

FOUND
IN
HIM

THE JOY *of the* INCARNATION *and*
OUR UNION *with* CHRIST

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Comforts from Romans: Celebrating the Gospel One Day at a Time, 2013

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Introduction

When I was a child, I had a recurring nightmare. I would dream that I was standing on a darkened stage, completely alone. In my dream I wasn't able to move, hide, or even speak. Rooted to the ground in terror, I sensed a threatening presence lurking just out of sight. I was lost, wandering. Somehow, and though I didn't know how then, I knew I was ruined and had ruined something, and that there was nothing I could do to make up for my mistake.

Even now, though I'm in my sixties, I can still feel the isolation and dread that threatened to engulf me on that dark stage. I was completely alone, engulfed with inescapable dread, barely able to breathe. I can't describe how terrifying that felt and still feels to me now when I call it to mind.

If you want to try to psychoanalyze me, I'll admit that I was what today might be called a "latchkey kid" and my nightmare probably expressed that loneliness and my sense that there was something intrinsically wrong with me that wasn't wrong with people who had "normal" families. My dad had left our home fairly early on, and my mom worked hard to try to make ends meet for my brother and me. When I think back on my childhood, "family" isn't a word I would use to describe it. After walking home alone from school every day, I would play by myself (and eat toast) until my mom arrived home from work, usually about 6 p.m. Then we would have some dinner, and I would go play with my dolls by myself or watch TV. My early life wasn't very social. In fact, it really wasn't social at all. I didn't have a lot of friends.

From this, you might conclude that it isn't surprising that I had nightmares about being alone and fatally flawed. That dream was, in some ways, a mirror on a lost and wandering little girl's soul. But I don't think I'm the only one who has ever felt that way. In fact, I think everyone struggles with feelings of alienation and a suspicion that something is very broken at the deepest places in our lives, no matter if we grew up as latchkey kids or in a loving family of nine.

It also seems to me, though, that everyone continues to hope. We hope that someday we'll wake up to discover that we aren't isolated, standing on that darkened stage, awaiting judgment, and that all that dread was just a bad dream after all. We hope that there is something more than this loneliness and isolation, something that will last beyond holiday family dinners and into the night when everyone is gone and we're alone again. On our hope-filled days we are like children waiting to hear some good news—news that will assure us that no matter how alone and ruined we are, someone has loved us, someone has rescued us, and soon we will be truly found.

Right before my twenty-first birthday, the Lord graciously saved me. He saved me from my sin and out of my great need. He saved me from the anger, bitterness, self-deception, and self-hatred that had marred my life up to that point. He saved me from my aloneness, isolation, loneliness, and self-condemnation. And he made me part of his family. I didn't know much about him during those early years, but I knew I finally belonged to someone and that this someone mattered more to me than anything. I knew that I was home. I was family. He had given me faith to believe that I was loved and welcomed, and from that point on, everything began to change.

Although this book isn't about my angst growing up as a lonely child, I want you to know where I'm coming from. I know what loneliness and lostness feel like as a child, and I know what it feels like today. I know that latchkey kids aren't the only ones who ex-

perience loneliness; we can be surrounded with family and friends and still feel completely out of sync, alone, isolated. We can stand in the foyer at church, surrounded by hundreds of other believers, and still think we're on our own, the only ones failing to perform, still trying to fit in.

WE ARE ALONE

Everyone struggles with feelings of alienation and isolation, whether or not we were raised with loads of siblings and very attentive parents. Alienation and aloneness are expressed in many ways. It can be expressed as inadequacy: "I can't do this on my own," or "I never seem to be able to get it right!" (whatever *it* is). It can also be expressed in the lack of being understood: "No one really knows me!" or "Why does everyone always misunderstand me?" Or, of course, it can be expressed as deep loneliness: "I'll never fit in," and "Why can't I make friends like she does?"

Sin has wrought devastation and isolation in all our lives. Our experience of sin, our own and others' against us, has brought separation and alienation to all of us. This separation and alienation originates in our broken relationship with God and flows out from there into broken relationships with one another and even with the created world. No matter how popular we might be, none of us has ever experienced deep unity or authentic union with another. Since the day that our forefather and mother were exiled out of the garden of Eden, we've been lost, trying to get back in, trying to find oneness with each other and the Lord, trying to find communion, our way home. We've been trying to be found. The truth is that, without Christ, we are utterly alone and our attempts to fill our hours with goodies or texting or work or even ministry are simply futile attempts to assure ourselves that things aren't so bad after all. But at the end of the day, in the middle of the night, and at the end of our lives, without the love and work of Jesus Christ, the God-Man, we are alone and we know it—and it terrifies us. Every one of us is standing on

that darkened stage, condemned, lost and wandering, needing to be found.

THE TRUTH WE ALL NEED

Found in Him has been written because most of us, even though we're Christians, are unaware of the importance of our oneness with Christ (commonly called "union") and his amazing oneness with us (known as the "incarnation"). I suspect that, for most of us, the nearness, or imminence, of Jesus barely enters our consciousness as we face the vicissitudes of daily life on that darkened stage. We neglect the doctrines of incarnation and union to our own deep impoverishment. It's a sad reality that many Christians spend their entire lives wandering around a spiritual wilderness, malnourished, thirsting, and consuming rubbish because they have never feasted on the soul-consoling, heart-transforming, zeal-engendering truth found in the study of the incarnation and union. So I invite you to join with me as we feast on these two often-neglected but beautifully resplendent joys. These joys come directly to us from the one from whom we were estranged, and who alone offers the only antidote to the isolation pandemic we're hoping to escape. He offers us this antidote because he has united in himself both God and man, making one new and completely unique Person, and has united believers with himself, with that Person. We will never know how found, loved, welcomed, and reconciled we are until we see how he has forever taken our nature to himself and has bound us to himself in enduring oneness. God is one with man in Jesus Christ, and we are one with him.

I'll admit upfront that we're going to be doing a little theology here. Don't let that frighten you. After all, theology is simply the study of God, and you wouldn't have picked up this book if you weren't interested in knowing more about him. Our study won't consist of obscure propositions or ideas disconnected from daily life. You'll find that these truths will bring life, peace and joy to your soul. Don't worry—we're all growing in the knowledge of

him, and in the knowledge of the Lord there is great satisfaction (Ps. 107:7).

THE FEAST FOUND IN THE INCARNATION

Here's how we're going to go about our study. The first part of this book, chapters 1–6, will introduce you to the topic of God becoming man, the incarnation. Of course, if you've ever sung a Christmas carol, you're already familiar with the incarnation, but I wonder how much any of us ever thinks about the events of Bethlehem when we're stuck in traffic or in the hospital or applying for unemployment benefits. Does the fact that the second person of the Trinity became a man so that he could love and save you ever cross your mind? As a woman who believed in the incarnation over forty years ago, I'll admit that I never thought about it much, except at Christmas. I suppose it's the same for most of us. The incarnation is most clearly stated in these precious words from John 1:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. . . . No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known (John 1:14, 16–18).

What do John's words mean? We'll spend six chapters considering their meaning, but in summary they mean that Jesus Christ "entered into complete solidarity with us in our sinful existence in order to save us, without becoming himself a sinner."¹ We are not alone. He is Immanuel, *God with us* (Matt. 1:23). *God is with us; we are not alone.*

We also learn about the incarnation from Paul in Colossians 2:9: "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily." A man who lived over two thousand years ago in Israel is also the second person of the Trinity, who had existed from eternity. He is the God-Man. How can this be? It is deep mystery, but it's a mystery

we must investigate because the implications of the incarnation cannot be exaggerated. In fact, in the 1500s Martin Chemnitz wrote that when we lose the truth of the incarnation, Jesus “can no longer be our Savior.” He calls the incarnation the “greatest and sweetest consolation”² that we can know.

It’s axiomatic to say that we are alone. We are solitary individuals; we all know that. Not only are we alienated from one another; we are alienated from God. But God has taken action. He became man, becoming one with us so that we would not have to live in deep solitude any longer—and his action opens the door not only to deep communion with him but also with one another.

THE FEAST FOUND IN UNION WITH CHRIST

In the second part of the book, we’ll look into Jesus’s union with us as individuals and corporately as his bride, the church. When I say “union,” I’m referring to the time Jesus taught that he is the vine and that we are to abide in him. I’m also talking about all those places in the New Testament where the apostles, especially John and Paul, use the words “in Christ” or “with Christ.” We’ll spend time looking into those little phrases, because it seems to me that when we read our Bibles and come across them, we’re tempted to simply gloss over them. They seem to us like little needless appendages. Sure, we know they are there, and we know that they must mean something, but, after all, how important can they be?

For example, in the beginning of the book of Ephesians, Paul refers to our union with Christ eleven times (Eph. 1:3–14)! Notice, as you read, the number of times in just two verses our little phrases “in Christ” or “in him” are included:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. (vv. 3–4)

I suspect that the little words “in” and “with” are more important than we know, as John Murray contends:

Nothing is more central or basic than union and communion with Christ. . . . Union with Christ is really the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation not only in its application but also in its once-for-all accomplishment in the finished work of Christ.³

A FEAST FOR OUR SOULS

Throughout all ten chapters of this book, I’ll be pressing you to see the ways in which these truths relate to you personally by connecting them to real-life examples. But this won’t primarily be a book of vignettes. No, I won’t waste our time on loads of stories about me, because there is way too much good news to give you, and, after all, my stories, as entertaining as I might think they are, are not what your soul needs.

THE PLEASURE OF GOD

In closing, here’s something more for you to consider: God seems to take great pleasure in union. In fact, God himself is a union of three persons in one God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—the Trinity. Consider the following demonstrations of God’s love of union in the midst of diversity. Flowing out from God’s tri-personal nature we see unity:

In creation. God made man in his image (Gen. 1:26).

In marriage. First instituted in the garden when man had perfect union with his Creator (Gen. 3:8), and the Creator wanted the man to know the joy of union with someone: “The two shall become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24).

In the incarnation. The Eternal Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14).

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In our rebirth. “He who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him” (1 Cor. 6:17).

In the church. “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:27).

And finally *in our ultimate transformation.* “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven” (1 Cor. 15:49).

Because we are made in God’s image, we are hardwired to love oneness and fear and despise isolation. It’s in our DNA, which is one of the reasons that we’re always hoping to find it in relationships or experiences, why we’re hoping to get off that dark stage. The fact that even unbelievers love being united with others with a common goal is testimony to that. Need an example? Think NFL. Sixty thousand strangers uniting together in one place to cheer their team onto victory in one voice. There’s something more enjoyable about actually being there with others than simply watching it on TV at home alone, isn’t there? It’s the experience of being a part of something bigger than ourselves and being a part of it with others. I’m no fan of the NFL, but I understand the joys of cheering with thousands of other people in unity.

THIS IS HOLY GROUND:

LET US ENTER WITH HUMILITY

The incarnation and Christ’s union with us are fundamentally holy mysteries. If we learn of them at all, it will be because he has made us able to know him, and it is his power (not my study or your diligence) that has carried it out. Without his gracious condescension to reveal himself, we would remain completely alone and in the dark. We need the illuminating grace of Christ, and I have prayed and am praying that the Lord will grant us that light.

We cannot earn knowledge of Christ, we cannot achieve it, or build up to it. We have no capacity or power in ourselves giving

us the ability to have mastery over this fact. In the very act of knowing Christ, *he is the master, we are the mastered.*⁴

So if we learn anything about him or about our place in his life or his life in us, it is because he is Lord and God and he has given us revelation of himself. Let us then humbly pray together that his light will shine into our isolation and darkness and that he who spoke light into existence will shine into our hearts to give us the “light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6), our brother, our kinsman-redeemer. We’re not standing on that darkened stage alone any more, nor will we ever again—no, now we’re standing on holy ground, and we are one with him, our elder brother.

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.⁵