

In Christ Alone (part 4)

Readings - Ephesians 1:7-10, Psalm 96:1-3

For the three Sunday mornings we have explored the implication of being “in Christ.” We have looked at the astounding truth that the Christian has been chosen before the earth was formed. Why did God choose us? We are no better than those around us. Grace is the only answer, grace means undeserved kindness. We do not deserve the right to be a Christian.

To be “in Christ,” is God’s act of mercy to us all; how that goes against our egos. Why? because we have not and will not earn the right and privilege of being “in Christ”. We have looked at how the Bible declares that God is Sovereign in His creation; we explored the fact that we know that woven into this Sovereignty is our human responsibility, and we acknowledged that such a Truth of God’s Sovereignty and our human responsibility reveals our limitations and God’s vastness since it is well beyond our understanding.

The last time we looked at verse nine in Ephesians chapter one and how the Christian, who is “In Christ,” is lavished with wisdom and understanding on a day by day basis through God’s revelation. God reveals His understanding and wisdom through His Word which is why we must focus on the Bible in our private times of devotion and our public acts of worship. “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path,” as the Psalmist says in 119:105. Consider the image; how we would feel if we are walking along a road without any natural or artificial light. How dark it really is and how grateful we would be to have a little lamp attached to a cane or stick to light the ground before our feet? This may seem odd to us today but when this Psalm was written this was the safest, most common way to travel in the dark; holding the lamp near the ground. This is what is meant by lamp to our feet; all those stones, dips in the path we suddenly become aware of before we stumble and fall over.

Extreme language you may say? “I am not in any darkness”, well listen to the diagnosis of our true condition from Jesus in John 3:19 “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.” Left to ourselves we will gravitate towards darkness. Just look at the festival of Halloween the other day, caricatures of evil that are delighted in. It is not harmless fun. CS Lewis in his book *The Screwtape Letters* summed it up with the correspondence between two evil spirits. One wrote to the other “*The fact that “devils” are predominantly comic figures in the modern imagination will help you. If any faint suspicion of your existence begins to arise in his (the Christian’s) mind, suggest to him a picture of something in red tights, and persuade him that since he cannot believe in that (it is an old textbook method of confusing them) he therefore cannot believe in you.*” You see the Devil is happy with the caricatures that depict him in the world because we will quickly dismiss him as a comic image and remain in our self-imposed darkness that we love. Because, “This is the verdict: Light has

come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil." We are happy; Jesus tells us we love our darkness. This is why we, those "in Christ," the Christian, see the Bible as key; "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path."

500 years ago Martin Luther began such a journey from the darkness of superstition to the light of the Bible in Germany when he began to uncover the Truths of God's Word with his protest against the practices of the Religious Authorities of his time. Consider the sacrifice of William Tyndale a few years later executed for translating the Bible into English so that the boy working the plough would know the Truths of the Bible. It should humble us and makes us reconsider the way in which we take for granted the price paid by our brethren so I, so we, can read today, "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path."

Why did many risk death to bring us this book, why did many die in horrific ways to give us this book? Because this book, God's Word, is unique; it will change the reader. Be aware, when you read the Bible it tells you of your real life it will identify your true self it will identify your real character, such honesty is neither comfortable nor pleasing. Remember what the Bible tells us, we are chosen by God but we don't deserve it, it is grace!! We were reminded by Pastor George, that a Christian's life is a struggle, we all know this but there is One who is greater who's power will stand against the tide of our sinful nature and our sinful environment and the Christian's testimony is like the writer in Philippians 4: 13 **I can do all this through him who gives me strength.**" Does that turn us into super Christians? No, but what is key to having such strength I can illustrate. When Pastor Gareth talked about a Christian feeling they were a failure in their Christian life, this was because they could not always remember their daily readings of the Bible. Gareth explained the fact that this wasn't a failure because by focusing on the Truth daily they were like someone who constantly washing their dirty basket (their minds.) Their minds, like the basket, may not be able to hold the water, it will seep out, but the basket will be the cleaner for being washed in the water. And so the Word of God needs to constantly wash away the dirt and dross of our daily lives. We live every day in a world that is Godless, that seeks at best to ignore God by being inactively hostile or at worst is actively hostile. So it is as important as breathing to all Christians that we take the opportunity to read the Bible, it will cleanse us!! As it promises in Ephesians 5:25b **"...Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word."**

The Bible is the best commentary on itself, in Hebrews 4:12 it describes itself thus **"... the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."** What a warning the Word of God is, it is alive, active, is this safe? No and how sobering is the warning that the Word is sharper than a two-edged sword. What an image. Who can't remember cutting themselves with a knife; what a shock it is when we lose concentration with a sharp blade, how it hurts, how we are startled when we are wounded. To read the Bible can easily wound us because it is always honest with what we are really like. **"...it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."**

We put on our best front to those around us; our public outer shell will be stripped away when we read in Romans 3:20 "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin." So, we cannot rely on being religious or nice or caring to others. God sums up all His laws as two prime motivations "...love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and love your neighbour (everyone else,) as yourself." Love God and everyone 100% all the time? we can't do it which is why the "...through the law we become conscious of our sin"; it cuts through all our self-reliance our pride and dismisses the lie that we can somehow or some way be good enough, "...no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law," But it is the honest truth, the sharp reality.

We live in a world that is destructive; there are constant wars and environmental disasters and ultimately death. This world is fundamentally broken, we may not live in a society facing the horrors of war and famine, floods, and earthquakes but we can suffer and do experience the effects of crime; of relationships breaking down of indifference fear and abuse; we all know this because the truth is we recognise we live in such a world. And if death is supposed to be a natural part of some sort of life cycle why do we all have such a universal sense that it is unnatural, why do we fear it since it should be viewed as natural as birth? Because if we are really honest we know there is more, death is not the end.

Well let me make plain the response of God to our situation, in Romans 8:3 "For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh (our inability to keep God's laws,) God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh." God came in the form of Jesus. He led a life that followed and kept God's laws and then He died on a cross so that His life that followed and kept God's laws is given to us. We are like someone who has got into a debt that is impossible to be paid off and is taken to court, we owe and can never repay God because we haven't kept His laws; Jesus comes and He does pay the debt, all of it. Romans 6:23 "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord," we have earned our debt to God - *but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord* and here we have the amazing truth of the Bible, the gift, mercy, undeserved kindness, Grace is given to us, which is verse seven of today's reading, "**In him** we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace."

So the Bible rightfully has a self-righteous health warning; **it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart**. And it is the key to living our lives as God wants us to; to minimize the potential pitfalls of displeasing God through the journey of our lives. We need to shine the Bible, His light in the darkness of our self-righteous and self-focused existence. We need to know how to harmonize our lives to be in tune with the purposes of God. "...with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ"

So we see why the Bible is key to an individual Christian's day by day interaction with God. Let me try and illustrate the importance of God's Word to all those "in

Christ". It is like us being a musician who has their musical score; the meaning for the musical instrument, the reason for the musician with their gifts and talents are not accidental. Form and pattern cry out Creator, the craftsman makes the instrument the composer creates the music so the musician can interpret the pattern of notes using the form of the musical instrument. And we, the human race, are here for a reason; there is meaning to our existence. Our form was created with the intention to glorify God 1 Corinthians 10:31 **"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God"**. So, our form was created to glorify and enjoy God, and the source is His Word and I have already said the best commentary of the Bible is the Bible itself, because the Bible says about itself in 2 Timothy 3:16 **"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."** Therefore, if we fail to read, seek God, through His Word we are like the musician who sits there with the violin and draw the bow across the strings. We will make a sound without a doubt. But will the resulting noise be the recognisable musical score before us, obviously not, why? Because we failed to look at the musical score; we may sit there trying to make a tune but it won't be the right tune because we fail to follow the musical score.

Ignoring the Bible results in individuals and society as a whole being discordant, neither content or fulfilled; do we not see this in our world around us, the pain the consequence of rebellion against God? Do we doubt? Well look at the Welsh revival in 1904, individuals and then a whole society in harmony with the Bible, a transformation of a society that *"love the Lord their God with their hearts and loved their neighbours as themselves."* Read up on the events; the crime figures plummeted, gambling and drinking to excess lost its attraction. Remember the Bible is the only way to harmonize our lives with what God wants us to do, **"God's grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ."**

And here we live in the times as they reach their fulfilment, Jesus sent out His disciples who passed on the Good News, that is summed up so succinctly by John in his Gospel, **"For God so loved the world (put your name there,) that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."**

These are the times that we see the outworking of the fulfilment of God's plan of liberation for the law breakers, their **"...forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace."** This is a picture of our individual solo means of Grace; our lives need the wisdom and understanding of God to understand His will. Does it come to us without effort? Ask any Christian here and as I have already said, no, it is difficult. Again, we are like the musician who needs to practice, to be able to play their part in the coming performance (there is a symphony coming, yes, there is a greater experience ahead of us all who are "in Christ,) But let us focus on the solo practice which is an illustration of our daily lives, do we seek time to read our Bible, do we struggle and strive? Because if you ask a musician they will tell you that it requires effort, time, commitment, to develop and the Christian can say the same; we struggle, we need to make a willing or sometime an unwilling effort, committing time to develop. Which is why George Mills reminded us that the Christian life is a

struggle? But the Christian has a promised helper. In John 14:26 Jesus tells us we will not be alone because "... the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." So, we will struggle with the Word of God like the musician who needs to practice; actively playing the notes getting them wrong as well as right. But there are times when there is a real sense of God blessing us; when we have struggled with the Bible; breath taking moments of wonder, joy, fear and trembling. These are times when our lives harmonize with the Spirit of God through the Bible and we have a real sense of the wonder, awesomeness, of who God is!

And where are we today? In a building with many who have played their solo pieces throughout the week, reading Bibles, struggling and striving. We are here today like a section of the orchestra. We are here to share in Community Grace. To what end? To seek God's grace "... that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ."

We are here today to continue to be taught, rebuked, corrected and trained in righteousness. But now we are something greater. We are like the musical sections of an orchestra, the local church, practicing the only piece of real music that has any meaning together, the Bible. We want to "be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from heart to the Lord." Ephesians 5:18b-19. But we will struggle with the Word of God; we will offend our family, make mistakes in our fellowship lives, just like the musician playing the wrong notes. But there are moments and I pray for more when there is a real sense of God blessing us, when we have struggled with the Bible together, God has blessed us with breath taking moments of wonder, joy, fear, and trembling. These are times when the church here in Doncaster and when I say 'Church' I do not mean this building because the church is not the construction of any man but the church in God's Word then and here today are those who He, the Creator, has chosen to show mercy and grace to, those who are "in Christ." We experience moments when our community lives harmonize with the Spirit of God through the Bible and we have a real sense of the wonder and awesomeness of who God is!

Who has not experienced the Bible being expounded or explained and known the speaker is talking to them? Remember "...it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. "He made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ."

Grace, God made known His will to that man on that day; it is a mystery why God chooses this man, woman or child. But never lose sight that we live in the times when God brings into unity "in Christ" those He will save there is no doubt. Ephesians 5:25b "...Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word."

And now finally you may say we come to the end of verse ten, we are so privileged to have and continue to have the means of both Solo Grace and Community Grace. Sometimes getting the notes of our lives harmonized with the will of God through His Word. And when that happens it is like the phrase of a melody we experience for the moment joy, wonder, fear and trembling as God reveals Himself through the Word His Bible we learn through our experiences, "...he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ." And it is to God we look "...to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ."

There is a time coming when we will see and experience our Future Grace. We will not be some bystander; we will play in the final, wonderful, symphony. You may not like orchestral music but when you hear a full orchestra playing together it can astound our senses the complexity the harmony can be breath-taking but what is essential is that they all play the same music, "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path." We have practiced our music by ourselves; we practice as a section of the orchestra as a fellowship or a local church. We experience the wonderful promise that we are not alone we have "...the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." To what end? To finally participate in what we have always been preparing to do all our Christian lives to be fully united "In Christ." He (Jesus,) will "...bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ."

This symphony that echoes through the pages of our Bibles has been heard once before. Dr Lloyd Jones said in his commentary of Ephesians that the word unity or unite in verse 10 is a compound word. So the meaning is bigger than to unify the fallen heaven and the world, it is, "To gather together 'again,' not merely to unite (or bring into unity,) but to reunite. Remember how God through the Bible describes His completed creation in Genesis 1:31 "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day" There was a time when there was no sin, no pain and ultimately no death and the Promise in verse 10 of Ephesians is that there will be a reuniting of creation that will be "very good," no sin, no pain, ultimately no death.

Consider the message in Acts 3:21 when Jesus had returned to God, the Father, "Heaven must receive him (Jesus,) until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets." So, we have the Promise that there will be a restoration that everything in Creation will be reunited "in Christ" all things in heaven and on earth under Christ." Which is only fitting, since "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Colossians 1:15-17.

When we read in Revelation 21:1 and 2 Peter 3:10 that the present earth and heaven will "pass away" John Piper makes the point that the phrase doesn't mean to go "out of existence" Peter describes the effects on creation when Jesus returns of

Him "...bring (ing) unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ." He used, drastic imagery such as to "melt" and "destroyed" and "disappear" which underlines the radical process when sin will be totally removed. Matter will no longer be affected by sin, this is the change of "...bring (ing,) unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ." But the Bible never implies the obliteration of creation; creation will be reunited, renewed in such a radical way that the basic building blocks of existence themselves will be purged of sin. Piper goes on to point us to Romans 8: "For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope." Piper says "Something is coming that makes creation, as it were, stand on tiptoe." We continue to read the amazing truths in Romans eight "...that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies." *The creation is not destined for annihilation. It is destined for liberation, from the, "bondage to decay."*

And where are we? Those who are "in Christ" remember this is the performance, the glorious symphony, the return of Jesus and the restoration of Heaven and earth, again. Well we read verse 23 "... but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to Sonship..." this is the here and now the first fruits of the Spirit, our individual and community means of Grace, we need always to seek God's grace, we have the firstfruits of the Spirit - the Holy Spirit who "... will teach you (and me) all things and will remind you of everything I (Jesus,) have said to you."

And what he has said to you and to me is recorded in the Bible. So as we open His Word. We acknowledge we get it wrong we groan do we not, sometimes with the weariness of our lives? That is because we are sinners in a world of sin that is anything but "very good!" and it is times like these that we need to recognize that we are so privileged now with the first fruits of our solo Grace, our community Grace but there is so much more to come with the complete adoption to sonship our Future Grace. At the end of verse 23, we have the promise of "...the redemption of our bodies." We who are "in Christ" will have "the redemption" of our bodies. And we are promised that it will be very good which means there will not be any sin to spoil. Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do (we will finally be able to) do it all for the glory of God.

Future Grace, the Symphony that will be played through eternity. This is the melody, the undeserved kindness of God we read of from the beginning to the end of God's Word. Grace is our eternal piece of music that we play poorly now but oh there is a time coming when the music will be very good when Jesus will bring "...unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ."