UNITED WITH CHRIST

Romans 6:1–14

Key Verse: 6:5

“For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

For Christians, Easter is the season when we celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus. But for many people, Jesus’ death and resurrection can seem kind of irrelevant. So in this study we want to think about what Jesus’ death and resurrection really mean in our lives today. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word.

I. Dead to sin

Let’s read verse 1. To understand this rhetorical question, we have to look back at the end of chapter 5. Paul wrote, “But where sin increased, grace increased all the more (5:20b). But he knew some people would misunderstand this statement. They’d think his teaching on grace would give them the excuse to remain in their sin. How did Paul respond to this idea? Let’s read verse 2. He says that when we believe in Jesus, we die to sin. But honestly many Christians don’t experience such a death. In fact, sin seems alive and well within us—not dead at all. Sin takes on many forms. Sometimes it leads us to disobey God’s moral or ethical standards. Sometimes it just gives us a general attitude of pride or ingratitude. But when Paul says “we are those who have died to sin,” he didn’t mean all sin is instantaneously removed from our lives. Let’s read verse 6. Here Paul uses the expression “our old self.” This is basically a description of our sinful nature. The last part of verse 6 says we were enslaved to our old sinful nature. Paul uses this expression “old self” in two of his other letters, in Ephesians 4:22 and Colossians 3:9. In both those verses Paul urges Christians to “put off” or “take off” our old self, just like we have to change our old, dirty clothes. It tells us that our old sinful nature isn’t suddenly gone just because we believe in Jesus; it’s something we have to deal with each and every day. Now let’s skip ahead and look at verses 11–12. Here Paul acknowledges that all believers have to face the reality of sin living within us. To overcome it, he tells us to “count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.” But when sin is still alive and well in our mortal bodies, what does it mean to “count ourselves dead” to it? The only way to do this is to remember what Jesus did for us. When we continually remember what he did for us by dying on the cross, we can count ourselves dead to sin.

II. Alive to God in Christ Jesus

How can people chronically entangled in sin become dead to sin and alive to God? Paul says it’s when we are “in Christ Jesus” (11). But how do we become “in” Christ? First of all, Paul mentions baptism. Let’s read verses 3–4. Paul wasn’t saying that the ritual of water baptism has some kind of magic in it to transform us. Rather, baptism is supposed to symbolize what Christ’s death and resurrection do for us. For baptism to be meaningful, we need to understand and accept what it represents. Being submerged in water represents dying with Christ, and coming up out of the water represents being risen with Christ.

We should note that Paul mentions two kinds of baptism here. One is being baptized into Christ Jesus; the other is being baptized into his death. The first kind, being baptized into Christ Jesus, generally means to publicly profess one’s faith in Jesus and join a local body of believers (1Co12:13; Eph4:4–6; Gal3:26–28). The second kind, being baptized into his death, is deeper; it means personally accepting Christ’s death on the cross for my own sin, and accepting his way, the way of the cross, as my own path in life. In these verses Paul emphasizes the second kind of baptism.

Let’s read verse 4 again. Here, the baptism into Christ’s death means, as Paul said back in verse 2, to die to sin. In verse 11 he says that we are “alive to God.” How does Christ’s death cause us to die to sin? Let’s read verse 6 again. When we accept that Christ died in my place, our old self is crucified with him. We can accept this only as a matter of faith. And as we continue to consider Jesus’ suffering and death on a cross, our attitude toward sin changes. We no longer long to enjoy it; instead, we begin to loathe our sin. 1 Peter 2:24 says, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; ‘by his wounds you have been healed.’” When we accept this saving grace in Christ through his death on a cross, the Bible says we’re spiritually “made alive.” Ephesians 2 says that when we lived in our sins, we were spiritually dead. We went along with our peers and with the cultural standards around us. Though we didn’t recognize it, we were living in disobedience to God. Paul goes on to explain in Ephesians 2:4–5: “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.” When we taste the great love, mercy and grace of God shown us through the death of Jesus on a cross, we come alive spiritually. God’s great love, mercy and grace in Christ awaken our souls.

But it isn’t just an emotional experience. According to verse 4, we’re baptized not only into the death of Jesus but also into his resurrection. Let’s read verse 4 once more. Christ’s resurrection actually enables us to change. It not only enables us to stop sinning; it enables us to live a “new life.” Today people start living a new life in many ways. Some move away from their family and all their friends and start completely over somewhere else. Some gain a new life by losing a lot of weight, gaining a certain level of education, or even by winning the lottery. But this new life is a new life in Christ. Verse 6 implies that it involves being given a “new self.” What is this “new self”? Ephesians 4:24 says that it is “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” In that passage Paul goes on to describe this new self and new life: we speak truthfully, we’re not ruled by anger, we no longer steal, we learn to be productive and giving, we use our words to build up others, and we become kind, compassionate and forgiving (Eph4:25–32). Receiving this new self is also a matter of faith. We need to believe that we have a new self in Christ. And by faith in Jesus we need to put on this new self every day.

In verse 5 Paul changes the imagery from baptism to union. Let’s read verse 5 together. In Greek the word “united” literally means “grown together.” This one word teaches that we have a living, organic relationship with Jesus, both in his death and in his resurrection. We grow in sharing his life, his heart, his character and his purpose. It’s similar to Jesus’ words in John 15:5: “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” As we stay focused on Christ and dependent on him, we continue to grow in a deep personal relationship with him, and in his character. His suffering, death and resurrection become more and more real to us.

Let’s read verse 5 again. This verse contains a conditional statement. “If” we are united with Jesus in a death like his, “then” we will be united with Jesus in a resurrection like his. What does this condition mean? Simply put, it means that if we want the new life now and the hope of a glorious resurrection someday in the future, we need to be united with Jesus in a death like his. We can’t skip over sufferings and jump into glory. But what does it mean to be united with Jesus in a death like his? Paul wrote something similar in Philippians 3:10: “I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death…” To be united with Jesus in a death like his, we need to be willing to participate in his sufferings and even to become like him in his death. But what does *that* mean? Jesus suffered not because he did wrong; he suffered on behalf of other guilty people. He was mocked, insulted, humiliated and even tortured. He willingly gave up everything, even his own life, to save people who didn’t deserve saving. To be united with Jesus in a death like his, we need to embrace his sufferings as God allows them into our lives. Paul said in Philippians 3:11 that after participating in Christ’s sufferings and becoming like him in his death, he could somehow attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul set a good example of participating in Christ’s sufferings. He wrote in 2 Corinthians 11:24-29: “Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?” In the next chapter of 2 Corinthians Paul also mentions that he was given “a thorn in the flesh.” It was a source of constant suffering for him. But while enduring this suffering, Paul heard the voice of Jesus telling him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2Co12:9a). Even painful sufferings become an opportunity for us to be more deeply united with Jesus and to experience his grace more.

So in Romans 6 Paul has been describing in various ways the new life we have through being united with Christ. We no longer live willfully in our sin. We begin to hate sin. We experience God’s great love, mercy and grace through the death of Jesus. We become willing to embrace the cross of Jesus, willing to suffer for others the way Jesus did. Finally, we begin a new battle within ourselves, a battle against our old sinful nature. Let’s read verses 12–13. Here, the word “instrument” is literally “weapon.” The new life in Christ is not withdrawn, checked out or just drifting along or going with the flow; it’s a life engaged. It’s a life that pursues being used by God as his instrument or weapon. And why do we do it? It’s because, as Paul says, God brought us from death to life by his amazing grace. As we remember and appreciate God's grace to us in Jesus, we really want to offer ourselves back to God as his instrument.

Today we thought about what Christ’s death and resurrection mean to us. It means we’re given a new life. All our sins are forgiven. We’re called to live in close fellowship with Jesus. We’re called to become more and more like him. We especially learned the importance of embracing Christ’s sufferings and depending on his power, not on ourselves. May God help us to be united with Jesus in his death and resurrection. May he help us to experience this wonderful new life in him, full of his grace, mercy and hope.