christ and looks to Him for “*wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.*” Observe that the text does not say that wisdom, righteousness and sanctification are the conditions of getting into Christ; rather, they are blessing from being in Christ, legally and vitally. We were placed in Christ vitally by God and His grace alone, and this is why the above text says that all glory is to be given to God for it.

### **In Christ Practically**

The third respect in which we are *in Christ* is *practically*. This respect is very important because it directly addresses the ultimate intent of the whole scheme of salvation, which is to secure glory for Christ. One of the most important ways this is done is by imitating Him in our practice of life. While we will not perfectly do this until being gloriously conformed to His image, we are to be in a progressive transition of imitation even now. This is done in the evolution of our practice, or in how we think, act and speak. Paul described this in:

*But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord. – 2Cor 3:18*

By an “*open face*,” Paul meant a face without a veil. God, by His grace, has removed a veil from our face that we might see Christ; however, in this life, we only see Him as through a glass. In the times in which the Bible was written, glassmaking was not perfected to produce the transparent glass we have today. To see through a glass then meant to see an imperfect image (1Cor 13:12). Notwithstanding, as we behold Christ in our imperfect way, we will be gradually transformed into what we are beholding. This will be completed and perfected when we see Him with clarity at His second coming. As John said, “*Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is,*” (1Jn 3:2).

As we journey through life, we should endeavor to be more Christ-like in the following ways:

1) Earnestly seeking the truth of God's word because it is inspired by Christ.

I list this first because the other ways cannot be met if we fail here.

2) Being committed to His church, which Christ loves as His bride.



I list this second because it is necessitated by the first, and will be essential to all that remains. Commitment to the church *requires* being a baptized member of it. Jesus was Himself baptized by John the Baptist. At that time, John confessed that he was unworthy to do the baptism, but Christ replied, “*Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness,*” (Mt 3:15). Baptism is of course symbolic. All the righteousness that mankind will ever have was symbolized in Christ’s baptism. Because all the elect are in Christ, they were all baptized when He was baptized in Jordan. This symbolized the fact that they all died to sin when He died, and were all resurrected to a new life when He was resurrected. They are commanded to be personally baptized to publicly profess this great truth and to honor Christ for what He has done.

3) Putting the interest of others above our own, as Christ did the same for us.

This is the so-called “Golden Rule,” upon which all the Law hangs (Mt 22:4).

4) Forbearing others, as Christ is forbearing of us.

This is really covered by the third rule, but reminds that it applies even to those who annoy us.

5) Forgiving others, as Christ is forgiving to us.

This also is covered by the third rule, but reminds that it applies even to those who wrong us.

6) Leading upright lives, as Christ did, with the intent of glorifying God and His Cause.

As Jesus Himself said, “*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven,*” (Mt 5:16).

7) Communicating His word to the world, that He might be glorified, and that others might share in our joy.

This last rule was His final commandment to us. Immediately before ascending, He said:

*All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen. – Mt 28:18-20*

Many have argued, sometimes foolishly, about the extent to which our practical imitation of Christ has been unconditionally foreordained of God. At the center of this controversy is yet another Ephesians text that describes us as being *in Christ*:

*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. – Eph 2:10*

One extreme says these ordained good works were merely moral standards, and that compliance with them was altogether left to human choices. So the expression “*should walk*” is taken to

mean no more than “ought to walk.” The other extreme says that all good works done by the elect were unconditionally ordained by God without any regard to their choices. This interpretation takes “*should walk*” to mean “would walk.” Both of these are extreme positions that should be avoided. The truth involves a combination of both ideas. The Bible teaches there can be no good in this sin-cursed earth without the ordination of God, but it also teaches that our decisions and actions are consequential. Our consciences corroborate both principles. How these two principles are mixed in God’s plan is likely more than any man can explain; however, we can at least see that the two ideas are reconcilable. An end can be unconditionally ordained without unconditionally fixing the mode or path by which it is to be achieved. For example, a man might unconditionally resolve to take his family to New York next weekend, and if he had absolute power to execute his intents, his resolve would predestinate the outcome. However, there may be many modes and paths of getting to New York, and for purposes of planning with respect to these, the man might take into account the wishes of his family. Accordingly, Paul described the church to Timothy as being a great house with many vessels. By the unconditional ordination of God, this great house will surely be built, and it will surely bring glory to Christ by its good works, but Paul warned Timothy that such a house contains some vessels of gold and silver, other vessels of wood and earth, and some to honor and others to dishonor. He exhorted Timothy to act in such ways that his role in this great house would be that of an honorable vessel (2Tim 2:19-21).

### **In Christ Physically**

The last sense in which we are to be *in Christ* is future, yet Paul described it as already done in Romans 8:30, meaning that it is as good as done before God. This will happen when all the elect family of God will be *physically* united with Him in glory. By “physically united” I do not mean to be physically merged, but that all will have been perfectly conformed to the image of His glorious, immortal body. Paul explained in Ephesians that this physical unification in Christ was the end to which the Universe was originally created:

*Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him: In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ. – Eph 1:9-13*

Many philosophers and religionists have questioned the ultimate purpose of all things, but Paul said that God has made only us privy to the answer. The ultimate purpose of the creation, both physical and spiritual, is its glorious unification *in Christ*.

In His famous prayer of John 17, six times Jesus used the word “*one*.” He prayed for the unification of the entire elect family of God within Himself and God, and He prayed that this

unified body would be received in heaven. This will happen when our physical bodies are raised in the resurrection and rapture. These bodies will be *in Christ* in the sense that they will all be conformed to His glorious image and share in His inheritance. As Paul said, “*Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself,*” (Phil 3:21).

### **Conclusions**

Hence, the whole scheme of salvation can be unified by the simple phrase “*in Christ.*” This is why Paul told the Corinthians, “*For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified,*” (1Cor 2:2). It all began with a people being in Christ legally by gift to Him from God. They are thereafter put in Him effectually to increasing degrees, and this will culminate “*in the dispensation of the fulness of times*” when God will “*gather together in one all things **in Christ**, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him,*” (Eph 1:9-10). It is therefore both literally and absolutely true that God “*hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places **in Christ.***”

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