

John 11:45-57
(Psalm 30; Romans 6:1-14)
“To Gather into One the Children of God”

Introduction

We see written large in these verses the mystery of unbelief and the majesty of grace. No one in Jerusalem questioned whether or not Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. No one questioned whether or not Jesus was a miracle worker. As a result, some believed the things he said about himself, but others sought to discredit him and even destroy him, because they feared that, if he were acknowledged as the Messiah, as God’s answer to our greatest need, everything they valued in life would be stripped away. They would lose their place, their position, and their identity. They would have to change radically, and they had no interest in doing that.

Is the situation very different today? Everyone is confronted with the miracle of the cosmos. We know that you can’t get something from nothing, yet there it is. And its marvelous complexity: As the physicist Fred Hoyle once said, the likelihood of the universe as we know it coming about by chance is as probable as a tornado blowing through a junkyard and leaving behind a Boeing 747. We must also face the universal religious experience of humanity, the moral imperative within our hearts, the historical miracle of the resurrection, the reality of lives transformed by faith in Christ, the power of the Word of God to continue to transform lives. Yet, while some believe, many others turn away, afraid that if it were true, it would jeopardize everything they hold most dear.

Against all this, we see the majesty of God’s grace. Even Jesus’ enemies unwittingly served his purposes. The high priest unintentionally spoke prophetically, declaring the central truth of the gospel: that Jesus came into the world to save, not only the nation of Israel, but to gather together into one all the children of God scattered among the nations. As John Owen wrote, what Satan thought was his hour of victory turned out to be his hour of crushing defeat, and so to this day, every blow that Satan aims at the people of God returns to crush his own head.

God’s answer to every kind of brokenness – cosmic, relational and personal – is simply this: wholeness and unity are found only by being united to God’s Messiah. The apostle Paul’s expression for this is “in Christ.” In him, God is uniting, not only his ancient people Israel, but those from every tribe, tongue, people and nation, all God’s children. Here, we see the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham: “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). This much is clear in these verses.

But there is a further implication of this reconciling work of Christ that we must not miss, the fact that we ourselves, as individuals, only find wholeness by being united, along with all the rest of God’s children, in Christ. When John speaks of Jesus death gathering “into one the children of God,” I would suggest that this has implications in our daily experience of our life in Christ, and in the degree to which we realize victory over sin.

Body

1. It is in Christ that we are forgiven for sins we have done.

We are forgiven for our sins through the sacrifice of Christ. As the Jewish people prepared for the Passover, they did not realize that the One who was the fulfillment of the Passover lamb, of the blood on the lintel and doorpost, the One who enabled death to pass by without harming God's people, stood in their midst. While the high priest and people prepared to celebrate the Passover, the Lamb of God prepared to offer himself for our sin. Only in him are we forgiven, because only through him is God able to forgive us and remain faithful and just.

Most of us are clear about this aspect of salvation. We believe that our sins were dealt with once for all on the cross, and that in Christ, we are forgiven. But there is a second aspect of this that few Christians seem to grasp in a life transforming way.

2. It is in Christ that we are also freed from bondage to sin.

If we fail to grasp this point, our experience of the life to which every Christian is called will be fitful and disappointing. To the degree that we understand this, not merely with our heads, but with our hearts, we will begin to live in an entirely new way, with an experience of the Holy Spirit's power that we had feared we might never know.

In Romans chapter five, Paul tells us that our problem is not the *sins* that we commit, but the *sinful nature* we inherited at birth, of which those sins are merely the symptoms. As the great Chinese Christian leader, Watchman Nee, who was the founder of the house church movement in China, often put it in his writings: *We are not sinners because we sin, we sin because we are sinners.* This is our desperate condition. We are children of Adam and in him we fell and became sinful by nature, expressed in our desires and inclinations. You don't have to teach a baby to sin. You have to try to teach it to behave, and its behavior is fitful and imperfect. I am not a member of the Wood family because I have characteristics of the Woods. Rather, I have characteristics of the Wood family because I am a Wood.

God's answer to the brokenness of our inheritance was to send the one for the sake of the many, the second Adam, Jesus, and his way of saving us is not by making us stronger, but by putting us to death in Christ so that we might be given new life in him. Look at how Watchman Nee puts this in his book, *The Normal Christian Life*:

The death of the Lord Jesus is representative and inclusive. In his death we all died. None of us can progress spiritually without seeing this. Just as we cannot have justification if we have not seen him [Christ] bearing *our sins* on the cross, so we cannot have sanctification if we have not seen him bearing *us* on the cross. Not only have our sins been laid on him, but we ourselves have been put into him...

God's means of delivering us from sin is not by making us stronger and stronger, but by making us weaker and weaker. That is surely a rather peculiar way of victory, you say; but it is the divine way. God sets us free from the dominion of sin, not by strengthening our old man [= old nature] but by crucifying him; not by helping him to do anything but by removing him from the scene of action.

Only when we can say confidently, intentionally with the apostle, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20), can we begin to understand the way of freedom and victory. In Romans six, Paul puts it like this: Understand this great truth, then consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ, and on this basis, "Let not sin, therefore reign in your mortal bodies ... Do not present your members to sin ... but present yourselves to God" (Romans 6:12f).

3. It is in Christ that we are reconciled to God and to one another.

John records this prophecy of Caiaphas, that it is better "that one man should die for the people," and John adds his prophetic word, that Jesus died not only for the nation of Israel, "but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (11:50-52). But we are so individualistic in our view of things that we do not recognize the communal aspect of our salvation depicted in such biblical pictures as "the vine and the branches" and "the body of Christ." We are united to one another as we are united to Christ. Therefore, what I claim for myself in Christ, I claim for you as well. If I am forgiven, then so are you. If I am to consider myself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ, then I am to consider you dead to sin as well, and stop believing the worst about you. In his great prayer for the unity of his people (John 17:20f), Jesus makes clear that this unity we have in him will be the greatest reason for the world to believe the gospel.

Conclusion

What are we to make of this? The more we realize the truth of our union with Christ, the more we will realize that the gospel calls us to *be what we are*, to live and act out of what is *already ours in Christ*. For Jesus died "to gather into one the children of God."