

## In Christ: “Unsolved Mysteries”

Text: Romans 16:25-26; Romans 5:12-21

9.24.17



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**Reflection questions...** [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

*Reflect on this statement by theologian, John Calvin...*

*“... 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... 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. 3:27)... all that He possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with Him. It is true that we obtain this by faith.”*

*“Read the following verses and finish this sentence: ‘In Christ, we are \_\_\_\_\_.’*

[John 1:12; Ephesians 1:5; John 15:5; Romans 5:1; Romans 8:1; Colossians 2:14-16; 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14; 1 Corinthians 2:16; Romans 8:35-39]

*“When we use phrases like, ‘in trouble, or, ‘in debt, what are we trying to convey about our relationship to the condition and how it is impacting us? How does being ‘identified by’ trouble or debt, alter the way we respond to our world? The way we see ourselves?”*

*“Why do you think that the usage of image and metaphor and parable are so necessary in attempting to talk about such a reality as being ‘in union with God’?”*

*“How do the images help you better understand our union with Jesus? (e.g. like branch in a vine, like an intimate marriage relationship, like a house for God built out of ‘living stones’, like a physical body with many parts which are all functioning under one ‘head’?)*

*“Paul begins his greeting to the people in Colossae (Colossians) by describing them as both being, “in Colossae”, and “in Christ”. Paul is locating us, both geographically and personally. Why are both geography (where we live, work, recreate) and relationship (our identification with God and others) vital to understanding the gospel?”*

*“How might knowing that the Father sees you--- and everything you do--- the way that he lovingly envisions Jesus, be valuable to the way you understand God’s posture toward you? To the way you view yourself and others?”*

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## Teaching Notes...

**When the reality of God's love for you finally gets your attention, arouses your imagination and captures your heart, you will have no further reason to doubt the extent of his commitment. You will no longer hesitate to abandon your way of life and trust in his. You'd be willing to follow him anywhere.**

Jesus comes **announcing** and **inaugurating** the Kingdom: *God's desires, God's way, producing God's anticipated outcomes---* "restoration".

His intent was to offer a vision of God and his way of life that was so robust and so persuasive that we would become convinced that there are no limits to his good intentions toward us and, in response, we would willingly re-order our lives so as to accommodate the new life being offered and experience the "shalom" (functionality; relatability) for which we were created.

When the biblical authors say things like, "*Set your mind on things above...*" (Colossians 3), they are not encouraging us to adopt our own '*mental happy place*', meant to project us far from all that we are currently seeing and experiencing, which we consider painful. A healthy 'vision' never leads us to 'escape' our present reality, but to more fully 'engage' it.

Instead, it is a way of 'imaging' what is not presently available to our sight ("*What does your mom look like? What do you want for lunch today?*"); what is real, but not visible.

It says that becoming a follower of Jesus is not primarily about gathering and giving our assent to a list of God-facts which we trust "by faith" (which, too often, becomes code for: not really believable, but we hope it's true!). It is, in essence, the conviction (belief statements that actually effect our lifestyle) that God has, in the person of Jesus, joined his life to yours! That you have been invited and, somehow, incorporated into the divine union of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit ("*perichoresis*": the divine dance).

Basic to all Christian tradition is the idea that the Bible is not so much a collection of disconnected stories, each with its own tidy set of principles for how to conduct ourselves, but it is a "*single story*" (meta-narrative) which encompasses all of other stories. Each story honestly represents both the beauty and the ruin of life. It says that none of creation is experiencing its former glory. It's not a good reflection of what it once was or was meant to be.

Paul is saying that there is something wrong with the world that cannot be attributed to partisanship, or lack of educational incentives, or "*gluten*". We are "not" simply good people with a few annoying habits. We are basically disoriented people, who has lost the sense of "*who they are*" and "*why they are*". A little bit of disciplinary action and, perhaps, a few new rules (Romans 5:13-14), could not remedy that condition.

From the very beginning, when we hear God say to Adam, "... *don't eat of the tree...*" (Genesis 2), we all know what he's going to do! Why? Because it's what we would do.

This propensity, this tendency toward self-reliance and serving as our own 'point-of-reference' which lies in all of us, is what theologians call "**human depravity**". What I don't believe that means is that our image-bearing status has been forfeited, but that it is simply blemished. It doesn't mean that we are all belligerent and mean-spirited, but that we are too easily deceived... too determined to find our significance and purpose in something/someone other than God.

**Whatever we want to say about the "gospel", it has to be tethered to "this" Story and Paul sees "this" Story as fundamentally God's passionate response to the devastation of all that he loves.**

It would be fair to say that the entire narrative is really about the desire and intent of God to restore, in/through one man (in a garden; where the will was surrendered), what was forfeited in another, in a garden (where the will was established). Re-connecting; re-uniting; reconciling.

Psalm 68:20 "*Our God is a God who saves;...*"

"Salvation" is the big, audacious word that encompasses all that such re-connectedness involves and the phrase Paul uses repeatedly to describe such a reality is, "*in Christ*" (over 165 times, in Paul's writings).

*"If union with Jesus is what is most central to our faith, then why is not central to most of what we do and teach? Why is it that when asked to summarize what we believe to be most true about salvation, that 'union with Christ', is rarely offered?"*

As one who "teaches God", believe me, it takes a great deal of self-restraint and courage to stand before a gathering of people who are being formed in a culture of TED talks, and sound-bites, and (140)-character expressions, and speak about 'mystical union'.

We want the pitch. We want the presentation, but the Story provides us with images and metaphors and symbols, before which we must sit and mumble (meditate).

So, we find ourselves in the company of both Jesus and Paul, hearing them say things like, "*Well, it's like branches being connected to a vine...*" (John 15). "*It's like the inexplicable oneness that a married couple experiences as a result of covenant community*" (Ephesians 5). It's an intimacy (mutual revealing) that is so robust and so pervasive that we no longer understand ourselves, by ourselves. It's a relationship in which our uniqueness is not forfeited, but actually enhanced by our union with the other. "*It's like stones being placed to form a temple where God is present and recognized...*" (1 Peter 2)

Jewish thought allowed for the idea of "**corporate identity**": where one person's actions could affect many (e.g. David and Goliath).

Paul is unhesitating in his willingness to admit to the limitations of logic and language. So, when he consulted his *Thesaurus*, and what was available to him proved insufficient, he just started '*making stuff up*'. He invented his own words.

Romans 5: when he was attempting to talk about how grace was always "one-upping" sin. "*...as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful kindness became more abundant*" (20). "**superabounded**".

By the same token, the phrases, “*in Christ*”, “*with Christ*”, are both a single word that didn’t exist, apart from Paul’s usage of them.

### **Romans 5:12-21**

Paul is offering (2) contrasting realities; (2) ways of being human, both with specific motivations and each with distinct outcomes/consequences.

#### **“In Adam”**

**Suspicion**→ **disobedience**→ **condemnation**→ **death**

#### **“In Christ”**

**Trust**→ **surrender**→ **forgiveness**→ **life**

▶ Adam comes as the ‘icon’ (image) of God and lives disobediently; Jesus’ comes as the ‘icon’ of God (Hebrews 1) and demonstrates what it’s like to be fully human.

▶ Adam’s single act brought death to all of creation; Jesus’ single act reversed the devastating effects and made new creation possible.

▶ Adam’s single act disconnected him from God and everyone else; Jesus’ single act made possible right relationship with God, each other and creation.

The point that all of the metaphors and images: if we are identified with **Adam**, we are still disconnected, still committed to life independent of God--- still experiencing the relational ruin brought on by sin.

If we are identified with **Christ** (“*in Christ*”), then everything that’s true of him is true of us (e.g. “*The Father loves me...*”, “*The Father and I are one...*”)

### **Union with Christ is always dependent upon Presence.**

It was to be the glory of God--- the Presence of God--- that distinguished us; that identified us. In Numbers (ch.2), God actually arranges the people’s living accommodations around the tabernacle; around the Presence. “... *and this is the way that they are to set out...*” (34).

### **This process of transformation (“Welcome back to who we were always meant to be”) is about getting what is actually true of us, “in Christ”, to become normative in our experience.**

In one sense, there’s something “definitive” and “conditional” to it: ‘*dead to alive*’ (Ephesians); ‘*you were darkness... now light*’; ‘*separated... brought close*’. In another sense, it is incremental: the process seems tedious and frustrating, and requires massive doses of grace... but it will also demand something of us: a committed determination and surrender.

It is to **actuate**, through the presence of the Spirit, and through the commitment to confession and repentance, and to our commitment to community, and encouragement and the adoption of practices which allow us to accommodate our new life, what is already true of us, “in Christ”. It means that you might actually need to behave your way into a new way of thinking. You may just have to trust it before you can explain it.

**The “faith of Jesus” (faithfulness) is not dependent upon “your faith”. But, when what is “real” becomes “our reality”, our experience validates our faith.**

Although God desires that we have the fullest experience of a dynamic, albeit somewhat inexplicable relationship with him, our experience is not primary. You can actually be functioning with the context of a certain reality and yet be failing to realize the fullest implications of that knowledge.

**“In Christ”: it’s a drastic “re-classification” of humanity.**

The word “in”, is a preposition, which signals a relationship between (2) things/people. It is a relational term which declares, *“You belong with me! You are mine!”*

We were formerly identified by all that we **were not**; now we are identified by all that we **are** because of or *“in Christ”*. You’re not just the same old person with a few new “God-hobbies”, but you are one with new impulses, new affections, producing a new life. You have a new “paradigm”. A *“new heart”* (Ezekiel 36; Jeremiah 32).

*“What are we supposed to do with this?”*

I’m assuming that, now, we have to re-think everything. Now that this has been revealed, it becomes necessary that we adopt a new paradigm (a new center) around which everything will now be judged; discerned. It will be the focus of the remainder of our journey “In Christ”.