

PRISON BREAK

[Acts 5:17-32](#)



We saw several weeks ago that Peter and John had been commanded by the Sanhedrin not to preach in the name of Jesus:

And when they had summoned them, they commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. (Acts 4:18 NASB)

The [Sanhedrin](#) basically functioned as we would think of the Supreme Court. They were the highest authority in the nation of Israel. In response to the Sanhedrin's command, Peter and John promised civil disobedience:

for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:20 NASB)



In our study last week we saw that many miraculous things were happening through the apostles, and the people were holding them in high esteem. The growing numbers of those who joined the apostles in trusting in Jesus as the Messiah, along with the preaching and popularity of the apostles, further aggravated by the crowds who gathered to be healed in the name of Jesus, was simply too much for the [Sadducean](#) priests to bear. So they had the apostles arrested:

But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy;¹⁸ and they laid hands on the apostles, and put them in a public jail. (Acts 5:17-18 NASB)

It was the Sadducees who had influenced the arrest of Peter and John in [Acts 4:1](#). But the conflict between the apostles and the Jewish leaders started long before this. It began with the appearance of Jesus and with His teaching and healing. He was quickly challenged as to His authority. For example, when Jesus told the man who was lowered through the roof that his sins were forgiven, the Pharisees immediately recognized Jesus' claim to deity, and they began to oppose Him ([Luke 5:18-26](#)). And when Jesus entered Jerusalem as her Messiah, accepting the praise of men and throwing the merchants out of the temple precincts ([Matthew 21:1-17](#)), He was challenged by the chief priests and the elders of the people as to what authority He had to do such things ([Matthew 21:23](#)).

Now we see Jesus' apostles receiving the same treatment because they were carrying on Jesus' work. Luke tells us this in the very first verse of this book:

The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, (Acts 1:1 NASB)

The word "*began*" here implies that Jesus' ministry will now continue through the teaching of the apostles. So the hatred the religious leaders had toward Jesus, they also have toward His apostles:

But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy; (Acts 5:17 NASB)

Once again it was the Sadducees as a party, led by the high priest, who initiated the arrest, because the apostles were openly defying the commands of the previous council and doing it right in the temple courtyards. So they respond by having the apostles, not just Peter and John this time, but all of the apostles arrested.

“And they were filled with jealousy”—the word “jealousy” is from the Greek word [zelos](#). It is used 17 times in the New Testament. It is translated as envy, jealous, covet, zealous, and desire. It comes from the Greek verb that means: *“to boil.”* It is used both favorably and unfavorably in Scripture. Here it is not used favorably.

These were the very men who should have been filled with God’s Holy Spirit; they were the leaders of Israel. But instead, they were filled with jealousy. It was not surprising that they were jealous. They felt that in the temple all the respect, and all the adoration, and all the worship, should be conducted through them. But here were these Galilean nobodies preaching a forbidden Name, drawing all the crowds to themselves, and actually performing the kind of wonders that were impossible for the priests.

Sadduceology—Let’s remind ourselves of who these Sadducees were, and what it was that they believed. The Sadducees were wealthy. They were far more into the social wealthy scene and liked the position and the influence. They only believed in the first five books of the First Testament and were not really that religious. They denied the possibility of a resurrection and did not believe in angels or spirits. According to Josephus, the Sadducees believed all history was the result of human decisions (*Josephus’ Jewish Antiquities 13.173*). But they were in for a surprise when they arrested the apostles. Certain things happened which forced them—and force us—to ask who was really in charge of the course of events.

These Sadducees were boiling over, because they were the religious authorities, they were in charge, and they had earlier warned the disciples against speaking out or teaching in the name of Jesus ([Acts 4:18](#)). But Peter and John had refused to obey them. So they were filled with a jealous rage.

This shouldn’t surprise us if we understand that **people in power don’t like it when they don’t get their way**. Do you realize that? We see a clear demonstration of this in the book of Esther:

After these events King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him and established his authority over all the princes who were with him. ² And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman; for so the king had commanded concerning him. But Mordecai neither bowed down nor paid homage. (Esther 3:1-2 NASB)

The reason that Mordecai didn’t bow to Haman was because he was a Jew. It was against his faith to bow and pay homage to a man:

When Haman saw that Mordecai neither bowed down nor paid homage to him, Haman was filled with rage. (Esther 3:5 NASB)

Because Haman would not bow to him, he came up with a plot to have all the Jews killed. That is some serious rage!. Well if you know the story, you know that his plot is foiled and he ends up being hung on a gallows that he built to hang Mordecai.

These Sadducees are just like Haman, the apostles will not listen to them, they are defying their authority, so they are boiling over with rage, and they have them arrested and put in jail:

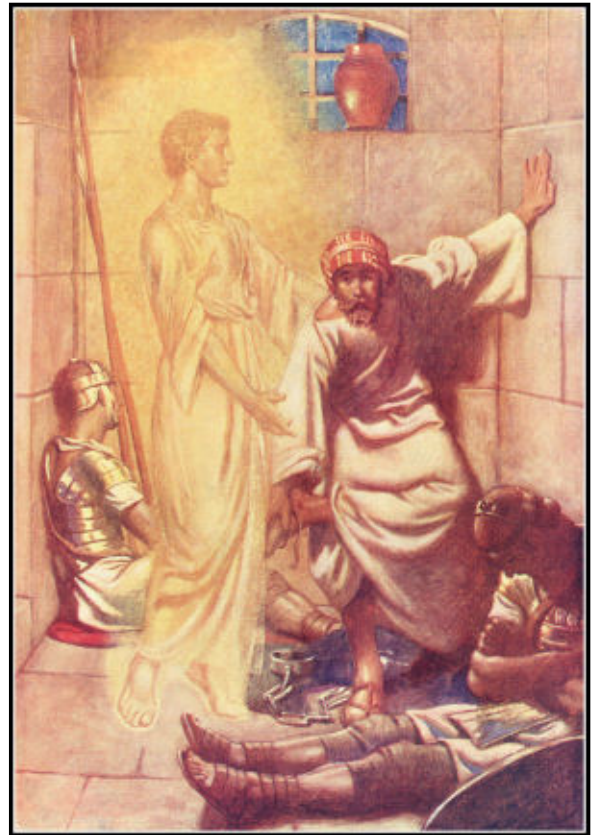
But an angel of the Lord during the night opened the gates of the prison, and taking them out he said, ²⁰ “Go your way, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life.” (Acts 5:19-20 NASB)

Previously, God allowed his messengers to remain in jail overnight (see 4:3); now, however, he sends his angel to liberate them. The specifics of this escape are not given, but it could well have been similar to the more detailed account of Peter's release in Acts 12. In both cases, the prisoners were released by the angel opening the doors of the prison, but the guards were somehow prevented from seeing it.

“Angel of the Lord”—the use of this term is very distinctive in Acts. It emphasizes the personal intervention of God, as it does in the First Testament. See [Acts 7:30](#); [8:26](#); [12:7](#), [23](#). The word “angel” is from the Greek word *aggelos*, which means: **“a messenger.”** In general, in texts where an angel appears, the task is to convey the message or do something on behalf of God. Since the focus of the text is on the message, the messenger is rarely described in detail. Thus, the divine emissary may or may not be some sort of supernatural being. How the angel got them out, we don't know, but it sure seems to be miraculous. The impression that Luke wants to give is that God Himself intervened.

Remember that the Sadducees did not believe in angels. You have to imagine that when Peter records this story, there's a smile on his face. While the Sadducees denied the existence of angels, and were sleeping, there is an angel releasing their prisoners from the jail.

The prisoners are released, and the angel tells them, **“Okay, you're free. Get out of Dodge. This is your one chance to escape. Run and hide, and don't ever show your faces in Jerusalem again.”** Is that what happens? No! They are sent back to the temple to preach Jesus:



“Go your way, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life.” (Acts 5:20 NASB)

That word “stand” is an interesting Greek word, [histemi](#). It means: **“to hold your ground,”** like a military command. They were to go, they were to hold their ground, and they were to proclaim the message of life, which would be to proclaim the resurrection.

Why did God break them out of prison just to have them re-arrested? The apostles ended up before the Sanhedrin, right where they would have been if they had not been released from prison. So, why release them? God did not set the apostles free so they could run for the hills or so they could just indulge their own comfort. They were set free for a reason. What was that reason? It was an acting out of prophecy. This was a picture of the presence of the New Age. This was a promise of Israel's that was being fulfilled. God had promised that when His Servant and His Anointed came, He would deliver the captives from prison:

“Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations.” (Isaiah 42:1 NASB)

Now notice what the Servant was to do:

To open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon, and those who dwell in darkness from the prison. (Isaiah 42:7 NAB)

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, Because the LORD has anointed me To bring good news to

the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to captives, And freedom to prisoners; (Isaiah 61:1 NASB)

The apostles being set free is an acting out of prophecy. Thus these prisoners being set free, just like the lame man leaping, indicated that the New Age was here. [The Kingdom of God](#) is revealed by the opening of the prison doors.

God delivered them from prison, and He can deliver whenever He chooses to, but we must understand that He does not always choose to. Jesus told His disciples:

"But you will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death,¹⁷ and you will be hated by all on account of My name. (Luke 21:16-17 NASB)

Some times God delivers His children, and some times He doesn't. In [Acts 7:58](#) Stephen is stoned to death even though he is filled with the Spirit and spoke with power. In [Acts 12:1](#) James, the apostle, is killed by Herod. No angel came to rescue them.

The angel of the Lord came to rescue the apostles—this time. But he did not come for Stephen. He did not come for James. He came again and again for Paul and for Peter. But there were many times when He did not stop the beatings and lashings and stoning and shipwrecks. The writer of Hebrews, after talking about the victories of faith, says this:

...and others were tortured, not accepting their release, in order that they might obtain a better resurrection;³⁶ and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment.³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated³⁸ (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. (Hebrews 11:35-38 NASB)

Here is a group of people that didn't gain great victories out on the battlefield. They didn't perform great feats for God, but in my opinion, these are the real heroes. They trusted God when the day was dark, when the night was long; the suffering was great, and even when there was no deliverance for them at all.

And upon hearing this, they entered into the temple about daybreak, and began to teach. Now when the high priest and his associates had come, they called the Council together, even all the Senate of the sons of Israel, and sent orders to the prison house for them to be brought. (Acts 5:21 NASB)

At daybreak the temple crier called, *"Priests to worship, Levites to the platform, and Israelites to deputations."* And so at their earliest opportunity, the apostles obey and resume teaching the people. They are living out their prayer for boldness.

"All the Senate of the sons of Israel"—Here the contest between old Israel and the new Israel, the people of God, is being emphasized.

But the officers who came did not find them in the prison; and they returned, and reported back,²³ saying, "We found the prison house locked quite securely and the guards standing at the doors; but when we had opened up, we found no one inside." (Acts 5:22-23 NASB)

Luke certainly appears to suggest here that the release had therefore been by a divine hand. Apart from God's sense of humor, there were clearly deeper purposes here. God was giving the Tribunal every opportunity of recognizing that His hand was in it, and that these men were under His protection.

How puzzled the Council members would have been to hear them affirm that the cell doors were securely locked and that no one had passed them in the night. How could this be? And even more of concern, to what would this lead?

Where was this all going? There seemed to be no end.

It is a little difficult to have a trial when the prisoners are missing. There must have been some very uncomfortable moments of silence in that courtroom, with all of these dignitaries shaken by this turn of events. They were not in control, as they so much wanted to convey to the apostles. The apostles were not even present to try to intimidate. Into that courtroom, stunned by these events, came those who reported that the apostles were back in the temple, doing exactly what they had been arrested for doing the previous day:

Now when the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them as to what would come of this. (Acts 5:24 NASB)

The captain of the temple guard and the chief priests are more than just puzzled at this. They are perplexed, at a complete loss to explain it. The Greek word translated here as “perplexed” is *diaporeo*, which is often used by Luke for *the human response to an encounter with the supernatural* ([Luke 9:7](#); [Acts 2:12](#); [5:24](#); [10:17](#)).

This is further evidence of what we talked about last week about miracles not causing men to believe. Think about what the Sanhedrin had seen and heard; they knew of all the miracles of Jesus. They no doubt all knew about the lame man that was healed at the Gate Beautiful. I’m sure that they had heard about Ananias and Sapphira and all the other miracles that the apostles were doing. And now their prisoners are miraculously freed, and they still don’t get it. Witnessing another miracle didn’t make the leaders any more ready to believe. Rather, it hardened them in their state of unbelief.

But someone came and reported to them, "Behold, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!" (Acts 5:25 NASB)

In a fast-paced change of scene and collision of characters reminiscent of a Keystone Cops comedy, Luke portrays the powerlessness of the authorities to silence the Church’s message.

The apostles are back in the temple preaching? Wouldn’t you think they’re probably up in the hills somewhere? The last thing you would expect is that they are right back where they were when they were arrested; doing the very same thing they were arrested for.

The chief priests would have been perplexed and furious at the same time. Perplexed because they did not know how they got there; but furious because they might at least have had the decency to go into hiding. They rightly saw this as a flagrant and deliberate challenge to their authority.

Then the captain went along with the officers and proceeded to bring them back without violence (for they were afraid of the people, lest they should be stoned). (Acts 5:26 NASB)

“Lest they should be stoned”—he temple captain clearly recognized the dangerous job the arrest party was going to have, and himself went along with the arresting party, for he realized that the crowds were going to be none too pleased, and he did not want a riot in the temple. Building works were still going on at the temple, and there were many loose stones around that could be picked up by an angry crowd to stone the captain and the officers.

They had to be very careful, because the people held the apostles in high esteem. I’ll bet they were afraid of the apostles, also. They knew about [Ananias and Sapphira](#), and they probably approached the apostles with great respect and courtesy. Thus it would seem that instead of arresting the apostles, the captain would negotiate with them, coming to an agreement that they would accompany him and his party to where the [Sanhedrin](#) were sitting.

Having previously received their official warning not to preach in the name of Jesus, the second appearance before the tribunal was always going to be traumatic. Now the court could sentence them without mercy:

And when they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. And the high priest questioned them,²⁸ saying, "We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and behold, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us." (Acts 5:27-28 NASB)

This was the third arrest for Peter and John. The high priest informed the apostles what they were being accused of. He sternly pointed out that despite the fact that the Sanhedrin had forbidden them not to teach in the name of Jesus, they had continued to do so. Indeed, they had filled Jerusalem with the teaching.

That's the first accusation, and it was true. But the disciples already told them they would disobey that command. After the religious leaders commanded them not *"to speak at all, nor teach in the name of Jesus,"* Peter said:

for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:20 NASB)

It's interesting to notice that these religious leaders can't even bring themselves to say the name of Jesus. Twice in verse 28 they say, *"teaching in this name"* and *"[you] intend to bring this man's blood upon us."*

Filled Jerusalem! Well that is step one. Jesus had said:

but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." (Acts 1:8 NASB)

Now Jerusalem is full. It is almost time to move on.

The high priest's second charge was that the disciples had accused Israel of Christ's death, which was an accurate charge. Peter made that indictment repeatedly:

this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. (Acts 2:23 NASB)

"Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified." (Acts 2:36 NASB)

but put to death the Prince of life, the one whom God raised from the dead, a fact to which we are witnesses. (Acts 3:15 NASB)

let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health. (Acts 4:10 NASB)

The apostles certainly did pronounce them guilty of shedding Christ's blood. If you were to go back to [Matthew 27](#), these same religious leaders were dialoguing with Pilate, and Pilate was kind of wavering back and forth as to whether or not he was going to have Jesus crucified. Do you remember what these leaders said to Pilate? They said, *"May His blood be upon us and our children."* Now we're just a couple of months down the road, and they're saying, "Hey, don't blame us!"

There is no attempt to refute the message that Jesus had died and had been buried and that He had risen from the dead. The issue is not about truth. The issue is about AUTHORITY.

No mention is made about how the disciples had managed to get out of prison. This seems to have been carefully ignored. They are not charged with a prison break, as the Sanhedrin seems unwilling to explore this miracle.

But Peter and the apostles answered and said, "We must obey God rather than men. (Acts 5:29 NASB)

They had already pointed out to the court that it was surely their duty to declare the things that they had seen and heard ([Acts 4:19-20](#)). That was surely what any reasonable court would expect. Now they pointed out to the high priest that they had to obey God, rather than men. Surely that would be what the high priest, of all people, expected of them. By saying, ***"We ought to obey God, rather than men,"*** Peter was implying the leaders were opposing God! That is boldness.

The Bible commands us as Christians to be subject to governing authorities ([Rom. 13:1](#); [1 Pet. 2:13-14](#)), even when these authorities are evil people. But if the governing authorities command us to do something that would be disobedient to God, then we must obey God, even if it results in our being punished.

If the our authority misuses its God-given power to command what He forbids or forbid what He commands, then the Christian's duty is to disobey the human authority in order to obey God.

If the government said that we could not meet as Christians or teach what the Bible says about homosexuality, abortion, or other moral issues; we must disobey the government.

"The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. ³¹ He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. (Acts 5:30-31 NASB)

This is awesome! In giving His defense, Peter goes on to preach the very Gospel which the Sanhedrin is forbidding him to preach. In order to answer their charge, he must bear witness of that which they do not wish to hear in the first place.

"The God of our fathers raised up Jesus"—his is the pre-eminent evidence for Christianity. It has been the primary theme of each sermon that has been preached in the book of Acts. Jesus was raised from the dead.

"Whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross"—gain the apostles charge the Sanhedrin with the death of Christ. The words "put to death" here are from the Greek word *diacheirizomai*, which is used only one other time in the New Testament. It means: ***"to murder with one's own hands."*** They were saying to Peter, "Stop telling everyone that we are responsible for this." Peter comes back with, "You murdered Christ with your very own hands." Instead of recanting, Peter became more aggressive.

The word Peter uses for "cross" here is [xulon](#), which is better translated as ***"tree."*** Why does Peter refer to the cross as a tree? Because he is drawing an association from [Deuteronomy 21:22-23](#), where it says that a person hanged from a tree is cursed by God. Peter is bringing attention to the magnitude of their rejection of Jesus, pointing out that they killed him in the worst way possible, both from a Roman perspective (the cross) and a Jewish perspective (the tree association).

Thus the Sanhedrin had disgraced Him, for to be hung on a tree was to be treated as a criminal accursed of God. But the truth was that far from God seeing Him as disgraced, He had raised Him up from the dead:

"He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. (Acts 5:30-31 NASB)

Being ***exalted to the right hand of God*** implies the position of authority. It is God who exalted Him—this is the work of God, and He's saying that to show them that they are far from God. You despised Him by hanging Him on a tree, but God exalted Him; you are fighting against God.

Prince is the same word Peter used in [Acts 3:15](#), when he told the Jews that they had put to death the Prince of life. The word means: “author” or “leader.” Jesus is the rightful Sovereign of the universe, the author of our salvation and faith ([Heb. 2:10](#)).

Savior, like "Lord," is a bridge word that opens the way for viewing Jesus as God. The First Testament is marked by the parallel themes that God will bring the final salvation, and that the Messiah will bring it ([Ps 106:47](#); [118:25-26](#); [Is 63:8](#); [Jer 17:14](#); [Joel 2:32](#)). The apostles reveal that God and the Messiah are one and the same, namely the Savior Jesus ([Acts 2:21](#), [36](#), [38-40](#)).

“To grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins”—his is a really remarkable statement that Peter makes to these religious leaders, when you think about the fact that these religious leaders were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. Yet, Peter is saying to them: Jesus, now exalted in glory with the power and position, is offering forgiveness to Israel.

The word “forgiveness” is a word that means: ***“the remission of sin.”*** It means basically to wipe away an obligation. What that word means is that God is willing to wipe the slate clean as if it never happened. How is this forgiveness received?

And seeing their faith, He said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." (Luke 5:20 NASB)

Forgiveness of sins is available to all who put their trust totally and only in Jesus.

"And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him." (Acts 5:32 NASB)

The duty of a witness is to speak that which he has seen. The disciples were in a court of law. This was the highest court in the land. And they were doing their duty to bear witness of the resurrection.

Then he asserts that there is an even greater witness, and that is the Holy Spirit, who has come from heaven at Jesus' command, and has been received by all who obey Him. The coming of the Holy Spirit was other evidence that the New Age had arrived. God had promised Israel that He would pour out His Spirit upon them and redeem them through resurrection:

"Therefore prophesy, and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, 'Behold, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel.'¹³ 'Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves and caused you to come up out of your graves, My people.¹⁴ 'And I will put My Spirit within you, and you will come to life, and I will place you on your own land. Then you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken and done it,' declares the LORD.'" (Ezekiel 37:12-14 NASB)

The Holy Spirit was given, not to the priests or to the members of the [Sanhedrin](#), but to those who obeyed God by believing in Jesus:

Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent." (John 6:29 NASB)

Believing in Jesus is obedience to God.

"And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him." (Acts 5:32 NASB)

This verse has been taken out of context and used to teach that if you don't live in obedience, you won't receive the Holy Spirit. We do not receive the Spirit through obedience. If we did, none of us would have Him. The Holy Spirit is given to every member of the body of Christ; to not have the Spirit is to not be a Christian:

However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. (Romans 8:9 NASB)

All believers have the Holy Spirit:

For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12:13 NASB)

There are no requirements to receiving the baptism with the Holy Spirit. "All" is mentioned twice, all believers have received the baptism with the Holy Spirit. Paul's point here is unity; the baptism with the Holy Spirit makes us members of the body of Christ. To not be baptized with the Holy Spirit is to not be a Christian.

"We were all baptized"—past tense. It happened at salvation. That is why there is no command in Scripture to be baptized with the Holy Spirit. There is no exhortation to receive the Holy Spirit—you already have Him.

The moment you trusted the Lord Jesus Christ, when God did that sovereign work of grace in your life and opened your heart, God, the Holy Spirit, united you, identified you with the body of Christ. That has tremendous practical applications. One of the greatest realities the Christian will ever understand about being united to Christ is that we stand complete in Him:

and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; (Colossians 2:10 NASB)

This message was preached by [David B. Curtis](#) on September 21, 2008. Media #432.



Berean Bible Church provides this material free of charge for the edification of the Body of Christ. You can help further this work by your prayer and by sending a contribution to:

[Berean Bible Church](#)
2000 Centerville Turnpike
Chesapeake, VA 23322