

In Christ Alone, Pt. 1
Found in Him
Acts 26: 9-18

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The most famous writing of the Apostle Paul is his letter to the Roman Christians. More than in other letter, Paul lays out his magnificent description of all Jesus is and does for us. No higher, grander statements of theological truth have ever been uttered. But in the final chapter of his letter, Paul gets very simple and personal. He sends greetings to specific Christians he knows in Rome. And one of these notes is very intriguing. “Greet Andronicus and Junia...they were in Christ before me.” *They were... in Christ... before me.* In saying this, Paul admits that once he was not something that he is now. At one time he was not “in Christ.” In fact, he hated the name of Jesus. Paul rooted out those who worshipped Jesus as Lord. He had them arrested. Once he even participated in the stoning to death of a Christian named Stephen. But now, he considers the truest way to describe his deepest identity is as “a man in Christ” (2 Cor. 12:2). Something happened that relocated his life. He was outside of Christ. Now he is inside Christ. He has joined Andronicus and Junia who already identified themselves as living “in Christ.”

They locate their lives as first, as primarily being in Jesus. They *live* in Christ. But what does that mean? It’s such a deceptively simple question to ask someone, “Where you do you live?” You could, of course, just answer with the address of where you sleep. Or the state or country in which you reside. Or you could take it further:

- I live in traffic, driving people from dawn to dark.
- I live in hope she’ll one day she’ll come home.
- I live in pain; nothing they can give me touches this wound.
- I live in the fast lane, always pushing it, never resting.
- I live in the shadow of my brother.
- I live in complete disarray, forever losing my keys and phone.
- I live in expectation that all this has got to change sometime.
- I live in fear of what will happen when she gets home.
- I live tangled in the web of his addiction.
- I live in the sunny warmth of her love.

We can describe where we live in terms of the condition, pace, and longings that permeate our days. The atmosphere created by the people with whom we live can seem more like our home than any physical dwelling. The culture of our community becomes so much a part of us we're not even aware of it. Its values and priorities seep into us. More, we each live inside the habits of our technology, media, and daily routines until we don't imagine that anything could be different.

Scripture, however, urges us to awaken to our truer home. We have a deeper center. We live out a mystery that can never be fully explained but can always be deliciously experienced. Early in John's gospel we hear this description of Jesus, the Word of God, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1: 4). In Christ is life. Life that lights up all our days. To be in Christ means passing from darkness to light, from estrangement to love, from death to life.

For Paul, this was a dramatic experience. He was on his way from Jerusalem to the city of Damascus in Syria. He had letters from the Jewish authorities giving him permission to arrest people. He was hunting Jews who had given their allegiance to the disgraced rabbi Jesus of Nazareth. They were to be taken from their homes and brought back for trial and imprisonment for blasphemy. Paul sincerely believed that he was doing God's will in ravaging the new believers in Jesus.

But along the road to Damascus, about noon one day, everything changed. A light brighter than the noonday sun shone all around Paul. Now a noonday sun in summer is pretty bright. Sometimes in Baton Rouge, I can hardly open my eyes when I first go outdoors. How bright was this searing light to make the sun pale by comparison. Paul fell to the ground under the power of this light.



Around 1600, Caravaggio painted his famous depiction of this scene. He imagined Paul knocked off a horse. Everything around him is dark, even though it's midday, because the light shining on him is so bright. Paul is flat on his back, helpless.



The close-up of the of the painting shows Paul looking like a dog in the posture of submission. He sees nothing. But Paul could hear. A voice spoke to him, using his given name, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” This was a complete subversion of expectation. Paul believed he was serving the LORD by hunting those who perverted people from true faith. The

voice identified himself, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” In ravaging my people, you are ravaging me. Because those who belong to me are part of me. They are *in* me. So in hunting them, you hunt me. Why are you doing this?



This painting by Domenico Morelli from 1876 gives us a sense of Paul’s total helplessness. He’s groping along the desert ground, trying to get away from the searing light. But also discovering that the one hunting him is the LORD himself. His hand is open to receive whatever God would give him. “Rise and enter the city, and you will be told exactly what you are to do.” Saul rose from the ground, totally blind. His companions led him all the way to Damascus. So traumatized was Paul they he neither ate nor drank for three days, until after he encountered a Christian named Ananias.



In this painting by Pietro da Cortana, from 1631, we see Ananias laying his hands on Paul. Ananias said, “The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Acts 22: 14-16). Nothing would ever be the same. From that moment, Paul new he was forever in Christ. He was joined organically to

Jesus.

Now, how does Paul's experience relate to us? What does it look like for ordinary people to know themselves to be "in Christ"? That's the mystery we will be exploring over these next 42 days. We'll be excavating treasure from more than 80 beautiful passages of Scripture. I love thinking of our whole church reading the same passages day by day. We'll even be memorizing two verses together. And, we'll be praying together prayers that arise from these passages. The printed prayers will be a springboard for our own. Along the way, we're going to be listening to some experienced and trusted teachers of how to live more deeply in Christ. There are some extraordinary writings I'm excited to share with you.



One of those authors is James Stewart of Scotland. Stewart had a robust preaching and teaching ministry in Edinburgh. He's often at the top of the lists of the finest preachers of the 20th century. In fact, I was so moved reading his book *A Man in Christ* that I completely changed direction for this year's Lent study. In beautiful language and depth of thought Stewart explores what Paul meant by being "in Christ" and how that applies to us. Here's a sample of what he said about Paul on the Damascus Road:

A direct consequence of Paul's encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road was his surrender to the divine love which now stood revealed.

That Jesus Christ, whose name he had maligned, whose followers he had harried, whose cause he had striven to bring down to destruction, should nevertheless have come to meet him, and to lay his hands upon him, was a thought at once gloriously uplifting and terribly subduing.

All his feverish quest for peace and righteousness and certainly was now over, for God in Christ had taken the initiative.

With all the passion of his soul Paul responded. He gave himself to God. He worshipped Christ. Grace on the side of God had met faith on the side of man: and from the white-hot crucible of that experience there emerged a new life. The cataclysm of that hour ushered Paul into a totally different sphere of being. He was now as unlike the man who had set out from Jerusalem as noonday is unlike midnight, as life is unlike death. His outlook, his world, his nature, his moral sense, his life purpose—all were changed. He was a man "in Christ." (Stewart, *A Man in Christ*, 76-77)

Christ Jesus revealed himself to Paul in that blinding light and those piercing questions. “Saul, why are you persecuting me? I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” In an instant, Christ changed him. And Paul responded. He surrendered wholly. Nothing would be the same.

There comes a moment in every life where the claim of God comes upon us. And we have to make a decision to accept that claim or not. To surrender our wills or not. This is true even for those who have been Christians all their lives. I’m quite sure Christ Jesus had already laid hold of me by birthing me into a family of believers. He staked his claim when my grandfather baptized me as an infant. But that did not mean there was nothing more for me to do. Christ called me to a conscious, responsible, surrendered commitment to him when I was 14. I did not go easily or quickly. God and I had wrestled for a couple of years. Then, at summer camp, he enabled me to do for myself what I could not do by myself. The hardest thing in the world, surrendering my life to Christ, happened with the ease of a gift. I said Yes to his Lordship. And though I was surely already one of his own, everything changed for me. Experientially, I went from being outside of Christ to being inside of Jesus. The Bible, which I read daily, went from being boring and murky to feeling like a shining Word written just for me. Joy filled me and I would never be the same.

And that kind of experience is not limited to our initial faith. It seems to me normal Christian experience to be called to new levels of faith and surrender. Last month I mentioned how that happened for me at a Promise Keepers’ event. I was already a pastor in my 30’s. It can be a dramatic moment. Or it can be a slow, steady season where the Holy Spirit leads along a path of deeper surrender and life change. So that we realize, maybe two years into it, that we are not the same. In one sense, Damascus Road is every Sunday and every day. Every Sunday, Christ makes himself known through his Word and worship. We are called to surrender freshly. Every day Christ makes himself known as we read the Bible and pray to him. He calls us to die daily to ourselves and live more fully for him. As James Stewart said, “Grace on the side of God meets faith on the side of man.” It is the basis of our first being joined to Jesus and our continuing life in Christ.

There is a distinction between being outside of Christ and being in Christ. It’s the difference between night and day, death and life. That’s what we’ll be exploring together in our readings this week. Let’s listen in on just a bit more of Stewart’s teaching:

Only those who through Christ have entered into a vital relationship with God are really “alive.” Existence outside of Christ is not worthy of the name at all; for as compared with the soul that has seen everything in heaven and earth transfigured by a personal experience of redemption and has begun to live daily in the romance and wonder and thrilling stimulus of Jesus’ fellowship, the man who lives for the world and the flesh and has no knowledge of God is virtually dead. He does not know it, he thinks he is “seeing life”; he cannot guess the glory he is missing, nor realize the utter bankruptcy and wretchedness of everything in which he has put his trust. But the fact remains. “To be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life.” (Stewart, *A Man in Christ*, 104-105)

Jesus calls us into life. The process may be wrenching. For first we have to die to ourselves. To my life, my way. And some of us let go of that control with much more difficulty than others. But once we have, if it’s as if the world goes from black and white to color. We go from being zombies to being truly alive. What we thought was the good stuff in our pursuit of the world looks like trinkets. We have the treasure of Christ which sparkles with eternal light.

This is why Paul would write to the Philippians, “Whatever gain I had, I count as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I count [all things] as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him” (Philippians 3: 8-9). We could ask Paul, “Where do you live?” He would answer us, “If you want to find me, you’ll find me at home, in Christ. Look for Jesus and you’ll find me there.”

That’s what we’re after this Lent, dear ones. Come with me! Deeper into Christ. We’re questing for home. Together.