

THEOLOGY  
for the PEOPLE of GOD



# SALVATION

Christopher W. Morgan & Thomas R. Schreiner

EDITORS

*David S. Dockery | Nathan A. Finn | Christopher W. Morgan*

“It is widely recognized that ‘salvation’ tends to serve as the comprehensive label, gathering up all the other categories: justification, election, redemption, regeneration, sanctification, and so forth. This excellent volume, grounded in responsible exegesis and wise theological reflection and synthesis, fills in the connections, and thus succeeds in painting an edifying and holistic picture of salvation. This work deserves wide circulation.”

—**D. A. Carson**, emeritus professor of New Testament  
at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Morgan and Schreiner have produced an enjoyable and comprehensive work on salvation. This volume will serve as an ideal textbook for whoever wants to know what God revealed about salvation in Scripture and how the people of God have historically understood salvation. I highly recommend this work for students of theology, preachers, and Bible teachers.”

—**Dongsun Cho**, associate professor, Korea Baptist  
Theological University and Seminary

“This book on salvation by Morgan and Schreiner is first rate: clearly written, thoughtfully organized, and informed by close attention to the biblical text and the biblical plotline, but also engaged with past and contemporary debates. Union in Christ insightfully colors the work which treats all the important doctrinal topics from election to the glory of God in salvation. This book is to be savored.”

—**Graham Cole**, dean emeritus and professor of biblical and  
systematic theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“In this hefty book, Morgan and Schreiner take on the impressive task of making accessible the complex conversations around the topic of salvation. They do not shy away from disagreements but helpfully bring in voices and texts from traditions they differ from, showing how various conclusions are reached but making clear their logic. Most helpfully, they provide systematic summaries at the end of each chapter to help the reader bring everything together by the end of the book. This is an engaging read on an important subject.”

—**Mariam Kovalishyn**, associate professor of  
New Testament studies, Regent College

“From the fall to redemption and consummation, Morgan and Schreiner provide an in-depth look at a biblical theology of salvation, including a definition and pastoral application of the Bible’s vocabulary of salvation. A must read for every pastor and seminary student who wants to understand the depths of God’s grace in salvation for all nations through Christ and in the Holy Spirit.”

—**John Massey**, associate professor of missions and Charles F. Stanley Chair for the Advancement of Global Christianity, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“What a treasure this volume is, filled to the brim with the promises of God by which we’re saved from our sins and given new life in Christ by the Spirit. It is comprehensively biblical, systematically arranged, centered on the person and work of Christ on our behalf, and laid out by two faithful, learned, godly theologians. This work deserves a wide reading among all those who want to know what God has revealed about the way of salvation.”

—**Douglas A. Sweeney**, dean and professor of divinity, Beeson Divinity School

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# INTRODUCTION

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16 ESV)

John 3:16 has helped millions around the globe understand salvation. In one verse we learn many truths. We read of God’s love as the motivation for our salvation: “God so loved the world.” We discover the ground of salvation: the coming of the Son of God, who died and rose for us. We see a major aspect of our salvation: eternal life. We find our responsibility concerning salvation: to trust in Christ alone to save us. We also delight in the universal offer of salvation: because God loves the world, he invites all to come and receive the blessing of salvation (“whoever believes”). That includes us, and thankfully so, since the surrounding verses reveal that we all need this salvation. No one will see or enter the kingdom of God without being born again, which is to receive new spiritual life from God (vv. 3–5). Indeed, all of us are already condemned (v. 18), live presently under the wrath of God (v. 36), and need the salvation found only in Jesus (vv. 12–18).

The Bible abounds with such teachings on salvation. By God’s grace and through our faith in Christ, we have a new identity. We are included in this salvation, chosen, and called by God. We have spiritual vitality, having been joined to Christ and having received new life in him. We believe, turning from our sin and trusting Christ. We are accepted, declared righteous by God because of Christ. We are family, adopted as God’s sons and daughters. We are saints, being transformed into holy people. We are glorious, being changed from glory to glory. Our salvation changes everything: how we

relate to and view God, ourselves, other believers, and those without Christ. This volume aims to unpack these life-changing teachings on salvation, but first we will treat some preliminaries.

## Biblical Words for Salvation

The verb “save” and the noun “salvation” are common in both the OT and the NT.<sup>1</sup> The verb “save” in English versions most often translates the Hebrew verb *yāšaʿ* and the Greek verb *sōzō*. The noun “salvation” usually stems from the Hebrew nouns *yēšûʿā*, *šēšûʿā*, and sometimes *p<sup>o</sup>letā*. In Greek we find the noun *sōtēria*, while “Savior” derives from *sōtēr*.

### *Physical Preservation*

Often the different terms translated “save” and “salvation” refer to physical deliverance. The angels tell Lot to leave Sodom to save his life (Gen 19:17). In Isaiah the Lord pledges to save Jerusalem from the Assyrians (Isa 31:5). It is the same in the NT. The disciples implore Jesus to save them from death when a tempest engulfs the Sea of Galilee (Matt 8:25). The woman who stretches out her hand and touches Jesus’s robe is delivered from her physical ailment (9:21).

The noun “salvation” often denotes physical deliverance too. The Lord saves and delivers Israelites by parting the sea so that they walk on dry land, but he destroys the Egyptians when they enter the sea (Exod 14:13). The common OT reference to physical deliverance is less common in the NT. Paul assures those on the ship with him during the storm that everything that happens will be for their salvation, their physical preservation (Acts 27:34).

### *Spiritual Deliverance*

Most OT texts using these terms refer to physical deliverance, while some also speak of spiritual salvation. But the NT often presents the idea of

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<sup>1</sup> For a helpful survey of the meaning of the word in Greek literature, Jewish literature, and in the NT, see “*Sōzō*,” *NIDNTTE*, 4:420–35. Cf. also W. Radl, “*Sōzō*,” *EDNT*, 3:319–21.



spiritual salvation. This occurs in Acts 4:12, for example, where Peter proclaims concerning Jesus Christ, “There is salvation in no one else.” Paul declares that salvation is open to every person who believes, from both the Jews and the Gentiles (Rom 1:16). The sinful woman whose tears bathed Jesus’s feet and who wiped them off with her hair was saved and forgiven of her sins by virtue of her faith (Luke 7:50). Believers are also saved, spiritually rescued, by Jesus’s blood (Rom 5:9) and his resurrection (v. 10). Hebrews declares that Jesus, as our Melchizedekian priest, “is able to save completely those who come to God through him” (Heb 7:25).

### *God as Savior*

The use of “Savior” for God and Christ stands out in the Pastorals, where Paul refers to God as Savior ten times while using the term only twice elsewhere (Eph 5:23; Phil 3:20).<sup>2</sup> Six times in the Pastorals God is identified as Savior (1 Tim 1:1; 2:3; 4:10; Titus 1:3; 2:10; 3:4) and four times Jesus Christ is Savior (2 Tim 1:10; Titus 1:4; 2:13; 3:6), which shows that both share deity.<sup>3</sup> Paul emphasizes God’s role as Savior (1 Tim 2:3) in the same context where he says that God “wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2:4). God as Savior in the Pastorals is linked with his longing for all to be saved and his provision of Jesus to make this a reality.

## **The Time of Salvation**

To think of salvation as focused on the past is appropriate, but salvation is richer than this. In fact, we should think of every aspect of our great salvation as eschatological, for the end times have arrived in Jesus Christ. Paul tells the Corinthians that “the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor 10:11). Hebrews affirms that “in these last days, [God] has spoken to us by his Son” (Heb 1:2).

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<sup>2</sup> See the essay by J. A. Fitzmyer, “The Savior God: The Pastoral Epistles,” in *The Forgotten God: Perspectives in Biblical Theology*, ed. A. A. Das and F. J. Matera (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 181–96.

<sup>3</sup> We note Richard Bauckham’s impressive work showing that second temple Judaism thought in terms of God’s identity and that from the earliest days Christians included Jesus in the unique identity of Israel’s one God: *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

The word “salvation” means that we are rescued or delivered, and the concept isn’t restricted to the words “Savior,” “save,” and “salvation.” For example, Paul tells of salvation when he says Jesus “gave himself for our sins to rescue us from this present evil age” (Gal 1:4).

A feature of NT eschatology is the already-but-not-yet character of God’s redeeming work.<sup>4</sup> The end times have been inaugurated but not consummated. So, even when salvation is spoken of as a past event, it still has an eschatological character. Jesus has already rescued believers from their sins: “By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Eph 2:8 ESV). Some texts speak of believers in the process of being saved: “The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but it is the power of God to us who are being saved” (1 Cor 1:18). The participle “being saved” is progressive, for Paul contrasts those who are being saved with “those who are perishing” (cf. 2 Cor 2:15).

Salvation isn’t only past and present but is also future. The end-time nature of justification is apparent in Paul’s earliest letter, where he speaks of the Jesus “who rescues [*ryomenon*] us from the coming wrath” (1 Thess 1:10; cf. 5:9). Paul shares a similar idea in Rom 5:9: “How much more then, since we have now been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from wrath” (cf. v. 10). As Heb 9:28 says, Christ “will appear a second time . . . to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (cf. Rev 12:10). Peter also regards salvation as eschatological, for he tells of “a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet 1:5).

## Preliminary Exegetical Reflections

Scripture emblazons the truth that salvation is of the Lord. Jonah famously sums up this theme inside the great fish: “Salvation belongs to the LORD” (Jonah 2:9). The psalmist exclaims, “The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom should I fear?” (Ps 27:1). Salvation is found *only* in the Lord, and humans can’t accomplish it but must depend entirely upon God. When Egypt’s army thundered toward Israel at the Red Sea, Moses did not

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<sup>4</sup> Many have argued this point. Perhaps George Ladd has influenced evangelicals on this matter more than anyone else. See George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

summon Israel to battle. Rather, he exclaimed, “Stand firm and see the LORD’s salvation that he will accomplish for you today” (Exod 14:13). The OT is replete with God’s people calling upon him to save them, for they realize that there is no help anywhere else (e.g., Pss 22:21; 28:9; 31:1, 16; 54:14; 80:7).

This theme appears also in the NT: “The Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). The hope for spiritual deliverance originates not with humans but with God, who chooses people for salvation (2 Thess 2:13; cf. 2 Tim 2:9–10). Salvation is of the Lord and can’t be accomplished by humans because of our sin, and thus God’s grace shines when “Christ Jesus [comes] into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim 1:15) through his death and resurrection.

This great salvation isn’t limited to Jews but is extended to all people everywhere (Isa 45:22; 49:6; Acts 28:28). Both Testaments declare: “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved” (Joel 2:32; cf. Acts 2:21; Rom 10:13). Salvation means confessing that Jesus is Lord and believing that God raised him from the dead (vv. 9–10).

Saving faith includes repentance (2 Cor 7:10), for there is no true faith without turning to the Lord and a change in life. God’s saving work includes perseverance, for Jesus says that “the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matt 10:22). Indeed, if people refuse to continue in belief, they won’t be saved (Heb 2:3; 10:39). Saving faith produces good works (Jas 2:14), which aren’t the basis of salvation but its necessary fruit.

## Salvation and the Biblical Story<sup>5</sup>

Before we zoom in on various aspects of the doctrine of salvation in subsequent chapters, we zoom out to view the Scriptures with a wide-angle lens. Conrad Mbewe of Zambia helpfully observes:

As you read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, you will notice that there is a coherent story line that holds it all together: the

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<sup>5</sup> Much of what follows depends on Christopher W. Morgan, with Robert A. Peterson, *Christian Theology: The Biblical Story and Our Faith* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020), 3–34, 325–92. For a more thorough treatment of how the biblical story frames theology, see D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 193–345.

themes of this story line are creation, the fall, redemption, and restoration. These are not equal themes in the way the Bible treats them. Most of the Bible is given to unfolding the third of these, the great drama of redemption through Jesus Christ. But this redemption is set against the backdrop of creation and the fall, and this redemption will find its final completion in restoration and final judgment, when the original creation is restored to what it was originally intended to be. The Old Testament develops this story line, preparing for Jesus, and the New Testament fulfills this story line, portraying Jesus. The person and work of Christ, therefore, is what unites the entire Bible. As we read both Old and New Testaments through the lens of redemption in Christ, we will understand the whole Bible the way God wants us to understand it.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Creation***

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). Already in existence prior to matter, space, or time, the eternal, self-existent God creates the universe and all that exists. Bruce Waltke introduces Gen 1:1–2:3: “The creation account is a highly sophisticated presentation, designed to emphasize the sublimity (power, majesty, and wisdom) of the Creator God and to lay the foundation for the worldview of the covenant community.”<sup>7</sup>

As the chief character in Genesis 1, God “creates, says, sees, separates, names, makes, appoints, blesses, finishes, makes holy, and rests.”<sup>8</sup> God is not the sky, sun, moon, water, trees, animals, or anything else created; God creates them, and they are subject to him. The creation is neither God nor a part of God; he is absolute and has independent existence, whereas creation has derived existence from him and continually depends on him as its sustainer (cf. Acts 17:25–28). Christina Gonet puts it well: “God created the

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<sup>6</sup> Conrad Mbewe, “How to Read and Understand the Bible,” in *ESV Global Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 1866.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 56.

<sup>8</sup> C. John Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 71.

heavens and earth *ex nihilo*, and all things depend on him for their existence and happiness.”<sup>9</sup>

The transcendent Creator is sovereign, with amazing authority and power. Like a king, he effects his will by his word, bringing things into being out of nothing (Gen 1:3; Heb 11:3). He further displays his authority over all creation by calling and naming the things he has created (Gen 1:5).

The transcendent, sovereign Creator is also personal. On each day of creation God is personally involved in every detail, crafting his world in a way that pleases him and benefits his creatures. In dramatic fashion, on the sixth day he personally creates man in his own image, breathing life into him. The personal God has made humans personal as well, with the ability to relate to him, live in community, and have dominion over creation. As D. A. Carson reminds, “We are accorded an astonishing dignity” and have “implanted within us a profound capacity for knowing God intimately.”<sup>10</sup> By making us in his image, God distinguishes us from the rest of creation and establishes that he is distinct from us—we are not gods but creatures made in his image.

God is also good, which is reflected in the goodness of his creation and reinforced in the steady refrain, “And God saw that it was good” (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). On the sixth day creation is even described as “very good” (v. 31). The inherent goodness of creation leaves no room for a fundamental dualism between spirit and matter, such that spirit is good and matter is evil. Indeed, material creation reflects God’s goodness, which is evident also in his generous provision of light, land, vegetation, animals, and creeping, crawling things. These are blessings given for humanity’s benefit, as are the ability to relate to God, fertility to procreate, and authority to use the earth’s abundant provisions for man’s good. Although creation reaches its summit in God’s creating man in his image, Gen 1:1–2:3 culminates in the rest of God. By the seventh day God finishes his creative work, rests, and blesses and sanctifies the day as holy, as a Sabbath to be kept. In doing so God displays his joy and

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<sup>9</sup> Christina Gonet, “The Narrative of Salvation in Anselm of Canterbury’s *Cur Deus homo*: Extracting and Explicating the Story Embedded in the Text” (PhD diss., Gateway Seminary, 2022), 131.

<sup>10</sup> Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 205.

satisfaction in his creation and his celebration of completion, and he commemorates this special event.<sup>11</sup>

God provides the garden of Eden as a place in which man and woman may live and work.<sup>12</sup> God “forms the man, plants the garden, transports man there, sets up the terms of a relationship with man, and searches for a helper fit for the man, which culminates in the woman.”<sup>13</sup> Man is formed from the dust of the ground but is more than dust; his life comes directly from the very breath of God (2:7). In planting the garden and moving man there, the Creator and covenant Lord provides a delightful and sacred space in which humans can enjoy a harmonious relationship with him, each other, the animals, and the land. Waltke observes, “The Garden of Eden is a temple-garden, represented later in the tabernacle.”<sup>14</sup> As such the garden highlights God’s presence with man.

So God creates Adam and Eve in his image as good and with wonderful privileges and significant responsibilities in the garden of Eden. They experience an unhindered relationship with God, intimate enjoyment of each other, and delegated authority over creation. God establishes the terms for living in his presence and graciously puts forward only one prohibition: they must not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

## ***Fall***

Foolishly, Adam and Eve do not obey God’s command but fall (Genesis 3). This account begins with a Tempter who calls into question God’s truthfulness, sovereignty, and goodness. The Tempter is “cunning” and deflects the woman’s attention from the covenantal relationship God has established. In verses 6–8 the central scene in the story of the fall reaches its climax. The fatal sequence is described rapidly in 3:6: she saw, she took, she ate, and she gave, culminating in “he ate.” Wenham observes that the midpoint of verses 6–8, “and he ate,” employs the key verb of the narrative—“eat”—and is

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<sup>11</sup> Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 114.

<sup>12</sup> Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, 39, 101.

<sup>13</sup> Collins, 132.

<sup>14</sup> Waltke, *Genesis*, 85.

placed between the woman's inflated expectations in eating (the fruit is good to eat, is a delight to the eyes, and gives insight) and its actual effects: their eyes are opened, they know they are nude, and they hide in the trees.<sup>15</sup> The contrast is striking: the forbidden fruit does not deliver what the Tempter has promised but brings dark new realities warned of by the good and truthful covenant Lord.

This initial act of human rebellion brings divine justice: "They sinned by eating, and so would suffer to eat; she led her husband to sin, and so would be mastered by him; they brought pain into the world by their disobedience, and so would have painful toil in their respective lives."<sup>16</sup> The consequences of their sin are fitting and devastating. The couple immediately feels shame, realizing they are naked (3:7). They sense their estrangement from God, even foolishly trying to hide from him (vv. 8–10). They are afraid of God and how he might respond (vv. 9–10). Their alienation from each other also emerges as the woman blames the serpent, while the man blames the woman and by intimation even God (vv. 10–13). Pain and sorrow also ensue. The woman experiences greater pain in childbirth; the man toils in trying to grow food in a land with pests and weeds; both discover dissonance in their relationship (vv. 15–19). Even worse, the couple is banished from Eden and from God's glorious presence (vv. 22–24).

How they surely wish they had listened to God's warning: If you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, "you will certainly die" (2:17). Upon eating the forbidden fruit, they do not immediately fall over and die from something like cardiac arrest. But they do die. They die spiritually, and their bodies also begin to experience the gradual decay that leads ultimately to their physical deaths (3:19).

Most devastating is that these consequences do not befall only Adam and Eve but extend to their descendants as well. Sin has entered the picture and has brought disruption and alienation in each human relationship—with God, oneself, one another, and creation. The immediate context and storyline of Genesis 4–11 underline this gloomy new reality. In Gen 4:7 God warns Cain that sin is "crouching at the door" and that its "desire is for you,

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<sup>15</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC (Waco: Word, 1987), 75.

<sup>16</sup> Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 148.

but you must rule over it.” Sadly, Cain refuses to heed the advice and kills his brother, Abel. Cain is consequently cursed by God, alienated from the earth, and banished from God’s presence (vv. 10–16).

Genesis 5 reminds us that God has created humans in his image and blessed them; the chapter offers hope through mention of Enoch and Noah but soberly underlines the domain of death with the refrain “then he died” eight times. Genesis 6 clarifies the extension and intensification of sin, which is portrayed as massive, pervasive, continual, and characteristic (6:5–11). God graciously establishes a covenant with Noah and appropriately judges humanity with the flood (Genesis 6–9). After the flood God reemphasizes the creational blessing and mandate and offers a covenant promise (9:1–17). Genesis then recounts the history of the Tower of Babel, at which God judges proud, self-seeking humans who attempt to make a name for themselves and to multiply their influence rather than serving as God’s image-bearers and advancing his name (11:1–9).

### *Redemption*

Thankfully, God does not completely eradicate humanity for such cosmic treason but graciously begins a restoration project instead. He begins the process of redeeming humanity and the cosmos, particularly restoring humans as full image-bearers so that we can participate in and reflect the glory, identity, and mission that we have longed for the whole time.

God calls Abraham from a family of idol-worshippers and enters into a covenant with him, promising to be God to him and his descendants (Gen 12:1–3; 17:7). God promises to give Abraham a land, to make him into a great nation, and through him to bless all peoples (12:3). From Abraham come Isaac and Jacob, whose name God changes to Israel and from whom God brings twelve tribes of his people. The rest of the Old Testament concerns God’s dealings with the twelve tribes of Israel.

Through Moses, great plagues, and a dramatic exodus, God calls Israel out of Egyptian bondage to be his people. He gives them the Ten Commandments, promises to be their God, and claims them as his own. He promises to be with them and gives them the Promised Land, which they occupy under Joshua’s leadership after defeating the Canaanites.



After Joshua dies, judges such as Gideon, Deborah, and Samson become leaders of the people.<sup>17</sup> History repeats itself, as generation after generation experiences peace, then rebels, then receives God's judgment, then cries out to God, and then experiences peace once again.

God gives his people a king, first Saul, then David, then Solomon. Under David, a man after God's own heart, the kingdom grows significantly, Jerusalem becomes the capital, and God renews his covenant promise with his people. God promises to make David's descendants into a dynasty and to establish the throne of one of them forever. God uses David's son Solomon to build a temple, where God's covenant presence is manifest. Solomon does much right but also disobeys God in major ways, and this leads to the kingdom's splitting into northern (Israel) and southern (Judah) kingdoms.

God sends many prophets to call the people to covenant faithfulness. They warn his people of the judgment that will come if they do not repent of their sins and turn to the Lord. Nevertheless, the people repeatedly rebel against him and his prophets. In response he sends the northern kingdom of ten tribes into captivity in Assyria in 722 BC and the southern kingdom of two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, into captivity in Babylon in 586 BC. Through the prophets God also promises to send a deliverer (Isa 9:6–7; 52:13–53:12).

God promises to restore his people to their land from Babylonian captivity after seventy years (Jer 25:11–12), and he brings this about under Ezra and Nehemiah. The people rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and build a second temple. Yet the Old Testament ends with God's people continuing to turn away from him (Malachi).

After four hundred years God sends his Son as the promised Messiah, Suffering Servant, King of Israel, and Savior of the world. The Son of God is conceived of a virgin and becomes fully human. In time Jesus is baptized, successfully defeats Satan's temptation in the wilderness, and is declared to be the Messiah. Jesus chooses and invests in twelve disciples as new leaders of his messianic community. He teaches about the kingdom of God, that God's rule has come in Jesus the Messiah. Jesus displays this by casting out demons, performing miracles, and preaching the good news to the poor.

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<sup>17</sup> Preben Vang and Terry G. Carter, *Telling God's Story: The Biblical Narrative from Beginning to End*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013), 1–9.

Jesus completely follows the will and plan of God, even without sin. He is loved by many but opposed by Jewish religious and political leaders. Not only does he not fit their conception of a Messiah, but he also undercuts their pride, beliefs, and traditions. The opposition increases, as the Jewish Sanhedrin condemns Jesus in an illegal trial. Because the nation is occupied by the Roman Empire, the leaders must send Jesus to their staunch enemy, Pontius Pilate, who finds Jesus innocent. Under pressure from the Jewish leaders and crowds, however, Pilate crucifies Jesus anyway. Jesus the innocent one, the righteous one, dies on the cross. From a human vantage point, Jesus dies as a victim in this despicably evil act. Yet the biblical story highlights that this death is part of God's eternal plan to save sinners. Jesus's mission is to seek and save the lost, and he does not fail to do so. Jesus saves sinners as their substitute, victor, sacrifice, new Adam, redeemer, and peacemaker.

Incredibly, Jesus not only bears the sin of the world on the cross but also is raised from the dead three days later. In a variety of places, situations, and groups, over five hundred people witness the resurrected Jesus. Through his resurrection he confirms his identity, defeats sin and death, gives new life to his people, and provides a foretaste of his people's future resurrection.

Jesus directs his disciples to take the gospel to all nations to fulfill God's promise to Abraham to bless all peoples through him. His disciples are to make disciples of others, who will then make disciples of still others. On the day of Pentecost, Jesus sends his Spirit, who forms the church as the New Testament people of God. The Spirit empowers the church to bear witness to Christ among the nations.

The early church "devote[s] themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer" (2:42). The early church is involved in evangelism (vv. 38–41), sharing the gospel with those who do not know Christ as the means of salvation. The church is committed to discipleship, instructing believers in how to follow Jesus as a way of life. The church is devoted to fellowship (vv. 42–47), sharing life together, knowing one another, loving one another. The church is also involved in ministry (vv. 42–46), praying for one another, giving to one another, meeting each other's needs. The church is active in worship (v. 46), praising God, publicly meeting together, and privately teaching, praying, giving, and partaking together. The church grows and faces persecution, but the gospel keeps moving on. Some Jews and many Gentiles trust Christ, churches are planted, and the cycle

continues. Along the way, the churches teach sound doctrine, correct error, and call believers to live in love, unity, holiness, and truth.

Apostles such as Paul and Peter also teach about salvation. The Father has planned salvation, the Son accomplishes it, and the Spirit applies it to all who believe in Christ. God chooses, calls, and gives new life in Christ to believers. God forgives, declares righteous, and adopts into his family all who have faith in Christ. God is making his people holy in Christ and will finally glorify all who know him. God saves out of his generous love and for his glory.

### *Consummation*

Jesus will finish what he has started. He will return to reign as king, bringing justice, peace, delight, and victory. The kingdom is God's reign over his people through King Jesus. The kingdom is both a present reality and a future promise tied to Christ's second coming. Jesus brings the kingdom in phases. It is inaugurated in his public ministry, as he teaches, performs miracles, and casts out demons (Matt 13:1–50; 12:28). When Jesus ascends to God's right hand, the place of greatest power, the kingdom expands (Eph 1:20–21) and thousands enter it through the apostles' preaching (Acts 2:41, 47). The fullness of the kingdom awaits Christ's return, when he will sit on his glorious throne (Matt 25:31). Jesus will judge the world, inviting believers into the final stage of the kingdom while banishing unbelievers to hell (25:34, 41).

The classic passage depicting the consummation and related truths is Revelation 20–22. Just as Genesis 1–2 reveals that the biblical story begins with God's creation of the heavens and the earth, Revelation 20–22 shows that it ends with God's creation of a new heavens and a new earth. The story begins with the goodness of creation and ends with the goodness of the new creation. The story begins with God's dwelling with his people in a garden-temple and ends with God's dwelling with his covenant people in heaven, a new earth-city-garden-temple.

Once and for all God's victory is consummated. God's judgment is final, sin is vanquished, justice prevails, holiness predominates, God's glory is unobstructed, and the kingdom is realized. God's eternal plan of cosmic reconciliation in Christ is actualized, and God is "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28).

As a part of his victory, God casts the devil and his demons into the lake of fire, where they are not consumed but are "tormented day and night

forever and ever” (Rev 20:10). Satan and the demons thus receive their due punishment, that will know no end. Then God judges everyone: those whom the world deems important, those whom the world never notices, and everyone in between. “Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire” (v. 15). God does not send only the ruthless Roman emperors to hell (which we might expect); he consigns to hell all who are not the people of Jesus (cf. Dan 12:1; Rev 13:8; 21:8, 27).

Magnificently, the new heavens and new earth arrive, and God dwells with his covenant people (Rev 21:3, 7), brings comfort to them (there is no more pain, death, etc.; v. 4), makes all things new (v. 5), and proclaims, “It is done!” (v. 6). Heaven is then depicted as a perfect temple, glorious, multinational, and holy (vv. 9–27). The people of God rightly bear God’s image: serving him, reigning with him, encountering him directly, and worshipping him (22:1–5). God receives the worship he is due, and humans are blessed beyond description, finally living to the fullest the realities of being created in his image.<sup>18</sup>

This is the essence of the biblical story, and it is also the story of salvation. Indeed, if we know Christ, it is our story too. Before creation, God the Father plans our salvation. In space and time two thousand years ago, Jesus comes and does the work necessary to save us. And ever since, the Holy Spirit brings God’s grace to bear on our lives as we trust Christ. Notice how the Bible describes our salvation not only in black and white but in technicolor. The apostles paint many pictures to teach that God rescues us when we could not free ourselves. The overarching picture is union with Christ, God’s joining believers to his Son by grace through faith so that all of his saving benefits become ours. When the Holy Spirit unites us spiritually to Christ, we receive many other benefits as well. The Father effectively summons us to Christ through the gospel (calling). The Spirit makes us alive spiritually (regeneration). He turns us from sin (repentance) and to Christ (faith) as he is offered in the gospel (conversion). The Father declares us righteous in his sight because of Christ’s righteousness (justification). He places us into his family as his children (adoption). The Spirit purifies us, setting us apart from

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<sup>18</sup> For a clear and edifying overview of the biblical story, framed with the doctrine of God, see D. A. Carson, *The God Who Is There: Finding Your Place in God’s Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010).

sin unto holiness once and for all and progressively working holiness into us (sanctification). God keeps us (preservation) so we continue to walk with him (perseverance) and do not turn away from Christ (apostasy). Because God chose us in Christ (election) and Christ died and rose to save us, God will share his glory with us on the last day (glorification).

## A Roadmap

In this volume we will study the doctrine of salvation, and we will look at each identity-forming and life-changing aspect of our salvation:

- We are in Christ (union with Christ).
- We are chosen in Christ (election).
- We are called to Christ (calling).
- We are alive in Christ (regeneration).
- We believe in Christ (conversion).
- We are righteous in Christ (justification).
- We are adopted in Christ (adoption).
- We are holy in Christ (sanctification).
- We are kept in Christ (perseverance).
- We are glorious in Christ (glorification).

We will then connect the dots. We will examine how each part of our salvation is not only for our good but also for God's glory. We will see how the doctrine of salvation relates to other key theological themes and how the doctrine of salvation functions in the Christian life.

# Union with Christ

A wide-angle view of salvation includes God's planning, accomplishing, and applying our salvation. God planned salvation before creation when he chose a people for himself. He accomplished salvation through Jesus's life, death, resurrection, ascension, and session in the first century. God applies salvation to believers when he grants them saving grace so that they come to know him. Theologians call this the application of salvation, or union with Christ, the means by which God grants all the other blessings of salvation to believers. Because we belong to Christ, we are saved, elected, justified, adopted, reconciled, redeemed, sanctified, and glorified. Calvin aptly described union with Christ:

As long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us. For this reason, he is called "our Head" [Eph 4:15], and "the first-born among many brethren" [Rom 8:29]. We also, in turn, are said to be "engrafted into him" [Rom 11:17], and to "put on Christ" [Gal 3:17].<sup>1</sup>

The OT doesn't speak directly of being united to Christ but contains the categories the NT employs. For instance, Adam is the head of the human

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3:1.1; 1:537.

race, and all human beings are united to him. Our organic unity with Adam is clear since we all come from him: “From one man [God] has made every nationality to live over the whole earth” (Acts 17:26). We see the unity of the human race when all human beings enter the world as sinners who will die by virtue of their union with Adam (Rom 5:12–19). On the other hand, those who belong to Christ enjoy life and righteousness by virtue of their union with him. Paul sums up his understanding of the roles of Adam and Christ in 1 Cor 15:21–22: “Since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also comes through a man. For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.” All human beings will die by virtue of their union with Adam, but those united with Christ will enjoy resurrection life forever.

## Exegetical Foundations

### *Abraham*

The father of the Jewish people is Abraham (Josh 24:3; Luke 1:73). Isaiah says to Israel, “Look to Abraham your father” (Isa 51:2; cf. Acts 7:2), and Israel is designated as his “offspring” (Ps 105:6; Isa 41:8). An individual Israelite may be described as a “daughter of Abraham” (Luke 13:16) or as his son (19:9). Abraham is also described as “the rock from which you were cut, and . . . the quarry from which you were dug” (Isa 51:1). Israel was tempted to think that they would be safe from judgment simply because they were physical descendants of Abraham (Matt 3:7–10; Luke 3:7–9; John 8:33–42; Rom 9:6–9). Those who truly belong to the Lord are the children of Abraham (4:9–12; Gal 3:6–9). Paul argues in Galatians that Jesus is the true offspring of Abraham (3:16), and thus those who are Abraham’s offspring put their trust in Jesus Christ (v. 29). We see, then, that one must be a child of Abraham to belong to the people of God, and only those who believe in Jesus, who are united with him, are truly the children of Abraham.

When we call Jesus the true seed of Abraham, this is another way of saying that Jesus is the true Israel, the true Son of God. In the OT Israel is described as God’s vineyard (Ps 80:8, 14; Isa 5:1–7; 27:2–3; Jer 2:21; 12:10; Ezek 15:2, 6; 19:10; Hos 10:1). Many of these verses lament that Israel has become an unfruitful vine, a degenerate vine. It is highly significant, then,

that Jesus is “the true vine,” and those who belong to Jesus, those who are part of the true Israel, are branches united with the true vine (John 15:1–2, 4–5).

## *Moses*

When we think of Moses, we think of the person who brought the law to Israel, and in that sense he functioned as an intermediary between the Lord and the people of Israel (Gal 3:19). When Israel sinned so blatantly against the Lord by making a golden calf, the covenant between the Lord and Israel was broken, symbolized by Moses’s breaking the tablets of the law (Exod 32:19). Moses interceded with the Lord, and the Lord did not destroy Israel but forgave them and restored the covenant with them so he could dwell in their midst (vv. 7–14, 31–32; 33:12–34:17). Moses’s intercession for Israel also spared them from destruction when they failed to obey the Lord and enter the land of promise (Num 14:11–25; cf. 16:20–24).

Moses was also conceived of as the human agent of Israel’s liberation, Israel’s redemption, along with Aaron: “The LORD . . . appointed Moses and Aaron . . . who brought your ancestors up from the land of Egypt” (1 Sam 12:6; cf. v. 8). Moses’s role as a leader is evident, since Joshua was installed in place of Moses as leader of the people (Num 27:15–23). Joshua is described as a “shepherd” (v. 17), which signifies his leadership role. This means that Moses is also conceived of as the shepherd of God’s people, since the authority Moses enjoyed is granted to Joshua (v. 20). We also see from Ps 77:20 that Moses and Aaron were viewed as shepherds: “You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.” They were also both understood to be priests (99:6).

There is a sense in which all of Israel was incorporated into Moses: “All were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Cor 10:2). Israel was, so to speak, plunged into Moses, united with Moses, their shepherd, their leader, their deliverer, their prophet, and their priest. But Jesus is greater than Moses. Moses predicted a prophet like him would arise (Deut 18:15), and that prophet is clearly Jesus Christ (cf. Matt 17:5; Luke 9:35; John 1:45; Acts 3:22–23; 7:37). Still, Jesus is greater than Moses, for Moses was a servant while Jesus is God’s Son (Heb 3:1–6). Believers are incorporated into Jesus by baptism (Rom 6:3–4; Gal 3:27), and thus they belong to the one who is the final revelation of God (Heb 1:2), the good shepherd of the flock



(John 10:11) who has delivered his people with a greater salvation than that accomplished under Moses.

### *Leaders and Kings*

Those who are identified as judges in the book of Judges delivered and saved the people (Judg 2:16, 18; 3:9; 10:12). The word for “judge” (*šāpat*) is used to describe both the *person* and the *activity* of the judges in the book (2:16, 17, 18, 19; 3:10; 4:4; 10:2, 3; 12:7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14; 15:30; 16:31). The word “judge” to English ears points to a person who makes legal decisions, but in Judges it has the idea of restoring peace “to a community after it has been disturbed.”<sup>2</sup> The judges, then, were leaders, restorers, and deliverers.

The notion of leadership develops further with the institution of the kingdom, especially with David’s rule, since the Lord made a covenant with David that promised that his dynasty would never end (2 Sam 7; 1 Chr 17; Pss 89, 132). The king represents the nation, as is clear in 1–2 Kings, for the state of the nation in both Israel and Judah depends upon the spiritual state of the king. It is remarkable that 1–2 Kings tell us very little about what is happening in individual lives; one of the points of the story is that the lives of the people are summed up in the behavior of the king. Both the southern and the northern kingdoms are represented by the king. Since the Lord promised that a Davidic king would reign on the throne, it was intended that a king from David’s line would represent the people. Such a promise is fulfilled in Jesus the Christ, and as the King, as the Messiah, he represents his people. The NT picks up this concept when it speaks of believers being in Christ. Those who are “in Christ” are represented by their king.

### *Son of Man*

Daniel had a remarkably strange dream in which he saw four beasts representing kingdoms (Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome; Dan 7:1–8). After seeing such ferocious beasts—and they are beasts because their rule

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<sup>2</sup> “*šāpat*,” in L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. and ed. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 4:1622.

ravages and destroys—Daniel had a vision of God’s throne room and the Ancient of Days (vv. 9–14). During the vision “one like a son of man” came “with the clouds of heaven” into the presence of “the Ancient of Days” (v. 13). “He was given dominion, and glory, and a kingdom; so that those of every people, nation, and language should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will not be destroyed” (v. 14). Clearly the Son of Man in Daniel 7 receives the kingdom, but who is this Son of Man? We note that the kingdom is given to a human being (that is what “Son of Man” means) instead of to an animal. The kingdom given to the Son of Man is humane, just, righteous, and peaceable. The vision is interpreted for Daniel immediately after he sees it (vv. 15–28). We are told three times who will receive the kingdom.

“But *the holy ones* of the Most High will receive the kingdom and possess it forever, yes, forever and ever.” (Dan 7:18)<sup>3</sup>

“As I was watching, this horn waged war against *the holy ones* and was prevailing over them until the Ancient of Days arrived and a judgment was given in favor of *the holy ones* of the Most High, for the time had come, and *the holy ones* took possession of the kingdom.” (vv. 21–22)

“But the court will convene, and his dominion will be taken away, to be completely destroyed forever. The kingdom, dominion, and greatness of the kingdoms under all of heaven will be given *to the people, the holy ones* of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will serve and obey him.” (vv. 26–27)

Those who receive the kingdom are identified as “the holy ones” (Dan 7:18), “the holy ones” again (v. 22), and then “the people, the holy ones of the Most High” (v. 27). The last reference demonstrates that the holy ones are human beings and not angels, since they are called “people.” When the vision is explained, the “Son of Man” of the vision is identified with the holy ones, and the people of the holy ones. The son of man, then, refers to the people of Israel, to those who belong to God. The kingdom promised to Israel will be granted to them. Despite all the twists and turns of history, despite the

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<sup>3</sup> All italics in Scripture are ours.

ferocious and ungodly rule of these beasts, the kingdom will come! Still, it is too simplistic to limit the rule to the people of Israel. The kingdoms are represented by ferocious beasts, but the kingdoms were also represented by a king. Indeed, the vision given of the Son of Man suggests he is an individual.

When we come to the NT, repeatedly Jesus identifies himself as the Son of Man. The title was chosen carefully, since the meaning of son of man in Daniel 7 wasn't immediately clear. Jesus, by appropriating this title, identifies himself as the king, as the representative of the holy ones of Daniel. Jesus as the Son of Man is the corporate representative of the holy ones, so that all those who belong to him, all those who are united to the Son of Man, belong to the people of God.<sup>4</sup> They are part of the true Israel because they belong to Jesus, the Son of Man.

### *Servant of the Lord*

We see something quite similar to the Son of Man when it comes to the servant of the Lord in Isaiah. Israel is often identified as the servant:

But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, descendant of Abraham, my friend—I brought you from the ends of the earth and called you from its farthest corners. I said to you: You are my servant; I have chosen you; I haven't rejected you. (Isa 41:8–9)

“Who is blind but my servant, or deaf like my messenger I am sending? Who is blind like my dedicated one, or blind like the servant of the LORD?” (42:19)

“You are my witnesses”—this is the LORD's declaration—“and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. No god was formed before me, and there will be none after me.” (43:10)

“And now listen, Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen. This is the word of the LORD your Maker, the one who formed you from

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<sup>4</sup> Oscar Cullmann argues that the Son of Man could function representatively for the saints. *The Christology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., trans. S. C. Guthrie and C. A. M. Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 138–40.

the womb: He will help you. Do not fear, Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen.” (44:1–2)

“Remember these things, Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant; I formed you, you are my servant; Israel, you will never be forgotten by me.” (44:21)

“I call you by your name, for the sake of my servant Jacob and Israel my chosen one. I give a name to you, though you do not know me.” (45:4)

“Leave Babylon, flee from the Chaldeans! Declare with a shout of joy, proclaim this, let it go out to the end of the earth; announce, ‘The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob!’” (48:20)

He said to me, “You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” (49:3)

Israel was God’s chosen servant and his beloved, but the people were exiled to Babylon because they had sinned and forsaken the way of the Lord. The Lord promised to redeem and deliver them as his servant. At the same time, it becomes apparent as Isaiah continues that the servant goes beyond Israel. The servant “will bring justice to the nations” (Isa 42:1) and be “a light to the nations” (v. 6). Isaiah could possibly have Israel in mind here and be envisioning Israel’s spiritual turnaround and its corresponding influence to the ends of the earth. But at 49:5 such a reading goes astray, for there it says that a servant will raise “up the tribes of Jacob” and restore “the protected ones of Israel,” as well as being a light for the nations (v. 6). The servant can’t be coterminous with Israel if he restores Israel. Israel can’t restore itself, and thus we have a distinction within Israel, an Israel within Israel—a servant who is the true servant. Furthermore, the servant is teachable, is obedient, and suffers despite his innocence (50:4–10), but this stands in contrast to Israel, which was in exile because of its sins and plagued with ungodliness (40:2; 42:18–25; 43:24–28; 44:22; 50:1). Finally, the servant dies for the sins of his people (53:4–6, 10–12), even though he was innocent and without sin (v. 9).

When we turn to the NT, Jesus is identified as the servant of the Lord (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45; Acts 8:30–35; Rom 4:25; 1 Pet 2:22–25). He dies

as the servant of the Lord to bring forgiveness to Israel, to fulfill covenant promises, and to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. We could say that Jesus is the true Israelite, the only true servant of the Lord, who always obeys the Lord. As the representative of Israel, he brings Israel (and the Gentiles) back to God through his atoning death. All those who belong to the Servant, all those who are united with Christ, are members of his people.

### *“In Christ”*

The notion of union with Christ plays a significant role in Paul’s thought. Union with Christ in Paul is found regularly with the expression “in Christ.”<sup>5</sup> But the concept cannot be confined to the places where “in Christ” itself occurs. For example, Eph 1:3–14 speaks of being “in Christ” (vv. 3, 10, 12), “in him” (vv. 4, 9, 10), “in the Beloved” (v. 6), and “in whom” (vv. 7, 11, 13, KJV). The diversity of expressions to describe being in Christ in this one long sentence (vv. 3–14) is astonishing, and the sheer repetition of the formula indicates that it is crucial in Pauline thought. Some scholars have even maintained that the mystical doctrine of being in Christ or participation in Christ is the center of Pauline theology.<sup>6</sup> Certainly participation in Christ, or union with Christ, is of tremendous importance in Paul’s thinking, but it isn’t clear that the theme is the center of Paul’s thought or the most important truth for understanding his theology.

Some use the word *mystical* to describe Paul’s in Christ theology, but the term does not provide the best inroad for understanding Paul’s “in Christ” theology. Since mystical is a vague term with a diversity of connotations, it is too imprecise to prove useful in defining Paul’s theology. In particular, during the course of NT scholarship some have attempted to forge a connection between Paul and the mystery religions of his day. Paul’s indebtedness to the mystery religions was forcefully argued for in the earlier part of the twentieth

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<sup>5</sup> The material here comes from my Pauline theology with some changes. See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> See Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (New York: Henry Holt, 1931), 219–26; and E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

century.<sup>7</sup> Few scholars today would accept such a thesis. The evidence has been carefully sifted through, and most have rightly concluded that the parallels between Paul and the mystery religions are superficial.<sup>8</sup> Some scholars uncritically used sources later than the Pauline writings and then proceeded to argue that Paul borrowed from the latter. Paul's faith is rooted in historical events—the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. This is a far cry from the ahistorical and experiential character of the mystery religions. Paul's theology is rooted in and reflects upon the OT Scriptures, not pagan mystery religions, which Paul would have dismissed as idolatrous and part of the elements of the world. For this reason alone, the term “mystical” should be avoided as misleading in explaining Paul's use of the phrase “in Christ.” Others have taken the phrase “in Christ” too literally, even to the point of understanding Christ to be akin to a fluid that permeates our existence. This conception, advocated by Adolf Deissmann among others, has been vigorously challenged, and most scholars now doubt its accuracy.<sup>9</sup>

It is fruitful to explore Paul's use of the term “in Christ” by beginning with Adam Christology. Paul does not use the phrases “in Christ,” “in Christ Jesus,” or “in the Lord” in only one fashion. The expression oscillates between the ideas of manner, locality, and instrumentality.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes the idea of manner seems prominent: “I speak the truth in Christ” (Rom 9:1). In many

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<sup>7</sup> The influence of mystery religions on Paul was advocated by Richard Reitzenstein, *Hellenistic Mystery-Religions: Their Basic Ideas and Significance* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1978); cf. Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970). Few scholars today would accept such a thesis. For example, those studying the history of religions were disposed to think that the Pauline doctrine of baptism was influenced by the mystery religions.

<sup>8</sup> For a decisive and careful refutation of this notion, see A. J. M. Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection: Studies in Pauline Theology Against Its Graeco-Roman Background*, WUNT 44 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1987); cf. Günter Wagner, *Pauline Baptism and the Pagan Mysteries: The Problem of the Pauline Doctrine of Baptism in Romans VI.1–11 in the Light of Its Religio-Historical “Parallels”* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1967).

<sup>9</sup> G. Adolf Deissmann, *Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History* (New York: George H. Doran, 1927), 135–57, esp. 138–42; cf. Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 154–63.

<sup>10</sup> For a thorough study, see Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012). But see Mark A. Seifrid's penetrating review, <http://themelios.thegospelcoalition.org/review/paul>

instances “in Christ” denotes both means and locality. Both of these notions fit under the rubric of Adam Christology, though we must be careful not to force every use of the phrase into this category.

We have observed earlier that in Paul’s thought all people are either in Adam or in Christ. Adam and Christ are the two representative heads for humanity. When Paul says believers are “in Christ,” he means that they are incorporated in Christ rather than in Adam. Christ is now their representative and head rather than Adam. Some scholars raise doubts about whether such representative or corporate Christology can be sustained by examining the evidence. They object that the whole notion of “corporate personality” is imposed upon the evidence instead of being vindicated by careful study.<sup>11</sup> Doubtless some go too far when they speak of corporate personality. But the contrast between Adam and Christ supports the representative character of Paul’s Christology, and it is clear that these two are the heads of humanity. Such an idea is found also in the OT, as we have seen that the king functions as the representative of his people (e.g., 2 Sam 19:40–43; 20:1), and the Son of Man and the Servant of the Lord represent Israel.

Those who are in Adam experience all the liabilities of being descended from him. Similarly, those who are in Christ experience all the blessings of being united to him. Every spiritual blessing belongs to believers in Christ (Eph 1:3). Those who are in Christ are a new creation (2 Cor 5:17), redeemed (Rom 3:24; Eph 1:7), and sons of God (Gal 3:26). What marks out Christian communities or assemblies, then, is that they are in Christ (1:22; Col 1:2; cf. 1 Thess 1:1). Both Jews and Gentiles have been brought near to God in Christ (Eph 2:13). God has reconciled the world in Christ (2 Cor 5:19). The blessing of Abraham is available to Jews and Gentiles in Christ (Gal 3:14). Thus, believers from every social class and ethnic group—both males and females—are one in Christ Jesus (v. 28). Believers have been chosen before the world began in Christ (Eph 1:4), and it is only by virtue of God’s work that they are in Christ (1 Cor 1:30). There is no condemnation for those

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-and-union-with-christ-an-exegetical-and-theological-study, accessed December 28, 2017. See also Mark Seifrid, “In Christ” *DPL*, 433–36.

<sup>11</sup> See John W. Rogerson, “The Hebrew Conception of Corporate Personality: A Re-examination,” *JTS* 21 (1970): 1–16; Stanley E. Porter, “Two Myths: Corporate Personality and Language/Mentality Determinism,” *SJT* 43 (1990): 289–307.

in Christ (Rom 8:1), and believers are alive to God in Christ Jesus (6:11). Believers are seated in the heavenlies with Christ (Eph 2:6) and experience freedom in him (Gal 2:4). When we see the comprehensive blessings that belong to those in Christ, it is clear that the promise to reclaim the world for God is inaugurated through him. The church is a new society that expresses in part what God intended when he made Adam and Eve. The saving promises made to Abraham are becoming a reality in Christ, since he reverses the curse and devastation imposed upon the world through the first Adam.

Since the apostles John and Paul are the two chief biblical teachers of union with Christ, we will examine key passages in John's Gospel and Paul's Epistles before we seek to correlate their teachings into a systematic theology of union.

### ***John 17:20–26***

The traditional division of Jesus's great prayer is correct. He prays first for himself (John 17:1–5), next for his disciples (vv. 6–19), and then for the world (vv. 20–26). In the last seven verses he prays for those who will believe through the apostles' preaching (and writing). He prays for the unity of his church according to this remarkable standard: "as you, Father, are in me and I am in you" (v. 21). The Father and the Son (along with the Holy Spirit) share the divine nature and therefore mutually indwell one another.

Jesus goes further, praying, "[Father,] may they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me" (v. 21). Astonishingly, Jesus prays that believers will be in the Father and the Son! So the Father, the Son, the Spirit, and believers will indwell one another.

Jesus goes further still, asking the Father to bring believers to heaven to see Jesus's glory (v. 24). (Although Jesus had not yet gone to the cross, he is so determined to go that he prays this prayer as if he had already returned to his Father in heaven [vv. 4–5, 11, 24].) Jesus's last words in the prayer speak of divine indwelling: "I made your name known to them and will continue to make it known, so that the love you have loved me with may be in them and I may be in them" (v. 26). Jesus has revealed the Father to the disciples so that Jesus's love and he himself might indwell them. Present union with Christ overlaps with God's indwelling his people. Though evangelicals correctly teach that the Spirit indwells them (Rom 5:5; 8:9–11; 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19–20;



2 Cor 1:21–22; Gal 3:13–14; 4:6; 1 Thess 4:8; 2 Tim 1:14), Scripture teaches that the Father (2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:22) and Son (Rom 8:10; 2 Cor 13:5; Gal 2:20; Eph 3:17; Col 1:27; 3:11) indwell them too.

John teaches much about union with Christ. We can summarize his teaching in three points. First, the Father and the Son indwell one another (John 10:38; 14:10–11; 17:21). Theologians call this *perichoresis*. Though John does not systematize and include the Holy Spirit, taking all Scripture into account we do include him and say that the three trinitarian persons indwell one another. Second, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit will indwell believers (14:20, 23; 17:22–23, 26). Third, the Father, the Son (and the Spirit), and believers will indwell one another (14:17, 20; 6:55–56; 15:4–5; 17:21).

### ***Romans 5:12–19***

As we have seen, John has amazing things to say about union with Christ, but Paul is rightly recognized as the Bible’s premier theologian of union. Although he does not use “in Christ” language here or say that believers shared in Jesus’s saving events (e.g., died and rose with him), this passage offers a big-picture presentation of union with Christ. Paul presents a meta-biblical theology involving the two Adams as heads of their respective people. The first man Adam represented the human race when he sinned in the garden of Eden. Through his primal sin, sin and death entered the world of humanity (Rom 5:12). Paul begins a comparison between Adam and Christ but leaves it incomplete. Paul next seems to appeal to Adam’s original sin to explain why death *reigned* from the time of Adam to the time of Moses’s giving the law, even over people who did not break a divine command as Adam did (vv. 13–14). Paul adds, “He is a type of the Coming One” (v. 14), laying the foundation for the thoughts he will develop in verses 18–19. Adam is an Old Testament prefiguring of Christ, the second and last Adam. There is thus similarity between them.

Instead of immediately developing this similarity, Paul shows in verses 15–17 how the two Adams are dissimilar. Adam’s sin brought death to many people, but Christ’s grace brought abundant grace, justification, and eternal life to many (v. 15). Adam’s one sin brought condemnation to the human race, but God’s grace brought justification and with it the forgiveness of many sins (v. 16). Death reigned through Adam’s sin, but those

who accept grace and free justification will reign in eternal life through Christ (v. 17).

Finally, in verses 18–19 Paul completes the unfinished comparison of verse 12 in light of the similarity of the two Adams hinted at in verse 14. Paul had written, “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, in this way death spread to all people, because all sinned” (v. 12). Now he completes that thought:

So then, as through one trespass there is condemnation for everyone, so also through one righteous act there is justification leading to life for everyone. For just as through one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so also through the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. (vv. 18–19)

Adam’s primal sin resulted in condemnation for all those in union with him: the human race. In a similar way, Christ’s “one righteous act” of dying on the cross resulted in justification to eternal life for all those in union with him: the race of the redeemed (v. 18). Verse 19 recapitulates verse 18: just as Adam’s disobedience to God made sinners out of all whom he represented before God, so Christ’s obedience “to the point of death—even to death on a cross” (Phil 2:8) will make righteous all whom he represented before God.

To summarize: In Rom 5:12–19 Paul views the history of humankind in terms of the two Adams. Their respective acts had catastrophic consequences for the people they represent. All whom Adam represents find death and condemnation in union with him. All whom Christ represents find justification and eternal life in union with him.

### ***Romans 6:1–14***

In one of Scripture’s most important passages on the Christian life, Paul is once more under attack. His opponents accuse him again of antinomianism (see Rom 2:7–8): “What should we say then? Should we continue in sin so that grace may multiply?” (6:1). As before, this slander provokes him: “Absolutely not! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (v. 2). If we ask when we died to sin, the apostle has a ready reply: “Are you unaware that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?”

(v. 3). Baptism signifies union with Christ in his death and resurrection. When believers are baptized, they are spiritually joined to Christ's death. This means that through union with Christ they have died to sin. It has no more right to dominate their lives. Paul explains further, "For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be rendered powerless so that we may no longer be enslaved to sin" (v. 6).

Jesus's death and resurrection are the only antidotes to the poison of sin. They saved us once and for all from sin's penalty (Rom 8:1). When Christ returns, his death and resurrection will save us from sin's very presence (v. 5; 1 Thess 5:19–20). In this life, Jesus's death and resurrection save us from sin's power, and they do so by virtue of our union with Christ. We died with him to sin's dominion, and we are raised with him to live "in newness of life" (Rom 6:4).

Jesus's saving work empowers the Christian life, but believers are not inactive. Paul urges them to put into practice what they know: "So, you too consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (v. 11). The words "in Christ Jesus" here signify union with Christ. Once more Paul expands his teaching:

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, so that you obey its desires. And do not offer any parts of it to sin as weapons for unrighteousness. But as those who are alive from the dead, offer yourselves to God, and all the parts of yourselves to God as weapons for righteousness. For sin will not rule over you, because you are not under the law but under grace. (vv. 12–14)

Union with Christ, then, is indispensable for successful Christian living. God calls us to walk with Christ step by step, trusting the Holy Spirit to apply Jesus's death and resurrection to us again and again. Sin is no longer our master, but Christ is. We trust his atoning death to have set us free from sin's cruel domination. We trust his mighty resurrection to empower us for a new life that pleases God and blesses us.

### ***Ephesians 1:1–14***

Union with Christ pervades this passage as perhaps no other in Scripture. Paul even mentions union in his salutation to the epistle, addressing his readers as "the faithful saints *in Christ Jesus*" (v. 1). He begins his introduction

with praise to God the Father for blessing the people of God with all spiritual blessings in union with the Son (v. 3). He then mentions one particular spiritual blessing from the Father: election, for God chose us “in” Christ (v. 4). The Father predestined us to adoption into his family, and with adoption comes an inheritance that is “in [Christ]” (v. 11).

Paul mentions the Son’s role in salvation: “In him we have redemption through his blood” (v. 7), where “in him” refers to union with Christ. God has a grand plan of salvation, a “mystery,” a truth contained in the Old Testament but revealed fully only in the New. God made known to the apostles this plan “according to his good pleasure that he purposed in Christ” (v. 9). Even God’s eternal plan was formulated in view of uniting his people savingly to Jesus. God’s goal? “To bring everything together in Christ, both things in heaven and things on earth in him” (v. 10). God will not only rescue all of his people but will deliver his creation from the curse (Rom 8:19–22; Rev 22:3) and bring about a “new heaven and a new earth” (21:1). And all of this will take place “in Christ,” “in him” (Eph 1:10).

In this passage Paul has spoken of the Father’s election and the Son’s redemption as being “in Christ.” It comes as no surprise, then, that the Holy Spirit’s work of applying salvation to God’s people is also in union with the Savior. When we believed the gospel, God the Father sealed us “in [Christ] . . . with the promised Holy Spirit” (v. 13). The Spirit thus serves as “the down payment of our inheritance, until the redemption of the possession, to the praise of his glory” (v. 14). The Spirit is thus seal and down payment, guaranteeing that God will keep us to the end (cf. 4:30).

Eph 1:1–14, therefore, is replete with references to union with Christ and our salvation. Union permeates the passage from beginning (v. 1) to end (v. 13). Union pertains to the roles of the trinitarian persons in salvation: Father (vv. 3–4), Son (v. 7), and Spirit (v. 13). Union crisscrosses election (v. 4), redemption (v. 7), God’s plan to deliver heaven and earth (v. 10), adoption (v. 11), and sealing (v. 13). Indeed, our great God “has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens in Christ” (v. 3).

### *Ephesians 2:1–7*

Few texts show our need for salvation as clearly as this one. We were besieged by the world (v. 2), the flesh (v. 3), and the devil (v. 2). We were spiritually

devoid of eternal life (vv. 1, 5), sinning in desire, thought (v. 3), and deed (vv. 2–3). Worst of all, “We were by nature children under wrath” (v. 3). If God were to repay us as our sins deserved, we would perish forever. Thankfully, however, Paul writes, “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us . . . saved [us] by grace!” (vv. 4–5).

What follows does not speak of God’s planning salvation before creation, as Eph 1:4 did. It does not recount Christ’s making atonement, as Eph 1:7 did. Rather, it treats the application of salvation, that is, union with Christ. One way Paul communicates union is by teaching that by grace believers participate in Christ’s narrative. So it is here. The apostle says that God

made us alive with Christ (Eph 2:5),  
 raised us up with him (v. 6),  
 and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus (v. 6).

The first two clauses are complementary. God united us to Christ in his resurrection—he “raised us up with him” (v. 6) and in that way “made us alive with Christ” (v. 5). In joining us to the risen Christ, God regenerated us now and will raise us from the dead to eternal life on the last day.

Uniquely in all of Scripture, verse 6 says that God “seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus.” God graciously applies salvation to believers by spiritually linking them to Jesus’s death, resurrection, ascension, and here even his session, his sitting at God’s right hand! We have sat down with the Son of God in heaven. Revelation 3:21 portrays this as a future event: “To the one who conquers I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.” But Paul here portrays it as a present one. Like other aspects of salvation, it is both already and not yet. This is one way God ministers his preservation to us. We—with all our temptations, struggles, and sins—are as good as in heaven now, seated with Christ! By God’s matchless grace he joins us to Christ permanently. Surely this is a grand motivation to love, serve, and live for God all our days.

God’s purpose in uniting us to his Son in this passage is cosmic and eternal: he did this “so that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:7). God will put us, his church, on display to the universe to magnify his amazing grace, mercy, and kindness!

### *Ephesians 3:1–10*

As he had done previously in Eph 2:11, Paul speaks directly to Gentile believers in Ephesus in 3:1: “I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles. . . .”<sup>12</sup> Paul tells about “the administration of God’s grace that he gave me for you” (3:2). God made this administration known to Paul by revelation. Paul also refers to it as “the mystery of Christ” (v. 4). It was a mystery because, although the Old Testament predicted it, it was not realized until the coming of Christ in the New Testament. Jesus gave the Holy Spirit to the “apostles and prophets” that they might broadcast the mystery (v. 5).

Paul explains the content of the mystery of Christ: “The Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (v. 6). Paul had previously described the pitiable situation in which the Gentiles had found themselves before they believed in Christ: “At that time you were without Christ, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world” (2:12).

But by his grace, God brought the Gentiles near to himself “in Christ Jesus” (v. 13). That is, God brought previously godless and hopeless Gentiles to himself by uniting them to Christ and his atonement. Union with Christ is a key soteriological principle in Paul. It is also an ecclesiological principle, for those united to Christ are also united to all others united to him. For this reason Paul describes Gentile believers in Ephesus as “coheirs [with believing Jews], members of the same body [of Christ, the church], and partners [with Jewish Christians] in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (3:6).<sup>13</sup>

This whole passage is autobiographical, because Jesus called Saul, the persecutor of himself and his church, to become Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9:5–6, 15):

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<sup>12</sup> In fact, of five uses of “Gentiles” in Ephesians, three occur in Eph 3:1, 6, 8, one in 2:11, and one in 4:17.

<sup>13</sup> For more on union with Christ and the unity of the church, see Kristen Ferguson and Christopher W. Morgan, “Baptists, the Unity of the Church, and the Christian Tradition,” in *Baptists and the Christian Tradition*, ed. Matthew Y. Emerson, Christopher W. Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020), 5–25.

I was made a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace that was given to me by the working of his power. This grace was given to me—the least of all the saints—to proclaim to the Gentiles the incalculable riches of Christ, and to shed light for all about the administration of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things. (Eph 3:7–9)

This autobiographical text takes us back to the beginning, when the risen Christ appeared to Saul of Tarsus, “to one born at the wrong time” (1 Cor 15:8). Saul knew that God had appeared in a light from heaven that knocked him to the ground (Acts 9:3–4). The questions and answer that followed revolutionized Paul's life and laid the foundation for his ministry. Jesus asked, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (v. 4). To which he replied, “Who are you, Lord?” Jesus answered, “I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting” (vv. 4–5). After this encounter Paul would never be the same. Has anyone ever been more zealous for the wrong cause? God turned the greatest persecutor of the church into its greatest proponent. On the road to Damascus Paul learned that to persecute the church was to persecute Jesus, its Lord and Savior. Thus, before he understood union with Christ, he experienced it at Christ's hands and was taught it from Christ's mouth. In time, union would come to dominate Paul's thinking, something for which we are very grateful.

### *Summary*

Union with Christ stretches back to the OT notion of representation. All human beings are represented by Adam, and then Israel is represented by Abraham, Moses, and David. We have also seen that “Son of Man” and “Servant of the Lord” refer to Israel in the OT, but even in the OT there were indications of an individual Son of Man and Servant of the Lord. The NT clarifies that Jesus is the true son of Abraham, the greater Moses, and the Messiah promised to Israel—the new and final David. He is also the Son of Man and the Servant of the Lord. Those who desire to belong to Israel must be united to Jesus Christ, for he is the true vine, and those in him are the branches. The notion of union with Christ is also communicated in Paul's “in Christ” theology, and we see that virtually every soteriological

blessing is ours in Christ. Salvation is ours because we are in Christ and no longer in Adam.

## **Systematic Formulations**

### *The Definition of Union with Christ*

Union with Christ is the Holy Spirit's work of joining people to Christ and all his saving benefits. God the Father plans salvation, for he chooses people for salvation before creation. God the Son accomplishes salvation, for he redeems the people of God through his death and resurrection. God the Holy Spirit applies the salvation planned by the Father and accomplished by the Son. The most comprehensive category of the application of salvation is union with Christ.

### *Our Need for Union with Christ*

Our need for union with Christ is separation from him. Before God rescued us, we were “separated from Christ . . . having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:12 ESV). God sent his Son as Reconciler, and because the Spirit united us to him, “in Christ Jesus” we “who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (v. 13). As a result, we believers “have access in one Spirit to the Father,” and we “are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God’s household” (vv. 18–19).

### *The Trinity and Union with Christ*

Being united to Christ we are united to the Trinity. To understand this superb truth, we must summarize trinitarian doctrine.

### **The Trinitarian Persons Are in Each Other**

Both Testaments testify to monotheism—the reality that there is only one living and true God (Deut 6:4; 1 Tim 2:5). The Old Testament hints at this fact, and the New Testament reveals that this one God exists eternally in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The persons are inseparable, for



God is one. But we must distinguish the persons and not confuse them (Matt 3:16–17). For example, only the Son became incarnate and died on the cross. We distinguish the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit but do not separate them.

Because God is one, the three persons of the Godhead indwell one another. Theologians call this *perichoresis*, circumincession, or co-inherence. The Gospel of John sets this forth most clearly. The Father indwells the Son (John 14:10); the Father is in the Son (17:23). The Son is in the Father (14:20). And the Father and Son are in one another (10:38; 14:10–11, 20; 17:21).

### **The Holy Spirit Joins Us to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit**

As a result of the Spirit's uniting us to the Trinity, God indwells us. Paul customarily says that the Holy Spirit indwells us. However, six times he ascribes indwelling to the Son (Rom 8:10; 2 Cor 13:5; Gal 2:20; Eph 3:17; Col 1:27; 3:11), and twice to the Father (2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:22). This means that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit indwell believers. Jesus promised to ask the Father to send the Holy Spirit to be with believers forever (John 14:16). Jesus taught his disciples concerning the Spirit, "You do know him, because he remains with you and will be in you" (v. 17). Jesus said that the Father (17:21) and the Son are in believers (14:20; 17:23, 26) and will come to make their home with them (14:23).

Furthermore, Jesus encouraged his disciples, telling them that when the Spirit came they would know that "I am in my Father, you are in me, and I am in you" (John 14:20). He and believers remain in one another (6:56; 15:4–5). In his famous priestly prayer Jesus prays that future believers would be in the Father and the Son as the Father and Son are in one another! (17:20–21). Although it is little known, Paul teaches that believers are in the Father and the Son: the Thessalonians are "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1).

Such teaching is overwhelming. How can we comprehend that the Trinity indwells us in a way similar to how the three persons indwell each other? First, we must guard the distinction between the Creator God and us his creatures. God's indwelling us does not mean that we become divine. God is always our Lord and Savior, and we are always his redeemed creatures. Second, the Father, Son, and Spirit have eternally indwelled one another, and their indwelling of us begins at our conversion. Third, the mutual indwelling

of the Trinity belongs to their divine nature, but God's indwelling us is by his grace through faith in Christ.

### *A Description of Union with Christ*

Our union with Christ is definitive, personal, and enduring.

#### **Union with Christ Is Definitive**

Union defines our existence as the people of God. Peter pictures God as using believers as “living stones” to build a temple to God through Christ, the “living stone” (1 Pet 2:4, 5) After this “beautiful picture of union with Christ,”<sup>14</sup> Peter adds, “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (v. 10). Union with Christ defines us—we are God’s people who have tasted his mercy through union with his Son. We, like the Corinthians, have received God’s grace “in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor 1:4).

#### **Union with Christ Is Personal**

Christ loved us outside of us; he died for us when we could not rescue ourselves. In union with Christ, however, God works inside of us. Union with Christ brings God’s grace up close and personal to us. For that reason, Paul uses the intimate picture of marital relations to depict union:

Don’t you know that your bodies are a part of Christ’s body? So should I take a part of Christ’s body and make it part of a prostitute? Absolutely not! Don’t you know that anyone joined to a prostitute is one body with her? . . . But anyone joined to the Lord is one spirit with him. (1 Cor 6:15–17)

Paul draws a parallel between the union of husbands’ and wives’ bodies in marital relations and our spiritual union between Christ and us.

Ajith Fernando of Sri Lanka underlines this personal aspect of our union:

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<sup>14</sup> We credit Robert A. Peterson with insights from his *Salvation Applied by the Spirit: Union with Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 240.

The doctrine of fellowship in Christ's sufferings is a natural extension of the doctrine of our union with Christ. Christ is a suffering Savior, and if we are to be truly one with him, we too must suffer. There is a depth of union with Christ that comes to us only through suffering. But not only do we share in his sufferings; he also shares in our sufferings. The exalted Christ, sharing in the glory of God, is not deaf to our cries of pain as we suffer; he himself suffers with us when we suffer. Paul came to understand this on the road to Damascus when he heard Jesus ask, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4). He had been hitting the church, but Christ had been feeling the pain.<sup>15</sup>

Our union with Christ is personal indeed!

### Union with Christ Is Enduring

Union with Christ is not temporary but permanent. Paul writes, "In him you also were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and when you believed" (Eph 1:13). This text presents the Trinity as active in sealing believers. The divine passive shows that God the Father is the sealer who takes the initiative in sealing God's people. God's seal is the Holy Spirit, promised by Old Testament prophets. The sealing takes place "in him," that is, in union with Christ. As the next verse suggests, the main meaning of this sealing is the permanence of salvation: "The Holy Spirit is the down payment of our inheritance, until the redemption of the possession, to the praise of his glory" (v. 14).

This is underscored by Paul's use of sealing later in Ephesians: "And don't grieve God's Holy Spirit. You were sealed by him for the day of redemption" (Eph 4:30). The chief theological significance of the Father's sealing believers' union with Christ with the seal of the Spirit is thus God's preservation of his saints. Our union with Christ is so permanent that even death cannot break its bond, as John reveals. God eulogizes those who die in union with Christ, "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on" (Rev 14:13).

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<sup>15</sup> Ajith Fernando, "Heaven for Persecuted Saints," Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Heaven*, Theology in Community 6 (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 232.

In sum: Union with Christ is definitive; it defines who we are, God's blessed people linked savingly to his Son forever. Union with Christ is personal: we are spiritually married to Christ, our bridegroom, and love him dearly. Union with Christ is enduring: we are linked to the Son of God our Savior with the unbreakable seal of the Holy Spirit.

### *Jesus's Story and Union with Christ*

The apostle Paul ministers union with Christ to us by placing us as participants in Jesus's story. By the grace of God we die with Christ, are raised with him, ascend and sit down in heaven with him, and even in a sense return with him:

We died with Christ. (Rom 6:3–8; 2 Cor 4:10; Gal 2:20; Phil 3:10;  
Col 2:20)

We were raised with Christ. (Rom 6:4–8; 2 Cor 4:10–14; Eph 2:6;  
Col 3:1)

We ascended with Christ and sat down in heaven with him.  
(Eph 2:6)

We will even “come again,” so to speak, with him. (Rom 8:19;  
Col 3:4)

Christ's death uniquely makes atonement for sins. When the Holy Spirit joins us to Christ, he unites us to his death, so that we died spiritually with Christ. Similarly, the Spirit unites us to the living Christ and his resurrection. Though Jesus's saving work ranges from his incarnation to his second coming, the heart and soul of his salvation are his death and resurrection.

Christ's atoning death and resurrection accomplish salvation past, present and future. Christ saves us with regard to the past, for “He was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom 4:25). Christ's death pays the penalty for our sins, and his resurrection brings acquittal and new life to us who were condemned and spiritually dead.

Christ saves us with regard to the present, for “we were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4). Christ's death broke sin's tyranny over our lives; his resurrection enables us to live new lives.

Christ's death and resurrection save us with regard to the future, for "if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, then how much more, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life" (Rom 5:10).

Christ's ascension and session save us too, for God, "because of his great love that he had for us, made us alive with Christ. . . . He also raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might display the immeasurable riches of his grace through his kindness to us in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:4–7). God puts his love, grace, and kindness on display when he unites us to Christ, seated at God's right hand.

Twice Scripture says that we share in Christ's return. First, "The eager expectation of the creation awaits eagerly the revelation of the sons of God" (Rom 8:19, Morgan's translation). The word "revelation" is the same word Scripture sometimes uses for the second coming of Christ (1 Cor 1:7; 2 Thess 1:7; 1 Pet 1:13; Rev 1:1). There is a sense in which believers have a revelation, a return. Paul means that our true identity is so wrapped up in Christ that it will be fully revealed only when he (and we!) come again.

Second, Paul again says believers will return when Christ does: "When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Col 3:4). Both Jesus and Christians will "appear" at his second coming. Believers are so united to Christ and his saving events that at his return the sin that obscures our identity in Christ will be removed so that we "will shine like the sun in their Father's kingdom" (Matt 13:43).

### *The Aspects of Salvation and Union with Christ*

Gaffin's words are apt: "The central soteriological reality is union with the exalted Christ by Spirit-created faith. That is the nub, the essence, of the way or order of salvation for Paul."<sup>16</sup> For this reason each individual aspect of the application of salvation is "in Christ." Regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification, preservation, and glorification are blessings we receive not apart from Christ but in union with him. Regeneration is "in Christ," for "God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, made

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<sup>16</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2006), 43.

us alive *with Christ* even though we were dead in trespasses. You are saved by grace!" (Eph 2:4–5).

Likewise, we are justified in union with Christ, for God "made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that *in him* we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). Paul values gaining Christ above all, and this means to "be found in him," that is, in union with him, and that entails "not having a righteousness of my own from the law, but one that is through faith in Christ—the righteousness from God based on faith" (Phil 3:9).

It is the same for adoption, as Paul teaches: "Through faith you are all sons of God in Christ Jesus. For those of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ" (Gal 3:26–27). "Being clothed with Christ" speaks of union with Christ—as clothing covers the body so Christ "covers" believers. Union is the embracive concept of which adoption is a part—"through faith you are all sons of God *in Christ*."

The Spirit's work of sanctification is not separate from Christ but in union with him: "We are his workmanship, created *in Christ Jesus* for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do" (Eph 2:10). Indeed, our union with Christ in his death and resurrection is the basis for successful Christian lives (Rom 6:1–14).

God's preservation of his saints is done in union with his Son: "There is now no condemnation for those *in Christ Jesus*" (Rom 8:1). On the last day God will save and not condemn all human beings "in Christ Jesus," in union with him. In fact, because believers are "more than conquerors through" Christ, "who loved us" (v. 37), Paul is confident that nothing at all "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 39).

Our glorification is also in union with Christ. As we saw when discussing our participation in Jesus's story, we will have a "second coming": "When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Col 3:4). Our full identity will be disclosed only when Jesus comes back, and this is because we will appear "with him," in union with him, "in glory." Our final salvation will thus involve great glory, for by God's grace we will obtain "the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess 2:14), even "an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory" (2 Cor 4:17).

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