

# Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

“... so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything”(Colossians 1:18).

## Coming in First Place – The Book of Colossians

Colossians 2:11-12

*How Do You Identify With Christ?*

**11 and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; 12 having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.**

How do you identify with Christ? How is it that you know, as well as make known the reality that you belong to Christ and that Christ belongs to you; or to borrow from the hymn; “*He calls me His, I call Him mine...*”?

Colossians 2:11-12 helps us answer that question, reminding us that what must first take place is a circumcision, a cutting away, or a stripping away of what Paul calls, “the body of flesh” which speaks of our sinful nature and impulse. How is this sinful nature dealt with; this general desire and inclination of our hearts to move against God rather than to submit to God? It is dealt with by the circumcision of Christ, that is the work of Christ on the cross; His own physical death for our sins whereby He crushed the power and influence of sin by nailing it to the cross and burying it in the grave. The “circumcision of Christ” in verse 11 is a metaphor for the conquering of the power of sin that takes place when a person comes to faith in Christ. It is fulfillment of the promise of the New Covenant as outlined by God Himself in Ezekiel 36:25-27

**25 Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.**

Notice that it is God who gives a new heart and who puts a new spirit within a person; implying that there is something wrong with the old heart and the old spirit. Jeremiah 17:9 tells us of course that the old heart is “**more deceitful than all else and is desperately [fatally] sick...**” It is God who removes the heart of stone, of hardness, of coldness, of callousness from within and replaces it with a heart of flesh (not to confused with a sinful flesh, but rather speaks of a truly functioning, spiritually living heart that longs for the things of God rather than for the things of sin). And notice as well that it is God that puts His Spirit within this person and it is then the work of the Spirit of God that causes a person to “walk” or live by God’s commands and who causes a person to be careful, watchful, and purposeful about doing what God commands. This beloved is a converted heart. This beloved is a heart that is born again. This is a God-regenerated heart. This is the person who has experienced the circumcision made and accomplished without hands; not as a work of man, the stripping off of the body of flesh; the power and influence of sin in a person’s life.

Beloved, the circumcision of Christ, this work of Christ upon the heart is an internal, spiritual and God-accomplished changing of the heart that conquers the power of sin. Think of the circumcision that Paul speaks of here as truly becoming a Christian whereby you experience

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a change of nature; a change of disposition; a change of attitude concerning God and self and sin; and a change of ability; for now, because God has poured out His Spirit within the believer, the believer is caused to walk, keep and delight in the Word of God. Is this how you identify with Christ? Has this been your experience?

This is what we looked at in verse 11 a couple of weeks ago and as we move now to verse 12, we find what could rightly be considered an elaboration; the explanation; a commentary of sorts on what is this circumcision, this change of heart within the believer by which He associates himself both inwardly as well as outwardly with Christ. In other words, we answer the question, “what is this circumcision made without hands?” It is this...it is having been buried with Him [Christ] in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God who raised Him from the dead.”

These are interesting verses that give rise to some questions. Let me say exactly what Paul was communicating to his first readers asking you bear with me as I will explain what this means as it may sound a bit different from what we are used to hearing. In fact, what I am about to say has been used by various groups to serve as proof that a person must be baptized in order to be saved, which of course would run counter to all that Paul has been teaching in this passage about the supremacy, the sufficiency and the completeness of Christ alone for salvation. Yet, here is the essence in my paraphrase of what verse 12 is communicating:

You have been spiritually circumcised by the work of Christ. This circumcision took place when you were buried with Christ and raised with Him. And this burial and resurrection with Christ took place when you were physically, literally, with water, baptized. Paul is not teaching that a person is saved because they are physically baptized, but what he is communicating is what was the general expectation of the first century church, something that is quite different than what we experience and expect today. For the vast majority of believers in the first century church, immediately upon conversion to Christ, a person would demonstrate the reality of this conversion and his or her commitment to Christ by being physically baptized. In other words, the baptismal act of going under the water (picturing the death and burial of Christ) and then the coming up out of the water (picturing the resurrection of Christ or being raised with Christ) was integrally involved with the conversion act itself. This can bother some of our sensibilities because we might struggle with how being baptized is not considered then a work by which we somehow participate in our salvation. And yet we have the same kind of thing take place today when we share the gospel with someone. As I share the gospel, the message of salvation with someone, I might end with a verse like Romans 10:13 saying “**Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved...**” And then I will ask whomever I am speaking with if they would like to call upon the name of the Lord and pray to receive Christ. When I ask them if they would like to pray to receive Christ, I inform the person that it is not the prayer that saves; that there is not some magical combination of words that causes that person to be received by the Lord. Rather, the prayer is simply a reflection and an outward expression of what the Lord has already worked upon the heart. Remember Ezekiel 36:27, “**I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe all My ordinances.**” So then, even the calling upon the name of the Lord is the result of the Spirit of God within the person causing that person to plead for salvation.

And so let us not think it strange that even as we ask a person to pray a prayer of salvation to confirm the working of God within, that the early church simply called people to a much more

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immediate participation with Christ in baptism to profess to family and friends, many of whom were often hostile or antagonistic to faith in Christ, their conversion and commitment to Christ.

With all this doctrinal groundwork laid, we might ask ourselves now, “how does this elaboration on the circumcision of the believer in verse 12 has a practical benefit for us?” Let us answer that question. First, I would have you notice that what Paul speaks of in verses 11-12 underscores the most basic fundamental gospel truths. There are three key “redemptive-historical events” that every believer in Christ must experience and come to know and embrace if they truly be born-again and set free from sin; 1) *that they have died with Christ*; 2) *that they have been buried with Christ*; and 3) *that they have been raised with Christ*. This is an often repeated theme of Paul. We see it in Romans 6:3-4

***3 Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? 4 Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.***

And likewise in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 we read:

***3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures***

And if you will allow me to read you Ezekiel 36:25-27 again, do we not see the exact same thing?

***25 Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. [death and burial] 26 Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you [raised to life]; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh [death] and give you a heart of flesh [burial]. 27 I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances [resurrection to newness of life].***

Do we see this pattern repeated here in Colossians 2? Yes, let’s note this beginning with verse 11 again:

***11 and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ [His work on the cross – i.e. His death]; 12 having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. . .20 If you have died with Christ . . .3:1 Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ...***

So we have this pattern that the believer is to identify with the death, the burial and the resurrection of Christ as also being his own death, burial and resurrection. According to 2:12, it is through faith, our belief, our trust, our dependence upon the working of God that we then identify with Christ by being baptized, picturing that when Christ died for our sins, we died to our sins; that

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as Christ buried that body of flesh in the grave; conquering its influence and dominion; we also buried our sins in His grave so as to no longer live our lives under the controlling influence and dominion of sin; and just as Christ was raised by the Father to newness of life; to a God-centered; God-exalting; God-confirming life; so too are believers raised with Christ to such a new life.

But what does this new life look like? How does this new life in Christ reveal itself? How can we know if we are now “in Christ” rather than “in sin”? Let us answer this very practically taking each of these three redemptive-historical events and asking ourselves if we have and are experiencing these as realities in our lives. For I fear that many make much of their theoretical knowledge of these events. That is to say, just because you can say that Christ died for sin; that Christ buried those sins and that Christ was raised to newness of life does not mean that you have experienced these truths’ life-transforming power.

By example, I can understand in theory what it would be like to jump out of an airplane and plummeting toward the earth at extraordinary heart-pumping speeds and pulling a parachute chord to imagine the stomach wrenching upward force that slows my descent to the earth as I admire the scenic topography. But all of that is for naught until I actually experience the event for myself. Too many today attend church with nothing more than a sound theological theory of the Christian experience but have yet to experience the reality of it. And even for many of us who have experienced it, we can forget what it is like as we get ourselves wrapped up in the affairs and concerns of this world. So let me try to express what are some of the experiences that ought to be the believers when Christ’s death has become his own death; when Christ’s burial becomes his own burial; and when Christ’s being raised to life becomes his own resurrection to life.

## 1. Died with Christ

We begin with examining what it means to have died with Christ. Let us never forget that according to 1 Corinthians 15:3, that Christ died for our what? **“Christ died for our sins...”** Beloved, may I remind you that if you have died with Christ, then you have died to sin. Spurgeon once said, *“Dwell much with Jesus and it is impossible for you to be at peace with sin (CHS).”* Let me ask you, are you at peace with sin today? Are there sins that you are comfortable with, that you regard as nothing more than slight inconveniences rather than gross assaults on the glory of God?

*To have died with Christ is to be hostile toward one’s own sin.* Consider for a moment with me that our Lord Jesus Christ so hated wickedness and sin that He bled to wound it to its core; that He died that it might die; that He was buried that it might be buried in His tomb; and that He rose that He might forever trample it beneath His feet. Let us never forget that as warm as Jesus was toward sinners, yet so hot was His hatred of sin. And as perfect as our Savior is in righteousness, so complete shall be the destruction of all sin. In other words, “How shall we who died to sin [in Christ] live in it?” (Romans 6:2). What sins are you courting today? What sins are you entertaining? What sins preoccupy your heart? To identify with Christ is to say no to sin; to die to it. And yet we can struggle and will struggle when we toy with even the smallest of sins.

Spurgeon noted, *“It is sadly true, that even a Christian may grow by degrees so callous, that the sin which once startled him does not alarm him in the least. By degrees men get familiar with sin.”* (CHS). We must look upon all sin as that which crucified our professedly beloved Savior and regard it as that which must be put to death. Isn’t this exactly the call of Romans 6:11-12?

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**11 Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. 12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts...**

Have you learned to hate sin; to know that it is sin that you laid upon Jesus and that every sin you have committed and will commit has been given to Him, imputed to Him, charged to His account and yet it has all been punished in Him?

## 2. Buried with Christ

For not only have we who are in Christ, who have been circumcised by Christ, are to be dead to sin having died with Christ, but, secondly, we were also buried with Him. There is a close connection between the death of Christ and the burial of Christ. But to make a distinction, the death of Christ on the cross is where the punishment for our sin was borne. The price of our salvation was paid for on the cross. The wages of sin is death according to Romans 6:23 and Jesus paid our wages by dying on the cross. The **“being buried with Him”** then speaks most specifically of our having sin put away. We are to be done with sin. This is the circumcision, the stripping away of the body of flesh, that sin nature and reckoning it as dead as we have now received the Spirit of God. In Galatians 5 we read that there are only two ways by which a person may walk or live; either by the deeds of the flesh, the pursuit of the sinful nature, which Galatians 5:19-21 identifies as a person whose heart or life is more characterized by **“immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry [which includes greed according to Colossians 3:5], sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, 21 envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these”** to which Paul continues to exhort, **“of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”** (see John 3:1-3).

Of course the second way in which we might live is by the Spirit, that Spirit that is received as a result of our circumcision by Christ. To walk in the Spirit is to have a life that is more characterized by fruit of the Spirit, you know it. It is expressed in Galatians 5:22-23; **“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”** There is absolutely no law, no limit to how much of these can be experienced and lived out for the believer. And then we read in verse 24, **“Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”** Does this describe you? Is this how you identify with Christ?

To have been buried with Christ means that as far as it is possible, you would long to have neither eyes, nor ears, nor heart for sin. For to be dead to anything means that whatever that anything is has no effect and no influence upon you. Such attitudes and actions are buried now in the grave. What is the relationship of your heart to sin? What needs to be buried as it were with Christ in the grave. Positionally, all your sin is buried in the grave if you have come to Christ; but what is it that you need to experience as buried? Interestingly enough, confession of sin becomes an experiential burial of the sin to which we are to be dead to.

## 3. Raised with Christ

But there is a final redemptive-historical event mentioned in verse 12, the **“being raised up with Him...”**. In Romans 6:4 we read a bit of an elaboration on this, **“so that as Christ was**

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**raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”**

What does all this mean, being raised up with Him so that we might walk in newness of life? We come full circle in a way. Christ came into this world to save sinner (1 Timothy 1:15); accordingly, He came the first time with reference to sin, to bear the sins of many (Hebrews 9:28); but when He was raised, He was raised in confirmation of His righteousness and in His service to God. So to then our lives, if we have been raised to Christ, are to be a confirmation of the righteousness of Christ in us and of service to God about us. Again, we read of the most practical implication of this in Romans 6:12-13 -

**12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, 13 and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.**

Remember that Paul is writing to saints, to believers in this letter and he exhorts them to identify any sins that may be currently reigning in their lives and to change their course, to repent and present or offer themselves to God as being “alive from the dead” or raised to “newness of life”. To walk with Christ is to be new; a new creature possessing a new spirit, living a new life that pursues a course that is contrary to this world. This is how we identify with Christ, our lives are new; we are slaves now to righteousness rather than slaves to sin and if we are living this way, the world will note it as 2 Timothy 3:12 reminds us, **“Indeed all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted** [will be pressed; will encounter antagonism or hostility.”

I don't want to get too elaborate on what it means to be raised with Christ just yet as this becomes a subject that is taken up in great detail in Colossians 3:1-7. Let just work on this for now, that being raised with Christ to newness of life means that our lives, how we conduct ourselves, what we talk about, what is deemed as most important to us is to be qualitatively different from the world. By quality, our new life is to reflect Christ's life; that is, what is important to Christ. And let me ask you this, after the glory of God the Father, what is it that is most important to Jesus? What is most important to Jesus is the Church for which He died and for whom He is doing everything necessary to present her to God as **“having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.”** To be raised with Christ is to make His interests your interests. Do you have an interest in Christ? If you do, then it is to be reflected in your interest in the Church, in the people of God. How do you reflect such an interest in the people of God.

In addition to this interest in the people of God, there ought also be an interest in seeing the church built up, added to, as one of the purposes of the church is evangelism, of making disciples of Jesus Christ. Are you interested in the people Jesus has called you to be witnesses of His grace and mercy? Do you see that everyone you come into contact with is not just a random encounter or some kind of inconvenience but rather as a result of the providence, the working of God to provide you the opportunity to express your newness of life?

As we close, notice in verse 12 that all of this experience of death, burial and resurrection is to be received how? It is received **“through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”** Based upon the Word of God we are to believe, trust, depend and react to the

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promises of God “through faith” – faith being the means or the channel by which we come to experience the reality of these truths. Beloved, the Christian faith is not some tidy little philosophy of life. It is salvation by grace. It is the trust that what Jesus did on the cross, He did for you to not only deliver you from the judgment of God that you deserved, but also to change the way in which you live your life, right now, today as well as on into eternity. The point of all this has been to say, “How can we cling to or want to remain with any form or habit of sin when we have so identified with Jesus who was slain on our behalf, who buried our sins in the grave and who was raised to live unto God?” Beloved, a believer can indeed sin, but a believer cannot live in sin, not without the conviction of the Spirit. By faith then we are to live out the reality of what was accomplished on the cross.

Have you identified with Christ by dying to sin, by burying that sin in the grave, being separated from its power and influence? What sins do you need to regard yourself as being dead to today? Have you identified with Christ as being raised from the dead with Him, that you are living now with His interests and looking forward to the promise of His coming again to take you to be with Him where He is, at the right hand of God the Father? I pray that this be so; and if there be any question, any concern, any confession that comes to your heart, may today be the day of deliverance, a day of salvation; the day in which you experience afresh being dead to sin and alive to God.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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