



UNION WITH CHRIST

THE BLESSINGS
OF BEING IN HIM

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

“It is sometimes said that preachers come to have only one sermon. When kindly expressed, this is far from being a criticism! On the contrary, the meaning is not that the preacher simply says the same thing every time you hear him; it is that he is always saying different things via the same things: his deepest convictions about what it means to know and love the triune God. I know I speak for many in saying that one of the richest blessings of Sinclair Ferguson’s ministry is the extent to which he has been captivated and shaped by the doctrine of union with Christ. For him, it is as much a meta-affection as a metanarrative; it is evident in the foundations as much as the structures of his thought; it overflows in his writing as much as in his preaching; it nourishes us in person as much as from the pulpit. So here is a delightful book on a glorious doctrine that Sinclair cannot preach and write about enough. May God use it to grant us all life-changing sight of what it means to belong to Jesus forever.”

—DR. DAVID GIBSON
Minister, Trinity Church
Aberdeen, Scotland

“I grew up in an environment in which becoming a Christian was of great importance. But I don’t remember ever hearing about what it means to be ‘in Christ’ which is the term and the sought-after reality that pervades the Epistles in particular. By working his way through key Scripture passages, drawing out and applying their truths, Sinclair Ferguson serves as a kind and wise guide to orient our understanding and our valuing to the wonders of what is being held out to us—to be in Christ.”

—NANCY GUTHRIE
Bible Teacher and Author
Nashville, Tenn.

“In this hugely readable little book, Sinclair Ferguson provides us with a biblical-theological road map of a truth that lies at the heart of biblical Christianity and that has shaped his own life and ministry for more than fifty years: union with Christ. Dr. Ferguson expounds the key New Testament passages that unpack for us the meaning of union with Christ and draws out their practical implications for living a joy-filled, Christ-loving, God-honoring life. The closing long quote from John Calvin’s *Institutes* (2.16.19) is worth the cost of the book—read it slowly, out loud, and feel the weight of Christ-saturated truth. This is a book to read and reread, a book worthy to be a *vade mecum*, a book to slip into your pocket and take with you wherever you go.”

—DR. IAN HAMILTON

President, Westminster Presbyterian Theological Seminary
Newcastle, England

“In this book, Dr. Sinclair Ferguson has taken a profoundly theological issue of the first order, which the church has often forgotten, and has brought it to the forefront of the theological discussion of our times. If believers were to understand the significance of their union with the Savior, they would be more naturally inclined to live more sanctified lives and, at the same time, would be joyful and grateful for being permanently united to Christ. We can genuinely say that we live and move and have our being in Christ. For John Calvin, our union with Christ should be given ‘the highest degree of importance.’ This is precisely what Dr. Ferguson has done and explained with exegetical precision, theological clarity, pastoral care, and mature experience. I must add that Dr. Ferguson has us accustomed to this kind of analysis. I celebrate the publishing of this book for the church of our time and pray that many read it, profit from it, and enjoy it as much as I did.”

—DR. MIGUEL NÚÑEZ

Senior Pastor-Teacher, Iglesia Bautista Internacional
Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

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To
Iain H Murray,
remembering
Jean A. Murray

With gratitude
for your joint
“work of faith,
and labour of love,
and patience of hope
in our Lord Jesus Christ,
in the sight of God
and our Father”
(1 Thess. 1:3, KJV)

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Introduction

Etched into my memory is a question that my friend Justin Taylor asked me during a question and answer session at a 2008 conference: “Sinclair, with this new resurgence of younger Reformed evangelicals, we hear a lot about the centrality of the cross, but not as much about union with Christ—its importance as a doctrine or its practical effects. Can you say a bit about the importance of union with Christ for our growth in holiness?”

The words stuck in my mind. I knew that union with Christ was a theme that had often been obscured in the history of the church. But it had been part and parcel of virtually the whole of my own Christian life. So the question alerted me to the fact that one of the crown jewels of the gospel had somehow gone missing. The way that my friend framed his question made me notice any new book or article that opened up the theme. Thankfully, these could now fill a bookshelf, and they range from academic studies to more popular and practical expositions.

Union with Christ has thus made something of a comeback. Good reason, therefore, to hesitate to add another book on the same theme. Why do so, then? For two chief reasons.

The first reason is this. There are certainly other books on the subject. But given the varied reading interests of Christians, for many this may well be the first book they ever read on union with Christ. In some ways, it is meant to be exactly that—a *first* book. It is intended to be not a magnum opus but an introduction to a vital theme, and I hope it may act as a catalyst to a lifetime of reflection on it.

The second reason for adding another book on the theme is related to the approach that I have adopted in these pages. Here the theme is explored by reflecting on specific key passages in the New Testament. This follows the approach and expands the material that was first prepared for the Ligonier video series *Union with Christ*.

UNION WITH CHRIST

I believe that this approach is usually the best way for most of us to be introduced to any Christian doctrine. It means that we anchor our thinking in the specific teaching of Scripture and in particular passages that we can return to and study for ourselves. In this way, we not only absorb the biblical teaching slowly but catch a sense of the contexts and even the atmosphere in which it is given. This in turn means that we learn how to apply the teaching and also discover that it creates an appropriate spiritual atmosphere in our own lives.

To use a simile, this approach feels more like standing in the sea and allowing each wave to flow over you rather than catching up the seawater in a single container and analyzing its contents. Or to allegorize a great event in Scripture, rather than treating the subject in the way that it would be handled in a work of systematic theology, it is more akin to the way that the Israelites patiently walked around Jericho day after day until, eventually, the city walls fell. Union with Christ is a broad, pervasive theme in the New Testament, and grasping all its dimensions and implications is really a lifelong task. Paradoxically, no preposition is shorter than *in*, and yet no other preposition is so expansive in its use. So much is this the case that in the vernacular Greek language (in which the Apostle Paul wrote), it has now virtually disappeared from use—as though it had too many possible meanings for it to have any real meaning. That is not the case in the New Testament. But it does remind us that life “in Christ” is a multidimensional reality. That is what makes reflecting on our union with Him so richly rewarding.

I hope, therefore, that these pages will help build an increased sense of the privilege of belonging to Jesus Christ and being united to Him. For that can be life-transforming.

I am grateful to the staff of Ligonier Ministries for their partnership in the production of this little volume, and for their friendship, encouragement, and help. And once again, I am especially thankful in Christ for my wife, Dorothy, our family, and our close friends in the ministry, whose affection has made possible almost everything in my life, including these pages.

In Christ

Ephesians 1:3–14

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, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

When people ask you about your faith, how do you describe yourself? Are you likely to say, “I am a Presbyterian” or “a Baptist”? Or perhaps, “I am an Episcopalian”? Or perhaps you say simply, “I am a Christian”?

It probably never crosses most of our minds that if we could ask believers

from New Testament days to describe themselves, they would probably never answer, “We are Christians.” In fact, the word *Christian* appears only three times in the New Testament. The disciples were first called “Christians” at Antioch (Acts 11:26). Later on, King Agrippa seems almost to spit out the word when he asks the Apostle Paul, “In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?” (26:28). And later, in his first letter, Simon Peter speaks about someone’s suffering as “a Christian” (1 Peter 4:16).

In these three contexts, *Christian* is probably a pejorative term, even “hate speech” devised by opponents of the gospel, just as the term *Puritan* was in the seventeenth century. It may well be that it was virtually spat out like the word *fundamentalist* today. These are “hate terms.” If this is how the word *Christian* first came into common currency, it is not surprising that in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke chooses to use the word “disciple” (e.g., in Acts 6:1; there are more than two dozen examples) or occasionally describes believers as followers of “the Way” (9:2; 22:4; 24:14), since they followed the One who said, “I am the way” (John 14:6).

But if you were to ask Paul, “How do you think about yourself?” his answer would probably not have been any of the above, but rather, “I am a man in Christ.”

I remember, as a young teenager, reading 2 Corinthians 12:1–10—the passage in which Paul speaks about the extraordinary revelations he received and the thorn in the flesh that kept him from pride. Introducing the passage, he says that he once knew “a man in Christ” who had extraordinary revelations of God’s wonder and grace, so remarkable that he felt it would be illegitimate to describe them to others. I recall wondering, “Who is this anonymous ‘man in Christ’ that Paul is talking about?” Perhaps I was dull in thought, but the answer only slowly dawned on me: Paul is speaking about himself! This is the basic way that he describes himself because it is the fundamental way in which he thinks about himself. He is “a man in Christ.”

Capture these two words “in Christ” and their equivalents (e.g., “in him”) in your mind. Then take a quick browse through the sixty or so pages in your Bible that contain Paul’s thirteen letters. You will find the expression “in Christ” or a variant of it over eighty times. Equivalent expressions “in the Lord” (or sometimes “in the Lord Jesus”) virtually double that number.

If you have never noticed this before, you will probably be astonished at

how often Paul uses these expressions and wonder how you can have never really paid much attention to them. And yet it is possible to have been reading Paul's letters for years, even decades, without noticing the significance of this little prepositional expression that is clearly his basic way of describing what it means to be a Christian.

These two words, the preposition "in" followed by the title "Christ," form the central theme of these pages. By the end of the book, you could be forgiven for thinking that this is the longest exposition of two words that you have ever read! And yet these pages will still only scratch the surface of this rich and wonderful doctrine. But I hope they will encourage you to see, from a series of biblical angles, what it means to be "in Christ." If you belong to Him, this is who you really and truly are, every day of your life—a man or a woman who is "in Christ."

One New Testament scholar has pointed out that in the movie *The Godfather*, the word *Mafia* is never used, and yet it is the underlying presupposition of the whole movie.¹ In a similar way, even when this specific "in Christ" phraseology is not used, what is meant by it is fundamental to everything the Apostle Paul has to say about living the Christian life. And more than that, it is also the solvent of many of the issues that disturb the individual believer or a whole congregation.

The New Testament never defines what "in Christ" means. The best way to grasp its significance is to reflect on various passages that describe what is involved in it. So in this opening chapter, our primary task is to introduce ourselves to the importance of being "in Christ."

One of the best ways to do that is by reflecting on its presence in the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Famous First Words

What thoughts do the words "Ephesians chapter 1" bring to your mind? To many Christians well acquainted with Scripture, it might be: "Oh! That is Paul's famous doxology passage about election and predestination: God 'chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world. . . . In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will' (Eph. 1:4, 11)."

In fact, Paul's opening doxology is one long 202-word sentence. And yes,

it is true that he emphasizes that both the origin of our salvation and our final destiny lie in God's sovereign choice and purpose. But what he wants us chiefly to see is the vastness of the privileges and blessings that are ours because we are "in Christ." Indeed, he opens the letter this way, doesn't he? He addresses it to the saints who (1) are in Ephesus, but nevertheless (2) are faithful in Christ Jesus.

The whole letter evolves from that statement. It is about what it means for believers to be "in Christ" and how to be "faithful" to Him (Eph. 1:1) while living in Ephesus in the first century AD, or in New York, or Memphis, or London, or Paris, or Buenos Aires, or Seoul, or Melbourne at any time in history, including today.

As believers, we are citizens of two different worlds. But first and foremost, we are in Christ Jesus. If we go to any of these cities where we are complete strangers and meet Christian believers, we are conscious that we are their fellow countrymen. We belong to the same city. "Our citizenship," Paul says, "is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20). We belong to the same nation. We are under the same King. More than that, all of us who believe in the Lord Jesus are "in Him."

In the verses that follow, Paul elaborates to this effect: "God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus." His point—to which we will return—is that all spiritual blessings are to be found in Christ. It is also important to put that point negatively: we are not to look for spiritual blessings outside of or apart from Christ. It is to Jesus Christ and our union with Him that we need to look in order to experience and appreciate the riches of salvation.

Paul explains how all this began—before the foundation of the world. God chose us in Him before He created the cosmos. Way back then (if we can speak from our own point of view), He chose us not apart from Christ but "in Christ."

The Apostle goes on to speak about the blessings that have come to us through God's grace. He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ. He has redeemed us in Christ Jesus ("In him we have redemption through his blood"; Eph. 1:7). The purpose that God is accomplishing, He has set forth in Christ. That purpose is to unite all things in Christ Jesus, both in heaven and on earth.

So to be "in Christ" is to be part of something much bigger than our individual relationship to Him. What can that mean?

Something Bigger than Ourselves

At the back of Paul's mind when he speaks of our union with Christ as bringing us into the orbit of His uniting "all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10) may be his understanding that there are two branches to God's family. There is the family branch of believers on earth. But in addition, there is a family branch of angels, who are also described in Scripture as being God's "sons" (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7). They are not related to Him in exactly the same way that we are. As we will see, unlike them, we are related to one another in our first father, our representative head, Adam.

We know that a significant part of the family in heaven rebelled against God—those that Jesus described as "the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41)—while others, "the elect angels" (1 Tim. 5:21), were preserved and remained (and remain) faithful to Him. The human family on earth fell in its entirety in Adam. But in Christ Jesus, the Father has reconciled us to God and brought us back into His family. More than that, by doing so He has brought us together with the angelic branch of His family in heaven. Thus, the two branches of His family now live for and love the same King and are destined to be together as one in the new heavens and the new earth.

So the Apostle Paul has this thrilling, indeed cosmic, understanding of what it means for us to be "in Jesus Christ." In Him we truly have a glorious inheritance. And all this is part and parcel of the Christian's hope, our assurance of a reality that we have not yet fully experienced. And it is ours because we are in Christ.

Furthermore, Paul repeats here what he tells the Romans: this hope will not let us down (Rom. 5:5). We will not be disappointed, for we who hope in Christ will be to the praise of His glorious grace (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14). We have already received the assurance of this in the gift of the Spirit, who pours the love of God into our hearts (Rom. 5:5): "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit" (Eph. 1:13).

Thus, untold blessings are the birthright of Christian believers. But the exclusive source and conduit of them all is our Lord Jesus Christ. This explains why masters of the spiritual life have always urged us to look nowhere else for blessing, but only to Christ and to the privilege we have of being united to Him.

The theologian B.B. Warfield (1851–1921) is reputed to have said that Ephesians 1:3–14 should never be read in church. Really? That must have been a shocker, coming from one of the great defenders of the inspiration and authority of Scripture! But then he added that it should always be sung. That captures the sense of the privilege that is ours, doesn't it? It well expresses the significance of this little prepositional phrase "in Christ." It makes us sing because it includes everything that is ours as a result of our belonging to Him. And here in Ephesians 1:3–14, Paul indicates its all-inclusive nature from the origin of our Christian life in being chosen in Christ to our final experience of the inheritance that will be fully ours by God's grace and through the Spirit of Christ.

Think about these words against the background of the Ephesians whom Paul is addressing. They are in Ephesus—the city that housed one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the temple of the goddess Artemis (Diana to the Romans),² described by the Roman author Pliny the Elder as "the most wonderful monument of Grecian magnificence."³ The coming of the gospel to Ephesus had borne wonderful fruit. But it had also resulted in riots (Acts 19:1–20:1). It must have been an intimidating experience to be in a minority group of Christians. But that was surely one of the reasons why Paul begins his letter to them in the way he does. "Yes," he writes in essence, "you are in Ephesus, but the more fundamental truth about you is that you are in Christ." And with that in mind, in the rest of this opening passage he gives them and us a wonderful exposition of how being "in Christ" leads to the enjoyment of "every spiritual blessing" (Eph. 1:3).

In chapter 2, he goes on to describe how all this begins in our experience. We were dead in trespasses and sins but have been raised up in and with Jesus Christ. In chapter 3, he explores this further: What is involved in being united to Jesus Christ and having our eyes opened to see the wonder of our new status?

In Ephesians 3:14–19, Paul prays that this will happen. Sometimes Christians assume too easily that because they have been given new life, they already know everything they need to learn about God and the gospel. But Paul never assumed that. He well knew that there is more to the Christian life than its beginnings. We all still need the eyes of our understanding opened so that we can grasp the magnitude and grandeur of what has become ours in Christ.

And so he tells us not only how we have been united to Christ by a spiritual resurrection, but also that we have been united to one another. For Paul, this was one of the most dramatic effects of the union. When Jews and gentiles are “in Christ,” the barriers between them are broken down. Together we become one new man, not two; we are being built together in Christ into one new temple. All this Paul goes on to describe in Ephesians 3. Then in Ephesians 4:1–16, he tells us that being united to Jesus Christ means that the church family was created to function like different parts of a single body. To that fellowship, Christ, the Head in whom we are all united, gives a variety of different gifts and ministries. As we each fulfill our role in the body, we build up one another and the whole body in love. And in this way, we also grow up together into Christ and reflect His majesty and glory as our Savior and Lord.

But then Paul comes back to the principle with which he began: “Yes, you are in Christ, but you are also in Ephesus.” There is a clash of worlds and cultures in being a Christian, wherever we live.

Here, then, is the basic question: “How do I express what it means to be in Christ when I am living in Ephesus (or wherever)?” In Ephesians 4:17–6:20, Paul gives practical instructions and encouragement about how we live out being in Christ—first, individually in the transformation of our lifestyle, then corporately in the world in which we live, and then domestically, in terms of our family life in our relationships with our spouse, our children, our parents, or our masters (4:17–6:9). In each of these spheres, we are called to live out the implications of the new epicenter of our lives, namely, the fact that we are “in Christ.”

And then—perhaps this comes as a surprise?—Ephesians ends with its famous passage about the Christian warfare and armor (6:10–20).

In Christ, into Battle

But against the background of the whole letter, this closing section makes sense. The words “Be strong *in the Lord*” (6:10) take on a new significance. Paul began by saying, “You are in Ephesus, but remember, you are also in the Lord.” Now he ends by saying that “since you are in Ephesus, in a culture that seeks to dominate and intimidate Christians, there are two things you need to understand.”

The first is that we experience every spiritual blessing in Christ “in the heavenly places” (1:3). Those are the realms into which we have been raised

with Him (1:3; 2:6). But the second is what we discover in Ephesians 6:12: it is in these same “heavenly places” that we encounter opposition.

We have now been brought into Christ’s kingdom, but this means from Satan’s perspective that we have therefore aligned ourselves with “the Enemy.” We are now in a spiritual battleground, caught up in a conflict: “We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil *in the heavenly places*” (6:12). The sphere of blessing is also the sphere of battle.

This helps to explain why pastors are often asked by new Christians, “Why is it that life seems to have become *more, not less, difficult* for me now that I have become a Christian, now that I am united to Christ?” Here is how Abraham Kuyper described this reality:

If once the curtain were pulled back, and the spiritual world behind it came to view, it would expose to our spiritual vision a struggle so intense, so convulsive, sweeping everything within its range, that the fiercest battle ever fought on earth would seem, by comparison, a mere game. Not here, but up there—that is where the real conflict is engaged. Our earthly struggle drones in its backlash.⁴

Before we were united to Christ, we were “following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (2:2). But now that by God’s grace we have escaped into Jesus Christ, it may feel at times as though all hell is let loose against us. It is in the heavenly places into which we have been raised in the Lord Jesus that the fiercest battles are fought. And although Satan and his minions know that they can never destroy our salvation, they will do everything in their power to destroy our enjoyment and assurance of that salvation and our love for our Savior. So we need to wear the armor of God.

Perhaps, as you have reflected on Paul’s description of this armor—the belt, the breastplate, the shoes, the helmet, and the sword—it has dawned on you that each part of it was worn successfully by our Lord Jesus Christ. It has been “Tested by Number One”! Therefore, you can trust it.⁵

Getting Out

We need to grasp one further principle as we conclude this opening chapter. It can best be expressed in this way: Perhaps when you first became a Christian, somebody encouraged you to “let Jesus into your heart.” That has been commonly used language in the evangelical subculture to explain how to become a Christian: “You need to let Jesus in.” True, some passages in the New Testament speak about receiving Christ and of His subsequent indwelling of us. Yet the dominant emphasis in Apostolic preaching and teaching is not that we let Christ *into our hearts* but that we *get out of ourselves* and into Him. The movement is out, not in. Our need is to get out of ourselves, not merely to “add” Christ to what we already are. We are called to abandon ourselves to Christ. The emphasis of the New Testament, therefore, is on believing *into* Him.⁶ For it is only in Him that we discover the riches of God’s grace.

Martin Luther (1483–1546) used to say that our problem as sinners is that we are *incurvatus in se*—turned in on ourselves. And this is exacerbated today because we live in a very subjective world, in a self-oriented, me-centered, narcissistic culture. And that atmosphere can all too easily affect us as Christians. So let us grasp these two fundamental points. We need to get out of ourselves and into Christ. And then we need to discover and experience everything that is ours in Christ.

I often remember a conversation I had at a student conference in the Netherlands when I was twenty. I was given the opportunity to speak briefly, and one of the students who had befriended me asked, “Are you going to speak to us about *the life out of Jesus Christ*?” I replied, “No, my plan is to speak about *the life in Jesus Christ*.” He replied, “Ah, this is what I mean!” I had thought he meant “life *apart from* Jesus Christ.” But what he meant was living the Christian life “out of the resources that are ours in Christ.” He was exactly right!

This is the theme of the chapters that follow because it lies at the heart of the entire Christian life.

Getting into Christ

Philippians 3:1–21

Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may obtain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the

goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

We have already noted the remarkable number of times that the Apostle Paul uses the expression “in Christ” or a variant of it and how his letter to the Ephesians grows out of the fact that Christians live in two spheres—their geographical location and their spiritual location. The whole Christian life is built on this foundation: we are “in Christ,” and yet we still live in the same location that we were in before we were “in Him.”

But how do we get into Christ?

Paul is not the only Christian in the New Testament who speaks about being “in Christ.” Other Apostles, as well as our Lord Himself, speak about our union with Him. But Paul is the one who most frequently expresses the wonder of this privilege. And the New Testament gives us some clues to how he discovered what it meant. Although he was obviously reluctant to speak about himself, he tells us more about his inner Christian life than any of the other Apostles.

The Acts of the Apostles records Paul’s conversion story three times. On two of these occasions (22:1–16; 26:1–23), he tells the story himself. Even so, the story is told “from the outside looking in,” as it were—as a record of the facts rather than a description of the inner process of his coming to faith.

But when Paul wrote to his friends in Philippi, one of his two “joy and crown” churches,¹ he opened up his heart to them about the inside story of how he came to be in Christ and what that meant for the whole of his Christian life. In this chapter, we will try to follow him as he walks us through that experience.

Paul loved the Philippians—and no wonder, when you remember what happened when he first visited the city (Acts 16:6–40). But now as he writes to them, perhaps a decade later, one of his concerns is false teaching with a Jewish flavor that he fears may unsettle and destabilize them.

Here, as elsewhere, we discover that some of the profoundest passages in the New Testament are found in responses to false teaching. Paul employs strong language about those who insisted that if gentile believers wanted to be full members of the covenant community, they would need to be circumcised. He says that these people are “dogs, . . . evildoers, . . . those who mutilate the flesh” (Phil. 3:2).

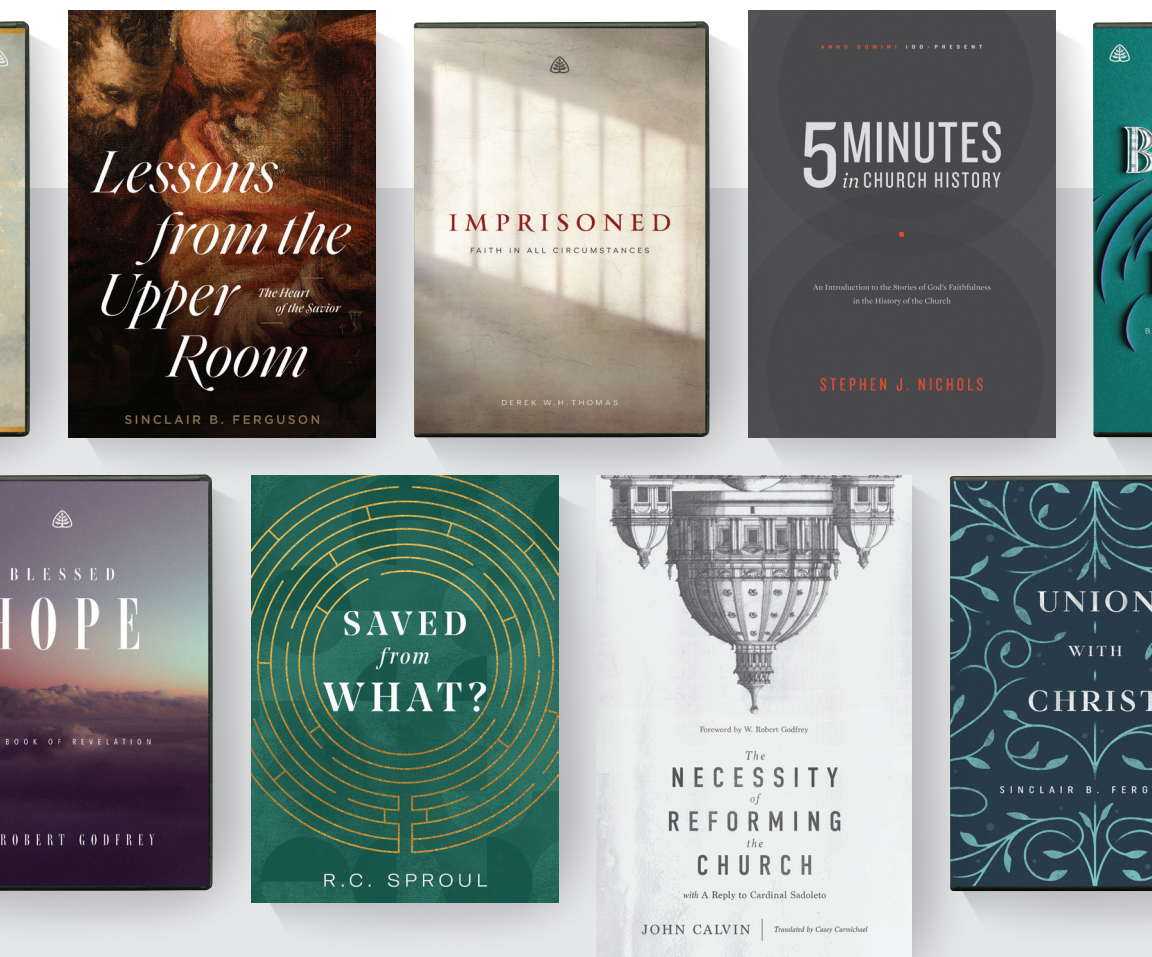
Whenever Paul encountered teaching that insisted that we need *something in addition to Christ*, he resolved the issue by underlining that such false teaching always fails to understand what it means to be in Christ. In Christ, we have everything we need for our salvation. Remember Ephesians—everything *in Christ*, nothing *outside of Christ*!

Paul was conscious that in calling him to serve the gentiles, the Lord had specially prepared him to deal with this destructive teaching that only the circumcised could really be saved. As a Pharisee, he had subscribed to that view himself. Indeed, probably none of his contemporaries had more fervently held it than he had. But this providentially equipped Paul to respond to the false teaching not only with an objective discussion of doctrine but also through his personal testimony. He could expose the error of false teachers not only theologically but also from his own experience. In fact, he had credentials that even they could not match! “If anyone . . . has reason for confidence in the flesh,” then “I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh.” “If they have something to boast in,” he might be saying, “I have more” (Phil. 3:4). “As to righteousness under the law,” he asserts, “[I was] blameless” (v. 6). “If anyone sought a righteousness of his own,” he adds, “then I was certainly that man. And I believed I had attained it and thought I had the evidence to prove it.”

But then, having achieved all this, Paul had been brought low to see that his self-made righteousness was not a gain but a liability. It was a loss, not a profit. What he needed was not a “righteousness of my own” but the righteousness of Another, “the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (v. 9).

Now, normally, and in many respects correctly, we think about the experience of Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road as the great turning point in his

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