

IN CHRIST ALONE....

WEEK 1:NEW TEACHING

Easter is the time when our thoughts are concentrated on Jesus' death, burial and resurrection and what they mean for our salvation. In fact, Easter is the time when we remember that our whole Christian experience exists only because of the Christ event. While we all have a good general knowledge and understanding of what happened on that Easter weekend, I thought this year that it might be a good idea to concentrate on the consequences of Jesus' atonement and what status it gives us as Christians today. As I was preparing the notes on those consequences I began to realise the extent to which faith in Christ changes us from the inside out. The bad news, however, is that in order to explore those consequences, I've had to venture into territory I haven't really tackled before in these Bible studies. Don't let the alarm bells deafen you when I say that that territory is doctrine. Once again, David's studies have already prepared the ground because without any collaboration at all between us, he took us back to the Reformers with an emphasis on Scripture alone, faith alone and especially Christ alone. Those are doctrines of the Christian faith and are very important. Think of the one that sounds the most familiar to you - as David put it - Faith alone. If I were to ask you what is the greatest doctrine of Protestant Christianity, I've no doubt your minds immediately would turn to Martin Luther and the doctrine of justification by faith. But if I were to ask you what doctrine the doctrine of justification by faith is based on, would you be able to express it in just three words? The title of these talks is not answer, although it is the clue. The answer is union with Christ. As the hymn David quoted says, "in Christ - This Cornerstone, this solid ground, Firm through the fiercest drought and storm." Another hymn says "On Christ the solid Rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand." This means that no matter what argument is put up against the centrality of the meaning of the cross and the resurrection for the existence of Christianity, the bottom line is, that if we have not entered into union with Christ through what He achieved on that Easter weekend, then we cannot claim to be Christians.

Little did Martin Luther realise that his 'lightbulb moment' of justification by faith would open up a whole new avenue of teaching that would start with the Reformers' identification of 'union with Christ' as the bedrock of everything to do with salvation. These quotes are the evidence of just how strongly this has been asserted with evangelistic theologians through the centuries.

....union with Christ has "the highest degree of importance" if we are to understand justification correctly John Calvin 1509-1564

[Union with Christ] is the cause of all other graces that we are made partakers of; they are all communicated unto us by virtue of our union with Christ. Hence is our adoption, our justification, our sanctification, our fruitfulness, our perseverance, our resurrection, our glory.

John Owen 1616-1683

"union with Christ is . . . the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation. . . . It is not simply a phase of the application of redemption; it underlies every aspect of redemption"

John Murray 1898- 1975

"Once you have your eyes opened to this concept of union with Christ, you will find it almost everywhere in the New Testament" Anthony Hoekema 1913-1988

" (union with Christ) at once the centre and circumference of authentic human existence"
Lewis Smedes 1921-2002

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Just take a look at some of the claims being made here, According to Calvin and Owen our justification, adoption, sanctification, fruitfulness, perseverance, resurrection and glory all depend on 'union with Christ.' That is taken further by Murray who says it underlies every aspect of redemption. And can anything more emphasise its importance when it is claimed by Smedes to be at the centre and circumference of authentic human existence, in other words the whole of human existence. Now, I asked myself, if this doctrine is absolutely crucial to Christianity, and as Hoekema says, is found almost everywhere in the New Testament, why do we not hear more about it? Well, if you're like me, you get a book. - to be precise Constantine R Campbell's 479 page book, published in 2012 on "Paul and Union with Christ." His opening words are:

"The theme of union with Christ in the writings of the apostle Paul is at once dazzling and perplexing. Its prevalence on every page of his writings demonstrates his proclivity for the concept, and yet nowhere does he directly explain what he means by it. This creates a problem for any student of Paul's theology, since union with Christ is both important yet obtuse."

"Dazzling and perplexing?" Amazing, yet difficult to understand. Difficult to understand, perhaps because he describes it with words like mystical, existential, sacramental, local, eschatological, ecclesiastical union, participation, identification, incorporation, instrumentality, soteriological, pneumatological, ecclesiological, eschatological.

Now, these terms are right and proper in an academic treatment of the topic, but what they show is that in order to understand man's explanation of union with Christ, we have to go back to what God says about it. In other words, Scripture alone. The good news is that we all can do that by simply following the words the apostle Paul uses for it in his letters and other terms familiar to us in the New Testament. We start with a new revelation of God in the Person and work of Christ and the new teaching that emerges from that work, particularly Jesus' death and resurrection. These talks are based on that teaching because although, union with Christ is the overarching theme of Paul's theology, John is in complete agreement with him. These texts include one David has already quoted.

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them. John 6:56

Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:4-5

This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. 1 John 4:13

Because of statements like this, we also have to accept that union with Christ is not just a doctrine that we have to study and believe in; it's a state of being that has to be lived. In practical terms it is life-changing. Paul's personal testimony sums it up.

Galatians 2:20-21 (NIV) I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

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Paul doesn't give an explanation of how this has happened, so there is a mystery involved. But in practical terms what he is saying is that Christ is at the very centre of his life and his whole reason for living. Christ is all in all to Paul and that is why union with Christ is the major theme of his theology. You will be glad to know that if you have read any of the letters of Paul you will have come across expressions like "in", "with" and "through" Christ or the Lord. These terms are used over 200 times in Paul's letters. For example, considering just the "in Christ" term, it is mentioned 8 times in the 6 chapters in Galatians, 34 times in the 6 chapters of Ephesians, and eighteen times in the 3 chapters of Colossians. All of these and similar expressions are summed up in the phrase "union with Christ". God gave Paul a profound understanding of the momentous consequences of Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension and continuing heavenly ministry as well of the prospect of His Second Coming. This understanding so captured the mind of Paul that his whole life and ministry were devoted to communicating the "boundless riches" of what it meant to be 'in Christ', which could be summed up in the words of Colossians 1:17 & 19-20. Nothing could emphasise more that the whole of our salvation and Christian life is found in Christ alone.

Ephesians 3:8 Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ,

Colossians 1:17 & 19 He is before ALL things, and IN HIM ALL things hold together.For God was pleased to have ALL his fullness dwell IN HIM, AND THROUGH HIM to reconcile to himself ALL things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Given Paul's religious background, to make a statements like that in Colossians and Galatians; and to be willing to suffer all the hardships he endured to take that gospel to the Mediterranean world, entailed him embracing a completely new mindset after his encounter with the Risen Christ on the Damascus road and his meditation for three years in Arabia on the whole Christ event and what it meant for the lives of those who believed it. For a scholar like Paul, this was new teaching indeed. We could say that of the senior figures in the New Testament Paul was one of the last to recognise it, for even when Jesus lived this was common knowledge. Anyone who heard Jesus acknowledged the difference in what and how He taught and also that it was teaching which came with what could only be explained as divine authority. And when Paul came to speak of it in Athens, it was also recognised as new teaching. Acts 17:16-21 records that Paul's preaching first in the synagogues and to God-fearing Greeks, leading to a debate with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. This, in turn, resulted in him being invited to the Areopagus - an open air debating forum - to speak about the gospel he was proclaiming.

Mark 1:27 & Acts 17:19-21 & 32

The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him." News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this NEW TEACHING is that you are presenting? You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean." (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.).....When they heard

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about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject."

We can see from the descriptions of the Athenians that they were more interested in the latest ideas than the truth of the gospel Paul was setting out for them. And, I think David will agree that the reactions were no different to those the preaching of the gospel often receives today. On the one hand, today's younger generations see what is in the Bible as 'new teaching' because their knowledge of it is so limited. On the other hand, we can receive Christian teaching for the whole of our lives, as many in my generation have done, yet never come to faith. In the context of union with Christ, this is our first challenge and the first step. Do we accept the New Testament teaching about who and what Jesus was? Scripture alone! The next step is whether or not we respond to that teaching with belief in and about the Person of Christ -faith alone!

Regardless of colour, class, creed, culture, sexual orientation or any other classification of the human race, in God's eyes there are only two kinds of people. Those who have responded with believing faith in the new teaching brought to us by Jesus about who and what He was and what He had come to do for humanity; and those who have rejected it. The key question for us, therefore, is 'how do we know we have believing faith?' It is the writer to the Hebrews who points us in the right direction and David's slide of the cloud covered bridge brought this text to life for me. Our bridge from earth to heaven exists even though we can't see it where it leads. But if we are united with Christ by faith in His atonement we can be certain our feet are already firmly placed on that bridge and that we are heading in the right direction.

Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

In all the uncertainties and darkness of this world which seems to be getting worse by the day, what we all need is to have a confidence and assurance about something stable, permanent and certain. There is a saying that 'seeing is believing', but this text tells us that we must believe in something we cannot see to have a confidence and assurance that the world cannot supply. The long list of the heroes of faith given in Hebrews 11 had this kind of belief and there is much to learn about how that faith was manifested in their lives.

None of them had ever seen God, perhaps except Moses who only saw His back. There is no doubt Abel heard about God from his parents and because he was given a perception of what the nature and character of God were and believed it, he offered the right kind of sacrifice. That blood sacrifice still speaks to us today, for it was the precursor of the blood sacrifice, Abraham was prepared to make of his son, and which was established in the Passover tradition in Judaism and the sacrifice of Jesus as the Passover Lamb in Christianity.

V4 And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.

V17 & 19 By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.

V 28 (NIV) By faith he kept the Passover and the application of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

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1 Corinthians 5:7

Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.

Then we have the examples of faith through Abraham's and Moses' willingness to leave the relative comfort and security of their environments to embark on journeys, literally into the unknown. I can't say whether I am right or wrong in thinking that it takes a greater leap of faith today to become a Christian. Leaving the comfort zone of a society that scorns and scoffs at the Christian way of life and denies the existence of God, cannot be easy, especially for young people who are subject to a greater degree of peer pressure than more mature adults. Anyone who becomes a Christian nowadays can never be sure of what reaction they will receive from family and friends, never mind society at large. This is because becoming a Christian will entail some life changes which may not be appreciated or accepted by even our nearest and dearest. And even Christians, in spite of their faith, may wonder is their faith real or worth it when they face the difficulties and traumas of life.

V8 By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

V24 & 27 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter.....By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.

V15-16 If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

But it is in the very place of seemingly impossible overwhelming circumstances and personal dangers that faith, if maintained, is proved and strengthened.

V7 By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.

V11 And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise.

V29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.

2 Corinthians 12:9 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

This does not mean that we become stoics who don't feel the hurt or the pain or the sorrow of circumstances. I've used the illustration of a stone being thrown into a smooth pond before to show that in the face of difficult circumstances, our faith does not disappear even though it may be disturbed for a period of time. Such faith may be weak but if there remains a belief that God is essentially good and will be with us in spite of the difficulties we face, it will be enough to bring us through them. That's how Noah, Sarah and the children of Israel got through the obstacles to their faith. Many Christians will testify that

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with the benefit of hindsight, in times when they were at the end of their tether, that the poem "Footprints" applied to them in those situations - when we were too burdened or too weak to 'walk the walk', Christ carried us. Have we the faith to believe that?

Just these few stories of these people illustrated for the writer of Hebrews examples of a belief that produced confidence and assurance, even in the face of impossibility and death; a belief in a God who would be faithful to all He had promised and purposed. Since that time, continuing even to the present day, there are countless numbers who have suffered terribly rather than renounce their faith. In one sense, we are still fortunate in this country that we have not suffered these more extreme challenges to faith. We are even more fortunate that all of those mentioned in Hebrews 12 because we have knowledge and understanding of something they could never have envisaged.

But their examples serve a more important purpose. They are both a continuation of and a contrast between faith that did not see God, yet still believed; and the fact that the new teaching brought by Christ gives us a historical reality for what has been seen. In 1 John 1:1-3, John speaks of Someone he had listened to, Someone he had seen with his own eyes and had even touched. What he believed about that Person resulted in him entering into a close relationship with God the Father and God the Son.

V39-40 These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

1 John 1:1-3 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

John's testimony alone is a very good reason to heed the Hebrew's writer's conclusion to his list because these together with another example of Old Testament faith leads us to what the new teaching about Christ requires from faith.

Hebrews 12:1-2 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Hebrews 12:5-6 By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: "He could not be found, because God had taken him away." FOR BEFORE HE WAS TAKEN, HE WAS COMMENDED AS ONE WHO PLEASSED GOD. AND WITHOUT FAITH IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO PLEASE GOD, BECAUSE ANYONE WHO COMES TO HIM MUST BELIEVE THAT HE EXISTS AND THAT HE REWARDS THOSE WHO EARNESTLY SEEK HIM.

John 6:29 Jesus answered, "THE WORK OF GOD IS THIS: TO BELIEVE IN THE ONE HE HAS SENT."

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What is new in the teaching of Christ is that there is a definite, focus for faith - the Lord Jesus Christ, Himself. John testifies to the existence of a real human being. Like Enoch, the basis of faith is the belief in the existence of a Person. For Christians Jesus is the Person God sent into the world. The new teaching of the Christian faith, however, takes us one step further from the old kind of faith, because not only do we have to believe that Jesus really existed, but that He was both human and divine. He was the Word who became flesh; God in human form. The world can accept the first element of faith. There is too much evidence to be able to deny the existence of Jesus, but to many He was just a good man who taught a right way to live. It is faith that takes that belief to a higher level of believing He was the Son of God. But faith then has to go up another rung of the ladder, for we then have to believe that Jesus died to save us from the penalty of sin and was raised from the dead and now has a continuing ministry from His place at the right hand of God the Father in heaven. Those are the indispensable tenets of the Apostle's creed and a genuine faith accepts these statements as indisputable facts.

The belief that one day they would meet with God sustained the faith of the Old Testament saints. If we want to live in the hope and expectation of meeting with God the Father and God the Son in glory then it is of immense importance that we base that prospect on the right foundation. That foundation is union with Christ. Bruce Milne in his book "Know the Truth" states

Faith, therefore, involves a living relationship to its object; to be a Christian believer means to be united with Christ."

One text of Biblical evidence for this statement is the record in Acts 16 of Paul's and Silas' imprisonment. Paul and Silas were miraculously released from prison and found the jailer about to kill himself because he would have been blamed for their escape. They stopped him committing suicide and as a result he asked how he could be saved. This is their reply.

Acts 16:30-31 & 34 (NIV) He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "BELIEVE IN THE LORD JESUS, and you will be saved—you and your household.".....The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

Believe in the Lord Jesus. Believe He existed and and put your trust and reliance in and on the fact that His sacrifice on the cross, validated by the resurrection, made complete atonement for the sin of the world. Acceptance of these two principles of the new teaching of the New Testament, is quite literally, a life changing experience for they are the first steps to being united with Christ.

WEEK 2: NEW TESTAMENT

If you've ever had to build a flat pack of anything you will know that if you don't follow the instructions step by step, the thing won't turn out as expected. And sometimes, even if you do follow the instructions step by step, it still doesn't turn out as expected. Doctrine is a bit like that. The only way to figure it out is to take it step by step, but it involves taking in more of the detail of those steps. The first steps we looked at last week were the fact that

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Christianity presented us with new teaching and challenged us with believing it . If we've agreed to believe it, where do we go from there. What is the next step to being 'in Christ'? The term 'New Testament' takes us to the next stage. And that is where a bit more detail comes in. We have to ignore the word 'Testament' for a minute or two and concentrate on the word 'new'. In the Bible the word never relates to something that has never existed before. These two texts illustrate this for us.

Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are NEW EVERY MORNING; great is your faithfulness. Lamentations 3:22-23

What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; THERE IS NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN. Is there anything of which one can say, "Look! This is something new"? IT WAS HERE ALREADY, LONG AGO; IT WAS HERE BEFORE OUR TIME. Ecclesiastes 1:9-10

Usually we talk of mornings beginning a new day. We can say with certainty that mornings definitely existed from the time of creation, so both each morning and each day are only new in the sense that they are the most recent manifestation of mornings and days. In a similar way, the love of God has existed even before the world was created, but the sense of newness here is in terms of quality. It is as fresh and as strong as it was when it was first bestowed on humanity. So in terms of both time and undiminished quality, the love of God is as recent as the next morning.

On the other hand, Solomon's words can be taken in two ways. Putting his statement in context, we are hearing the words of an old man, who has heard it all, seen it all and done it all and ended up wearied of life itself. In other words, like Alexander the Great, who complained that there were no more worlds to conquer, he had nothing to anticipate or get excited about. Neither man could envisage something that had not existed before in their experiences; something extraordinary that would transform their experiences and be capable of bringing a new sense of fulfilment or purpose into their lives. That was a human response, but Solomon's also had the insight to see that when God created the cosmos, everything that was meant to be in it has been there from the beginning. When the scientific disciplines discover new species or new ways of doing things, it is the discovery that is new, not the elements of it. For even the quest for the origin of the earth will show that God formed the earth from something already in existence as Genesis 1:2 tells us:

Genesis 1:2 (NIV) Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

That means that what new thing scientists discover is, in fact, something very old. That is something we find throughout the Bible, for all the 'new' principles of God's dealings with people in the New Testament, are principles that already existed, albeit in a different format, in the Old. The radical transformation of the old is what constitutes the new teaching and new focus of faith in New Testament. So when we consider the new things mentioned in these talks, what is meant is that when the word 'new' is used, it means contrasting the recent development with the previous form of it; or as a contrast, with the new being best and the old form being inferior.

The writer to the Hebrews gives us an example in 8:6. The ministry of Jesus is obviously more recent than the ministry of Moses; and the new covenant established through and by

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Jesus is better than the covenant of law established through Moses, because of the better promises inherent in the atonement of Christ on the cross.

But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises. Hebrews 8:6

That may sound complicated but in the New Testament, new birth, new creation, new life, new name, new song etc. draw a direct and distinct comparison between what God is doing and how He is doing it in the periods before Christ came and since Christ came. The 'newness' of Christianity is both a continuation of what and how God dealt with His people in the past, and a new perspective and revelation of what and how those things are to be implemented until Christ returns. And it is this understanding of the word new in Biblical terms that help us to see how the old was radically changed in order to bring about the New Testament teaching of the revelation of God, His Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and how that new revelation enables us to become united with Christ.

This is especially the case when we turn to the word 'testament.' You may think of it as representing all the books contained in this section of the Bible. You may think of it in terms of a 'last will and testament' expressing a person's will about what has to be done with their possessions and who should get what. From that perspective the New Testament is God's will for and legacy to humanity. There is nothing wrong in regarding the New Testament in either of these ways. But it may surprise you to know that in Biblical terms, New Testament refers to a covenant or dispensation. Both these words are important because what the New Testament encompasses for us is a new covenant for a new era - the last days when God is speaking through His Son.

Hebrews 1:2 (NIV) but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.

This verse, for me, sums up the whole purpose of the New Testament. And what won't surprise you is that this new covenant is what makes union with Christ possible. If Christ had not died on the cross and rose again, union with Him is impossible. So, you can see that the doctrine of union with Christ is based on something that is very familiar to us. The barrier to union with Christ is sin. Unless that could be removed from us, there was no way an unbreakable bond could be established with Him. We are reminded of the new covenant in Christ's blood every time communion is celebrated in church. In this one text, however, we have the emphatic assertion that everything connected to God's Son has established God's will for our planet from the coming of Jesus into the world until He takes it into eternity. If we consider previous covenants we can see that the period between each of last 3 covenants can be estimated. By contrast there will be no interval between this new covenant and any future ones. This is because this new testament or covenant, as the text tells us, is the last one God will make with humanity. That in itself is one reason why it can be referred to as new in terms of time. No matter how far into the future we go, it will always be referred to as new because it will always be the most recent covenant. It is also 'new' in the sense of quality because it is far superior to all the covenants that preceded it. Very specifically, it is the fulfilment of what was promised to Jeremiah and encompasses what was promised in the covenants with Abraham, with Moses and with David. Chapters 30 to 33 of Jeremiah speak of the faithfulness of Yahweh who would keep His covenant promises to His chosen people despite the fact that they would face exile. It can be seen from these texts that what God was planning in covenantal terms was a continuation of the covenants He had made with Abraham

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regarding the Promised Land; and the Mosaic covenant when the Israelites became His chosen people after the exodus from Egypt and with David regarding an everlasting kingdom.

Jeremiah 30:3 The days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity and restore them to the LAND I GAVE THEIR ANCESTORS TO POSSESS,' says the Lord."

Jeremiah 31:31-33 (NIV) "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make A NEW COVENANT with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. IT WILL NOT BE LIKE THE COVENANT I MADE WITH THEIR ANCESTORS when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.... "

Jeremiah 33:15 (NIV) "In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line; he will do what is just and right in the land.

What new thing God was going to do was to renew and expand the covenants He had already established. The difference was that the new covenant would be applied in a radically new way. So radical, in fact, that it would establish a new order governing God's dealings with humanity - dealings that would make union with Christ a real and active experience in the lives of believers.

So, what is new about this most recent covenant and why is it so superior to all that has gone before? First and foremost it's superiority is grounded in the coming to earth of Jesus of Nazareth. That name is used deliberately because as we saw last week, unless we have faith that Jesus existed and He was who He claimed to be "union with Christ" is impossible. We saw last week that faith in the existence of Jesus as both God and Man is the foundation upon which a relationship with Christ is built. Now you would be right in saying that many, many people believe in the existence of Jesus and that they will even admit He was an extra-special human being. But they stop short of believing He was God incarnate. That is the litmus test of faith in the existence of Jesus for, without it, any talk of new covenant is meaningless. The truth is that if Jesus was not who He claimed to be, then Christianity is the greatest deception ever inflicted on the human race. And, for me, that would surpass the combined number of greatest tragedies this world has ever experienced. It is simply unthinkable!

Hebrews 12:6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

John 6:29 Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

Secondly, we need to have faith in what Jesus claimed to be - the Saviour of the world. That means we have to rest our certain hope of salvation and expectation of eternal life on the work of Jesus. In Pauline theology from which the doctrine of union with Christ was formulated, the main aspects of the work of Christ were His death and resurrection. Everything that is 'new' in Christianity stems from these two events since the new covenant itself was established by the shedding of Jesus' blood.

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Talking about the shedding of blood may seem a gory topic for a Bible study, but think of it in terms of this ancient Chinese proverb.

“An invisible red thread connects those who are destined to meet, regardless of time, place or circumstance. The thread may stretch or tangle, but it will never break.”

That ‘red thread’ for Christians is the blood of Christ shed on the cross to redeem us and cleanse us from all sin, enabling us to be brought into a relationship and fellowship with God in this life and for all eternity. It is the ‘red thread’ that weaves its way through the Bible from the acceptable kinds of sacrifices God required of Old Testament peoples to the ultimate shedding of the blood of His only Son. The sin of the world could only be overlooked in the Old Testament by the sacrifice of animals; sin under the new covenant could only be forgiven by the sacrifice of Christ.

Hebrews 9:22-23 (NIV) In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

This covenant, therefore, is forever new because it was a God-Man who offered Himself as a sacrifice - and that can never be repeated. It is also new in terms of the greatness of the sacrifice. It cost God the suffering and death of His beloved Son.

John 3:16 (NIV) For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.....

1 Peter 1:18-20 (NIV) For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, 19 but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

Ephesians 1:7 (NIV) In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace

1 John 1:7-8 (NIV) But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

No matter where you start to read in the New Testament it will not be long before you come across a reference to the the blood of Christ and the momentous consequence of believing that Jesus death’ on the cross dealt for once and for all with the problem of sin. With that barrier removed, the way to union with Christ was open to the “whosoever” would believe in His atoning death on the cross.

Christ’s death removed a barrier, but you’ve got to admit that it would be extremely difficult to be united to a dead Person. That is why the resurrection of Christ completes the means by which we can become united with Him and why the writer to the Hebrews is so insistent that Jesus’ sacrifice was far superior to any sacrifice that had ever been offered to God in the past. In Hebrews 9:11-15, he opens this up to us much better than I could, starting off by saying that it was by the shedding of His own blood that Jesus entered the Most Holy Place, meaning the very presence of God.

V11(NIV) But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here,

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In the old tabernacle this would have been the Holy of Holies which the High Priest was only permitted to enter once a year. What was new about Jesus entering the presence of God was the fact that He was not doing so in order to atone for the sins of Himself and the people He represented so that God could overlook their past sins. Jesus entered the presence of God having **already** atoned for all the sins of the world, past, present and future. In other words, eternal redemption was made available to the whole of humanity for as long as it existed. Not only that, in verse 11, this writer emphasises that what Christ had achieved on the cross meant all the benefits of that for humanity were already in existence. That comparison alone shows just how inferior the old system of sacrifice was in dealing with sin and giving certainty about a person's eternal destiny.

That certainty exists because of what we are then told in verses 13-15 because they point to what scholars call the 'new order', a term based on what is said in Hebrews 9:10. The superiority of Jesus' sacrifice of Himself by death on the cross, authenticated by His resurrection and by His ability to enter the very presence of God to claim redemption for humanity inaugurated a new dispensation or new era. Henceforth, a relationship with God through union with Christ was put on a new footing.

V12 He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.

The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

V10 (NIV) They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

V10 (MSG) but are limited to matters of ritual and behaviour. It's essentially a temporary arrangement until a complete overhaul could be made.

In the context of comparing the system of worship in the early tabernacle, the writer to the Hebrews is asserting that these "external regulations were only applicable until the commencement of a new covenant and dispensation. Both in terms of time and quality, this system had now been superseded. I've used these two translations of this verse because the Greek used in it has a literal translation of "a time of setting straight." A 'new order' would be the result of this happening and the setting straight would include reformation and overhaul of the old system resulting in its complete reconstruction. Now, this may seem like splitting hairs, but this writer is making a very important point. The old system was adherence and obedience to external rituals, rules and regulations; the new new covenant, would be based on an internal faith in the work of Christ for our salvation and acceptance and obedience to the standard of behaviour and lifestyle that requires of us as believers. F.F. Bruce in his commentary on Hebrews states what had changed in this way. ***".....the coming of Christ involved a complete reshaping of the structure of Israel's religion. The old covenant was now to give way to the new, the shadow to the substance, the outward and earthly copy to the inward and heavenly reality."*** (p211)

This is only one example of how the writer to the Hebrews spells out for us the that the coming of Jesus of Nazareth into the world introduced into the world a new religious order

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and inaugurated a new era in salvation-history. His whole purpose in writing is to show that this was a divinely ordained event with phenomenal consequences because, not only was this covenant far superior to the old covenant of law in terms of how humanity could relate to God, it would stand for all eternity. And if it was to stand for the whole of eternity, then what is entailed in union with Christ is the most important thing that Christians need to know and understand in order to steer them through the pitfalls of this world, strengthen their faith and reassure them that God will be faithful to all that is promised by this new covenant and new order.

Only one more detail of this aspect of union with Christ has to be looked at. The new covenant achieved by the death of Jesus and validated by His resurrection was an accomplished fact. On the basis of that the sin which separated us from God had been removed. But how did those things alone link us with God through the Risen Christ? That is where Jesus' continuing heavenly ministry comes in, the writer to the Hebrews again showing us how this works. We are familiar with the concept that our sin separates us from God. We've used the illustration before of the cross bridging the gulf that exists between us and God the Father. We could never negotiate a reconciliation on our own. Neither could we build a bridge to reach God by anything we could do or say. Works worked in the Old Testament, but under the new covenant, salvation comes not from works but from grace. Also in the Old Testament, we find Moses continually mediating between the people and God, particularly at the time when they had angered God so much that He was going to destroy them and start all over again with Moses. From the time of the Exodus, as we have seen, the priests, especially the High Priest were the mediators on behalf of the people. Only 'in Christ alone' could a bridge be built to link us to God the Father. Once again we turn to Hebrews for an explanation of how and why we can be sure a link has been established.

Hebrews 9:15 For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

Hebrews 2:17-18 (NIV) For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Hebrews 7:24-26 (NIV) but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. 25 Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

Look at what is said. In verse 15 Jesus is called a mediator. Mediation has to happen when a disagreement between two parties has reached a point where neither party, for various reasons, is prepared to move from their entrenched position. Today, we have a body like ACAS to talk to both parties and to try to arrange a means by which both sides could resolve their differences. God could not forgive sin: we are incapable of freeing ourselves of it. Someone had to step in and offer a solution that would enable God to forgive sin and enable us to be free of it. Jesus stepped in offering His death on the cross as a solution to the problem of both God and humanity. Why could only Jesus do this? Because, as Hebrews 17-18 says, being fully human, Jesus was in the unique position of

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understanding exactly what we go through and is thus able to represent our best interests. In verses 24-26 we are told that as the exalted Christ - holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners - He also able to represent God's interests as well. Furthermore, His roles as Mediator and as High Priest are permanent, will last forever and because He can no longer die, He will continue to intercede for us until we enter heaven.

What 'New Testament' means in terms of union with Christ takes us to the point of, not just faith in Who Jesus was, but putting a total trust and reliance on What Jesus was - the Saviour of the world, our Mediator, our High Priest through His atoning death on the cross, His resurrection and His continuing heavenly ministry. The wonderful thing about this stage of union with Him is the assurance that that faith, trust and reliance has opened heaven's doors to receive our prayers, in and through the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

John 15:16-17 (NIV) You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.

Hebrews 4:16 (NIV) Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

WEEK 3: NEW LIFE

So far, we've seen that in Biblical terms everything that is described as new means the most recent manifestation of whatever is mentioned and its superior quality compared to anything that has gone before. We also saw that in trying to understand what an unbreakable bond has been established between us and our Lord, we have to go slowly taking the path to understanding step by step, simply because our whole Christian existence depends on our union with Christ. The more I've read about it, the more I've come to realise what a tremendous change that makes to the life of any human being. Outwardly, we're all exactly the people we always were, but inwardly we are being changed in a miraculous and mysterious way. Paul tells us that one day we will all be changed into imperishable, immortal beings. But that quality of life is already in us if we are 'in Christ'.

1 Corinthians 15:52-53 (NIV) in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.

That is the overarching benefit of being united with Christ and it starts with our being given a new life when we accept by faith all that Jesus has achieved for us. A new life is our possession as we live out our human existence now, but one day, it will become the reality of eternal life. That prospect alone makes union with Christ an essential topic for Bible study. That is because new life is inextricably bound up with the Holy Spirit, as is all other aspects of our newness of life. The sending of the Holy Spirit is the means by which our link with Jesus could be established, maintained and strengthened as we opened ourselves up to the leading and guiding of Him. Primarily, the work of the Spirit is to direct

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the believer's heart, mind, body and soul to everything connected to the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the very practical way in which our union with Christ is continually operating in our lives.

John 14:25 But 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.

John 15:26 When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me.

What we can look at now is what is new about the coming of the Spirit and why is the sending of the Spirit this time far superior to what has gone before? By now, you know that the Irish way is to go backwards in order to go forwards. Fortunately, there's a lot of logic to going backwards in the Bible to find our way forward. The Old Testament writers seem to have understood God's Spirit to be the dynamic Being who came upon human beings in many different situations. From the Patriarchs to Moses and the skilled artisans in Exodus; and from Judges like Gideon to all the prophets and kings like David and Josiah, the Spirit enabled all those set apart by God to do what God wanted them to do and be the kind of people God wanted them to be. For the most part, manifestations of God's Spirit with a person could be seen and heard, sometimes in very dramatic actions like that of Elijah on Mount Carmel or like the bizarre behaviour God sometimes required of Isaiah and Ezekiel. However, there are also indications in the Old Testament that there will be a new future era, when the continuous presence of the Holy Spirit will be granted to all humanity who entered into the new covenant which heralded the coming of the Kingdom of God. Two prophecies in particular were fulfilled as a result of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. Joel's prophecy was the one that pointed directly to the beginning of the church. On the day of Pentecost, Peter quoted Joel and in his sermon explained the phenomena of everyone hearing his words in their own tongues. It was the outpouring of the Spirit which the apostles themselves had experienced in the upper room when tongues like flames of fire lighted on them. In response to his words, people wanted to know what they should do. Peter used the same words as Jesus: 'repent and be baptised'. But, very significantly added that doing so would lead to the granting of the gift of the Holy Spirit. We are told that 3000 souls entered the kingdom of God on that day.

Joel 2:28-29 & 32 And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.....And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the Lord has said, even among the survivors whom the Lord calls.

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The second important prophecy is found in Ezekiel 37:12-14. This is the chapter that gives us the vision of valley of dead bones and God restoring them to life. Ezekiel prophesied during the exile when the Jews were, to all intents and purposes, a dead and scattered nation. These words of Ezekiel must have heartened even the most despondent because God was promising restoration to fellowship with Him and revival of the religious obligations associated with that. However, that restoration and revival was to be through

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the agency of the indwelling presence of God's Spirit. Explicitly, Ezekiel tells the people they will live only because they have the Spirit within them.

Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.'"

What makes Ezekiel's prophecy so relevant to the new life inherent in union with Christ is that from verse 15 we are given the context of God's decision to grant His Spirit in this way. The context described in the rest of the chapter is one nation under one king and living by one everlasting covenant. This is a picture of the end times when God's servant will rule over a kingdom of people whose chief characteristic is righteousness, for God could not make His sanctuary in any other environment. This would be achieved through the Spirit which God would give when that time came.

v 24 & 26 - 27 My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees.....I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people.

What the prophets envisaged could be described as a moral universe where God's and people's hearts, minds and souls were as one. Jesus perhaps voiced this when He prayed that we would be one with Him just as He was one with the Father. That is a picture of the perfect union of believers with God the Father and God the Son and is the ultimate aim of new life in Christ which is given to believers on profession of faith in Him.

John 17:20-21 & 23 I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.....The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

This prayer and the texts quoted in the first week about us being in Christ and Christ being in us has led to much scholarly debate as to how they explain union with Christ. The simplest solution, which seems to me to be the most satisfactory one, is that we are bound to Christ through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, because the Holy Spirit, is the Spirit of both the Father and the Son, both are active in our lives empowering, encouraging and sometimes disciplining us as we live a Christian life. This makes sense when it is compared to the situation in the Old Testament. The new spiritual life did not materialise in those days because it could not happen until Jesus returned to heaven as Saviour of the world. Only then could the Spirit's presence become a reality in those who put their faith in Christ. That faith brought the gift of the Spirit who interacts with the heart of the believer. Paul contrasts this new foundation with the Jews who relied on the rite of circumcision to identify them as God's people. Paul is saying this outward symbol means nothing. It is what has been done to the heart on the inside that now counts with God. In 1 Corinthians 2:12 Paul leaves us in no doubt that the heart that is

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right with God is the one that is controlled by the Holy Spirit. And he explicitly states in 2 Corinthians 3:6, that it is the Holy Spirit who 'gives life'.

John 16:7 But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

Romans 2:29 No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.

1 Corinthians 2:12 Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.

2 Corinthians 3:6 He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

These texts from both Old and New Testaments refer to a new spiritual life and this is essential if we are to be united to Christ. Again there is a mysterious element to this state of being but from the very beginning the apostles taught that the essence of the gospel is 'new life'.

Acts 5:20 (NIV) "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people all about this new life."

2 Timothy 1:10 but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

When the apostles were imprisoned by the Sanhedrin because of their preaching, they were released by an angel who told them very specifically to tell people all about this new life. In other words, it was the gospel they had been preaching and were commanded to continue to preach that was the equivalent of new life. Paul's words in 2 Timothy 1:10 makes this point. Life and immortality comes through acceptance of and belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And when we turn to Pauline theology, the doctrine of union with Christ, is all about new life. The only problem is that the way he explains how this comes about is a bit complicated. Maybe not for Baptists who have a long tradition of the teaching of baptism. So, please bear with me as an ex-Presbyterian comes to grips with it. Paul depicts the transition from the old to the new life in terms of the work of Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. Now, given that that was a work of God through Christ, I found it a bit hard to see how any human believer participates in a work that only Christ could do. Yet, this is what Paul tells us in Romans 6. He directly relates the new life resulting from our union with Christ to our death, burial and resurrection with Christ. I'll be the first to admit this is not easy to understand. That's why I've used the Message translation of Romans 6:2-5 which explains the process much better than I could.

Romans 6:3-5 Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, WE TOO MAY LIVE A NEW LIFE. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his

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Romans 6:2-5 (MSG).... If we've left the country where sin is sovereign, how can we still live in our old house there? Or didn't you realise we packed up and left there for good? That is what happened in baptism. When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace—a new life in a new land! That's what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. Each of us is raised into a light-filled world by our Father so that we can see where we're going in our new grace-sovereign country.

Baptism, itself, is not what unites us with Christ. Being from the Baptist tradition you all know it is the outward symbol of a relationship that is already established through faith in the atoning work of Jesus' sacrifice of Himself for the sin of the world. The only problem for me with the Message translation is that while the meaning of the burial and resurrection aspects are very clear, Paul's reference to being baptised into Christ's death does not seem to be explained at all. However, the usual way of explaining being baptised into the death of Christ is that, because Christ paid the penalty for our sin, that price no longer falls on our heads. But in return for that, the new life requires us to die to the sin that will remain with us while we live in this world. Satan is not going to let us go to another country without a fight. That is why, just as Christ defeated sin on the cross by dying, so we must share in that death by dying to the sin that still besets us in life. That is part of the working out of the salvation we have been given. If we are conscious of sin in our lives, regardless of what it is, and we are ready to confess it and repent of it, then the good news is that this is a definite indicator of whether or not we have been baptised into Christ's death, burial and resurrection. Sin in many different forms will always beset us, because Satan wants to destroy our new life in Christ. Satan's attacks may be hard to bear and the suffering involved may be intense. It is true these trials can come as a test of faith. But, it is equally true that if a believer had not embraced the new life of union with Christ, there would be no need for Satan's 'fiery darts' to be fired at us. So, consciousness of sin and a desire to put it to death in our lives is evidence that we have entered a new spiritual realm.

Paul explains this transition by comparing Christ and Adam. This is explained by comparing the inevitability of spiritual death through Adam's sin, with the spiritual life faith in the Atonement of Christ, grants to the believer.

Romans 5:12 & 21(NIV) Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned—..... so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul is telling us that because of Adam's sin, all have sinned. Another way of putting that is that by allowing sin to enter a perfect environment, Adam opened the door for the rest of humanity to enter into that tainted domain. It is a sinful domain ruled by the prince of this world - Satan - and Paul has no hesitation in underlining his rulership. In verses 6 and 12 Paul speaks of sin ruling the body and reigning in it. In verse 6 also Paul sees non-believers as slaves through sin and in verse 14 it is seen as our master. The domain represented by Adam, therefore is the realm of slavery to sin leading to death. Every human being enters that realm when they are born.

Romans 6:6 (NIV) For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—

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Romans 6:12 (NIV) Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.

Romans 6:14 (NIV) For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.

Paul also leaves us in no doubt about the pernicious nature of the sin that dominates Satan's realm. As well as ruling and enslaving us, it pays wages, seizes opportunities, deceives and kills us.

Romans 7:8, 11 & 13 But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting..... For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.....it used what is good to bring about my death,

It is only by defining what our life entails spiritually and the dangerous nature of sin, that we can begin to realise what a tremendous blessing new life through union with Christ is. Perhaps we have become Christians without having fully understood the kind of environment we were trapped in. I doubt if anyone having a true understanding of that would choose to remain there. But isn't that is the great tragedy of our world? People do not realise or understand the extent to which Satan has blinded them to their spiritual danger. Satan in so many ways has made sin so attractive that the majority of people just do not realise where it is leading. Once, however, our eyes have been opened by the Holy Spirit to our eternal danger and faith follows it, we are in the position of being ready to leave one realm and enter another. The gospels explain this transition as entering the Kingdom of God. And being in the Kingdom of God opens up a completely new kind of life for us. We are immediately connected to the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. We are united to Him as the vine is to the branches.

1 Corinthians 4:20 (NIV) For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.

Romans 14:17 (MSG) God's kingdom isn't a matter of what you put in your stomach, for goodness' sake. It's what God does with your life as he sets it right, puts it together, and completes it with joy.

1 Thessalonians 5:23 (NIV) May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul goes much further than John in showing that being citizens of the Kingdom of God is the same as being 'in Christ.' Paul does not mention the Kingdom of God often but in 1 Corinthians he states the kingdom of God is a matter of power. As far as Paul is concerned the Kingdom is not just some future state of being to talk about, it already exists in the here and now, because it was inaugurated when Jesus was resurrected from the dead. That kingdom is already in the world through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in every believer. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit that enables every believer to be united in Christ so that God can take our lives and bring them into conformity with His Son's. In Romans 14:17 Paul likens being in the kingdom of God to God setting our lives straight, making us whole and completing it with joy. Our new life consists of being put right in the sense of having the righteousness of Christ. We are made whole when body, soul and

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spirit are being brought into sync; and we have the joy of knowing our lives are going in the direction that will take us into an eternity spent with Christ.

Whether we are conscious of it or not, a seismic shift has taken place in our spiritual citizenship and status. In these texts it can be seen what that enormous shift involved. We are rescued from the darkness of sin and evil into the light of the kingdom for Jesus was the Light of the world. We have moved from death to life - out of the realm of the first Adam who opened the door to a fallen world of sin and death, and through faith have entered the kingdom of the last Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is a life-giving Spirit; and our very lives, as Christians, are hidden in Christ. Hidden with Christ is another way of saying we are inextricably linked to Him.

Colossians 1:13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

1 Corinthians 15:45 (NIV) So it is written: “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit.

Colossians 3:2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Does Paul tell us how we can be sure of this? Paul asserts the Risen Lord is a life-giving Spirit. In heaven Jesus has returned to His spiritual form has returned to that state in power. Can anything illustrate more vividly the extent of that seismic shift, than the astounding claim, that for those who have committed their lives to Christ, the very power that raised Christ from the dead is made available to us? And, because we are united to Christ through belief in the gospel and acceptance of the salvation it offers, that power in the Person of the Holy Spirit is ever present

Ephesians 1:18-20 (NIV) I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms...

Romans 1:16-17 (NIV) For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

1 Corinthians 1:24 (NIV) but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Being united with Christ, means a new life, characterised by the power of the Holy Spirit in us, but that is only the beginning of all the other blessings that accompany it, which will show even more amazingly how being united with Christ truly is a life-changer.

WEEK 4: NEW BIRTH

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You've all heard the old conundrum - What came first, the chicken or the egg? Well, when you come to new life and new birth it seems you're faced with the same dilemma. Don't you have to be born to live or do you have to live in order to be born. Since a new birth brings a new life into being, which, at the same time, can be considered as a new creation, don't they all mean the same thing? Now trying to answer questions like that could drive you round the bend, up the walls or heading for the hills if you wanted a definitive response to them. What settled these awkward questions for me was thinking about the views of when life actually begins. Today, in the medical world and beyond it, there is no recognition of life until a foetus is deemed capable of being born. From that perspective, the prospect of a viable birth is the indication of the existence of life. But the Christian view of the beginning of life is that it starts at the moment of conception. Regardless of whether or not birth follows, life is present. From this perspective, life comes before birth. We have seen that union with Christ is a step by step process. Faith in the new covenant in Christ's blood, brings us the gift of the life-giving Spirit. We are freed from the realm of Satan and enter the kingdom of God because, through baptism, we identify with Christ in dying to sin and rising to a new life. So we might ask ourselves, why then is a new birth necessary and how does that cement the union we already have with Christ through faith and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit? In one sense we could compare our new spiritual life to conception. It opens up all the potential for development and growth as a Christian. New birth, then takes us into the circumstances where we develop the nature and character of that new life in the way we live our lives. In other words, we have been given new life in Christ in order to manifest it in the way we function in all the various activities of our human existence.

One Biblical example might serve to illustrate the difference between having new life and the new birth taking us on to live that life. John 20 describes Jesus' appearance to the disciples in the upper room where they had hid themselves for fear of the Jews. Jesus' meeting with them resulted in Him commissioning them to carry the gospel to the world. Yet, while they collectively received the gift of the life-giving Holy Spirit on that occasion, they could not carry out their task until the Spirit came to them in power at Pentecost.

John 20:21-23 (NIV) Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

John 20:27-28 (NIV) Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

In other words they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit, which, in effect had imparted the new life to them. The exception was Thomas who was not present, but he too, later responded in faith to Jesus, and there is no reason to doubt that at that moment he too received the life giving Spirit. However, they could not carry out the commission Jesus had given them until, they received further empowerment to do so.

Acts 1:4-5 (NIV) On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.

Acts 1:8 (NIV) But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

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Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV) Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

We could then see Pentecost in terms of the new birth. The eleven disciples who had been given the life giving Spirit, were ‘born’ as apostles. They now were able to carry out their function as the messengers of the gospel because the life of the Spirit had now become the very power of Christ in them to carry out the commission of making disciples of all nations, baptising them in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

However, this example, also serves to show that while new life and the new birth are inseparable elements of union with Christ, they involve two different aspects of it. New life is the entry point to union with Christ. New birth is the point where that life becomes a motivating and functioning force directing our lives towards God’s purposes and plans for them. If we accept that this is a straightforward way of distinguishing between new life and new birth, the big test is whether or not it can be backed up by Scripture, because unless it can, then our idea of both the new life and new birth are invalid.

Unfortunately, Jesus does not make the explanation of new birth easy for us to understand as His encounter with Nicodemus shows. We are all familiar with the story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night. We are told he was a member of the Jewish ruling council and, as such, he was breaking ranks with those who were plotting to put Jesus to death. We don’t know how this meeting was arranged in the first place, but it obviously had to be one made in secret. I don’t like to speculate or read between the lines in Biblical texts, but the time the meeting took place, and the risk to his reputation and standing if this secret meeting was discovered, suggests Nicodemus had been listening to Jesus and was concerned about what that meant for his personal spiritual welfare. He had been given the insight to see that Jesus did speak with divine authority and, to openly admit that, given the Sanhedrin’s blanket rejection of Jesus, seems to suggest he was questioning his own standing with God if he did likewise. Did his belief that Jesus was a teacher sent from God constitute the kind of faith that had enabled the Holy Spirit to have entered his being at that stage? That’s a question the Bible does not answer for us, but if we believe the Holy Spirit’s role is to direct people’s hearts and minds to focus on Jesus, then Nicodemus’ whole attitude of respect for Jesus and his seeking of answers from Him suggest the Holy Spirit was already at work in his life.

John 3:2 “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

Obviously, we don’t have a full account of all that was said when Jesus did agree to meet with Nicodemus and, in spite of his willingness to listen to Jesus and take counsel from Him, it seems Jesus was not prepared to make explanations easy for him. Given that Nicodemus was a teacher of Israel, Jesus did not patronise him by offering him cliches or platitudes about his spiritual condition. Jesus acknowledged his level of understanding of Israel’s religious writings, but challenged him to look at them from a different perspective. Possibly, Jesus’ statement that he had to be born again stumped Nicodemus, for he immediately thought of that prospect in literal human terms. Can we honestly say that we would never be met with exactly the same response if we simply said to anyone who asked about Christianity - you must be born again. Although society uses the expression ‘born-again Christians’, how many of those who use the expression could actually explain what it means?

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In response to Nicodemus' and our perplexity Jesus gave an answer which is difficult to explain precisely. But what we can say is that Jesus directed Nicodemus' thoughts back to the Scriptures a teacher of Israel would have known and studied. Nicodemus was told being born again was by water and the Spirit. But the Message translation of John 3:5 would have also indicated to Nicodemus that being born again was a work of God sending His Spirit. Just as the invisible Spirit hovering over the waters resulted in a visible creation or birth of the cosmos, so it is the invisible work of the Spirit which enables a person to be born again. In other words to be regenerated and renewed like the original creation, without the legacy of sin human birth entailed.

John 3:5-9 (NIV) Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.

John 3:5 (MSG) Jesus said, "You're not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the 'wind hovering over the water' creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it's not possible to enter God's kingdom.

Water is mentioned as an illustration of the Spirit's invisible work. Nicodemus would have been very aware that cleansing by water in the Hebrew Scriptures symbolised renewal and cleansing. We have the example even in the New Testament of the Pharisees complaining that Jesus' disciples did not wash their hands before eating. Jesus criticised them for thinking that this external washing made them clean inside. The Old Testament texts illustrating this are in Ezekiel and Jeremiah. The Old Testament scripture that brings both water and Spirit things is Ezekiel 36:25-26. The emphasis in these texts is that only God can supply the living water that makes a person clean on the inside. The Pharisees in Jesus' day were examples of those who had chosen to dig their own cisterns for water to cleanse themselves by their own efforts. New birth therefore, is looking to God who is the spring of living water, to cleanse us completely from the sin we all inherit from Adam for unless we are cleansed from this, Jesus makes it clear we cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Ezekiel 36:25-26 (NIV) I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

Jeremiah 2:13 (NIV) "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

Mark 7:3-4 (NIV) (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

As we saw last week, Ezekiel's prophecy was fulfilled when we were given the gift of the Holy Spirit by profession of faith in all that the work of Jesus achieved for us in salvation. And, evidence of the new birth is a change of heart.

Psalms 51:17 (NIV) My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.

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Psalms 51:7-10 (NIV) Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.....9 Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. 10 Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Using Ezekiel's description we can agree that it is that sin that hardens the heart like stone and turns it from God. It is the impurity of that sin that puts idols in place of God. In general, anything that we love more than God is an idol, be it money, a person, ambition, activity or whatever. In this text the heart of flesh is the opposite of a heart of stone. A heart of flesh is a heart open to the voice of the Spirit and willing to acknowledge God's purpose and plans for our lives. That is the only kind of heart that is capable of receiving the new spiritual life God wants us to have. David described this kind of heart as broken and contrite. He goes on to say that it is one that needs cleansing by washing so that God can overlook his sins and get rid of his iniquity. The result is the creation of a pure heart and a renewal of his own spirit.

For Nicodemus these Old Testament texts would have helped him to understand the new birth is an act of God. It is something that happens to a person as he/she is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. And just as birth is over and done with as soon as it happens, and the baby then starts to develop and grow and be active in the various stages of life, so the new birth acts in a similar fashion in the spiritual life.

Ezekiel 36:27 (NIV) And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

John 14:15-16 (NIV) If you love me, keep my commands.

In Ezekiel we see that the Spirit makes the new birth visible by motivating and empowering Christians to follow God's way in their lives. Thoughts, attitudes, words and deeds focus on the kinds of character the new birth engenders in us. Above all, that character is one that takes Christ as its example and is prepared to "trust and obey" Him. Did the life which I suggested was already at work in Nicodemus when he came to Jesus, lead to new birth, a heart of flesh to replace the heart of stone shown by the Sanhedrin's rejection of Jesus. Did Nicodemus show that he had been 'born again' by water and the Spirit? We only have one more mention of Nicodemus in the New Testament, but it is a mention that clearly shows Nicodemus had undergone a radical transformation from the stiff-necked orthodoxy of the ruling authorities, to a heart and mind believing who Jesus was and what He was doing to save the world. John records for us that Nicodemus risked the wrath of the religious authorities by publicly helping Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus. An additional and telling statement was that Jesus was buried with full honours accorded at Jewish funerals. This was a total rejection of all the charges against Him and a complete denial of the criminal status the manner of His death had conferred upon Him in public estimation. On the positive side, it was an affirmation of Jesus as a very special and unique human being. I don't think we would be wrong in thinking that this public identification with Jesus and care for Him in death, given the circumstance of it, was an indication that Nicodemus had been 'born again.'

John 19:39-41 (NIV) He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. 40 Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.

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We then might ask what led to a new birth in Nicodemus? It is often not realised that the most well-known text in Christianity was spoken to Nicodemus for verses 1-21 in John chapter 3 were addressed to him. In verses 14-19 Jesus left him in no doubt that the only way to salvation was through belief that He was God's Son and belief in Him was the only way to salvation and eternal life.

John 3:14-19 (NIV) Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

Jesus went on to teach about a choice between light and darkness and truth. And it would appear that Nicodemus' appearance in daylight, at Jesus' burial, after his encounter with Him by night, was evidence of a new birth working its way out in life. The fact that John recorded this event suggests John believed Nicodemus was plainly showing, that after His encounter with Jesus in the darkness of night, he had not only accepted the new teaching that came from Jesus as truth, but was prepared to live by them, by his public display of support for Jesus in the light of day.

John 3:21 (NIV) But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

Verse 21 of John 3 also finds support later in the New Testament. There are only two other mentions of the new birth, but both are very significant. The word of truth is associated with it in James 1:18. James is telling us that it is God who chooses to give us new birth through the word of truth. Since Jesus is the Truth and the Word become flesh, the new birth links us to Him through the gospel of truth. James is also telling us that this is God's way of choosing the means of new birth and Paul agrees with him. Paul could not make plainer the fact that hearing and believing the the word of truth, as Nicodemus appears to have done, means we are in union with Christ. The expression "included in Christ" could not be understood in any other way. And as we have already mentioned before, the gift of the Holy Spirit is the guarantor of that bond with Christ. John Blanchard in his commentary on James states categorically (p68) "It is the word of God alone that is the instrument of the new birth."

James 1:18 (NIV) He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

Romans 10:17-18 (NIV) Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.

Ephesians 1:13-14 (NIV) And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

But as I mentioned before, human birth is only the beginning. Birth happens on one day only - our birthday. It is only the beginning of the rest of our lives. Similarly, the day of

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our new birth in Christ is only the beginning of the rest of our spiritual lives. Divine intentions lie behind uniting us to Christ through new birth. James mentions 'firstfruits' and in the Old Testament harvest festivals the first fruits were very special because they were set apart for God's use. Our new birth makes us special to God and set us apart for His use. Spiritually we are born into great privilege, the greatest of which is eternal life. But with that privilege comes responsibility - the responsibility to live the rest of our lives in a manner reflecting the divine nature of our birth. That's something I'll return to next week. In the meantime, what seems to be the overriding responsibility is, first, gratitude for the status union with Christ has given us and the new perspective it encourages and assures us of in the midst of what we go through in this world. Secondly, to make every effort to live a godly life. That should be a practical demonstration of our gratitude. Quoting John Blanchard again, he states that *"God is never more properly thanked for His goodness than by our godliness."*

The second mention of new birth is in 1 Peter 1:3. The emphasis here is a living hope. Hope in the Bible is not wishful thinking. Very often in life there are false hopes and hoping in vain. Union with Christ, however, through the new birth makes spiritual hope a foundation we can totally rely on because any hope resting in, with or through Christ, is something that is absolutely certain to materialise. Just as a child born into royalty can expect a particular type of inheritance, so our new birth gives us the expectation of a divine inheritance. Peter describes this as indestructible in that it can never perish, spoil or fade. Furthermore, it already exists in heaven and being shielded by God's power ensures that one day we will receive it. That means that any hope in Christ will never be misplaced or be disappointed.

1 Peter 1:3-5 (NIV) Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

Finally, how does us being a 'new creation' fit in with new life and new birth? Paul mentions it only twice in his letters. It is true that this term could also mean the same as 'new life' and 'new birth', but as we've seen both of these descriptions involve a different aspect of New Testament teaching on union with Christ. But if we take the term 'new creation' literally, even in human terms, the combination of new life and new birth results in a new creation - one more human being entering the world. In spiritual terms, however, new creation means a different kind of human being has now begun to function in the world. Because of the new life and new birth given through faith in the new covenant in Christ's blood, the human being that now exists is one who has been regenerated, redeemed, justified, reconciled to God and sanctified by the power of the Holy Spirit. As such they are united to the Saviour of the world.

Romans 1:16-17 (NIV) For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

Galatians 6:15 (NIV) Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation.

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2 Corinthians 5:17 (NIV) Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

That is why Paul was very adamant in his condemnation of the teaching of some in Galatia who were insisting that people had to add circumcision to faith in Christ in order to be saved. They must have been scandalised by Paul's statement that the issue of circumcision was of no importance. But, to Paul, union with Christ was all that mattered because the old way of identifying God's people was now obsolete. The Christ event had superseded all that had counted for salvation in the past. In Christ, all the old distinctions, primarily that between Jew and Gentile had disappeared. Henceforth, what distinguished one human being from another was whether or not they were "in Christ." And, perhaps for all the new things we are in Christ, we could echo the words of Psalm 139, for united to Him we are even more fearfully and wonderfully made.

Psalms 139:14 (NIV) I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

Psalms 139:14 (MSG) I thank you, High God—you're breathtaking! Body and soul, I am marvellously made! I worship in adoration—what a creation!

WEEK 5: NEW COMMANDMENT

I've mentioned that our union with Christ is a mysterious and miraculous transition from one state of being to another. Over the past weeks we've seen that if we accept, by faith, the New Testament's teaching about the significance of the Easter events, then there is a seismic shift in our inner being. We can't see it, but we know through the assurance of the Holy Spirit that we have been changed on the inside. We have been given a new life and new birth, which makes us a new spiritual creation. And this is far superior to our old natures, because the blot of sin has been removed from us, and we are now on the road to a guaranteed eternal destiny. Last week, however, I said that the new birth is the beginning of how we are to travel that road as Christians. It is the beginning of how we start to live the life Christ intends us to live as we maintain and strengthen our union with Him.

There is one obstacle. We are still the same people we always were, with habits, attitudes, traditions, ways of doing things etc. What Paul calls the 'old self' still clings to us and if we are to maintain our union with Christ - to remain in Him as the branch remains in the vine - then, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we have to "put off" the old and put on the new. Just as living takes effort at every stage of our natural lives from birth to death, so living our new life from our new birth means we have to make an effort to transform our former selves to be fruitful servants of Christ. Paul leaves us in no doubt that this will require effort and there will be conflict. To dethrone self and put Christ on the throne of our hearts and minds will not always be easy to do and we have to face the fact that sometimes we will be defeated for we have powerful forces opposing us. Paul describes the conflict as a struggle between the flesh and the Spirit. That battle will have to be fought for the whole of our lives because we are not just fighting against flesh and blood. The more we seek closer union with Christ the more intense the battle will become. That is why God has provided the armour mentioned in Ephesians 6. We can only win those battles when that armour is deployed with the help and strength of the Holy Spirit.

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Romans 8:5-6 (NIV) Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. 6 The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.

Galatians 5:16-18 (NIV) So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.

Ephesians 6:12 (NIV) For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

The key weapon in this struggle to put off the old self and put on the new is self-control. Paul mentions this several times in his letters and crucially it is part of the fruit of the Spirit. We are responsible for the thoughts, words and deeds of our bodily lives. And very especially, we have to recognise that the battle for self control will begin in the mind. There are a number of Christian writers today who are publishing works that highlight the fact that if Satan can dominate our minds, he can stifle and nullify all the blessings union with Christ have made available to us. These works are true to Scripture for we find their origins in the words of Paul. The issue is simple, words and deeds have their origin in the mind, whether we are conscious of it or not. But we are wholly responsible for what we allow into our conscious minds and what thoughts we dwell on and even encourage and nourish. I can't remember where I read it, but it was stated that the more oxygen you gave a fire, the greater force you gave it. The point was not to give wrong thoughts more oxygen. Pour cold water on them as soon as they surface. Christ told us not to worry about anything, but think of how much our minds are taken up with anxiety, worry and even fear about the circumstances of our daily lives. Think of what feeding angry, resentful, envious or immoral thoughts do to you, never mind the fact that they drive out the Holy Spirit who wants to fill our minds with the list Paul gives in Philippians 4:8.

Galatians 5:22-24 (NIV) But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Philippians 4:8 (NIV) Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

These texts also show that the mind is either governed by the flesh or the Spirit and as those in Romans 12:2 and Ephesians 4 show, our new inner self involves the renewing of our minds. If we don't submit to this change, then hostility to God makes union with Christ impossible.

Romans 8:6-7 (NIV) The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.

Romans 12:2 (NIV) Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

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Ephesians 4:22-25 (NIV) You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

There is no denying this will take effort, but the struggle is worth it, because we have been given the vision of what we can be 'in Christ'. Paul tells us because we are united with Him we can have the same mindset as Christ. In Colossians he tells us that the new self, comes about by our minds being informed about the knowledge of the One who has made us a new creation through His death and resurrection on that world changing Easter weekend.

Philippians 2:1-2 (NIV) Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ..... then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.....Philippians 2:5-6 (NIV) In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Colossians 3:9-10 (NIV) Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

But what does Paul mean by having the mindset of Christ? Obviously, we cannot know what He is thinking at any given moment, so how do we know we are making the effort to have the mindset of Jesus? The answer to this is very simple - by obeying the new commandment. The dominant characteristic of the new commandment is love. So when love is the standard of and determines all our words, thoughts and deeds, a mindset that keeps us in union with Christ will develop and grow in strength.

John 13:34-35 (NIV) "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Another important question. Why should love be emphasised over and above all other characteristics of Christianity? Ultimately, because love is an attribute of God and it was His love that sent Jesus into the world as our Saviour. Everything that God does flows from love. Throughout the whole Bible, God is giving us a revelation of His love for us as the human race. His is a divine form of love that sees a world in great spiritual need of a Saviour; and is prepared to give Himself in the Person of His Son to save it. Easter is the very special time of the year when we have the greatest demonstration of what love is and what it does. We see in Christ's work the love of God for the whole of humanity. Jesus shares that same attribute, because He was willing to sacrifice Himself for us. The new commandment is thus an extension of the love that originates in the mind of God and of His Christ. The same love that the Godhead extended to us has to be extended to others through us. In a sense, we could say that we can manifest our union with Christ by being the channel through which the love of God and of Christ is broadcast to our family, friends, community, nation and the wider world.

Now, we come to the tricky question? What is love? Does it mean we have to let people do what they want even if it results in death, destruction and suffering for others? The Bible teaches that that is not God's view of love. Throughout the Bible we find God's love in perfect balance with His justice. God's love is not blind to the sin and evil of the world. Could we honestly claim that God is love if He simply allowed everyone to do what they wanted without incurring any penalty for their wrong doing? As we look around the world today we see so much that is cruel and unjust. I'm probably repeating myself when I say I've always found love to be a difficult concept. The way the word is used in our language

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justifies so many things that are blatantly wrong. For the life of me, I cannot understand or accept the kind of love for Allah, that justifies the horror of what ISIS does to people under its control. Much nearer to home, in common ordinary day life, love is used to justify all forms of immoral behaviour. So, how are we supposed to extend love to those whose actions are in direct contravention of the clear teaching of God's Word. In negative terms the only tolerable way to set our minds is to remember what God has said and what we have been taught.

1 Samuel 2:9-10 (NIV) It is not by strength that one prevails; those who oppose the Lord will be broken. The Most High will thunder from heaven; the Lord will judge the ends of the earth.

Ezekiel 7:3 (NIV)I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for all your detestable practices.

1 Timothy 5:24 (NIV) The sins of some are obvious, reaching the place of judgment ahead of them; the sins of others trail behind them.

2 Corinthians 5:10 (NIV) For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

Romans 12:19 (KJV) Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.

From the texts of the Old Testament and the history of God's judgements on His chosen people to Paul's statements in the New Testament, we have an explicit assurance that sin and evil will be judged according to God's standard of righteousness. God set the standard of righteous behaviour in the Ten Commandments, so no one can deny there is a standard of right and wrong. But over and above that, He set the criteria for exemption from the judgement for failing to obey those laws, as faith in the atonement for sin Jesus made by His death on Calvary's cross. Since God is in control of the ultimate destinies of the lives of everyone and will do what is right and just in all circumstances, we are left free to concentrate on the positive aspects of what Jesus intended when He issued this new commandment.

We have to bear in mind that when we talk about love, we are referring to divine love and that is a matter of God's will. All that we are when we are united to Christ ultimately stems from God's will for humanity. We are commanded to develop the same kind of love. It is not optional; it is a matter for the will, not feeling. So where does obedience start? Jesus' reply to the question "Who is my neighbour?" gives us our direction. He starts with the way we are to love God. God will not mind us asking 'why'? First, because if we are united to Christ we will strive to live as He lived. Jesus lived by being devoting His whole being, heart, soul and mind to obedience to the will of the Father for the salvation of the world.

Mark 12:30(NIV) Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'

John 4:34-35 (NIV) "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.

1 John 2:6-7 (NIV) Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.

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John 6:29 (NIV) Jesus answered, “The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”

John 12:44-45 (NIV) Then Jesus cried out, “Whoever believes in me does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. The one who looks at me is seeing the one who sent me.

Jesus' obedience took Him to a cross. By comparison, all He has commanded of us is to love, those He suffered and died for. John 12 clearly shows that our response to Jesus is at the same time our response to God the Father, who has given us the most momentous demonstration His love by sending His Son to die on Calvary's cross. No matter how hard you try, no matter how great your secular or spiritual knowledge and/or understanding is, you will never be able to devise another way by which present and eternal salvation could be made possible, that would satisfy the demand of both love and justice.

That is why both John and Paul can speak of God's love being 'poured' out' and lavished upon us' - to the extent of our adoption as His children, which makes us co-heirs with Christ in relation to God's favour for all eternity. Now if that doesn't confirm our union with Christ I cannot think of what else would.

Romans 5:5 (NIV) And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

1 John 3:1-2 (NIV) See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

Romans 8:16-17 (NIV) The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

And, now comes the really difficult part!

Mark 12:31 The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’

Galatians 5:14 (NIV) For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

James 2:8 (NIV) If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbour as yourself,” you are doing right.

Please, excuse the expression, but are we really meant to love neighbours that could be described as the 'neighbours from hell'? This is where our will will be tested to the utmost. Our human feelings and emotions tend to dominate us depending on whether our encounters are with nice people or downright obnoxious people. If we let our feelings and emotions determine how we react to and treat people then we cannot express the love Jesus intended in the new commandment to love our neighbour as ourself. This is something we will struggle with because we will be tempted to think that Jesus has made an impossible demand on us and expects too much of our ordinary human nature. The problem with that line of thought is because of new life through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, we have no excuse. Our new birth was given to enable us to live according the

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Spirit directed new self, not the old one. And the Bible gives us extremely important reasons why we need to obey the commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves.

The world will know nothing of God's love through Christ's sacrifice if we don't show it in thought, word and deed. God does not want anyone to perish through lack of knowledge of how much He loves them and wants to save them. That is what we see at the cross. Jesus has paid the penalty for the sin of every human being. God's love is shown in the fact that no one is excluded from that offer of salvation. The 'whosoever believes' means exactly that.

Ezekiel 18:32 (NIV) For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!

2 Peter 3:9-10 (NIV) The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

In fact, the whole purpose of Calvary was reconciliation through repentance. Reconciliation was not to be just our self-satisfaction of being right with God. We were made right with God in order to be reconciled to each other as well. The relationship is horizontal as well as vertical.

2 Corinthians 5:18-19 (NIV) All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them.

2 Corinthians 5:18-19 (MSG) All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other. 19 God put the world square with himself through the Messiah, giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins.

Those who choose to repent enter into the love of God through Christ enter into union with Christ. Those who reject the offer are then subject to His judgement and bring the consequences upon themselves. In view of these reasons, Jesus has every right to tell us that, according to the new commandment, we must love even our enemies, for that's exactly what God was doing when He permitted the humiliation and death of His only Son in our place.

Luke 6:27-29 (NIV) But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

Romans 5:9-10 (NIV) Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

None of us would dispute that this is probably the most difficult aspect of obeying Jesus' command to love. In fact, it is completely impossible unless we are united to Christ and striving towards having the same mindset.

But what does the command to love mean in practical terms? Very simply, by responding to the needs of others regardless of who or what they are? Jesus went around doing

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good because of the Holy Spirit and the power that accompanied Him. The new commandment involves doing as Jesus did - doing good wherever, whenever we can and in whatever way we can.

Matthew 5:46-48 (NIV) If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Acts 10:38 (NIV) how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

Locally, nationally, and internationally, we all have neighbours who have many different kinds of needs. In terms of the new commandment, if we preach the love of God then we have also got to practice the love of God in using our time, treasure and talents to address the world's needs, physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. This is the practical evidence of our union with Christ. We love with actions and the truth of the gospel. Love to others by responding to need shows the new life is in us. And, by that expression of love, we have the assurance of the Spirit that we truly are "in Christ."

1 John 3:18 (NIV) Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

1 John 3:14-15 (NIV) We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death.

1 John 3:23-24 (NIV) And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. he one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

Just a final word about the qualities of love. Love binds together every other virtue, because union with Christ is union with God who is love. I've used the Message translation of 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 because it speaks to us in down to earth language.

Colossians 3:14-15 (NIV) And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

READ

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 (MSG) Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, Doesn't have a swelled head, 5 Doesn't force itself on others, Isn't always "me first," Doesn't fly off the handle, Doesn't keep score of the sins of others, 6 Doesn't revel when others grovel, Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, 7 Puts up with anything, Trusts God always, Always looks for the best, Never looks back, But keeps going to the end.

8 LOVE NEVER DIES.

1 Corinthians 13:13 (NIV) And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

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The three words of verse 8, for me, sum up why Jesus gave this new commandment. The love that we extend to God and our neighbour has eternal value. We won't need faith or hope in heaven anymore, but we will find love is what remains for it can never die.

WEEK 6: NEW JERUSALEM

Over the past 5 weeks, I've tried to show that the doctrine of union with Christ is the bedrock of everything to do with our salvation. New Teaching challenged us to have faith, not in a set of rules, regulations and rituals, but in the Person of Jesus Christ the Son of God. Believing who He was led to the invitation to put our trust and reliance on what He was - the Saviour of the world who atoned for our sins on the cross in the new covenant in His blood. This faith trust and reliance brings us the new life through the gift of the Holy Spirit, which, in turn, leads us to the new spiritual birth and new creation. As we saw last week this requires us to live according to the new commandment to love God wholeheartedly and to extend that love to our neighbours whoever and whatever they may be. This week we come to the ultimate blessing of that process of union with Christ. It is nothing less than eternal life spent in the new Jerusalem and what the Bible calls a new heaven and new earth.

As you are all aware there are many interpretations of what will happen when God decides to bring an end to this world as we know it. For example, I have deliberately chosen 'New Jerusalem' as the title for this talk rather than new heaven and new earth, because there is much debate about how the new heaven and new earth will come about. Some believe our present universe will be destroyed and will be replaced by something completely original. Others believe this present universe will undergo complete renovation, a radical make-over. These two texts illustrate the argument, for Matthew specifically mentions 'renewal'; Peter's statements indicate replacement.

Matthew 19:28 (NIV) Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

2 Peter 3:7 & 12-13 (NIV) By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly..... as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

There is no point in pursuing this debate because we will not find a definitive answer to the questions it raises. That is why, in terms of our transference into our eternal existence, we get more certainty from viewing it in terms of the New Jerusalem. That is because throughout the Bible, Jerusalem was always associated with the presence of God. From the time David brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem and Solomon installed it in the most sacred space of the temple he built there, right up to the point it was destroyed by the Romans in AD70, Jews believed God's presence was there. To this day that is why the city is so important to the Jewish nation. For Christians Jerusalem represents the eternal dwelling place of the Lord and where His temple will be. Logically, therefore, to be in God's dwelling place is the same as being in heaven. The prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the temple he had built for God in Jerusalem is an explicit reference to this fact. That accords with what has been envisaged from Old Testament times and what John has put in a Christian context in Revelation.

2 Chronicles 6:21 (NIV) Hear the supplications of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place; and when you hear, forgive.

Joel 3:17 (NIV) Then you will know that I, the Lord your God, dwell in Zion, my holy hill. Jerusalem will be holy; never again will foreigners invade her.

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“The distance all around will be 18,000 cubits. “And the name of the [heavenly] city from that time on will be: ‘The Lord is there. ‘Ezekiel 48:35

Revelation 21:2 (NIV) I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

So, regardless of what way you believe the world will end; regardless of whether you accept the renewal or replacement debate about a new heaven and earth; and regardless of whether you regard the new Jerusalem as an actual place or representing the kingdom of God, what remains absolutely certain is that our entry into heaven involves entering the presence of God and His Christ.

If that is a certainty, then our chief concern now is whether or not we can enter God’s presence knowing we will be made welcome. And the only way to be certain of that is knowing now whether or not we are united with Christ. All our hopes and expectations of an eternal existence rest in being ‘in Christ alone...’ And, an eternal existence in the safety and security of the presence of God is the reason why we need to be united with Christ in the present. New Testament writers believed the coming of Jesus into the world as its Saviour was the beginning of the end of this world. The New Testament writers are clear in their belief that we are now living in the last days and the end times.

**Acts 2:16-17 (NIV) No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:
17 “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.....**

1 Corinthians 1:7-9 (NIV) Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. 8 He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 1:2 (NIV) but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.

1 Peter 1:20 (NIV) He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.

1 John 2:18 (NIV) Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come.

These are the last days because Jesus was God’s final revelation of Himself to our world and the covenant established by Jesus when He died and rose again will never be repeated. We are living in the time of humanity’s last chance to get right with God and so to have the absolute assurance of where we will go when we die. That is why we have to take seriously the doctrine of union with Christ. Union with Christ is the only passport into the New Jerusalem. Just as an earthly passport gives the personal details that entitle you to entry into a different country, union with Christ certifies that you are entitled to enter God’s presence because you have genuinely repented of sin and have accepted by faith the atonement of Christ for that sin which removed you from the realm of Satan into the Kingdom of God. It certifies you have been reborn through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit and have maintained that connection to Christ by obedience to the new commandment and by bringing your life, as far as you could, into conformity with the mind of Christ. In other words, you have acquired all the credentials that will enable you to fit into the ethos of dwelling place of God and our Saviour.

This is the essence of the gospel we take to the world, but unfortunately, in this day and age we are faced with a counter culture that insists there are many roads to finding God and eternal life, and Christianity is only one of them. So, why must we continue to preach and teach that union

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with Christ is the only way. Bluntly put, because Jesus said so! The early church took His statement literally and the early believers were referred to as followers of 'The Way'.

John 14:6 (NIV) Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Acts 9:1-2 (NIV) Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

Acts 18:24-26 (NIV) Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos.....He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John..... He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

Acts 19:9 (NIV) But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.

Jesus claimed He was the only way to God and John Blanchard in his book "The Hitch-hiker's Guide to Heaven" (p25) says: "...if we tried to use a compass to find heaven's location the needle would always point to Jesus."

What has been said so far about all the new things involved in union with Christ are reason enough for accepting Blanchard's statement as fact. In the context of where we will spend eternity, however, there are even more reasons we can give. When Jesus claimed He was 'The Way' He could do so because He had perfect understanding of where He had come from and where He was returning to. You can imagine the astonishment of Jesus' hearers when it sunk in what Jesus meant by these words. All they saw was a Man, a mere human being in their eyes, openly telling them that He had come to earth from God's dwelling place in heaven and would be returning there. Furthermore, Jesus stated that He had seen God, a claim no Jew would have dared to express in private, never mind in public. The Way implies a that Jesus is the link between God and sinners for nothing could be clearer than His statement that no-one can come into God's presence except through Him. And we can see from these texts that when Jesus added the Truth and the Life to the Way, He was summarising that He spoke only what was true and those who believed in Him already had eternal life. John records that such believers would be raised up on the last day, indicating that time was already moving towards that moment.

John 6:38-40 (NIV) For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.

John 6:46-48 (NIV) No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. Very truly I tell you, the one who believes has eternal life.

John 13:3 (NIV) Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God;

Another reason why union with Christ is so crucial is because He is already preparing our place in heaven. 'My Father's house' can only refer to heaven and most commentators accept that the reference to 'rooms' can be understood to mean 'permanent residences'. I would love to know what kind of a place Jesus is preparing for me. I think we all would, because Paul has told us that we have never seen, heard or imagined, in the here and now, what God has prepared for those who love Him. We know from Revelation 21 that heaven will be a place where none of the sin and

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evil and the sufferings they cause can ever trouble us again. Since a desert island is probably the nearest we'll get to somewhere like that on earth, no wonder Paul sees death as gain.

John 14:2-4 (NIV) My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

1 Corinthians 2:9 (NIV) However, as it is written: "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived"— the things God has prepared for those who love him—

Philippians 1:21 (NIV) For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Whatever awaits us in heaven, we know it will be perfect in every way, because Jesus knows intimately those who are His. They are those who already possess eternal life through union with Him. He stresses such believers will never perish and, because they are protected by God, Himself, nothing can separate them from Him. That is the picture of the strength of the bond that links us to Christ. Paul spells out for us that if we are 'in Christ' nothing can separate us from God. That means, that nothing can stop us arriving at the place Jesus is preparing for us.

Matthew 7:21-22 (NIV) "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

John 10:27-30 (NIV) My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one."

Romans 8:38-39 (NIV) For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Going back to John 14:2-4, two additional statements by Jesus emphasise why we can have total confidence in Jesus being the Way into the presence of God. He says that what He wouldn't have told the disciples that there was a place being prepared for them if it wasn't the truth. There was no purpose to Him going back to heaven to prepare a place for His followers if He was not going to ensure they could eventually arrive at that place. Jesus then adds that He is coming back to take them there. Given where He is returning to, being where He is, is simply another way of saying they will arrive because He will personally see to it that they do. Although these words are a reference to Jesus' second coming, they do not exclude the meaning of all who are 'in Christ' being taken to their appointed places by Jesus when they die, or if He returns before that event.

All of these familiar texts, testify to the fact that the doctrine of union with Christ is the most meaningful and logical term to encompass all that is involved in the means of our salvation and what that salvation involves in our lives on earth and for our future in eternity. And we can also see how our final destination fits into the Biblical definition of what is new. It doesn't matter whether the heavens and earth will be renewed or replaced completely in a literal sense. It doesn't matter whether or not this image was the only way John had of describing what God would do at the end time. But what matters very much is whether or not we are united to Christ when it does happen. If that is our status in Christ then we can be sure that our experience of our new environment will be the fulfilment of Jesus' promise that where He is we will be also.

Unfortunately, today, more attention is given to the events preceding the advent of the new Jerusalem, heaven and earth. All we can be absolutely sure of is that whatever process is involved, something wonderful will emerge. When we think of heaven, we often think of it in terms of release from all that troubles us in this world. But, there are greater matters we will encounter

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that will leave us in no doubt that the environment we have reached will be ever new, not just because it is our final destination, but because of the new experience of being in the very presence of God who makes everything new. And God always keeps His promises. Our dwelling place for eternity will be far superior to the greatest experience of anything we encountered on earth.

Revelation 21:5 (NIV) He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"

2 Peter 3:13 (NIV) But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

For Peter, the characteristic of the new heaven and earth he highlights is the righteousness that will pervade them. Yes, as Paul, says, if we are in Christ we already are righteous in the sight of God. What will be new and far superior is the fact that righteousness will be the norm because our righteousness will be perfected and established forever. A crown symbolised rulership and it is righteousness which will not only reign throughout the New Jerusalem, but will rule in and over our lives there.

Philippians 3:9-10 (NIV) and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

2 Timothy 4:8 (NIV) Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

That will happen because we will be the answer to Jesus' prayer for complete unity with Him and with the Father. Union with Christ now, although invisible, is the first instalment of the unity that we will one day experience visibly in eternity. That is the time when our mindset will be in complete sync with God and with Christ. The whole purpose of our new life, new birth, new creation in Christ, is to prepare us for the time when our resurrected mind, body soul and spirit, in whatever form they may take, will never again deviate from the perfect humanity God first created in Eden. He will be our God and we will be His people in every sense of that statement.

John 17:20-22 (NIV) My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

John 17:23 (NIV) I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity.

Wonderful as this may be, there is perhaps one thing even more wonderful. We will see Jesus in glory. If we are honest, our visions of Jesus, especially at Easter, is that of a tortured human being on a cross. Yes, we have depictions of Him when He rose from the dead and ascending into heaven. But, these are mere images for, except for those who saw Him on earth, no one knows what Jesus actually looked like. At the same time, even if we had a photograph of Jesus, what we would see is a shadow of His real self, for mirrors in Paul's day were only polished bronze and gave only a partial or distorted image. We will see the Person whom Paul described in Colossians, holds together the world and everyone and everything in it past, present and future, just by the fact of His existence. "He's got the whole world in His hands" sums up Paul's words, but if you fully explored what Paul is telling us about Jesus, you begin to realise just how inadequate the words of the song are in the face of the reality of the glory of Christ.

1 Corinthians 13:12-13 (NIV) For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

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John 17:24-25 (NIV) “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

Colossians 1:16-17 (NIV) 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. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Ephesians 1:22-23 (NIV) And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

And there is more! What amazes me, is the fact that if we are united to Father and Son we will share in that glory. We sing that as:

**Finish then thy new creation, Pure and sinless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation, Perfectly restored in thee:
Changed from glory into glory, Till in heav'n we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee, Lost in wonder, love and praise.**

For even our songs will become new as we behold the reality of that glory of the Godhead, of the beauty and bliss of our new eternal environment, our union with God and Christ, and the perfect rest of knowing nothing can ever again spoil what has been stored up in heaven for us. There, in the dwelling place of God, we will sing a new song. New because we have reached the culmination of all that started with being united to Christ while we lived on earth. The new song in eternity sung by those in heaven in Revelation 5, is echoed by the redeemed from the earth who sing it in chapter 14. The new song has 4 themes. It is sung to God for what He has done for us in Christ. It lauds the salvation that has come through the shedding of Christ's blood. It praises His redemptive work which is universal for it is given to every tribe, tongue, people and nation. It triumphs in the fact that the work of redemption has enabled the establishment of God's eternal kingdom. As is said in Revelation 14, only the redeemed from the earth, in other words, only those who are united to Christ now, will be able to sing that new song. In fact, I've no doubt that as we spend more time in the New Jerusalem, we will be adding even more verses to it! In the light of this thought, there's perhaps more truth than we've realised in the words, ***“When we've been there 10,000 years, bright shining as the sun, We've no less time to sing God's praise than when we'd first begun.***

Revelation 5:9-10 (NIV) And they sang a new song, saying: “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God, persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. 10 You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.”

Revelation 14:3 (NIV) And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth.