

ALIVE TO GOD: CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST

Study Four

YOU HAVE DIED

Paul the apostle insists that, as Christian believers, we begin our lives crucified. This is how he saw himself:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is 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 (Gal. 2:19–20).

He insisted also that this is the case with us:

you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3).

Paul fully expected that this would be common knowledge among believers, even among those whom he himself had not taught, such as those at Rome:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3–4).

Questions for Reflection:

- *How much is this the basic common assumption of Christian believers today?*
- *What gets in the way of Christian believers acknowledging that they have died?*
- *What difference might it make if we did acknowledge this?*

WHEN DID WE DIE?

If we were to ask, ‘When were we crucified with Christ?’ there is a range of ways in which that could be answered.

Before the Foundation of the World

In the intention of God we were crucified with Christ before the foundation of the world. Christ ‘was destined before the foundation of the world’ as ‘a lamb without defect or blemish’, whose ‘precious blood’ would be poured out (1 Pet. 1:19–20). We who believe in Christ are among those whose names have ‘been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered’ (Rev. 13:8).

When Jesus Died

We have already seen that we were drawn into Christ by his identificatory love for us when he was ‘lifted up from the earth’ on the cross to enter into ‘the judgement of this world’ (see John 12:31–33). Paul says to Timothy:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him (2 Tim. 2:11).

While we may self-centredly take this to refer to some symbolic or imitative action on our part, by which we qualify to live with Christ, Paul does not take it that way. It has been pointed out that, as a matter of practicality, crucifixion is not something we can do to ourselves—it has to be done to us.¹ The way Paul speaks, it happened to us when Christ died for us:

one has died for all; therefore all have died (2 Cor. 5:14).

That is, all have died in that action of one dying for all.

L. E. Maxwell brings out the objective nature of what happened there:

In taking upon Himself my ‘likeness of sinful flesh,’ apart from which Christ could not have borne the penalty for my sin, He took me up into Himself—*made me one with Himself*. I am legally and ethically involved. I have been sentenced to death in Christ. It is my *judicial* position.²

How we could have died with him, before ever we were born, is a mystery of the love-action of the triune God. We are told: ‘the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all’ (Isa. 53:6)—an action of the one we now call the Father. We are told it was ‘through the eternal Spirit’ that Christ ‘offered himself without blemish to God’ (Heb. 9:14), and ‘the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God’ (1 Cor. 2:10). Could we say that the Holy Spirit, who searches our hearts,³ was muckraking out the whole of human history, to load it onto him? We do not know. Our feeble love knows something of wanting to bear the pain of others, to take it from them. A mother or father, with a baby persistently crying in pain, unable to tell them what is wrong, may desire somehow to enter into that child to free the child and bear the pain themselves. Our powers of love fall short of being able to become the other person—perhaps the love of God can get into our skin and do that in a way we cannot. We cannot say. We simply know, by faith, that he embraced us there in our worst moment—that we were there with him, and that his death was our death. The day he died was the day we died in him.

By the same token, since it is ‘through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead’ that ‘we have been born anew to a living hope’ (1 Pet. 1:3, RSV), we could say that we came into new birth on a Sunday morning in April around 33 AD.

The Faith Relationship

Paul knew he was ‘crucified with Christ’ when he came to live ‘by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me’ (Gal. 2:19–20)—when he believed and was saved.

¹ We could, perhaps, drive nails through our feet, and one of our hands, but the final nail would have to be hammered in by someone else!

² L. E. Maxwell, *Born Crucified*, Oliphants, London, 1958, p. 17.

³ Perhaps as ‘the lamp of the LORD’ in Proverbs 20:27, one with our spirit, ‘searching every inmost part’.

We are effectively united with Christ by faith. This is elucidated by the way Jesus speaks of abiding:

Abide in me as I abide in you (John 15:4).

The context is that of ‘the vinedresser’—‘my Father’—coming to cut and prune ‘the true vine’, whom Jesus identifies as himself (John 15:1–2, RSV). The judgement-action of the cross is imminent. In that action, we are to abide in Christ—‘abide in my love’—and so be ‘cleansed by the word’ and ‘bear much fruit’, rather than be removed, ‘thrown into the fire, and burned’ (John 15:3–10). It is by abiding in Christ—through faith—that we are taken through that judgement of the cross without being destroyed by it, but saved:

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life (John 5:24).

This is where what was done objectively on the cross for all becomes subjectively the reality for each. Maxwell again:

When God declares the ungodly sinner just, He makes no mere legal and lifeless imputation of righteousness apart from a real and deep life-union of the believer with Christ. God has indeed declared righteous ‘the ungodly,’ but not *apart* from Christ, not *outside* of Christ. We are justified only in Christ; that is, having come into vital life-union with Christ through faith in His atoning death.⁴

Alexander Whyte quotes Luther on Galatians 2:19–20, to distinguish this action of faith from the imitation of an example:

Paul speaks here not of crucifying by imitation or example, for to follow the example of Christ is also to be crucified with Him. This crucifying is not that of which Peter speaks, that Christ left us an example that we should follow in his steps [1 Pet. 2:21]. But Paul speaketh here of that high crucifying, whereby sin, and the devil, and death are crucified in Christ, and not in me. Here Christ doth all Himself alone. But I, believing in Christ, am by faith also crucified with Christ, so that sin, and death, and the devil, are all crucified and dead unto me.⁵

Baptised into His Death

Paul came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. He regained his sight and was filled with the Holy Spirit (see Acts 9:17–22). That was also the time when Paul was baptised and had his sins washed away, calling on the name of Jesus (see Acts 22:16). Paul particularly sees baptism as our association with the death of Jesus:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3–4).

⁴ L. E. Maxwell, *Born Crucified*, p. 16.

⁵ Alexander Whyte, *In Remembrance of Me*, (1906) reprinted Baker Book House Company, Grand Rapids, 1970, pp. 52–3. Whyte says that of this book [Luther’s commentary on Galatians?] ‘John Bunyan said that he preferred it before all the books he had ever seen as most fit for a wounded conscience’, and commented: ‘In Bunyan’s day the books that taught this doctrine were likely to fall to pieces if one did but turn them over! Such books were then the meat and drink of heroes; they were the consolation and the strength of saints’. May such days return.

Note that this is not some special teaching or anything new: Paul fully expects believers whom he has not met to know as a matter of course that they began their Christian life dead and buried in Christ. Paul did not say this just to the Romans; he said it to the Colossians as well:

you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead (Col. 2:12).

When Christ is Revealed

Paul also says that, as we know this now by faith, we will know the full implications of what it means for us to have been put to death and raised up in Christ when Christ is revealed in glory at the end-time:

you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory (Col. 3:3–4).

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his (Rom. 6:5).

Our answer to the question as to when we were crucified with Christ, then, takes us from before the beginning to after the end. The whole human race is taken up in this action. Either we die with him, and live, or we remain in terrible death eternally. The judgement of what happened on the cross is one thing no one can escape.

Questions for Reflection:

- *How would we identify the time when we were crucified with Christ?*
- *How does this relate with the actual death and resurrection of Jesus?*

OUR EXPERIENCE OF BEING CRUCIFIED WITH CHRIST

So do we just believe that we have been crucified with Christ, and that's it? Something as monumental and all encompassing as that could scarcely go unnoticed in our experience. The realisation itself that we have been crucified with Christ, or that we needed to be, is a shattering one.

It may be helpful to look at the experience of particular persons in the Scriptures as they came to this. How is the necessity for our being put to death and our being raised to life presented to us there? We will examine both the Old and the New Testaments. While, in the Old Testament, Christ was still to come, nevertheless God's dealings with His people then was as much on the basis of what He was going to do in Christ as it was later, and is for us. We see this spelled out, for instance, in Hebrews 11:1–12:2. For all this 'great . . . cloud of witnesses', as for us, Jesus is 'the pioneer and perfecter of our faith' (Heb. 12:1–2); as mentioned specifically in the case of Moses:

He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward (Heb. 11:26; compare vv. 13–16).

Jesus said of Abraham:

Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad (John 8:56).

Peter makes reference to David writing Psalm 16:

I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying,

‘He was not abandoned to Hades,
nor did his flesh experience corruption’ (Acts 2:29–31).

We may take it that all of us, in both Old and New Testament times, are impacted by and need to relate to the death and resurrection of Jesus, and that the experience of persons coming to faith in God can be identified in this connection.

Abraham and Isaac

The message that came to Abraham in Genesis 22 is that the life of Isaac, the promised offspring of Abraham and Sarah, was forfeit to God:

Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you (Gen. 22:2).

This should not be seen as an arbitrary imposition on God’s part. According to Genesis 2:17, the life of every sinner is forfeit to God:

of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.

What we know also is that, almost at the point of being killed, Isaac’s life was spared and given back to him:

Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me’ (Gen. 22:10–12).

It seems that Abraham had in some way anticipated something like this (he had told the young men in verse 5 that he and the boy ‘will come back to you’), by virtue of the faith given to him by God’s revelation of His purpose, perhaps going back as far as the promise of victory to the offspring of the woman in Genesis 3:15, affirmed to Abraham in the revelation of the stars in Genesis 15:5–6, and in the covenant sacrifice of verses 7–21, by which God Himself undertook to bear the consequences of any breach of the covenant on the part of Abraham and his descendants.⁶ Certainly the writer to the Hebrews saw Abraham as receiving Isaac back from the dead:

He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back (Heb. 11:19).⁷

Even so, a death did occur:

⁶ Compare Jer. 34:18–20. Even though this was a covenant made by God with Abraham (see Gen. 15:18), God substituted Himself for Abraham in the covenant making ceremony. See further in yet-to-be published studies by Martin Bleby, *God of Abraham*.

⁷ The words ‘figuratively speaking’ are in Greek ἐν παραβολῇ (*en parabole*), which means ‘by comparison’.

And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son (Gen. 22:13).

Ever thereafter Isaac and, by extension, all his descendants would have known that his life was forfeit to God, and that he now lived only by virtue of a substitute sacrifice provided by God.

Jacob

Jacob was an inheritor of the promises of God, intent on securing them for himself by his own scheming actions. Over many years he needed to learn that they would come to him, but only by the action of God. This finally came through to him when he was helplessly facing death:

The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, ‘We came to your brother Esau, and he is coming to meet you, and four hundred men are with him.’ Then Jacob was greatly afraid and distressed (Gen. 32:6–7).

Jacob took whatever precautions he could and prayed to God, with more frankness and openness, and with more complete reliance on God and His promises, than he had ever prayed before:

Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. Yet you have said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number’ (Gen. 32:11–12).

Jacob’s all night lone wrestling with ‘a man’ (Gen. 32:24) was recognised as a life-and-death encounter with God:

So Jacob called the place Peniel [that is, *The face of God*], saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved’ (Gen. 32:30).

The encounter left Jacob permanently incapacitated—‘the sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip’ (Gen. 32:31)—but alive and rightly humbled.⁸

Joseph

Jacob’s son Joseph also received promises from God, on account of which his brothers ‘conspired to kill him’ (Gen. 37:18). Reuben’s intervention prevented that, but Joseph was still thrown into a pit, sold into slavery in Egypt, and was given out as dead, as his bloodstained robe was presented to his father Jacob, who mourned and bewailed him many days. The hand of God was evident in all of this, as ‘the LORD was with him, and that the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hands’ (Gen. 39:3), and ‘the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love’ (Gen. 39:21). As Joseph summarised it later to his brothers:

God sent me before you to preserve life . . . Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today (Gen. 45:5; 50:20).

⁸ See further: Martin Bleby, *God of Jacob*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2002.

Moses

Foundational to Moses' calling and ministry is an often-overlooked passage:

On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the LORD met him [Moses] and tried to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched Moses' feet with it, and said, 'Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!' So he let him alone. It was then she said, 'A bridegroom of blood by circumcision' (Exod. 4:24–26).

The reason God might have good cause to kill Moses can be found in the preceding passage, where Moses' recalcitrant reluctance to do what God is appointing him to do—bring the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt into the promised land—ends up with Moses' pathetic plea: 'O my Lord, please send someone else'; at which 'the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses' (Exod. 4:13, 14). There was also evident careless neglect on Moses' part with regard to the covenant of God with Israel, in that he had not circumcised his son, born to him some time before (Exod. 2:22).⁹ This could indicate a propensity in Moses to disbelieve the promises of God—scarcely a helpful attitude in one called to such a task. Once again, Moses would have known ever after that his life was forfeit to God, and that he lived only by virtue of the blood of the covenant of God. Nothing other than this would see him through.

This could have something to do with the description later given of Moses:

Now the man Moses was very humble [or *devout*; translated elsewhere 'meek'], more so than anyone else on the face of the earth (Num. 12:3).

Isaiah

We are told that when Isaiah in the temple 'saw the Lord . . . high and lifted up', what he saw was the glory of Christ (see John 12:41). What did that do to him?

I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!' (Isa. 6:5).

Isaiah was brought to a point of being utterly undone, before the cleansing of his lips with 'a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs', the taking away of his guilt and the blotting out of his sin, and his sending as a speaker of a thoroughgoing and provoking, though rejected, word, even as to the chopped-down, burned-over stump of Israel (Isa. 6:6–7).

Isaiah later sang:

I will give thanks to you, O LORD,
for though you were angry with me,
your anger turned away,
and you comforted me.

Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation (Isa. 12:1–2).

⁹ For the covenant significance of circumcision, see Gen. 17.

Peter

Did not a similar experience come to Peter, of being undone before being remade, when Jesus blessed him with two boatloads of fish:

when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord' (Luke 5:8, RSV).

The Thief on the Cross

What about the thief, the violent robber, who was hanging on the cross beside Jesus? He uncharacteristically accepted his own condemnation and death as justly deserved, in the light of Jesus' righteous innocence:

Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong . . . Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom (Luke 23:40–42).

Jesus' acceptance of this man was full and untrammelled.

Paul

When this came to Paul, it left him blinded, and unable to eat or drink, for three days (see Acts 9:9). Alexander Whyte, preaching in Edinburgh, said this on Galatians 2:19–20:

And though Christ had been crucified long before on Calvary, yet Paul saw him 'evidently set forth' during those three days in Damascus. For three days the mystery of the Cross was being opened to Paul; and I think it likely to certainty that Paul during those three days went down deeper into the mystery of Redemption than any mortal man had ever done before, or has ever done since. No man can come near that mystery and live: the man Christ Jesus died as He entered into it; and while Paul was having it revealed somewhat unto him he lay as good as dead. He was three days without sight, and did neither eat nor drink. But during those three dead days he had sights given to him to see, and meat given to him to drink, that the Damascus world around him knew not of. He was like those mysterious beings in heaven who are 'full of eyes within'; and with his deep inward eyes Paul saw, as he lay at the mouth of hell,—he saw, I say, that which he was brought up from hell, and taken up into heaven, that he might fearlessly preach. He saw Jesus Christ, the Son of God, upon the Cross; and he saw Him there made sin for him, that he might be made the righteousness of God in Him. Nor did Paul merely see that Cross, and lie three days and three nights looking at it. Paul was more than a spectator and a student of the Cross of Christ. Paul was lifted up upon the Cross and was himself crucified with Christ. Whether in the body or out of the body Paul could never tell; but ere ever he was aware, he was lifted up and lost to law and life and all things upon that awful, that wondrous, that glorious Cross. The last thing he remembered was his being lifted up upon that Cross. He did not remember dying; he did not remember being dead: the last thing he remembered was, with an awful boldness, laying and leaving his conscience of sin on the thorn-crowned head of the crucified One. And in that dying act Paul's whole life—his guilt, his condemnation, his curse, his very existence—was all drunk up by that Cross. Paul was as if he had never been born during those three terrible days. After those days were over there arose from the earth on which Paul had lain, there came down from the Cross on which Paul was crucified, a man, a form of a man, in some outward respect not unlike Paul; but it was not the former Paul at all. Those Damascus disciples he had come to persecute trembled when they saw Paul, as they thought, on their streets and in their synagogue, but there was no cause: the Paul they had heard of was dead, and his world would see him no more. He was dead, and his bones were scattered at the grave's mouth. So effectually, so completely, so utterly did Paul die on the Cross with Christ. Now, do not delude yourselves, and say that this was all an imagination, Paul's powerful and evangelical imagination. No. All this was real as life and death are real, as law and justice, judgment and eternity, God and Christ are real. Paul's unreal and imagined life was when he was yet at Gamaliel's school, and on the road to Damascus. After he fell from his horse he

came to himself; he became sane and wise for the first time; and this earth has never seen a saner, wiser and nobler man than Paul the apostle who was crucified with Christ.¹⁰

This is preaching—and personal—but it makes the point that, for Paul, being crucified with Christ would not have gone unnoticed.

Ourselves

I believe something like that must come to each one of us—probably in more ways than one. One way it came to me was when I was preaching through Paul’s letter to the Romans, and came to the opening verses of Romans 6:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3–4).

On one Sunday I had preached a good philosophical sermon on the interconnectedness of the whole human race, to explain how it was possible that when Jesus died we, in some sense, died with him. But, in the week that followed, the passage would not let me rest with that. I had to come back to it. Suddenly I saw what I had not seen before: that Paul is talking about this ‘body of sin’ (Rom. 6:6), that had to be destroyed; this ‘body of death’ (Rom. 7:24), from which I needed to be delivered—this body in which I have rebelled against God, that is now riddled with sin and death. No way could I take that carcass into the presence of the holy God—no way would I want to! Thank God that it has been disposed of in the death of Christ, and no longer has any lasting reality. Since then I have always spoken of our being *deservedly* crucified with Christ.

P. T. Forsyth comments on much of what we hear in churches today:

So much of our religious teaching betrays no sign that the speaker has descended into hell, been near the everlasting burnings, or been plucked from the awful pit. He has risen with Christ—what right have we to deny it?—but it is out of a shallow grave, with no deepness of earth, with no huge millstone to roll away.¹¹

While Forsyth humbly and generously acknowledges such ones as fellow-believers in Christ, risen with him, he pleads that they still have much to learn about how they came to be that way.

¹⁰ Alexander Whyte, *In Remembrance of Me*, pp. 50–52.

¹¹ Peter T. Forsyth, *The Church, the Gospel and Society*, Independent Press, London, 1962, p. 94. I am grateful to Jason Goroncy for this reference.