

# Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

## Remembering Our Union with Christ

Ephesians 1:3-14

After Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu had sought to worship the Lord in a manner other than what the Lord had prescribed by offering “strange fire” and because of this the Lord struck them dead, the Lord then called Aaron to teach the rest his sons and all Israel that when worshipping the Lord there is to be a difference between the ordinary and the extraordinary, between the common and the holy; between the routine and the sacred. In Leviticus 10:10 we read:

***and so as to make a distinction between the holy and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean***

There is to be a purposeful difference, a distinction between ***“the holy”*** – that which we devote, consecrate, and set apart to the Lord and ***“the profane”*** – which, while that word sounds so ominous, really just means anything common, ordinary or routine. Our worship of God is to be anything but just common; anything but just what we might otherwise ordinarily do.

We set apart this day of the week apart in order to make it special, holy, anything but routine as we gather with the saints and purpose in our hearts to worship the Lord through praise, prayer and the proclamation of His Word. Woe to us when we make Sundays ordinary and forget the high calling we have to see this day as special and extraordinary. It breaks my heart when we can become so flippant with this day so as to portray, even unwittingly, that there is nothing important about such a time as this and consider it “optional” rather than “optimal”; as common, rather than holy. Such attitudes can be revealed in our attendance, in our attitude while at a church, in our attentiveness to details concerning church; things like promptness and readiness for worship, to engaging heartily in praise and worship; in making every effort to hear and apply the Word of God.

In our brother John Schamber’s journal that I had the privilege of reading through in preparation for his funeral, I jotted down this statement that he made concerning the church. He wrote,

*“A healthy church life comes from the proper spiritual attitudes of its members.”*

So, let me ask you, how are your spiritual attitudes? The life of this church is dependent upon your striving after proper spiritual attitudes. And the greatest of spiritual attitudes begins with simple obedience to the revealed will of God.

This morning we have the privilege of celebrating the Lord’s Supper; of being obedient to one of our Lord’s commands. It is our custom to do this twice a month and as with anything that is done routinely, there is the risk of our minimalizing or marginalizing the significance of this time. We might think, “Oh, were doing this again?” Or we could even subtly think, “It’s not that big of deal, we do this twice a month, so how important could it be?” Beloved, it’s not an issue about how frequently we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, whether it be once a week, once a month or even once a year. At issue is our obedience. For whatever else we may do as a church; there are two key imperatives that our Lord Jesus Christ intends for every member of a local fellowship to

# Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

regularly participate; that is baptism; the act of publically declaring one's commitment and union with Christ by means of water (and while this is only done once by every true believer; all believers are to participate and celebrate with the one being baptized); and the second key imperative is what we do today; as a body; as a family; we remember Christ by partaking of the Lord's Supper.

I thought it would be good, as we have considered even last week the principle of body life, having noted in Colossians 2:19 that we are all joints and ligaments in the body of Christ and each responsible to supply and hold this body together, to remind ourselves of one of the key functions of body life, the remembering of our Lord's death for our salvation. So would you join me in an attitude of wonder and worship to consider what it means to celebrate the Lord's Supper? Let us probe the principles behind our saying that we eat and drink from the Lord's Table. Let me give you just a few thoughts to ponder as we begin then:

- In the Lord's Supper we proclaim the Lord's death. We proclaim that in the flesh Jesus bore the wrath of God on the cross for us. In the Lord's death we find Jesus as our “propitiation – or satisfying sacrifice for sin” as well as our “reconciliation – our being brought back into right relationship with God.”
- In the Lord's Supper we proclaim that Jesus, through His Word, feeds and nourishes our soul.
- In the Lord's Supper we proclaim our union and fellowship with one another.
- In the Lord's Supper we proclaim that Jesus is coming again.

Let us focus our hearts then on the Lord's Supper, this proclamation of our union with Christ. I pray that we will do more than that which is common here, simply eating bread and drinking grape juice. I pray that we will do that which is holy and by faith, through the working of God's Spirit within, we all remember that we have been joined to Christ Himself, by the spilling of His blood and by His death for we who have believed. Whatever else this celebration might be, let us be assured that by partaking of this Supper, we are proclaiming to one another and to the world that we belong to Christ, that He purchased us and that we live for Him. In short, we are in union with Christ. Let us turn to Ephesians 1 and look at what this means and then the benefits of being in union with Christ.

## I. We must be in union with Christ

*3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love 5 He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. 7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace 8 which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight 9 He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him 10 with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing*

## Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

*up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him 11 also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, 12 to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. 13 In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation — having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, 14 who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.*

What we have in this text is an early Church Creed, a statement of faith that the early church proclaimed. While our English translations turn all these verses into several sentences, it is in the Greek one long complicated one that teaches one of the most important doctrines of our faith. Sadly it is not a doctrine that we consider enough; nor is it often preached. In our text here we have a doctrine without which our salvation is not even possible. What is this doctrine of which I speak? Is this a message on election; or predestination? Is this message about redemption, the atonement, or the depravity of man? To be sure, all of these elements are found in our text, but the doctrine of which I wish to speak to you is that of union with Christ. If you did not pick up on, look back at your text and notice how many times Paul repeated the phrase, “in Him” or “in Christ” or “in the Beloved” – some ten times in just twelve verses. All this is set up in verse 3, ***“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.”*** This idea of union with Christ permeates our text. How important is this doctrine of being “in Christ”? Consider what the great Reformer, John Calvin noted:

*First, we must understand that as long 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 ... As I have said, all that He possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with Him.*

Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) was one of the leading reformed theologians of the nineteenth century made this keen insight as well:

*There is no fellowship with the blessings of Christ except through fellowship with His persons ... Christ is never to be thought of apart from His people, or His people apart from Christ.*

How is that for simple and straight-forward? In other words, if you are not united to Christ, you are not saved. And being united to Christ is to be united to His people. Beloved, union with Christ, being “in Christ” is one of the core truths of the doctrine of salvation. A person is simply not saved until he has been made one with Christ. And, once made one with Christ, we are forever kept in and by Him. So, when we eat and drink the Lord's Supper, we are to remember that we are proclaiming this union with Christ. Let me ask you; are you in union with Christ? Are you married to Him? Do you find in your heart a longing to devote yourself to the very things that Jesus loves? And what does Jesus love? Jesus loves the Father, the Word of God, and His people; the church! Remember the words of our brother John who said, *“A healthy church life comes from the proper spiritual attitudes of its members.”* How is your attitude toward God,

# Coming in First Place ~ the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

toward His Word and toward His people? This is how we can know and measure our union with Christ for as we increase in such things, we demonstrate the reality of being in Christ.

## **II. We must acknowledge the benefits of union with Christ**

Let us consider now the benefits of being in union with Christ. Ephesians 1:3 says, ***"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ."***

Isn't this amazing? Our God and Father has blessed us with every spiritual blessing ***"in Christ."*** Do you want to experience the blessings of God? Then you must be found ***"in Christ."*** So, when we celebrate the Lord's Supper and proclaim His death, we are first proclaiming our union with Christ and then we read that God proclaims to us that because of this union with Jesus, we possess every spiritual blessing in Him.

But just what is a "spiritual blessing"? Beloved, a spiritual blessing is both the result and evidence of the presence of the Spirit of God within you. Can you identify your spiritual blessings? They included such things as regeneration (that is, being born again), faith, hope, love, the gifts of the Spirit, and the fruit of the Spirit. A spiritual blessing is simply any way in which the Spirit of God has impacted your life.

Notice the origin of these ***"spiritual blessings"***. They come from ***"the heavenly places"*** which is not really speaking of a place as much as it speaks of the fact that all such blessings come from the hand of God. The point is that we have the benefits and privileges of heaven, from heaven, right now, here on this earth; here in these bodies, all because we are ***"in Christ"***. So, when we proclaim the Lord's death for our sins so that we might be one with Him, we are also proclaiming how richly blessed we are because we are in Christ. If we are not ***"in Christ"***, we have no spiritual blessings; no regeneration, no faith, no hope, and no love. If we are not ***"in Christ"*** then partaking of the Lord's Table is nothing more than eating a piece of bread and drinking a cup of juice.

Let us consider this more carefully and answer the question, "What is it that God holds before us today as we partake of the bread and of the cup?" In other words, what are the blessings of union in Christ, or of being in Christ? There are at least four in our text that I would have you note:

The first blessing as found in our text is that of election, of God's choosing us. Sometimes this is called predestination and I would have you notice that these are not words made up by theologians; these are Biblical words and concepts. The teaching of election is this; it is God's choosing some to eternal life and this eternal life is only for those who are in union with Christ. Let me show this to you by reading verses 4-6 and 11-12:

*4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love 5 He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.*

*11 also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, 12 to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory.*

## Coming in First Place – the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

Beloved, the words used by the Holy Spirit in this text clearly teach that God does not choose anyone because He foresees their faith, that they will accept and believe Jesus. The text is clear that God does not choose those who are better, superior, smarter, or wiser than all others. Nor does God choose because of anything in a person. The basis upon which a person is chosen is due to their connection, their union with Jesus and for reasons that are describe as nothing more than the kind intention of His will, God chose, elected and predestined those who would receive this union with Christ. This is why Paul praises God because he knows that all human merit is excluded. All the praise goes to our sovereign and infinitely gracious God!

Election to salvation is never apart from Christ and is in fact wholly dependent upon Him alone. This union with Christ, according to our text and many others, was planned, predestined, predetermined by God from eternity and to eternity. The text is clear that we are chosen only **"in Christ"** and that through Him alone God determined to have a relationship with us. And so, when we eat and drink of the bread and the cup, we proclaim our union with Christ in the blessing of God's electing, predestinating and choosing us to the praise of His glory. Anything beyond this is violating these very words of God.

A second blessing that we have because of our union with Christ is that of experiencing God's grace. This grace is most gloriously experienced in our salvation or redemption from sin. Look again at verses 6-7:

*6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. 7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace 8 which He lavished on us.*

Because we are **"in Christ"** we have received all of God's grace. In this context, grace speaks of getting something we do not deserve. Let us never forget that **"the wages of sin is death"** – eternal separation from God. This is what we deserve. This is what we earn. Our just payment for life apart from Christ is hell, everlasting punishment and the full wrath or anger of God. But rather than these, **"in Christ"** we receive what? We receive grace, getting those things we do not earn and do not deserve. In Christ we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Beloved, the punishment of our sin was all predetermined by God. This means that we were **"in Christ"** when He suffered and died. We were **"in Christ"** when He took our deserved punishment and shame on the cross. We were **"in Christ"** when God laid on Him the iniquity of us all. We were not yet saved because the work of the Spirit had not yet applied the work of Christ to our lives, opening our hearts to respond to the truths of the gospel, but we were nonetheless **"in Christ"**, **"in Him"**, chosen before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless rather than common and blameworthy. This is grace and this is salvation. The puritan Thomas Goodwin said it this way:

*"Grace" is more than mercy and love, it superadds to them. it denotes, not simply love, but the love of a sovereign, transcendly superior, one that may do what he will, that may wholly choose whether he will love or no. There may be love between equals, and an inferior may love a superior; but love in a superior, and so superior as he may do what he will, in such a one love is called grace: and therefore grace is attributed to princes; they are said to be gracious to their*

## Coming in First Place ~ the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

*subjects, whereas subjects cannot be gracious to princes. Now God, who is an infinite Sovereign, who might have chosen whether ever He would love us or no, for Him to love us, this is grace.*

So then, when we eat and drink of the bread and the cup, we are proclaiming our union with Christ, having received this blessing of grace, salvation and redemption.

The third blessing we have because of our union with Christ in this text is nothing less than having been given understanding of the mystery of the gospel message. Look again at verses 9-10:

*9 He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him 10 with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth.*

God has made known to us a mystery. Now, in the Bible a mystery is not some kind of puzzle to be solved by man. Rather, a mystery is simply something man cannot know unless or until God reveals it to him. Sometimes we consider ourselves very blessed when someone else entrusts us with some deep secret. Beloved, this is what God had done for us **"in Christ."** For **"in Christ"** alone God has revealed His plan for saving people. In Christ God has shown us His eternal purposes and plans, at least concerning the salvation of people from every tribe, every tongue and every nation. And what is this plan? God's plan is to bring all things together under Christ. God's plan is for every knee in heaven and earth and under the earth to bow before Christ and for every tongue to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11). Some will confess Him as Lord and Savior, while other will, because of their sin; confess Him as Lord and Judge. And right now, we are called to proclaim to all creation that salvation is found in Christ alone. This is the mystery revealed. And God does not want us to sit on this mystery. He has revealed it to us so that we might make it known to others. Some secrets are meant for sharing. That certainly is the case with this one. So our calling in life is to spread the Good News about Christ. Our calling is to call every knee to bow and every tongue to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and to receive Him as Savior. So, when we eat and drink the bread and the cup, we proclaim our union with Christ in the blessing of this gospel message of salvation.

The final blessing I would draw your attention to because of our union with Christ is the gift of the Holy Spirit; the very working and presence of the Spirit of God in the life of the believer. Look at verses 13-14:

*13 In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation — having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, 14 who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.*

Beloved, it is because the believer is **"in Christ"** that he or she possesses, or shall I more rightly say, is owned by the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit is called by Paul in verse 14, **"a pledge of our inheritance"**. The Holy Spirit is given to us as a deposit, a down-payment, the earnest funds that reveal the genuineness, the surety of our salvation in Christ. When we put earnest monies down on a house, we convey that we are real and sincere about our intentions to buy that

## + Coming in First Place ~ the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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

house. This pledge is our promise that more is coming and that we will complete the deal. Beloved, the Holy Spirit that we receive in Christ is God's promise of more to come. The Holy Spirit that we receive in Christ is God's promise that someday all the blessings of salvation, the fullness of salvation; that is deliverance from the penalty, the power and the very presence of sin will be ours and that we will be fit for eternity in the presence of our Holy God. So then, when we eat and drink of the bread and the cup, we proclaim our union with Christ by acknowledging the working and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

With all this then in mind, let us now celebrate the Lord's Table in a manner that is anything but common, anything but ordinary, and anything but routine and let us proclaim all that we have received by the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

---

**Copyright © 2010 Edward K. Godfrey.** *This message is the sole property of the copyright holder and may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this message must contain the above copyright notice. This message may not be copied in part (except for small quotations used with citation of source), edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of the copyright holder. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Edward K. Godfrey, Pastor, Hope Community Bible Church, and 2300 South 13<sup>th</sup> Street, Rogers, AR 72758.*

*Remembering Our Union With Christ  
June 20, 2010*