

Christ Beside Us

Christ and No More | July 1, 2018 | Bryce Beale

The resurrection reminds us of several important points. The moving of the immovable stone says, “Nothing will be impossible with God.” The living footsteps of the Savior in the garden before the tomb echo the sentiment of the green grass and the glowing sun: in a world that dwells in the shadow of death, life prevails. The white linens are folded neatly in the grave, for God’s purposes are fulfilled properly and in order.

But one resurrective point makes up the subject matter of this present lesson, and it is provided in the terse words of J.I. Packer:

Now, [he writes,] when the New Testament tells us that Jesus Christ is risen, one of the things it means is that the victim of Calvary is now, so to speak, loose and at large, so that anyone anywhere can enjoy the same kind of relationship with him as the disciples had in the days of his flesh.¹

When Christians claim that Jesus is alive, they mean he is alive. They should, at least, mean that statement as though it were true, as true as it would be in reference to any other person.

Contrary to the odd notions of mystical mediums and Roman Catholics, we do not commune with the dead. We may carry the memory of the deceased in our hearts, and rightly so; but they are not our daily companions. They inhabit heaven, if they are in Christ, or otherwise they inhabit hell. But they do not inhabit our houses.

My observation is that we Christians, who profess the resurrection, most commonly treat Christ as though he were, for all practical purposes, still dead. Like our dear friends who have fallen asleep in the Lord, we imagine Jesus far away in heaven, cheering us on, but not near enough to be intimately involved in our lives.

We are half right, of course. When the first disciples stood staring into heaven after Jesus disappeared behind the clouds, two men in white robes appeared and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”² If Jesus were here, and not there, we would not be looking forward to his return.

But that’s not the end of the story. For before he lifted into the sky, Jesus told this band of lookers on, “behold, I am with you always, to the

¹ *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), Kindle ed., 40.

² Acts 1:11 (ESV).

end of the age.”³ These are strange words to say just before leaving, and would be dishonest if by “with you” Christ meant, “with you bodily.” If, on the other hand, Jesus only meant, “with you in a sort of sentimental way, in your heart as a memory,” then “with you always” would offer little comfort to those early Christians, and little comfort to us. We would be justified in imagining Jesus as distant.

What does the Savior mean by his assertion that he is “with you always,” even though his body has ascended to the right hand of the Majesty on high? What does it mean that Christ has risen from the dead and is active in the world?

Last week we considered what it means to have a friendship with an invisible friend, and we saw that it is not far different from a friendship with a visible friend. The absence of Christ’s body, while something, is not everything. We can have a meaningful, satisfying friendship with Christ right now, even while we await his bodily return. There is an inexpressible joy available to us now. But we will only feel that joy when we believe that Christ is real, is with us, when by faith we see him in our lives and love what we see.

I noted too last week that our relationship with Christ depends on his words and his deeds, much like all our other relationships. But there is this difference—our other friends are with us bodily. Jesus is not. I said this is not a huge difference, but it remains to prove that claim. Today, then, I want to talk about the actions of Jesus in our day-to-day experience, and next week I will turn to his words.

If we would be satisfied by a relationship with Jesus, we must begin to believe that he has in fact exited the grave not just to retreat into heaven, but so that he might be with us always, working in our lives.

The Spirit of Christ

How then is Christ with us? What does he mean in saying, “I’ll never leave you!” just before his body disappears into heaven?

I answer: Christ is with us through the Spirit.

That answer itself can be understood in two ways. You will remember that Jesus, when he assumed the body of a human within the womb of Mary, perfectly and mysteriously conjoined two natures. You and I have one nature—we are humans, and we have human natures, either fallen or redeemed. But Jesus, from the moment of his miraculous conception, has existed with two natures, one human and the other divine. This we

³ Matt. 28:20.

term the hypostatic union, since two natures coexist as one person or subsistence, the Greek of which is *hypostasis*.⁴

Therefore we can make statements like the following: when Christ was on earth, he was always in exactly one place *according to his human nature*, but at the same time, he was always everywhere *according to his divine nature*. For God is omnipresent, he is everywhere. So as a spiritual being, as God, Jesus was always in all places invisibly. But once he was born as a man, he was also, according to his human nature, in just one place.

The same is true at present, for Jesus has seen fit to retain our nature and will do so forever. He is still both God and man. So is Jesus present in this room at this moment? According to his human nature, as a man, he is not. He is in heaven, at the right hand of the Father, interceding for his saints, and we await his return. But I ask again, is Jesus present in this room at this moment? Absolutely. He is here according to his divine nature, as God. Why can't we see him? Because God is Spirit—he is not visible to these mortal eyes. But he is here, and he sees and hears all. That is the first way to understand the Savior as present in the Spirit.

But there is another way warranted by the biblical evidence. For although we may rightly say God is here among us, Scripture shows that God wants us to see his presence with us now as accomplished through the special work of the third member of the Godhead—that is, the Holy Spirit. Ah! We are trying to strum the chords of infinitude, and if we make an awful sound in doing it we are to blame, not God. But bear with my human tongue a bit longer, and you will see why it keeps flapping.

Consider these few lines of inspired writ from the pen of Paul, in Romans 8:

You, however, are not in the flesh but in *the Spirit*, if in fact *the Spirit of God* dwells in you. Anyone who does not have *the Spirit of Christ* does not belong to him. But if *Christ* is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If *the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead* dwells in you, *he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead* will also give life to your mortal bodies *through his Spirit* who dwells in you.

I tell you, we are uttering mysteries! And I don't offer these mysteries to confuse you—neither does God. Rather, let's gather one berry from this bush and not lose ourselves in the million leaves and branches. What I

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Bible Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press, Zondervan, 2004), Logos ed., 558.

wish for you to see in this passage is that the Spirit of God, in this age, is the particular member of the Trinity who indwells God's people. But, at the same time, Paul can speak of the Spirit as mediating Christ. He is the Spirit of Christ.

Why should we care? Because we are longing to be satisfied in Jesus, and we mean to do it by fanning the embers of our love for him. Little can so fan those embers as the conviction that Christ is present with you, every day, in all the affairs of your life, caring and guiding and leading. He is not distant. "But," you say, "he is distant, far away in heaven." And I am trying to answer that objection, though it is not easy to answer in few words. I want you to see from Scripture that Jesus is not *merely* distant. He is with you, as he promised his disciples he would be.

And he is with you specifically in the Spirit. You who are filled with the Spirit of God, you can be equally sure that you are filled with Christ. You can state with the apostle, and state boldly, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."⁵ Here you have been living your life as if you were alone, an individual among individuals. But when you close the door to your bedroom and sit solitarily there, you are not solitary at all. The most essential being, Christ Jesus, God himself, is with you—no, more, is in you. If the Spirit is in you, then Christ is in you.

"Well," someone points out, "it doesn't feel like he's there." Yes, and it doesn't feel like we are being flung around the sun on a gravitational sling, either, but so we are. As we said last lesson, faith is the environment in which we love Christ, because he is invisible. Therefore Paul, knowing full well that Christ dwells within his people, could still pray "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith."⁶ Christ is there, but you don't know he's there until you know he's there. His presence doesn't alter the course of your life very much until by faith you are slapped in the face with the reality of it.

That slap is the reason we are gathered this morning, and the reason I am speaking. My aim is to stir up within you a conviction that Christ is with you, and is active in your life. I hope I have begun to convince you of the first part of that statement, that he is with you; now we must move on to the second, that he is active in your life.

The deeds of Christ

Christ is with us always; now, what does it mean that he is at work? His body is absent, so we do not see the movement of his limbs, or the

⁵ Gal. 2:20.

⁶ Eph. 3:17.

expression of his face. How does he work in the lives of his disciples today?

For an answer I must direct you to a fascinating passage, one of the very last that the Apostle Paul ever wrote. As he neared the end of his course, Paul found himself imprisoned in Rome. The sword awaited him and would reach his neck in a short time; but already Paul had stood trial before his accusers and had, he claims, won the battle.

Hear his report of the event:

At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.⁷

It is probable that every person present at this trial saw no more than a lonely, deserted man condemned by his kinsman. Perhaps they knew the sword would be his fate. To them, this may have been a sad situation and Paul was the loser in it. But Paul did not see it that way. By faith, Christ dwelt in his heart; he was convinced that Christ was present, but not just present, standing idly by. He believed that Christ was present and active, though invisibly, much as any living friend would be.

"The Lord," he says, "stood by me"—there is his real presence, in the Spirit—"and strengthened me...So," he concludes, "I was rescued from the lion's mouth." Paul can use "Lord" to mean the Father, but in this context he is clearly speaking of Christ.⁸ Jesus was not only present—he did something!

⁷ 2 Tim. 4:16-18.

⁸ See 2 Timothy 4:1, "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom." Christ Jesus is the one who will judge the living and the dead. Therefore when we read in verse 8 Paul saying that "the Lord" will reward him for his faithful service, and in verse 14 that "the Lord" will repay Alexander for his evil deeds, we can conclude that, in this context, "the Lord" refers to Christ Jesus. Furthermore, 4:1 speaks of "his appearing and his kingdom." The first item, "appearing," shows that the antecedent of the first "his" must be specifically Christ, and thus the second, parallel item's "his" will mean "Christ's"—i.e. Christ's kingdom. Therefore when Paul says in our present passage that "[t]he Lord will...bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom," we should understand the antecedent of "his" to be "Christ," yet the passage itself offers by proximity

What did he do? Well, two things. First, he did something within Paul. He influenced his will; he made the man more determined to proclaim, and to proclaim well, the gospel with which he was entrusted. So Christ works within us, to will and to work for his good pleasure. He is making us want to do right, and increasing that want, and supporting us as we do it. That is the first thing.

But there is a second, and that occurs outside of Paul. The apostle was inwardly strengthened, and outwardly he was rescued.⁹ More than that, Jesus will rescue Paul from every evil deed—not that he will keep him from physical harm, but he will keep him from the spiritual malice meant by evil deeds. This requires Christ to be working outside of us, in the world around us, to prevent anything from coming near that would spiritually destroy us. If the lion’s mouth that threatens us is the devil, then Jesus restrains that puppet; if it is the devil working through some human agent, then Jesus manipulates that human agent by an exercise of his own sovereign will.

This is precisely what I meant last week when I noted that Jesus does not act in our lives through his own physical body, but rather through his sovereign control of all bodies, of all things. If you want to move a stumbling block from out of my way, you must push on it with your feet or arms; but if Christ wants to do it, he may push on it with your feet or arms, or anyone’s feet or arms, or he may just will it away and it will be gone. He is a sovereign Lord; he can rescue us however he wishes.

The point of everything up to now in this lesson is as follows: if you are a Christian, then Christ is present with you now, and is doing things in your life. If you wonder, “How can I have a meaningful relationship—indeed, a relationship more satisfying than any of my other relationships—with Christ if Christ is not with me in the body?” then here lies the answer: Christ is with you spiritually.

“Yes,” you think, “but it’s still not the same as having a tangible friend.” And I agree. In fact, Jesus agrees. He told his disciples, sad to hear that he was leaving, “it is to your advantage that I go away.”¹⁰ Having Jesus here in the body is not the same as having him here in the Spirit—it is better to have him here in the Spirit. You have quite the advantage over the first disciples, who were merely permitted to walk and talk with the

the antecedent “Lord.” Therefore we can infer that the two, “Christ” and “Lord,” are synonymous in this passage. Christ is the Lord.

⁹ Someone may object that Paul was rescued *by* being strengthened to proclaim the gospel, so that Christ’s work is here isolated to within the apostle himself. However, for Paul to proclaim his message clearly, it would at least be necessary for no external interruption to ruin the proclamation, and so the rescuing would rely at least in part on Christ’s work to prevent external hindrance.

¹⁰ John 16:7.

earthly Jesus. No, Christ is with you in the Spirit, present everywhere you are, never absent from you, so close that we can rightly say he is within you; and he no longer restrains the exercise of his sovereign authority, as he did during his earthly ministry. Now that he has ascended, all things have been put under his feet. He has, as we read in Ephesians, “ascended far above all the heavens”—not to get away from the world and from us, but rather, “that he might fill all things.”¹¹

St. Patrick was a missionary to Ireland in the fifth century A.D. At that time Ireland was a pagan nation, run by Irish Kings who took their counsel from druids, a sort of magic-working intelligentsia. As Patrick spread the gospel across Ireland, he faced intense opposition, at least in part from these druids. Legends have arisen which pit Patrick against his druid foes in great contests, but we do not know which, if any, of these legends are true.

We do know, however, that Patrick lived a dangerous life. “Daily,” he wrote, “I expect murder, fraud or captivity...” Yet Patrick lived with a vivid sense of God’s presence and, we might say, by extension, of Christ’s presence. The most famous of all writings attributed to Patrick is called the *Lorica*, or “Patrick’s Breastplate.” It is a prayer for protection, and though it may or may not have been written by Patrick himself, scholars tend to agree that it is rather reflective of his attitude and life.¹²

One part of the prayer reads,

Christ with me,
Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right,
Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down,
Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,

¹¹ Eph. 4:10.

¹² Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, “Patrick: Patron Saint of Ireland,” *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* ((Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 229-31.

Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.¹³

This is the heart we must foster if we want to find in Christ a well of complete satisfaction. The first step is just to believe that he's there, and the next small step is to believe his being there matters, to see him active in all the affairs of your life.

Conclusion

An awareness of Christ is born in us when we choose to see in the ordinary happenings of Wednesday the influence of a very present Savior. You can see an unusually joyful time in Scripture and prayer Wednesday morning as the consequence of a good breakfast, or of a nice cup of coffee. Those factors may be in play, but the believing heart sees Christ in them, and around them, and behind them. The believer says, "Thank you Christ, for strengthening me to believe your words, and to enjoy you in them, and to cast my burdens upon you!" Jesus is there with you Wednesday, and he did that! He actually did that.

A little later in the day, perhaps you leave your place of employment and come to your car in the parking lot, only to find a new scratch across its side. You can see that as no more than misfortune, or an accident combined with a conscience-less driver. Or you can say, "Jesus, I wonder why you have brought this about, or allowed this to be. What are you meaning to teach me? How are you scheming for my good in this circumstance?" That is the pulse of the loving heart that knows its Prince is near.

This then is how Christ acts in our lives. He is present in the Spirit, he works within us, he works around us, and there are no limitations to his activity. But of course this opens another important question. Not all the things that happen in our life are pleasant. For example, sometimes our car door does get dinged. If we are to see in all the events in life the sovereign intentionality of Christ, wouldn't some of these suggest that Christ is unkind, or is against us? Since Jesus is not here to explain his reasons for what he does, how are we to interpret the events we experience? How are we to hear the voice of Christ?

The answer to that question we will pick up next week.

¹³ Qtd. in Bob Kellemen, "St. Patrick's Morning Prayer: The Lorica," *rpmministries.org*, RPM Ministries (March 13, 2012; accessed June 30, 2018).