



One Safe in Christ

Imagine a painting of a house. The house is engulfed by threatening storm clouds and lightning, and is being buffeted by the weather. One brilliant white flash of lightning strikes a large tree in the background, the surrounding scenery is blown about by the wind and there are lashes of rain hitting the sides of the house. But in the midst of that dangerous storm, the sturdy house is a secure and peaceful place. It is a haven in the storm. The lights are on inside, and they shine golden through the windows.

This scene of storm and threat is a biblical image of judgement. The house represents Christ. The gospel invites us into that house, so that we might be hidden from the storm of God's judgement. In that house we find peace and safety – absolute protection from the deadly storm outside.



That is the gospel invitation: come into Christ, escape from judgement and enjoy great blessing. Outside is the threat of deluge, of being struck by lightning or blown away by a typhoon. Every conceivable image of danger is outside of the house. But *in* that house, you are secure. Nothing is going to break through the shelter of that house. Inside, there is blessing. There is food, warmth, comfort. Everything is to be enjoyed there, inside the house.

This is a simple depiction of the *locational* view of union with Christ. Over the next two chapters we will look at four important aspects of what union with Christ means: location, representation, relationship and presence with God. In doing so, we will see two things. First, we will see that union with Christ is not simply a New Testament idea: rather, it is a great truth which echoes and fulfils themes that have been running all the way through the Bible. Second, we will see that our union with Christ in the Spirit is the foundation of all our security and blessing in the gospel.

LOCATION

Eden

Genesis 2 tells the story of creation. On two occasions the narrator shows God placing man in a garden. The first one is in verse 8: 'Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed.' The second is verse 15: 'The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.' The repetition here is striking, because the second one follows the first so closely: 'and there he put the man'; 'God took the man and put him in the garden'.

Two things in particular are worthy of note. First, the Lord's deliberate, purposeful action. Man didn't simply *end up* in the garden. He didn't stumble upon it as he was looking for a place to call his own. The Lord planted a garden, and then put man there. It is quite clear that the garden was planted for Adam. It was to be humanity's home.

Second, it was *a garden*. The word depicts an enclosed area that conjures up images of a park, surrounded by a hedge. The Lord had made the universe vast and complex. In that unfathomable expanse, He placed Planet Earth. And on that planet, with a surface area of over 510,000,000 sq. km, the Lord planted a garden where He placed the first man.

It is helpful to note, as G.K. Beale points out, that garden imagery in the Ancient Near East represented temples and royalty.¹ In Genesis we see God's very presence there in Eden – God the King, presiding in His temple-house. In that place there is security and blessing for Adam and Eve. Beale says that 'the Garden of Eden was the first archetypal temple in which the first man worshipped God.'²

That garden is described in a striking way in verse 9: 'The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food.' It is a place of abundance and provision. Man could live there and want for nothing. It wasn't too long before the man was joined in this place of grace by God's kindest

1 Beale's *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 17, Apollos/IVP, 2004) is an excellent resource for further exploring these themes.

2 Ibid., p. 66.

gift to him, Eve. French theologian Henri Blocher makes the point that ‘we are to understand that no riches of any sort are lacking in Eden’.³ Everything was as it should be there in the garden.

When sin came in, however (Genesis 3), and God visited Adam and Eve in grace and judgement, He expelled them from the garden, on the east side (3:24).

The Land of Promise

In Genesis 11, we read the curious story of Babel. The restless human race finds an expansive plain, settles there and holds the first global conference. Two points are worth mentioning from this passage. First, the decision to settle was in direct contradiction of the command to ‘fill the earth’. Second, the migration is said to be ‘eastward’ (v. 2).

So far in Genesis, ‘east’ has proved to be a significant marker, cf. 2:8; 3:24; 4:16; 10:30. The writer is not primarily interested in geographical detail or in historical accuracy (though neither of these is irrelevant). Rather, the scene is being set for a significant reversal.

Once more, as in 3:8, at the very point of sin, the Lord comes to His people in both grace and judgement. Then, out of this migrating mass of humanity, He calls Abraham out of Ur, in the general vicinity of Babel, and makes some remarkable promises. Integral to those promises is a land:

Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you,

³ Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning* (InterVarsity Press, 1984), p. 114.

and him who dishonours you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ (Gen. 12:1-3)

The Lord led Abraham and brought him into Canaan. There, the Lord promised that Abraham’s children and descendants would inherit that land (v. 7). The story of Abraham, from that point onwards, is about him learning to trust in God and the promises the Lord makes. But these promises are neither other-worldly nor insubstantial. They concern a specific, locatable piece of real estate. It was in that land that Abraham and his descendants would be blessed.

As we have seen, in Eden the man and woman had everything for the taking – fruit which they could simply pluck (Gen. 1:29-30). But after the perplexing act of disobedience, the Lord cursed the earth so that it yielded its fruit reluctantly. Man could still eat of it, but he would now be able only to eke out an existence: it would be harvested only through thorns and thistles, and by blood, sweat and tears.

The land the Lord promised Abraham, however, was different. It is described as ‘a land flowing with milk and honey’ (Deut. 11:9). In that land, God promised Abraham’s descendants to bless the fruit of their womb, their crops, their wine, their oil and their livestock (Deut. 7:13). Everything the people considered rich and sumptuous would be there for the taking. It seemed too good to be true. It was as if God was saying, ‘You know the land of Eden, where I placed your relatives – the land I’m giving you now is like that.’ It was as though it would be a place that didn’t know God’s curse.

This is why He did not lead His people out of Egypt to Mount Sinai and then tell them to wander around the

wilderness for a while and decide where they wanted to live. There was only one place that was ordained for them: it was in the land that they would be blessed.

Judgement

Psalm 37:3 says this: 'Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture' (NIV). The context of the people of Israel was an agrarian one; their herds were a means of wealth and production. The idea that you could leave your flock to graze in safety was a glorious mark of God's blessing. There 'in the land' is the location of God's blessing.

But when the Lord judged Israel because of their faithlessness, He raised up enemies against them and through them provided warnings and tasters that the land would be the focus of His judgement as well as His grace. The land was the means by which God mediated His blessings on His people, but 'in the land' was also the place where He mediated His judgement. Exclusion from the land was God's ultimate judgement: 'How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?', the people lament in Psalm 137. Being in exile, outside of the land, destroyed the very sense of identity of the people of God.

The Old Testament ends on a negative note. The people of Israel are back in the land: God's promises of a return to Canaan have proved true. Yet things aren't as they should be because the people are still rebelling, as the final chapters of Nehemiah show vividly. Nehemiah desperately tries to cleanse the people of their Sabbath-breaking and inter-marriage with the idolatrous Moabites. And yet we sense that this will be a fruitless effort. God's people are not loving God well and faithfully. There are 400 years of silence – and then Matthew's Gospel opens.

Christ Jesus

Everything we read about in Matthew takes place ‘in the land’, the same land promised to Abraham thousands of years earlier. Equally significant is that all that God had promised to Abraham and his progeny occurs ‘in the land’. The birth of the Messiah is ‘in the land’. In the third and fourth chapters of Matthew, Jesus’ baptism and temptation are ‘in the land’. Baptism by John in the River Jordan conjures up memories of the route by which the people of Israel entered the land in the first place. In a sense, with Jesus as the true Son of God, this was a homecoming, a return from exile, a new beginning. Jesus begins His ministry ‘in the land’, and it becomes once again a land of blessing. The dead are raised. The hungry are fed. The sick are healed. Sins are forgiven. The land was now, at last, the place it was meant to be.

But then something almost inexplicable happens. After Acts 8, with the persecution of Stephen, the church is scattered. And now this land, which is so prominent all the way through the Old Testament and even through the four Gospels, disappears from view. We do not find any more references to being ‘in the land’. Suddenly, something significant becomes simply insignificant! Why is this?

It has been replaced by that to which it pointed – Jesus. Being ‘in Christ’ is the refrain echoing through the pages of the New Testament. Being ‘in the land’ was just a hint – an indication, a promise – of God’s ultimate blessing which comes to us in Christ. So in Ephesians 1:3 we read that ‘we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus.’

Going back to our first illustration, that house is a place of blessing. Everything your heart desires is there, ‘in

Christ'. The gospel call is saying those two things: come into Christ where you will have blessing; come into Christ and therefore escape from judgement. G. K. Beale points out that Christ is now the temple – the same dwelling-place of God which is imaged in Eden. This temple, and therefore locational, imagery stretches throughout the whole of the biblical narrative:

The Edenic imagery describing the city-temple in Revelation 22:1-3 also reflects an intention to show that the building of the temple that began in Genesis 2 but was abandoned, will be commenced again and completed in Christ and his people, and will encompass the whole new creation.⁴

Not only was Jesus born in the land, and not only did He live and minister in the land, He also died there. In His death He was cut off from the land: exiled, as it were. The exile to Babylon of up to 40,000 Jews in 586 B.C. was just a foretaste and precursor of this ultimate exile. Jesus was outside of the city, He was cut off from the people. He was the ultimate reject. As He was lifted up on the cross, earth rejected Him and the doors of heaven were closed to Him. In those hours of darkness, stranded and skewered, when even His Father turned His face from Him, He became the ultimate cursed one.

He endured judgement, and we died with Him. As those 'in Christ' – united with Him by His Spirit, through faith – when He died, we died. Just as there is blessing 'in Christ', so too Christ is the one who mediates God's judgement. Because we are 'in Him', we are secure. Jesus took the judgement in Himself; He bore the judgement instead of us. We are safe 'in Him'. We no longer have to

⁴ G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission*, p. 170.

fear God's judgement. God the Father turned His face in anger from His Son 2,000 years ago at Calvary. Because of this the Father will never turn His face from us in anger nor reject us for our sin.

That is the glory of what it is to be in Christ. This is a very rich biblical theme. Whenever you read about the land in the Old Testament, remember that it is there to point you to what it means to be 'in Christ' in the gospel. Whatever blessings the Israelites enjoyed in the land are nothing compared to the blessings we enjoy 'in Christ'.⁵

REPRESENTATION

Representation is a difficult concept for those of us living in a western context to grasp. We understand individual responsibility, partly because we are so immersed in a culture of individualism. We are committed to individualism. We can accept that if we personally do something wrong, we should suffer for it. But the thought that we should suffer for what someone else did, or that someone else should suffer for us, is an alien idea.

Think of the Olympic Games, however. The concept of representation is very clear in that sporting event. The athletes do not compete simply as individuals, running, swimming, fighting, jumping, riding, throwing or leaping for their own glory. When we talk about the Olympics with our friends, we commonly use language such as: 'We won three medals last night', or, 'It was sad that we lost out on that gold – but we won silver for the first time in forty years.' If we know someone from another country,

⁵ For a detailed look at these themes we highly recommend chapters 5 and 6 of Beale's *The Temple and the Church's Mission*. Pages 216-45 are particularly instructive on this topic.

we ask, 'How many medals have you won?' It is clear that we, as individuals, have not won any medals. And yet, we have! The athletes are our representatives. We feel a surge of patriotism because of what they have accomplished.

Representation in Romans

Understanding representation is key to understanding our union with Christ. Jesus represents us. He stands for us: His death is our death and His life is our life. Romans 3:21-24 is profound and wonderful:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

In Romans 3:20 Paul asserts that there is none righteous, not one. All the world is laid level in its sin and need. But in Christ, God gave Himself, and He achieved salvation for us. God's answer to the human predicament, in sin and under judgement, is Christ. There is redemption only 'in Christ'.

Paul goes on to discuss Abraham, showing that it is faith in the promises of God that made Abraham righteous (4:3). And then Paul says that that is exactly the way it is with us:

But the words 'it was counted to him' were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification (4:23-24).

Jesus was there as our substitute. It is through faith, trust and confidence in what God has done in Christ that we are made right with God. 'Therefore,' Paul says in chapter 5, 'since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand' (vv. 1-2). So as we go into this house, which is Christ, we stand in Him – we stand in grace so that judgement will never touch us.

In the second half of chapter 5, Paul then points us to Adam, our first representative: '...sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned' (v. 12). Of course, we know that we all sin. This is the story of the Bible. In Genesis 3, Adam sins. In Genesis 4, Cain repeats that sin, and from then on sin spreads. In Romans chapter 3 Paul has pointed out our individual guilt for personal sin. But that is not what Paul is saying here. Here, Paul is talking about representation. He is saying that when Adam sinned, as our representative, we all sinned. When Adam sinned it wasn't just his future that was being determined, but the future of all humanity. The whole of humanity were there 'in Adam', as our representative head. His failure is our problem. Our sin, the individual sin that we commit, is because in Adam we sinned. The sin that we commit is a consequence of the sin that Adam committed. It isn't simply that we repeat Adam's sin, though we do do that. Rather, he set the tone for all human experience. Because of Adam we are born into an environment in which sin is the norm. Adam's sin is our sin; and Adam's condemnation is our condemnation.

Paul's principal point, however, is that Adam's failure is not the end of the story. In fact, it is just the beginning. 'But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many

died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many!' (5:15). If Adam as our representative is bad news, Jesus Christ as our representative is glorious.

Paul sees only these two categories: we are either 'in Adam' or we are 'in Christ'. The gospel is God's command and invitation for us to come out of Adam: out of sin and judgement. The gospel is also God's command and invitation for us to come into Christ. The good in Christ is so much better than the bad in Adam.

For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. (5:17)

Paul delights to maximise Christ as the representative head. It is a sorry picture 'in Adam'; it is nothing but glorious 'in Christ'.

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. (5:18)

Paul is driving this point home: it is all about representation. So the question we have to ask is: am I in Adam, or am I in Christ? Who is my representative head? Upon whose work am I depending? To depend on Adam is foolish. The result of what he did was nothing but death, curse, suffering and misery. But if I am in Christ, then the result of what Christ achieved is nothing but this: glory, blessing, life, righteousness. Everything for which our hearts instinctively yearn is true in Christ.