

The Lord Suffers When His People Suffer.

By Elizabeth Kendal (Dec 2012)

We who have been redeemed by the Lord Jesus Christ are legally united to him in a mystical yet very real spiritual union: we are *in Christ* and Christ is *in us*. This is exactly what our Lord prayed for in the Garden of Gethsemane. **Read:** *John 17:20-26*

Our *union with Christ* is a legal arrangement, forged in love and sealed in blood.

In his discourse, "The Wisdom of God displayed in the Way of Salvation" (March 1733),¹ puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards explains not only how our *union with Christ* works for us, but how it came to be.

Edwards writes:

"The wisdom of God . . . has accomplished that men, though sinners, should be without guilt, in that he hath found a way that the threatening of the law should be truly and properly fulfilled, and punishment be executed on sin, and yet not on the sinner. The sufferings of Christ answer the demands of the law, with respect to the sins of those who believe in him; and justice is truly satisfied thereby. And the law is fulfilled and answered by the obedience of Christ, so that his righteousness should properly be our righteousness. Though not performed by us, yet it is properly and reasonably accepted for us, as much as if we had performed it ourselves.

Divine wisdom has so contrived, that such an interchanging of sin and righteousness should be consistent, and most agreeable with reason, with the law, and God's holy attributes. For Jesus Christ has so united himself to us, and us to him, as to make himself ours, our head. The love of Christ to the elect is so great, that God the Father looks upon it proper and suitable to account Christ and the elect as one; and accordingly to account what Christ does and suffers, as if they did and suffered it. — That love of Christ which is so great as to render him willing to put himself in the stead of the elect, and to bear the misery that they deserved, does, in the Father's account, so unite Christ and the elect, that they may be looked upon as legally one."

So our *union with Christ* is a legal arrangement that arises out of Christ's extraordinary love for us; a love so great that he was willing to die in our place so that we could be with him for eternity. And it is precisely because of our *union with Christ*, that the penalty for *our* sins is paid by *his* death and *our* resurrection is guaranteed by *his* resurrection. It is with this in mind that the Apostle Paul exhorts us to consider ourselves *dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus*, and to live in the light of that reality. (**See:** Romans 6:1-14).²

¹ Jonathan Edwards. *The Wisdom of God displayed in the Way of Salvation* (March 1733). SECTION VI
<http://www.biblebb.com/files/edwards/wisdom.htm> OR The Works of Jonathan Edwards, volume 2

² For an excellent essay on this topic, see: *Union with Christ*, By Rory Shiner, Matthias Media, The Briefing, 1 June 2011. <http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/2011/06/union-with-christ/>

Most of what has been written concerning the theology of our *union with Christ* relates to our justification, that is, to our being made righteous in God's sight (what we now *are*); and our ongoing sanctification, that is, our progressive growth in holiness and Christ-likeness (how we now *live*).³

However, we should also reflect on how the theology of our *union with Christ* relates to our suffering and persecution. For it is precisely due to our *union with Christ*, that the LORD suffers when his people suffer.

This is why Isaiah could say concerning the suffering of God's people:

In all their affliction he was afflicted. . .
(from Isaiah 63:8-9)

This is why the risen Lord Jesus Christ, when he confronted Saul on the road to Damascus, asked this chief persecutor of Christians:

"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"
And when Saul asked, *"Who are you Lord"*,
Jesus replied: *"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."*
(from Acts 9:1-5)

This is why Jesus says to us:

Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."
And, *"As you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."*
(from Matthew 25:31-46)

The Lover is never indifferent to the suffering of their beloved (e.g. their spouse or their child). If my beloved was critically injured, unjustly imprisoned on false charges or diagnosed to be terminally ill, and my neighbour decided that they'd rather not know because they don't want to be burdened by my beloved's misfortune – what impact would that have on my relationship with my neighbour?

The Lord is never indifferent to the suffering of his beloved: indeed, he shares his peoples' suffering for Christ is *in them* and they are *in him* on account of his great love for them. Yet many Christians and churches decide that they'd rather not know because they don't want to be burdened or embarrassed by the misfortune of the persecuted. Choosing to turn away from the suffering, persecuted church -- preferring not to look or even know because it makes them feel uncomfortable; preferring not to intervene or even intercede because they can't be bothered or simply don't care -- they sabotage their relationship with the Lord. For though they be turning away from the persecuted church, Jesus Christ cries out, *"Why are you rejecting me?"*

Those who separate themselves from the persecuted church are dismembering themselves from the Body of Christ. And while they might be pleased to be free of the Body's burdens and embarrassments, they can make no claim to health or wholeness. For like any dismembered member, they are, in reality, unviable and useless.

Dear Father,

may the Holy Spirit who lives in me and ministers to me,

work in me to align my heart more closely with heart of Jesus Christ.

Help me Lord, to see those who are persecuted as you see them, to love them as you love them,

and to be sensitive to your pain and your indignation as you suffer with your precious loved ones.

May my response always be that of generous prayer and burden sharing

as a faithful, loving and valuable member of the Body of Christ.

AMEN

³ For more on justification and sanctification see <http://www.theopedia.com/Salvation>