

PAUL ON UNION WITH CHRIST

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Philippians 3 follows Paul's great Christological passage of Philippians 2:5–11. The great goal in view is the unity of the fellowship and the humble mindedness of believers. Paul has used two illustrations of how Christ's life works its way out in Christ's servants. There is Timothy, who like Christ, does not mind his own interests but the interests of others. Then also there is Epaphroditus.

I'm using the English Standard Version, but I wish some translation would have the courage to stop translating the first verse of Philippians 3 as "finally" and thus make the Apostle Paul, as well as ourselves, the butt of many preacher jokes. The expression here really means "now to move on to other things."

Philippians 3:8–15,

¹Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.

²Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. ³For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— ⁴though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. ⁷But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

⁸Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— ¹⁰that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹²Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and

straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵Let those of us who are mature think this way. . .

And he brings this to a conclusion in verse 20 of chapter 3: "Our citizenship is in heaven and from it we await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." (You can see that what he has said to the Colossians in Colossians 3:1–4 is a reality in our own life, because he, Christ, appearing, will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself). Philippians 4:1 continues, "Therefore my brothers whom I love and long for, my job and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord my beloved."

Our first study on union with Christ focused on Colossians 3: the notion of union with Christ in the life of the Christian believer. Colossians 3 is a passage that sometimes strikes me the way it struck me in the old days when I was going away and my wife packed my suitcase. She did it because she's much better equipped to pack suitcases than I am, but I always encountered the same problem before I resolved that I would pack my own suitcase in the future. And that is when your wife packs your suitcase, you get everything out at your suitcase and it is impossible to get everything back in.

And Colossians 3 is certainly such a passage where there is so much that is useful for us in gospel ministry. It's surely one of those passages that we need to take people, individually and corporately, back to again and again and again and say, "Do you see how the gospel works through union with Jesus Christ?" This message is on union with Christ and serving in the gospel ministry, because it is, in essence, Paul's theme here.

These verses, in some ways, present us with Paul's life text. It is his self-understanding as someone who has been called into the ministry of the gospel. And as he gets close to the section in which he unburdens the heart of the drive of his ministry, it's very clear that he moves again back into this realm that union with Christ is central to living the Christian life and therefore, by necessity, *union with Christ is that driving principal that transforms our gospel ministry.*

We live the Christian life in union with Christ but we also minister in union with Christ. That actually is one of the reasons why, on several occasions, the New Testament seems to emphasize that the one who actually does the preaching when we preach is Jesus Christ himself. Remember how Paul says it in Ephesians 2, that once Christ had

finished his work he came and he preached peace to those who were near and to those who were afar off. This is part of the reason why in giving sermons, when we are 15–20 minutes into the sermon, we have forgotten that the brothers speaking are actually speaking with a different accent from the accent we have ourselves. We are caught up in the fact that Jesus Christ is preaching his word to us himself, through servants to whom he has united himself to by the Holy Spirit, and whom he has made servants of his work. And that's why we are able to say we don't preach ourselves, *but Jesus Christ as Lord*, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. How can we dare to say that? It is because in gospel ministry we minister out of the reality of our union with Christ and the way in which it impacts the dynamics of being a servant of the Lord Jesus. And what I want to try and do in the time we have together this morning is to look at four aspects of union with Christ in Paul's gospel ministry.

First, I want to say something about the background to union with Christ in Paul's thinking. How on earth did he come up with the notion of union with Christ? Where does it come from? Second, the structure of Paul's thinking about union with Christ. Thirdly, the role of union with Christ in the way in which Paul thinks about the gospel. Fourthly, union with Christ and the way this particularly influences the manner in which Paul thinks about a fruitful gospel ministry.

The Background to Paul's Theology of Union with Christ

First of all, the background to Paul's teaching about our union with Jesus Christ. How is it that somebody who is so antagonistic to the gospel becomes the writer who, more than any other contributor to the New Testament, expound the reality of the Christian and the gospel minister's union with Jesus Christ?

He sees it here as absolutely central to his knowledge of Christ. He says I want to know Christ and to be found in Christ, and the particular way *I want to know him is to know him in the fellowship of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, in order that I might become like him in his death, and at the last become like him in his resurrection*. As Paul says in verse 21, when Christ comes, he will transform these bodies of humiliation to become like his body of glory. All because we are united to Christ, as Paul expounds in his letters from eternity through resurrection: chosen in him from before the foundations of the world; raised with him at the end of time; and made like him for all eternity.

Paul gives us some clues here. He hints at the fact that as a young man he was profoundly ambitious. That's why he can still reel off all the things that would distinguish him for high honors in the school of Judaism. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews, circumcised the eighth day. He had deliberately chosen the way of the Pharisee, had studied under Gamaliel, had outdone, he thought, all of his contemporaries in zeal for Judaism. He believed he was second to none. And that was evidenced by the fact that even while a Gamaliel might say, "Now let's just wait and see what will happen," Saul of Tarsus' response to the Christians was, "Let's make it happen by destroying them." So Paul regarded himself.

He was obviously a Type-A personality, profoundly driven, doubtless a little obnoxious to many of his contemporaries, but he was determined to be the "#1" Jew. And then a series of things happened at which he only hints to here, but I think become clearer as we weave together Acts with some of the things Paul says about his own life in his epistles. Remember how he says in Galatians 1, in summary form, what he says in Philippians 3. He puts it modestly now as a Christian believer when he says "I outstripped many of my contemporaries." Now what he means is "I outstripped them all." That's what he means. That's just genteel language for saying, "I had reached the pinnacle in my generation until something happened." And that something that happened is hinted at by his friend, Luke, in the Acts 5. There he speaks about something that began to happen in the life of the early Christian Church and how a particular figure began to appear whom the early Jews of the First Century were not able to contend with. You remember the success of the church and then the devil inspired conflict that there was between the Hebrew-speaking and the Greek-speaking widows in Jerusalem. And then suddenly out of nowhere Stephen is chosen to be, I actually believe an Evangelist, not a Deacon, because what he does is what an Evangelist in the New Testament does not what a Deacon does, he begins to preach.

He was an apostolic lieutenant and he was full of grace and power and doing wonders and signs among the people. And then there were some of those who belonged to the synagogue of Freed Men, as it was called, and of the Syrianians and of the Alexandrians and of those from Cilicia (Acts 6:9). They had ethnic-centered synagogues in Jerusalem and — *surprise, surprise!* — Cilicia was where Saul of Tarsus, in Cilicia, came from. And whether the event actually took place within the synagogue, it was this group of Jews who rose to, as it were, mass themselves against Stephen. But what are we told? When they rose up and disputed with Stephen, Acts 6:10, they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

Now why is that significant? It is because Saul of Tarsus was there. This undoubtedly is what Luke is hinting at before he brings Saul on the scene. He's setting the stage. He's saying: *Now when you get a little further in this book, remember this, look back on this because this is really significant.* What's the next thing that Saul of Tarsus, now Paul, actually tells us about his life history? It's found in Romans 7, at least according to John Shearer's understanding of Romans 7, and my understanding of Romans 7, that Paul is really speaking about himself. What was it that began the event that eventually brought him to Christ? It was the commandment tucked there at the end of the Ten Commandments — "Thou shall not covet." Why did that particular commandment come to Paul so that Paul says, "Sin came alive and I died."

Why that commandment? I'll tell you the answer that I think is the best answer the New Testament gives us. The reason was Stephen. Saul had been able to out-argue, out-reason, out-zeal, out-holiness everybody he knew. But there was something about this Stephen. Stephen had everything that Saul of Tarsus didn't have and more. And there was nothing Saul of Tarsus could do except to yield to Stephen's preaching and to Stephen's Savior or destroy Stephen and Stephen's Savior and all who belonged to Stephen's Savior. That's why, as the story goes on in Acts, Luke is making it clearer and clearer and clearer that the connection (and this is tremendously important), the connection to Saul of Tarsus' conversion and Paul the Apostle's ministry is to see its deep linkage to what God does in the apparent human wastage of the life. And you remember the next thing we're told is that when the Lord Jesus addressed Saul of Tarsus, having flattened him on the ground by the effulgence of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, as described in 2 Corinthians 4, the Lord Jesus says to him, "Why are you persecuting *Stephen?*" or "*the Church?*" — no, that's not what he says. Rather, in as much as you have done it to the least of these, my brothers, you have done it to me. His question is "*Why are you persecuting me?*" "It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

"Why are you persecuting me?" So that part of that original revelation of Jesus Christ to Paul, that came not from man but from Jesus Christ himself, had imbedded in it right from the very beginning that all those who trust in Jesus Christ are so united to him that to persecute them is to persecute Christ, and to persecute Christ is to persecute them. And although Paul's hidden years are truly hidden, it surely becomes evident in his letters, as he meditated on what that first revelation of Jesus Christ meant to him, that it was deeply significant. It can mean nothing less than that those who have come to faith in Jesus Christ are united to Jesus Christ so that Christ, as it were, places them under the

umbrella of his own grace, and everything that Christ has done for them, and all the resources that God has stored up for them of wisdom and knowledge, are there by the grace of God through the Holy Spirit.

And so we find in God's economy, and in Saul of Tarsus' life, what we often find in our own lives. This is part of the diversity that there is within gospel ministry that the womb in which we are brought to living faith in Jesus Christ often shapes the burden of our whole ministry. You can see that right the way through the Old Testament Scriptures. Why is Isaiah's favorite way of describing God, "The Holy One of Israel"? Answer: Isaiah 6. Why is Paul's favorite way of describing what it means to be a Christian to be "in Christ"? Answer: surely the Damascus Road.

And as Paul thought this through — as he indicates to us fairly clearly in the fact that Romans 5:12–21 is actually the epicenter of everything that the Apostle Paul wants to say; it's the underground, fundamental truth of his understanding of the whole of human history and the whole of the gospel — he begins to see, as Thomas Goodwin put it so eloquently in the 17th Century, that "before the face of God there stand only two men, Adam and Jesus Christ, and all others hang before God by their girdle strings." And what the gospel does for us is to take us out of our union with Adam in sin and death and judgment and hell, and to put us into union, and then communion, with our Lord Jesus Christ in righteousness and life and peace and joy and new fruitfulness to God. This is precisely why Paul then immediately moves on from Romans 5:12–21 through Romans 6:1–23 to expound for us, "Therefore, don't you understand baptized Christians what it means to be baptized?" It means to have been united to Christ in his death and resurrection so that all the treasures that are given to us in Jesus Christ are ours from the very beginning of the Christian life. Yes, we grow into them; yes, they are so grand that we experience more and more of them, but they are not dangled out before us as a carrot only for those few who have reached maturity. They are given to every blood-bought child of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

So this is the undergirding. This is the background to Paul's theology of union with Christ.

The Structure of Paul's Theology of Union with Christ

Second, there is a structure to his theology of union with Christ, or as I prefer to say, there is a grammar by which Paul speaks the gospel. I was saying to somebody this

morning that every single year I give a ten-minute lecture to theological students on the use of the apostrophe. Why? I do it because I say if you can't use the apostrophe properly, why should I believe you when you preach something far more important in the gospel? These details matter. And we understand this. Let me not get off here on a hobby horse, but we need to learn to try and speak the gospel properly so that the ministry not be blamed. But natively the gospel is a foreign language to us, and we need to learn that the new language of the new gospel that brings us into the new creation is a grammar that's actually shaped by the nature of the gospel itself.

Those of you who were blessed, or cursed, to study Latin in high school or in elementary school will remember one of the first strange things you have to learn is that you put the verb at the end. The doing word comes at the end. This is very difficult for us who are Americans to understand. How could anybody could speak a language where you put the doing word at the end? We are a doing community. But you see, the gospel teaches us to put our doing word at the end and Jesus' word at the beginning, while our native tendency is to drag back the doing word and put it at the beginning and then top that up with Jesus' doing just to make life a little better.

There's a very clear grammar in the gospel. Sometimes Paul almost seems to create words in order to express the gospel. He uses the Greek language occasionally in a way that seems to have no parallel in classical Greek, because the gospel demands that we speak the gospel with a grammar that's characteristic of the gospel. And in that sense we need to learn several principles. The first is that we need to learn that the grammar of the gospel has it's appropriate mood. In our languages, we speak about the indicative mood and the imperative mood. The indicative mood is saying that these are the things that are true. The imperative mood is saying that these are the things you need to do. And in the gospel, the structure of the grammar is always that the indicative gives rise to the imperative.

That's why, as ministers, we need to soak ourselves in such things as what the cross achieved. We need to be soaked in all that Christ has done so that it oozes from us. So that preaching Christ is not something we learn as a technique because we understand that it's the right thing to do, but we speak the grammar of the gospel because by God's grace — through the word and by the Spirit — that grammar has become instinctive to us. And it oozes from us.

It's a very difficult thing to pin down. I remember reading as a teenager that Japanese people think British people smell of milk. Apparently Japanese people didn't

drink milk. Likewise, I guess Korean people don't know that they smell of Kimchi. You see? And there is an atmosphere that we give out in our preaching, isn't there? That's the way God has made it. As Phillip Brooks says, "preaching is truth through personality." God has not just sent down a book. His methods are men.

What oozes out of most preaching (that in it's depths has reversed the grammar of the gospel is, no matter how much we speak formal gospel language) is: "Pull yourself up by your boot strings and do better." And we crush rather than convert. So there is a mood.

There's also a tense in the gospel. And the tense in the gospel for a Christian believer is this: That the present is to be rooted in the past. That you need to go backwards to what Christ has done to go forwards into what you are to do. It is what has become known in our contemporary world as an emphasis on the grandeur of the *already*, and the mopping-up operations of the *not yet*. And we need to learn to pronounce this gospel. And we need to learn the prepositions of the gospel. Remember how Paul uses them in Galatians 2:20–21? In a few words he summarizes the work of Jesus Christ by saying *the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me. And therefore I am crucified with Christ. Nevertheless I live, but not I but Christ lives in me.* And there, in these three prepositions, the Apostle Paul summarizes the basic structure of our union with Christ. Since we were chosen in Jesus before the foundations of the world, he came as our substitute and representative. There is this sense in which we now know through faith that we were crucified with him. And the past that once dominated us has been nailed to the cross. The dominion of sin that reigned over us has been broken. Christ has died for us and we have been crucified with him. And then the wonder of wonders is a third dimension to our union with Christ: it is a mutual union in which not only are we said to be in Christ, but Christ, the Lord of glory in all the fullness of his role as our benefactor, comes to dwell in the heart of the merest, tiniest believer.

As our fathers used to say, "One man may have a greater faith than another man, but no man has a greater Christ than another man." And he dwells in each, so there is a background, there is a structure.

The Central Role of Union in Paul's Gospel

Thirdly, there is a central role to union with Christ in Paul's pastoral ministry. Now perhaps the simplest way to do this is simply by (not quite randomly, but not actually all that non-randomly) pointing you to some passages in various epistles.

Right from the very beginning of 1 Corinthians Paul is explaining to them that the way in which you deal with all the pastoral problems and divisions is remembering that the baseline truth about us is that, not just that we are in Corinth, struggling to live in a city that had become proverbially immoral, but we are living out our life as those who are in Christ. We are driven by the fact that our citizenship is not in Corinth, but in Jesus Christ. You are in Christ. You are in the Lord Jesus. You are in him! Now let me just point you to some of these passages.

Romans 5 is a foundational chapter. But it's not always the easiest chapter to preach on. To live the Christian life today you don't need Romans 5:12–21, do you? I think if Paul were here he would say, well why did God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, bring me to write that?

Yes there are things that are difficult to understand as Peter says of Paul's letters, but the proper response to that is not to laugh and to sit down, but to plead with God that you may be brought to understand them rather than distort them. Then you may be able to proclaim them so that the people of God are not given husks instead of bread. And you remember how Paul goes on in Romans 6, which if anything is just as challenging to preach. To say this to the believers, "Don't you understand Romans 6:5? If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his, because of something we know."

Now again, he's being polite to the Romans. He's perhaps not sure that they know this. And my guess is (alas I think about my own failure in this respect) that many of the people who sit in front of us *don't know what Paul says we know*. Or if they know it, it's only because they were once a Navigator and memorized this verse. What is it that we know? *We know that because of our union with Christ, our old man was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.*

And you see what he's saying. He's saying that because we are united to Christ, the man we once were united to, Adam, has been crucified with Christ. And in his death, as he goes on to say later on in the passage, verse 10: "the death he died, he died..." — now notice the preposition: not for sin (which is true) — but he died *to* sin. That is to say when Christ died, he came under the condemning influences and impact of sin. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "he was made sin for us, although he knew no sin in himself" — he died because he entered into the dominion where sin reigns.

And since he came under sin, not simply as guilt, but as Paul uses the term here and throughout chapter 5–7, as he came into the territory where only sin reigns unto death, it looked as though sin had also won it's dominion over him. That's why Jesus didn't rise two hours after he was buried. It needed to be clear, not just that the Scriptures needed to be fulfilled, but it needed to be clear that he has actually entered into the territory of the dominion of sin.

The best I can do to illustrate what's going on here is what it's like sometimes when you watch tennis. You watch someone like Federer playing #123 in the world. And the first set goes serve by serve and Federer ekes through by winning the tiebreak. You're sitting there thinking: *#123 in the world is almost as good as Federer. Federer just got there by the skin of his teeth.* But then what happens? The poor #123 then proceeds to lose the next two sets: 6-1, then 6-1, and he's out of there. It's because all his powers have been exhausted in trying to hold Federer down.

And as Peter says when Jesus enters into the dominion of sin and death, death uses all it's powers to hold our Lord Jesus Christ down under it's reign. For as all the time Jesus is exhausting and breaking the dominion of sin so that when he rises, it's clear that the dominion of sin has been broken. Paul is not under the dominion of sin. He is united to Jesus — yes, in distinction from the Lord Jesus, sin is still present in me, sin is still in the unresurrected world around me — but because I'm united to Christ, sin no longer has dominion over me. And that's why I'm able to say with Paul, as he says in Romans 6:12–14, having considered myself as someone who has died to the dominion of sin in Jesus Christ, raised in newness of life, *I am in the position of responding to sin in the power of the Spirit.* I can now say, "I am united to Jesus Christ, and I'm no longer in Adam and under the dominion of sin." I'm in a position of freedom to fight back, to struggle by the power of the Holy Spirit that will enable me to overcome sin. And Romans 7 feeds into this. And Romans 8 feeds into this.

And then in 1 Corinthians, let me just point you to something Paul says in chapter 6. He's speaking here, the section of 1 Corinthians 6:12–20 which is headed in the ESV as "Flee Sexual Immorality." He says you are so united to Christ — now listen, it's not some disembodied spirit somewhere within you that's united to Christ. *You* are united to Christ. Body and soul. *You* are Christ's. That's why when you die your body is still yours and your body is laid in the dust in the Lord. And Paul says you need to know that your bodies are actually members of Christ. So he says, "Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who is

joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? As it is written, 'the two will become one flesh,' but he who is joined to the Lord becomes one Spirit with him." I think *pneuma* there should be capitalized because he means that Jesus, and believers, don't have half a Holy Spirit each. We don't have two different Holy Spirits. We have one in the same Holy Spirit who came upon the Lord Jesus at the moment of his conception and never left him throughout the whole course of his ministry.

We are *that* united to Jesus through the Holy Spirit and so he's saying when you go into the brothel, you are *not able* to say: "Jesus, just stay out of here." He's saying: *don't you understand that you are so united to the Lord Jesus that what in effect you're doing is saying: "Jesus, come with me to the prostitute."* That's how close and real Paul sees our union with Christ. And Galatians 2 and Ephesians is full of this. You've been chosen in Christ from before the foundation of the world and because you're in the benefactor, all the benefits are poured out upon you in the Savior, Jesus Christ. Then Philippians 3 and Colossians. You can't escape from the way in which Paul suggests there is not a single problem in any congregation that union with Christ cannot solve.

And it is fascinating that in Romans Paul deals with legalism on one hand, and antinomianism on the other hand. The way you and I would deal with it is to say, "Antinomian, let me just give you a little dose of legalism." Or to the Legalist, "Let me just give you a little dose of Antinomianism." That's the way most Legalists and Antinomians try to right themselves. But the way Paul rights the ship is saying, "Don't you understand how the gospel works for those who are united to Jesus Christ?" So that what the law can never do because it's weak through the flesh, God does by sending his son, in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, to condemn sin in the flesh." Christ dies for us in order that the righteous commands of the law might be fulfilled in us who by the Spirit are united to Jesus Christ and walk by the Spirit.

The Role of Union with Christ in Paul's Ministry

This fourth and final point is in some ways actually the most significant. And that is because this dominates the way Paul thinks about knowing Jesus Christ. First, Paul has given us a hint of the background to his theology of union; secondly, there is the structure or grammar of this theology of union; and thirdly, there is the central role of union as he operates with the different churches. And all of this because of his deep personal experience of union with Christ, not only as a Christian, but as a servant of the gospel. And it's in that context that I think he's speaking here.

He's saying that *this is my driving ambition as a gospel minister. I want to know Christ and to gain Christ.* Now what does that mean? Well he spells it out. *To know Jesus Christ — the real Jesus Christ — is to come into communion with the one in whom by grace you are in union, the one with whom you are sharing the fellowship of his sufferings, being made like him in his death, sharing in the power of his resurrection and ultimately being conformed to his image.*

I want to say to you this morning that because union with Christ is so close to the heart of Paul's understanding of the Christian life and the gospel ministry, suffering with Christ *is* the pattern of gospel ministry. You are ordained into sharing in the sufferings of Christ and in the triumph of Christ. You do not have the former without experiencing also the latter, even though that triumph and glory and fruitfulness may be invisible to you, and even invisible during the course of your ministry. And you do not ever have the genuine triumph and fruitfulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, in the power of resurrection grace, without being willing to share in the sufferings of Jesus Christ. Because the Jesus Christ we all long to know — how hard it is to dawn upon our distempered souls! — the only Jesus Christ who ever was upon the earth and who now is in heaven is the one who entered into glory through suffering. The one who was crucified in order that he might be fruitful. He became a grain of wheat who fell into the ground and died in order that it might bring forth much fruit.

And as we close, let me show you where Paul makes this abundantly evident, in 2 Corinthians 4:10–12. He says we face many problems. "We're afflicted on every side, but we're not driven to despair and we are perplexed. We're persecuted, but we're not forsaken." We are as J. B. Phillips paraphrased it "We are struck down, but not struck out." "We are always carrying in the body the dying of Jesus." Now the translators back off from that. That sounds a little too mystical for most evangelical translators, but that's what Paul says. "We are always carrying around in our bodies the dying of Jesus."

It's as though he's saying that union with Jesus Christ leaves an impression on the life of the gospel minister. And these chapters are about the life of the gospel minister in which the dying of Jesus is emblazoned on our lives. That's why we shouldn't complain about it. It's what we were ordained into. "As we carry around in our body the dying of Jesus, it is in order that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our bodies. For we who are alive are always given over to death for Jesus' sake so that the life of Jesus might be

manifested in our mortal flesh." So — here it is — in union with Jesus Christ: death, death, death, death *works in us*. In order that life, life, life, life *might work in them*. And so we might say that Paul's union with Christ is the very epicenter of how he views Christian ministry. The lens in the spectacles with which he views what it means to be a gospel minister is that as one united to Jesus Christ. *I have 20/20 vision on my experience. Because the lens of carrying around Jesus' death is in my right eye and the lens of sharing in Jesus' victory is in my left eye.* And it is these two lenses, not one without the other, because thinking that we were sharing in the dying of the Lord Jesus without knowing that this is the way of fruitfulness would crush us. And then thinking that we can share in the triumph of Jesus Christ would be a pastoral-realized eschatology that would make us lose our central gravity in the gospel in our sharing with him in his union.

I asked at the beginning how it was that Paul came to this. I ask at the end how Paul came to this in particular. And I think it's the same answer. Yes, it's the providences of God; yes, it's coming to faith in Jesus Christ; yes, it's the work of the Holy Spirit. But yes, it's someone else, isn't it? When he first saw a man literally carrying around in his body the dying of Jesus, in whom death worked in order that life might work in others. What did Stephen ever do for the Christian Church except extraordinary miracles and terrific debate? Answer: the Apostle Paul. You think about so many of the characters in church history, your heroes, and you know all about them because you've read biographies, but even the biographers often don't know who died in order that they might live. Some of you know one of my life-long theological heroes has been John Owen. John Owen never knew the name of the man he heard preach, who preached him into assurance of gospel grace. Nobody knows the name of that man. And I'm sure if he knew anything and spotted Owen in the congregation, he died several times, but life was born and many of our lives have been changed.

Well, this is our calling. It is fearful. But it's also — is it not? — most glorious. Who would not die if this is the fruit of our dying in union with Jesus Christ? Who would not live in any other way than by being united to him in his death and resurrection?

Heavenly Father, thank you that you have not only united us by your Spirit to our Lord Jesus Christ, but in your word, you have began to teach us, as we have studied these things, how marvelous not only our identity as Christians is, but how amazing is the pattern that you have set for us as gospel ministers.

Lord, we are often sore and crushed and perplexed, but we thank you that out of the darkness you bring life, and out of the death you bring resurrection. We know that nothing that refuses to die can ever be raised again from the dead.

And we pray that in this Spirit we may yield more and more to our crucified Savior, and more and more enter into our share in the triumph of his resurrection, so that anything that is lacking in us of our fellowship in the sufferings of Christ may be filled up in order that anything that is lacking in your ordination of our fruitfulness may come to pass in our ministries. And to this we commit one another with thankfulness in Jesus' name. Amen.