

OPENING SCRIPTURE: “If anyone is **IN CHRIST**, there exists a new creation; the old things are passed away, and something new has come into existence” – 2 Corinthians 5:17.

INTRODUCTION: THE NEW BIRTH by which we are transitioned from a position in ADAM to a new position in CHRIST, is **NO LESS** a creative act than the creation of the universe was a divine creative act.

SO THE PRACTICAL QUESTION WE WANT TO ANSWER TODAY IS ... WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

A key word for us this morning is the Greek term ζωή (*pronounced ZOË*). The simplest translation of this word is **LIFE**, but if you trace the linguistic development of the term (*e.g., as it is described in the Greek Lexicons¹*) you will find it carries a much deeper meaning than simply ‘biological life.’ Certainly it can be used to mean ‘physical existence,’ but the Greek word means more than our simple word – **LIFE** – *It means ‘the absolute fullness of life.’*

The entry for ζωή (*ZOË*) in *The Greek-English Lexicon by Arndt and Gingrich* begins with references to ‘life-in-general,’ but soon transitions to New Testament occurrences where *ZOË* carries supernatural elements in its meaning. For example:

- This word appears twice in the opening verses of JOHN’S GOSPEL, specifically in the phrase: ‘In Him was **LIFE** (ζωή), and **THE LIFE** (ζωή) was **THE LIGHT** of men” – *John 1:4*.
- **THIS LIFE** is **THE LIFE OF THE LOGOS – THE LIVING WORD** – who stepped into human history when ‘**THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND DWELLED AMONG US**’ – *John 1:14*.

JESUS HIMSELF said in the 10TH CHAPTER OF JOHN: “I came that they may have **LIFE**, and have it abundantly” – *John 10:10^B*.

THEN IN JOHN’S FIRST EPISTLE, the Apostle wrote: “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of **THE SON OF GOD**, so you may know you have **ETERNAL LIFE**” – *1 John 5:13*.

AND I WANT YOU TO NOTICE WHAT PAUL WROTE IN ROMANS 6:4; HE WROTE:

*Therefore we have been buried with HIM through **baptism into death**, so that as CHRIST was raised from the dead through the glory of THE FATHER, so we too might ‘WALK IN NEWNESS OF LIFE.’*

Finally, *still* under the heading, ‘supernatural life,’ the discussion in *Arndt and Gingrich* moves to the lives of believers, lives that proceed from the life of **CHRIST**, the incarnate Word (λόγος / *LÓGOS*).

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There is a commonly held MYTH THAT BEING A CHRISTIAN is a boring existence. And there is some truth to the MYTH if we look at LIFE from an unbeliever’s point of view. But where THIS ILLUSION MISSES THE MARK is pointed out clearly in the verse we just read from ROMANS, for there PAUL refers to THE CHRISTIAN LIFE by the phrase, ‘**IN NEWNESS OF LIFE.**’

And who among us does not like the idea of something new.

One of the oft-missed benefits of God’s forgiveness is ‘*we are not trapped in our own pasts.*’ There may be consequences of past failures that extend into the present – or even into the future – but the Christian Life is a life of new beginnings – and every day is a new day to be thankful for

¹ Arndt, William F., Gingrich, F. Wilbur, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, The University of Chicago Press, 1957, Pgs. 340-41.

God's great blessings. But as we mature in our faith, GOD CHANGES US; He alters how we see the world, and He amends what we consider 'A GOOD LIFE.'

- What we find to be *fulfilling* changes; what we find *interesting* changes.
- What we *enjoy doing* changes.
- The people we *desire* to be around changes – and it is not uncommon to find converts to the faith – *over time* – migrating to a completely different set of friends.

★ This is what unbelievers do not understand when evaluating THE CHRISTIAN LIFE, and why THE AFOREMENTIONED MYTH THAT CHRISTIANITY IS BORING does not hold true for us.

THIS ALSO IS WHY PAUL WRITES IN THE NEXT CHAPTER OF COLOSSIANS: "*Set your mind on things above, not on the things of earth.*" – *Colossians 3:2*. This speaks to an altered worldview that reflects the new creation God brought into existence when he transferred us from THE KINGDOM OF DARKNESS TO THE KINGDOM OF LIFE AND LIGHT IN HIS SON.

This transformation demands change, not just a change in attitude, but a change in what we value ... so the new birth dramatically affects how we live our lives.

PAUL writes in EPHESIANS:

In reference to your former manner of life, lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind by putting on the new self that has been created in righteousness and holiness in the likeness of God Himself – Ephesians 4:22-24.

EXEGESIS [READ COLOSSIANS 2:8-17] –

I. CIRCUMCISION: The first thing PAUL mentions in *Colossians 2:11* is 'CIRCUMCISION' – He refers to it as 'A CIRCUMCISION MADE WITHOUT HANDS.' Then in *VERSE 14*, he speaks about 'A CERTIFICATE OF DEBT CONSISTING OF DECREES AGAINST US' ... (A CERTIFICATE OF DEBT THAT WAS 'NAILED TO THE CROSS'). And finally, in *Colossians 2:17*, PAUL cites 'A BODY OF RELIGIOSITY' (consisting of what we eat and drink, and what religious holidays are celebrated, mentioning specifically 'THE SABBATH') and he deems these things 'SHADOWS OF A GREATER REALITY.' Notice the language:

1. His use of the term 'SHADOWS' ...
2. His reference to 'A CERTIFICATE' that is associated with JESUS' DEATH ON THE CROSS ... (but it is a document that was not physically nailed to the cross) ...
3. And his reference to 'CIRCUMCISION' in a way that does not mean 'the physical act itself' –

This unusual 'phrasing' indicates PAUL is referring to spiritual realities that go beyond the normal physical and material use of these terms.

The way PAUL uses language in *VERSES 11, 13 and 14* gives us a valid basis when we read in *VERSE 12*: 'having been buried with him in baptism' – and – 'in which (i.e., by baptism) you also were raised up with him through faith' ... to understand *VERSE 12* is not referring to *physical water baptism*, but to a spiritual identification with THE ATONING WORK OF JESUS ON THE CROSS. Thus it calls our attention to the spiritual accomplishments of JESUS – i.e., to what His death accomplished *spiritually* for believers. In other words, the spiritual reality of the Atonement is a more complete reality than any physical experiences that may have led up to it.

★ Now let me be clear: **OUR FAITH IS A FAITH GROUNDED IN ACTUAL HISTORY.** I AM NOT SUGGESTING A HERMENEUTIC THAT SPIRITUALIZES OR ALLEGORIZES THE REVEALED WORD

OF GOD. I AM SAYING THE ACTUAL HISTORICAL EVENTS THAT ARE FOUNDATIONAL TO CHRISTIANITY POINT TO AN EVEN GREATER REALITY THAT IS SPIRITUAL IN NATURE.

Said another way: *WHAT WE SEE AROUND US IS NOT ALL THAT THERE IS.*

So our context for today's lesson is A NEW REALITY in the form of A NEW CREATION that changes us – and this change is grounded in one thing only: THE CROSS – and as a result, THE OLD SELF – i.e., *what we were before we came to faith in CHRIST* – has been put to death with Him.

In **VERSE 11**, PAUL describes this *NEW CREATION* as resulting from 'THE CIRCUMCISION OF CHRIST.' (This is what is known as 'A SUBJECTIVE GENITIVE'). In other words, what is in view is a circumcision *BY CHRIST* – an act performed *BY HIM not TO HIM*.

By 'THE CIRCUMCISION OF CHRIST,' he means, 'an act of faith on the part of the believer' of which *CHRIST IS THE PRIME MOVER*. 'THE CIRCUMCISION OF CHRIST' is not the cutting-away of a small portion of flesh – something every Jewish boy experiences on the eighth day of his life – but *a spiritual circumcision – the spiritual reality physical circumcision was intended to symbolize*. It is what MOSES spoke of in DEUTERONOMY when he said: "Circumcise your heart and stiffen your neck no longer" – *Deuteronomy 10:16*.

To ISRAEL, the physical ritual *symbolized* a separation *from* the world and a separation *unto* God. But even beyond this, CIRCUMCISION WAS A SIGN OF COMMITMENT to others.

★ *The spiritual significance of A CIRCUMCISION MADE WITHOUT HANDS deepens our commitment to God and to others by moving them from the physical sign to an inward transformation.*

II. BAPTISM: Now in **VERSE 12**, PAUL moves from CIRCUMCISION to BAPTISM. Whereas PAUL just spoke of *a circumcision that was not made with hands, i.e., 'circumcision as 'a spiritual rebirth'* to which the physical act was testimony in ISRAEL, here he speaks of *a baptism that does not involve water*, but to which the ordinance of baptism testifies.

★ I want you to notice – nowhere in **VERSE 12** is water mentioned. The use of the term 'BAPTISM' in this passage is symbolic.

In all cultures, and certainly in the Jewish culture, DEATH is SEALED by THE BURIAL OF THE BODY. It is the final step in the separation of the departed from his or her earthly life.

THE ORDINANCE OF BAPTISM, by immersing the new believer in water, symbolizes the burial of the body – And since what is in view here is the idea of identifying with CHRIST, BAPTISM illustrates both THE BURIAL and THE RESURRECTION of the new believer to A NEW LIFE – It is a testimony to THE INDIVIDUAL and to THE CHURCH that in a manner not unlike THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS, that same GREAT HOPE belongs to us individually as CHRISTIANS.

So it is in this sense that every believer has been *'buried symbolically with CHRIST in HIS BAPTISM,'* and then *'symbolically raised up with CHRIST in HIS RESURRECTION.'* And it is this spiritual association – this identification with CHRIST IN THE FULLEST SENSE OF THE ATONEMENT that water baptism symbolizes.

III. THE HUMAN CONDITION: In **VERSE 13**, PAUL returns to the description of EVERY CHRISTIAN'S PREVIOUS STATE – "*You were dead in your transgressions.*"

It is when we fail to remember that from which God has saved us that we get confused about *'Works-righteousness, the Law, Election,'* and *'a true appreciation for THE GRACE OF GOD EXPRESSED BY THE SACRIFICE OF HIS SON AT CALVARY.'*

It is here in **VERSE 13** that PAUL gives us the proper perspective of the gift we have been given.

What PAUL is asserting is ... *'If God has gone so far as to FORGIVE YOU OF YOUR TRANSGRESSIONS; if He has MADE YOU ALIVE TOGETHER with Him through FAITH, even when you were living in the uncircumcision of your flesh, HOW MUCH MORE will He do for you now that you are SPIRITUALLY ALIVE and A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY OF GOD.'* If you want to know how you can be used by THE LORD now that you are saved, consider what He did for you when you were living in the dregs of sin. In this context, take a moment to read **EPHESIANS 2:1-10** – There is nothing God cannot accomplish. And when God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves – that is GRACE. SALVATION is a sovereign act of grace on the part of God. It is not a matter of faith plus works. It is not a matter of belief plus water baptism. *All these things are 'results' not 'causes.'*

IV. REGENERATION AND FORGIVENESS: In **VERSE 14**, PAUL takes one more step to make sure this is clear in the minds of THE COLOSSIANS. **VERSE 14** explains that God did not simply overlook our sins, or in some way 'excuse them.'

Forgiveness by God and forgiveness among humans work differently. If I offend you, I could come to you, apologize, and ask for forgiveness, and there is at least a chance you would do just that – forgive me. Furthermore, human forgiveness may simply involve the setting aside of an offense. Certainly the wages of my offending you or you offending me is not death, followed by some sort of eternal perdition. Beyond this, human forgiveness is imperfect; sometimes offenses we thought were forgiven, reappear years after *the so-called 'forgiveness'* was given, or supposedly given.

But God's ABSOLUTE RIGHTEOUSNESS and His PERFECT JUSTICE do not allow Him to forgive in that manner. Because God is ABSOLUTE RIGHTEOUSNESS, and because ABSOLUTE RIGHTEOUSNESS demands God respond to sin with HIS PERFECT JUSTICE, apologies cannot be the basis for divine forgiveness. The Book of Hebrews is clear: *"Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sins"* (Hebrews 9:22). *For God to forgive you, someone had to die – either you or a substitute.*

Human attributes – (*including how we forgive each other*) – are RELATIVE; DIVINE ATTRIBUTES are ABSOLUTE. This is why God cannot forgive you on the basis of an apology, and this is why God cannot forgive you because you are sorry for your sins. Neither an apology nor any amount of sorrow you can muster will result in divine forgiveness. And it is not just that you cannot be sorry enough; it is that there is no causal relationship between being sorry and receiving God's forgiveness.

Don't misunderstand what I am saying. I am not suggesting you should not be sorry for your sins. Sorrow is a natural response when we look to JESUS for forgiveness. I just want you to understand it is not the basis for how God's forgiveness works.

THE ONLY BASIS FOR GOD FORGIVING YOUR SINS IS THAT JESUS CHRIST DIED ON THE CROSS AS YOUR SUBSTITUTE ... AND HE PAID THE ULTIMATE PRICE BY SHEDDING HIS OWN BLOOD SO FORGIVENESS CAN BE OFFERED TO YOU IN THE MANNER IN WHICH GOD FORGIVES ... So with this in mind, read again **Colossians 2:13-14** –

In order to make this point, PAUL used the phrase, *"having cancelled out THE CERTIFICATE OF DEBT consisting of DECREES against us ..."* THE CERTIFICATE OF DEBT has a two-fold meaning:

- (1) FOR THE JEWS it meant every transgression of THE LAW OF MOSES by the Jewish people.

- (2) FOR THE GENTILES it means every transgression of THE MORAL LAW, which is THAT INNER VOICE that we know as THE CONSCIENCE.

PAUL objectifies this for us in order to make what God has done easy to understand. He objectifies it by the phrase ‘CERTIFICATE OF DEBT.’

By ‘DEBT’ PAUL means *‘something you owe but cannot pay’* – but then that debt disappears!

In order to make the debt disappear, PAUL says ‘GOD NAILED IT TO THE CROSS.’ *This is a graphic way of describing what happened when JESUS was nailed to the Cross and the sins of the world were transferred to Him by means of IMPUTATION.*

THINK OF IT THIS WAY: *You owed an infinite debt and there is no way you could repay it – ever. Then in one stroke, God the Father transferred that debt to God the Son, who by His death on the Cross completely satisfied every requirement demanded by GOD’S PERFECT JUSTICE, and as a result, you now are released from what you rightfully owed.*

If you can understand this, then you can understand the Gospel because that is exactly what God has done.

He took our DEBT – *our sins* – that were hostile to us in that unaddressed they will result in eternal separation from God in eternal punishment – *and He took them out of the way ...* He removed the barrier of separation and adopted us into the very family of God. Because of JESUS, our sins no longer are a matter for consideration; the slate is clean.

PAUL has gone to great lengths to explain to us where we stood before God as members of a fallen human race; He has described to us what JESUS CHRIST has done to remove every barrier that separates us from God; and He has given us tangible examples so we can know exactly where we stand before Him:

Our Sins are Forgiven

The Grave has been Conquered

There is no more Guilt

We have been Made Right with God, and ...

We have within us the very Life of Christ –

The Abundant Life He desires for each of us.

V. THE ANGELIC CONFLICT WAS RESOLVED AT THE CROSS: God not only dealt with the sin-problem, making an abundant life possible ... He also has triumphed over our enemies.

Now to grasp the full meaning of this, I need to refresh our collective memories by citing a verse from **EPHESIANS CHAPTER SIX:**

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenlies – Ephesians 6:12.

In **COLOSSIANS 2:15** PAUL explains how **THE FINAL DEFEAT OF LUCIFER** took place ... and there are two aspects to this defeat.

In **THE NASB** – at the end of **VERSE 15** – we see the phrase *‘through Him’ ... ‘having triumphed ... through Him’* (referring to **CHRIST**).

But there are *two ways* this phrase can be translated²: (1) It can be translated, **‘THROUGH HIM’** (as in the NASB) or (2) it can be translated, **‘THROUGH IT’** (as in the NIV). The pronoun (either **‘HIM’** or **‘IT’**) is written in THE DATIVE CASE and it can be MASCULINE or NEUTER in terms of GENDER.

In Greek, you cannot distinguish between the masculine and neuter forms of a relative pronoun – they are written the same way. So context becomes the determining factor in how to translate the phrase.

In **VERSE 14** – we see what I think is a better antecedent, viz., the word **CROSS** ... and it also is written in THE DATIVE CASE. So I believe the better sense of **VERSE 15** is, “When **JESUS** had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through **THE CROSS**.” It is **CHRIST** who prevailed, and He prevailed by what He accomplished when He died on the **CROSS**.

VI. THE HEART OF THE MATTER: LIBERTY OR THE LAW: The title of today’s lesson is **LIBERTY OR THE LAW** ... Up to now, everything has been building to answer this question, because how you answer this question is a good spiritual barometer for measuring how well you understand the challenges of **THE CHRISTIAN LIFE**.

WE HAVE LIBERTY that never could have been ours under any mystical system or legalistic system of **WORKS-RIGHTEOUSNESS**.

At the beginning of our lesson, we asked the question, **WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?** Well **PAUL** tells us in **ROMANS** ... HE WRITES:

*Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, “**FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED.**” But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us.*

*For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord
– Romans 8:35-39.*

IN CHAPTER 2 VERSE 8 **PAUL** warned **THE COLOSSIANS** not to be deceived by **FALSE TEACHERS** who were misleading some in the church with new philosophies and false perceptions about God and forgiveness. **PAUL** now brings this warning to a head in **VERSES 16-17**.

He tells the people *‘Do not let others judge you with respect to food, drink, the observation of religious festivals, or even the Sabbath.’*

Some of the false teachers in **COLOSSAE** were making the case that there were hostile angels – or at the very least ... hostile forces in the world that could be defeated through the observation of certain religious festivals, through legalism, and as we will see next week, through asceticism.

WELL THEY WERE HALF-RIGHT; FALSE TEACHING MANY TIMES IS BASED ON HALF-TRUTHS, WHICH IS WHY IT CAN BE HARD TO CATCH. Therefore, be diligent and test all theology by the Scriptures ... not by how much you like the teacher or by how the message may affect you emotionally ... neither of these things is sufficient to prevent theological error from creeping into the Church.

² The pronoun *αὐτός* (*autos*) is written *αὐτῷ* (*autō* – Dative Singular) – and as written, it is either masculine [and therefore is a reference to Christ] or it can be neuter [and therefore is a reference back to verse 14 where Paul mentions the cross].