

“In Him”

Text:

Colossians 2:11-15

“In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.”

Introduction:

The Apostle Peter wrote that some of what Paul wrote in his epistles was “hard to be understood” (II Peter 3:16). Today’s text would probably qualify in that category. It is one of those passages that you read and say to yourself: “That sounds really important, but I’m not quite sure what he is saying.” If that is the case you are right that he is saying something important, and we will try to make clear what that is before we finish.

The first thing to be observed is that it is a continuation of the paragraph that we were on last time. Therefore, it is a part of his central warning to not be led away into a way of thinking that is not according to Christ, because “all the fullness of deity is in him”, and “we have been completed in him.” The text begins “in him (Christ) also”, indicating that it is an elucidation of the previous statement. All of today’s text then is an explanation of how God has completed us, given us all that we need in Jesus Christ.

The thing that is emphasized in this passage is our identification with Jesus Christ. The expression “in him” appears at the beginning and end of the text, and the expression “with him” occurs three times between the two uses of “in him”. This is something that Paul emphasizes throughout all of his letters. We have received all kinds of blessings from God because of our identification with Jesus Christ. These blessings have nothing to do with us or anything that we have done or achieved; they have everything to do with the fact that we are “in Christ”. This is a somewhat difficult concept to grasp, but it is central to a right understand of the Christian life. A helpful, but probably imperfect, illustration would be that of a small

child's identification with his parents. He receives all kinds of benefits just from the fact that he is their child. He does nothing to earn them, he simply enjoys them. Sometimes he may express appreciation, and sometimes he may be unappreciative, but he still enjoys the benefits of being in his family. His parents do all the work, make all the effort to provide the necessities and comforts of life, and they do it willingly, and even joyfully because he is their child, but the child is really incapable of contributing anything at all. So it is with us. All of the blessings of salvation, all of the things that fill us in Christ are beyond us. We are incapable of having them on our own. God has bestowed them on us freely, but it is Christ who has achieved the work that makes them possible, and it is of this work that our text is speaking. The very structure of the text emphasizes this. All of the verbs speak, not of actions we have performed, but of actions God has performed on our behalf in Christ. We are portrayed as participating in those actions, even though all of the effort was provided by Christ. We died with Christ; we were buried with Christ; we experience new life with Christ. We share in Christ's victory over the powers of evil.

A couple of other observations are in order before we get to the details of the text. First Paul's emphasis in this text that we died with Christ, and that we were raised to newness of life with him are the basis the almost everything that he is going to say in the rest of the letter. In fact, we will see that in all of his writings this is always the basis of his ethical instruction. Notice what he says in verse 20: "Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ." Then notice what he says in 3:1: "If ye then be risen with Christ". Both of these "ifs" are strong "ifs" which could be translated by "since". The basis of the Christian life is that we have died with Christ to the old life which is characterized by sin, and we have been raised to new life with Christ which is characterized by righteousness. The rest of the letter is primarily ethical instruction that is going to tell us to put off the old life because we are dead to that life, and to put on the new life because we have been raised with Christ.

The final observation about this text is that it is build around four images. It is in understanding these images that we will understand what the passages is saying. They would have been immediately clear to Paul and probably to the Colossian readers, but they may be less clear for us. The four are:

- We have been circumcised with the circumcision of Christ
- We have been buried with Christ in baptism and raised to newness of life
- Christ cancelled our debt by nailing it to his cross
- Christ has defeated the powers of evil and led them in triumphal procession

I. A Circumcision

The first image that Paul uses may strike us as strange, but given the importance of circumcision in Judaism, and the debate about it in early Christianity, it is not surprising that Paul would speak of it. The first thing we should observe is that if Paul mentions it, it is likely that the false teachers were in some way giving it some importance in their teaching. Most likely, this was not the same as it was in the Galatian churches where the teaching was that circumcision was necessary to salvation, but for some reason the Colossian Gentile believers were being told that there was some advantage to them being circumcised in the flesh after the Jewish practice.

Our next hint as to what Paul is talking about is when he tells us that real circumcision is “not made by hand”. In Greek this is a single word, and every time the word is used in the New Testament it emphasized something that God has done or is going to do in the future as opposed to something done by man. In Mark 14:58 when accusations were being brought against Jesus before the Sanhedrin one of the witnesses says: “We heard him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hand, and within three days I will build another made without hands.” Another example is in II Corinthians 5:1 where Paul is assuring believers by telling them that physical death is not the end of life. He says: “For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens”. By saying that our circumcision is “not made by hands”, Paul is indicating first of all that Jewish circumcision is a human work, and hence of no spiritual benefit to us, and secondly, that true circumcision is a work of God performed not on the flesh, but on the heart.

The difficult thing about this verse is to determine what Paul means by “putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ.” This is the translation of the ESV, and it follows the Greek very literally without paraphrasing. Now this is often understood to mean that the putting off the body of the flesh is a reference to the sinful nature. The problem with that is that Paul never uses “flesh” in Colossians as referring to the sinful nature, and the only other time he uses the expression “body of flesh” anywhere is in 1:22 where he says that God has reconciled us to himself “in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreprouvable in his sight”. In this case the reference is clearly to the physical body of Christ.

This indicates that when the NIV paraphrases the passage “In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ”, it is missing the point of the passage. The real point is not the circumcision performed by Christ, but the circumcision performed on Christ. In that

circumcision it was not just a bit of flesh that was symbolically cut away, but his entire physical body that was tortured and mutilated on the cross. The circumcision of Christ in which we share and participate is his death. "It is appointed unto man once to die, and after that the judgment, so Christ was appointed to bear the sins of many" (Hebrews 9:27). His death was our death. We need no further circumcision.

Taking the circumcision of Christ to be a reference to his physical death lines up with the rest of the passage as Paul next speaks of burial and resurrection. These three things as we have already seen are the bedrock facts of the Gospel: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, he was buried, and he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (I Corinthians 15:3-4).

I. A Baptism

According to verse 12 we were "buried with him in baptism", that "wherein we are risen from with him through the faith in the operation of God who has raised him from the dead." Some people make a connection between circumcision and baptism based on this passage. The link is rather obvious. As circumcision was the rite of initiation for the Jews, so baptism has become the rite of initiation for Christians. In this case the text is read as if the "circumcision of Christ" is equal to baptism. As we have seen though, the circumcision of Christ is a reference to Christ's death and should be kept separate from the image of baptism. In Mark 10 James and John had asked Jesus if they could sit on his right hand and on his left hand. In reply Jesus says in verse 38: "But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They said to Him, "We are able." Obviously Jesus is not referring to his baptism in water. He is rather referring to his death, burial and resurrection. When Paul says here that we have been buried and raised with Christ in baptism he is then referring to more than just the act of baptism. He means that when Christ was buried, we participated in his burial, we were buried with him, and that when God raised him up we were raised with him. Baptism is a representation of this, but the reality is in the real death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, the Gospel.

We should also point out that according to this verse what makes this operative for us is faith. We are risen with him "through faith". All of this is a work of God, but it is through faith in Christ, that we experience new life in Christ.

II. A Canceled Debt

In verse 13 Paul speaks of the Colossians' past. He says that they were dead in their sins and the uncircumcision of their flesh. Not only were they alienated from God because of their sins, they were ignorant of the true God and of his covenant with Israel, but all that is now in the past. They were not a part of Israel, but they have been incorporated into Christ, and in him they have been given new life. As a result of this incorporation into Christ, this identification with him, Paul says that all their trespasses have been forgiven. He then proceeds to give us a third image that dramatizes the forgiveness of our debt.

In this verse our sin debt is portrayed as a document written in our own handwriting that proves that we are indeed in debt to God. The verse further points out that God has made an end of this debt by cancelling it and by nailing it to the cross. Adolf Deissman, a well known 19th century expert in New Testament Greek has demonstrated from the papyri that debts were cancelled by making an X through the IOU. He suggests that this is what Paul means here when he speaks of Christ nailing it to the cross. However, if this were the case Paul would probably have used another verb instead of "nailed". He would have said that he "crossed" it out. In any case what is obvious in this text is that God has not only cancelled our debt, he has gotten rid of the document on which it was written. He has wiped it out. In the Greek version of Isa. 43:25 the same verb is used when God says: "I am the one who wipes out you iniquities and I will not remember them." This is the answer to David's prayer in Psalm 51:1: "According to the multitude of thy tender mercies, blot out my transgressions."

IV. A Triumphal Procession

The final image of the text is that of a triumphal procession. We have already noticed by previous references that the Colossians were greatly concerned by spiritual powers or beings. We have already noticed that Paul has emphasized that all beings were created by Christ and are thus subject to him. He now clearly tells them that any power that such beings might have held over them has been once and for all broken by Christ's victory on the cross. He then adds that they have been led in a triumphal procession and that their defeat has been made known.

Ancient kings would lead their defeated enemies in procession through the streets to demonstrate that they no longer held power and that they had been humiliated in defeat. This is what Christ has done with the wicked spiritual beings of the universe. Not only has he defeated them by the cross, he has demonstrated to the universe that they have no power, that they are no longer to be feared. They are the powers of darkness, but once the light of Christ has shown upon them, they are demonstrated to be without power.

In our culture and experience we might not think of these powers in the same way that the Colossians did, but they continue to exist. We experience them in things like political tyranny, corporate greed, and the general hubris of a human-centered world. But in the light of Christ, his cross, and his way, all of these things are shown up as weak and ugly things that will come to naught. Once we have seen the light that is in Christ, they hold no more power or attraction over us.

Conclusion:

So with these four images, Paul explains to us how we are complete in Christ, how that through our identification with him, we have all that we need. We have been forgiven of the debt of our sins through his death we have died to the old live and been resurrected to new life through identification with him in his burial and resurrection. We have nothing to fear from any other power in the universe, because all powers have been subjected to him, and all power has been given to him. We have nothing to fear, we have all that we need in him.