

## Pastor Bob Fox's Personal Notes on Colossians 2

### **2:1 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf, and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face,**

Paul's commitment enabled God to create in him a single-mindedness extraordinaire. It is remarkable that one would "struggle greatly" for the spiritual development of anyone, much less people they do not know. This is simply "off the radar" of most people, even many Christian people. Paul cared for the health of the people of God in the way that others cared for themselves. In words like these that we see in Paul's expressions of his own emotions, we see the work that God wishes to do in our hearts to bring us to a point where we love Him with all our heart, soul, and mind. It is the attitude of Christ who laid down His own life for others (Jn 10:11; 15:13; 1 Jn 3:16).

When the work of God moves forward it does so because this work moves forward, very often in the heart of just one person. That person becomes so concerned about that which remains undone in some part of God's work that they "struggle greatly." This is the first work of God's Spirit in bringing about change in the spiritual climate somewhere. When we are willing to bear a burden for the eternal good of others we are beginning to hear the voice of God and an empowering to act in His behalf will soon follow.

Colosse and Laodicea were towns in modern day Turkey that were roughly 100 miles east of the principal city of the province of Asia, Ephesus. They were 15-20 miles apart and it is believed that Epaphras was the leader of the work in both these cities (1:7-8; 4:12-13; cf. Philemon 23). Paul was entrusting the work that was his heart to faithful others, because it was simply so great in scope. The downside was this, that his heart was with the people in such places, but he had never had opportunity to meet them.

That Paul had never met them, yet had the authority to influence them from afar speaks of a side to the ministry that is often missing today. It is certainly true that ministry is relational, even as God is relational. Paul's words here are quite relational in tone, anything but clinical and detached and authoritarian. But there was an understanding of his spiritual authority that obviously existed, though he was personally unknown to the readers. His word carried weight and would add weight to the leadership of Epaphras.

This is a reflection of God's relationship with humanity. He is one who longs for relationship, and approaches us relationally. But He is God and does not set aside His authority as such. God's church is led by servant leaders like Christ, whose master is God. They are caring and relational. They are friendly by temperament, perhaps not naturally but by the seasoning of God's Spirit. But their words are to be heeded because of the spiritual authority that God has bestowed on them.

**2:2 That their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself.**

Paul's struggle for these churches grew out of his desire to see a certain string of results come about in them. These were things that he knew the Lord had for them and that leaders, like himself had to lead them into. The immediate result was that they might be encouraged. The intermediate result was confidence in the pattern of life they were following. The end result was the experience of Christ Himself. We see in the NASB rendering of this verse the domino effect that occurs when matters of the faith are properly ordered. There is steady progress toward maturity.

It is an important thing for individual hearts to be encouraged. There is a collective heart that grows out of this in a local Church that gives great impetus to the mission. Hearts are encouraged through the supportive fellowship that the Holy Spirit choreographs. If believers will just invest time in each other, time during which they behave toward each other as the Holy Spirit is directing, they will find that their hearts will be encouraged. Paul refers to this supportive fellowship as the knitting together of hearts in love. This captures what the Holy Spirit does between individuals in the body of Christ. The problem is that in all eras such relational living out of the faith can be set aside by busy schedules, by self-centeredness, by a merely academic approach to the faith, and by a host of other things that occur naturally in people. And so Paul prayed that these Christians would be willing participants in this that can be seen as one of the vital signs of the faith. Christians impact each other to the degree that they set aside self-interests and allow their hearts to be knit together in love.

The next phrase is one that expresses an intermediate result that occurs where such relationships are formed. That result is that something Paul refers to as "wealth" comes to be discovered. This is an expression for strength in faith. As we engage in the spiritual growth process with other Christians we come to a greater confidence in the way of life we have chosen. This confidence grows through a growing understanding of everything of God, ourselves, the world, other people, things, life processes, virtually everything that is. Paul calls this "the full assurance of understanding." The term rendered "full assurance" refers to evidence that has become plain and is completely convincing. It is evidence in full bloom. In this case it is having evidence about truth that enables one to envision precisely the end result God's plan is moving toward. Such assurance of the final outcome of God's plan is the goal of the Holy Spirit in His work in us and is always praised in Scripture (1 Thess 1:5; Heb 6:11; 10:22).

So far then, Paul has described his struggle for the readers as the burden to see their hearts encouraged and their faith brought to completeness through the completion of their understanding. Their hearts would be encouraged through supportive fellowship. Their understanding would be increased through his ministry, and that is why he was specially burdened for all who had not seen his face. Paul had understanding of truth that they needed. That understanding imparted by him, plus the ensuing conversation among them sparked by that fuller understanding, would lead to spiritual wealth for them. But there was a greater result still that Paul desired to see in them all, a kind of over-arching purpose that explained his concern for them.

The final phrase of this verse states the result that God wishes to bring about in each believer. It is the result toward which all that is called ministry should aim. That result is a true knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ. It is not just knowledge of all the facts about Christ, though these

are essential. It is the personal, moment by moment knowledge of His will that grows out of deep personal relationship with Him. This relationship is the mystery that unlocks and leads to life as it was meant to be lived. Jesus is the “seed of the woman” (Gen 3:17), that would crush Satan and undo the effects of evil in creation for all who would believe.

This is the mystery hidden in all the types and symbolic rituals carried out at God’s instruction by ancient Israel, spoken of in meticulous detail in the first five books of our Bible. All of the imagery and symbols pointed to relationship to Yahweh and all that Jesus would transact between Yahweh and humanity. The astute knew from the symbols that some great person and string of events was coming. But the detail of this coming person and era was fuzzy. In the knowledge of Jesus Christ it all became clear.

Paul was a key figure in explaining this mystery and making sense of it. This was his calling and role in the plan of God (Eph 3:1-13). A large part of the mystery of Christ was that His family would include the Gentiles (Eph 3:6). This was the truth that the apostles would have to apply in the fledgling church, raising the ire of the Jews.

Why such far-reaching truth was put forth by God in such mysterious form is itself a mystery to us. The truth that the promise ruler of the Old Testament would be Yahweh Himself in human form could be plainly seen in the Old Testament once Christ had come. But it was veiled apart from the teaching of Christ and His apostles. The same can be said about the death of Messiah for the sins of the world. God certainly could have stated these things very plainly ahead of time, but chose instead to leave many things unstated.

Perhaps the reason behind the mysterious nature of the Christ lies primarily in two thoughts that we know about God. First, we know He wanted salvation to be through faith. Ultimately, there must be missing pieces for faith to be required. It is hard for us to over-state the significance of faith in the plan God has set forth for His dealings with humanity (Heb 11:6). Second, His plan was designed to prove His sovereignty over all, including evil. The plan therefore involved evil conspiring to kill the God-man. The death of that One would provide atonement for all of humanity who would believe. It was essential therefore to shroud the plan of Christ in mystery in written revelation so that the Evil One would not be alerted to the fact that he was helping to bring about God’s desired redemption by killing Jesus Christ. Redemption is a matter of great intrigue at a cosmic level that the forces of evil gave an unwilling assist to. In doing so they proved God’s sovereignty over them.

The use of the word “mystery” was likely purposeful and strategic in terms of the Holy Spirit’s inspiration and Paul’s thought. What history would call “the mystery religions,” were on the rise in Paul’s day. These were religious systems that searched for an esoteric knowledge and wisdom that they believed had been concealed by supernatural beings. Adherents to these movements would pursue everything from fictitious spiritual beings to supposed hidden messages in Scripture. They would propose hybrids of Christianity and mixtures of paganism and Judaism, but would not simply accept Jesus as the logos (Word) of God incarnate. Their minds were bent on superstitions and so driven to search beyond Christ for all that God had actually unveiled in Him. Paul’s statement here that God’s mystery is embodied in Christ had profound meaning for centuries to the people of the Mediterranean world. Paul’s next thought would emphatically reinforce the completed nature of God’s revelation in Christ.

## **2:3 In whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.**

There are people whom, outside of Christ, come to gain both wisdom and knowledge. By all standards we admire them as learned. But in all things whom we come to be is finally judged by whom we might have been. In the case of the wise and learned, what do they have if they know nothing of the person of Christ? They may have studied thoroughly His works. But if they have not acknowledged His presence in those works, then they have missed the statement they make. The wisdom of such persons is great, even admirable. But they are missing an important piece of the intellectual and emotional puzzle. It is the piece that unifies it all and gives definition to the whole. What might they have been if they had acknowledged Him? Without Christ our great wisdom becomes foolishness (1 Cor 1:18-31).

The ancient world was becoming fascinated with wisdom and knowledge. This has always been an attraction to humanity. This quest to know comes from our design and the very spirit of our Creator. Since we became separated from God we have rightly sensed that we are missing a great body of knowledge that lies beyond us. This “secret knowledge” was thought to exist in the collective realm of the gods in the Greek world. Such a treasury of knowledge was understandably coveted. There came to be the theory that if we could get beyond the realm of our physical senses into the spiritual realm of reality, we could gain access to this reservoir of true wisdom. The next verse will reveal that in these words Paul is speaking directly to this mindset that was prevalent in Colosse. They are words that certainly were appropiate in terms of what we know of ancient thought.

As with many things there is an element of truth to this idea of missing information. It takes a good direction if it is pursued by God’s revelation of the truth rather than by superstition. There is much wisdom to be gained through God’s revelation of truth. It provides for us wisdom that could not be known apart from God. Paul says that the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are indeed hidden, but not in strange mysterious beings. They are to be found in Christ. In Him and His words we find that which we otherwise would not have known. Through his work we can be re-united with God and His Spirit can be our constant companion. Whatever learning we pursue, this added perspective of His Spirit leads us to more precise conclusions about the relative meaning and application of what we have come to know. The facts must be discovered by the persistent and diligent effort of research and discovery. As these processes of learning are engaged in, the Holy Spirit makes aware of things like implication and application which are the real treasures or benefits of what is learned. This is the same whatever branch of truth is explored. Its real treasure is mined when it is applied in harmony with God’s design and purpose. It is the same whether that truth is found through Bible study or scientific study. The treasures of wisdom and knowledge are in Christ.

## **2:4 I say this in order that no one may delude you with persuasive arguments.**

Paul’s statement about all the mystery of wisdom and knowledge being posited in Christ was intentional. There were those who were trying to mislead the Church in this regard. They were persuasive-clever with words. The study of ancient religious thought indicates that these were individuals who were the forerunners of Gnostic thought. The thinkers of the movement had complex, elaborate schemes that explained reality with myriads of mysterious deities, discovered and known only by them. They spoke of the existence of a body of knowledge that could not be accessed with normal processes of reason. They boasted of knowing what could not be known by others and delighted in drawing followers and admirers to themselves.

There is one thing about complexity, it can thoroughly intimidate the unlearned, and frequently does. There is a natural tendency in us to equate charm and complexity of argument with intelligence and veracity. It makes us vulnerable to all kinds of scams and schemes in every realm. The defense against this is the simple truth from the mouth of an expert witness. Paul's letter is meant to provide this. It is the assurance that there is no more information they need other than Christ. To have Him is to have access to all the knowledge and wisdom that exists. He will lead us to it and can make it known in His time. There are no magic formulas or secret codes. He is the Creator and sustainer of all that exists. If something has existence it is certain that He not only knows it, but is its master. We need look no further than Christ, though it is certain that we can always draw closer and look deeper into Him, and that will be Paul's message in this letter.

## **2:5 For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ.**

We can say that these words of Paul reflect the feelings of Christ for his family in the present age of His absence from earth. Anyone who has accepted responsibility for the spiritual development of others has felt what Paul describes here. Any parent has experienced what it is like to be absent from their children physically, but with them in spirit. The words are another way of expressing the "struggle" (verse 1), he has for their greater experience of Christ. To be present in spirit is a way of expressing this inner longing to be there in Colosse to encourage, protect, and nurture their growing faith.

But this idea of being present in spirit means more than just the normal, human emotional bond that is felt. Through the Holy Spirit there is ability to perceive need and ability to precisely intercede for those who are not present. There is some capacity to exercise spiritual authority in the situation (1 Cor 5:3-5), and bring about practical results. To be present in spirit is an experience that all humans have on an emotional level. To those indwelt by the Holy Spirit it can rise to a whole different level, beyond separation anxiety and nostalgia. There is a practical though spiritual work that can be accomplished by God's people in each other's lives through the leading and direction of the One Spirit that is joined to each of us. Paul's words here go on to show that this is the experience he is describing here.

He describes himself as rejoicing and seeing their growing faith. There is no worry or anxiety in those words. There is assurance and an actual perception enabled by the Spirit that order and stability are emerging in the Colossian Church. We conclude that there are spiritual senses, developed and energized with experience (Heb 5:14). These senses, employed with information he had likely gotten from Onesimus and others, enabled him to discern their condition without having met them. The same type of process can occur in us so that we can pray and act with precision with respect to those we are separated from. There is vast potential for impact in such work.

The two things Paul senses present in the Colossians which he wishes to stimulate and develop further are rendered "good discipline" and "stability" by the NASB. The word for good discipline is *taxin*, which speaks of order. Such an idea can refer to things like organization and predictability, which the other word used here, stability, also speaks to. This no doubt refers to a conformity to the apostolic pattern that had emerged in their individual and collective life. It was not mere order and self-discipline, which are often present in false doctrinal systems, false religions and cults. Paul was witnessing The Way, as it was called in Acts, the way of living and

thinking Christ defined and modeled and the Apostles passed along. It was what the early Christian leaders were calling “the faith” (Jude 3-4). Paul was heartened by their conformity to this.

There is a spiritual order and stability and there is also a fleshly one. The former is to be cultivated, the latter is to be stomped out. The orderliness of the Spirit refers to things like moderation, restraint, a sense for priority. Orderliness in the sense of these things prepares a person for the degree of spontaneity that life lived by the Holy Spirit requires. God has no interest in an order that quarantines Him and confines Him to certain times, places, and modes of action. Orderliness and discipline embraced to produce the safety of predictability is the enemy of true spirituality. Stability as Paul envisions it is the way of life he taught and advocated. It is the product of trust in Christ. It is strong conviction regarding His supremacy, His goodness, the sovereignty of His rule and the reliability of His teachings and promises. This trust within stays the course even in tumult. It is not taken in by sterile institutionalism or by spiritual sounding fads, by the lure of the sensual, or by the deceit of the pseudo-spiritual. It establishes no comfort zones.

In the thoughts that follow, Paul will seek to minister to this faith-based orderliness and stability that was present in the Colossians to develop it further and so insulate them from the creeping death of the spirit of their times.

## **2:6 “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him.”**

This is a pivotal thought in Paul’s letter. He has provided much by way of under-girding argument for the supremacy of Christ. Now He will get quite directive as to how the Colossians should be thinking as they are bombarded with these intelligent sounding schemes being pedaled among them.

Paul has spoken in some detail of the identity of Christ (1:15-21). This was how they had “received” Him, as the God-man, the creator of all that is, appearing on earth in human flesh. The teaching of the Apostles regarding Christ’s identity was not to be compromised. It was the essence of the Gospel. Without this there was no Gospel. They, along with all Christians since, are to accept this teaching of Christ and then are to live by its implications. That is what Christianity is as a movement. It is all centered and contingent on Christ being the God-man. When we read the phrase “receive Christ Jesus the Lord” we think of what we have come to call “receiving Christ,” the moment of our first act of faith where we express our new belief in a prayer. We then take this verse as a call to faith. It is that, but more precisely it is a call to re-embrace the identity of the central figure of the Faith. So most likely here Paul is speaking of the specific apostolic teaching about Christ’s identity, the apostolic doctrine of Christ that was first presented to the Colossians, likely by Epaphras. Paul’s call to them is to continue to embrace that doctrine of who Christ is, rather than allow Christ to be made into a lesser being by false teachers who were bringing supposed “new knowledge” to them. The message and news of Christ they originally received was that He was God in human form. They were to maintain this teaching, and preserve it just as they had received it. They were to have faith and trust in it as they had earlier, and then live by its considerable implications.

The little phrase “the Lord” is probably an affirmation of the identity of Christ. The Biblical language and terminology of Paul’s day was based to a large degree on the Septuagint, the Greek language version of the Old Testament. In that version this word “Lord” is used wherever the

personal name of God, Yahweh, occurred in the Hebrew version. In New Testament language therefore, the word “Lord” probably was used to convey more than a title of authority when used of Christ. Paul’s description of Christ as the creator and sustainer of all in chapter one unmistakably identifies Him with Yahweh of the Old Testament. This term “Lord” is likely used throughout the apostolic writings very purposefully, to clearly equate Jesus with Yahweh. The thought of Christ’s identity continues into the next verse, where continuance in the faith they had been instructed in is urged. It all is meant to give further definition to the command in verse 6 to walk in Him.

## **2:7 “having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude.**

The One who enables the first step of salvation is the one who enables every step in its ongoing process. The same principle He established for our justification is applicable to our sanctification. To be justified we face our own inability to earn forgiveness and trust in His work on the Cross in our behalf, in answer to His conviction that this is what the truth prescribes. We then by faith each moment answer His call to holiness, face our own inability, and trust that through His work on the cross His Spirit will enable us to behave as the truth prescribes. We come to embrace Him for forgiveness at the start of our journey of faith, and as we embrace him in the moments we are built up by Him as the journey continues. And so the truth prescribes that the journey continue on just as it began, by faith, centered in Him. He is its central figure, its enabler and its sustainer.

This is how the way of life Jesus modeled was represented by Him to us. He used various figures such as the vine and the branches to illustrate this, that apart from Him we could do nothing (Jn 15:5). This is the way the apostles presented the life in their teaching. They did not present it as a way of life and worship that would take on any other form or be centered in any other being than the triune God as they set forth (Jude 3). Jesus was the Christ, the ruler appointed by God to be sovereign over all creation and to be its savior. He was both the source of its physical existence and its spiritual life, its breath and its hope.

Paul prescribes this to the Colossians as the antidote their present dilemma, as they are being seduced by new spiritual thought mingled with Christian rhetoric. He uses three words, all participles, to describe the centrality of Jesus in the Christian process. He adds the phrase “just as you were instructed” as a kind of certificate of authenticity to this thinking. The first participle is in the perfect tense, describing completed action that results in an ongoing state. He uses a word that describes what must happen to a seed to become a viable plant. A seed sends a sprout upward, which is capable of sustaining itself for a few days on nutrients in the seed. It must then send roots outward and downward to draw nutrients from the soil or it will die. Paul describes the Colossians as having done this critical thing. They were “rooted in Christ,” able to draw from Him that which they needed to nurture spiritual life. It is an apt description of new birth—union with Christ. Our spirits have been joined with the Spirit of God.

The second and third participles are in the present tense, depicting action that is ongoing. The first of the two is a term used to describe the building of a house. Combining it with the first participle we see that union with Christ by the Spirit provides the foundation through which Christ begins to impart His character to us, resulting in a new kind of life. The second of these two participles is a word that describes stability and depicts the season when this process of growth becomes habitual and ongoing in a life.

All three participles are in the passive voice, depicting action Christ is carrying out in us. It is not that we have no role in it. Paul's writings make it abundantly clear that we do. They would not be necessary if it was all just destiny and fate. But here he wishes to emphasize that our role is to keep Christ in His central role in that process and not to substitute anything or anyone else. We are being led in a process by Him. That process will continue on if we do not interrupt it by misplacing our faith in things other than Christ.

He commands us to continue on and to do so abounding or overflowing with gratitude. It is easy for Christians in time when their thought and faith is being threatened to get grouchy, arrogant, and self-consumed. There is instead a graciousness that should characterize us, the pleasantness that comes from someone who feels they have been graced and blessed. Our gratitude should be on display. Such people are embracing, they smile, they are not easily ruffled, they are accepting, they show ability to flex, they display no sense of entitlement, they are ready to serve. Their sense of all that is guaranteed them in Christ diminishes their need and concern for everything else that is a part of the earth experience. They hold it all with a loose grip. They come to understand they will inherit any of it that is of worth. And so they aren't vexed by grabbing it now.

This is the life of faith demonstrated by Christ, embraced by the apostles, and set forth in writing by them for any and all who choose to follow. It is available to all, but it is as the apostles defined it. It's terms cannot be altered nor its conditions, and neither can its central figure and sovereign Lord and Head, Jesus Christ, be compromised. It is ordained by Him as He has set it forth. Like access to the tree of life, He never releases the way of life from his sovereign control.

## **2:8 "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ."**

In the original language this verse is quite pre-emptive and directive. "Beware so that not any man shall be taking you as spoil . . ." This is graphic language. The Colossians were to be on guard because this was a very clear and present danger. Individuals were capturing and leading away the unsuspecting through philosophy and empty deception. In the great quagmire of religious thought people are the casualties and are viewed by the unscrupulous as the prize. A following brings power, a degree of acclaim, and opportunity for wealth. There are many who appear pious and good-hearted who move into Churches only to take people as slaves to their own desires. There are many such desires, from the perverted to the more complex passions for power and fame. But there is no shortage of people operating in a fleshly way in Churches.

The rhetoric of philosophy has always been intimidating. It can easily create an air of intelligence and wisdom. Paul is calling for alertness so that Christians will not be led away from Christ. None of his words are written to condemn the legitimate pondering of the great philosophical question of why things exist. Such questions are spoken of in the Scriptures and they were spoken of by Jesus. Paul is concerned about turning away from God's clear revelation of the truth about such matters which is normal in the circles that explore these things.

There are two directions philosophical thought that excludes God tends to drift. When it does it becomes empty deception, a mere illusion. It drifts into what Paul calls the tradition of man. The tradition of man includes everything from legalistic religion to atheism, from the complex polytheism of the Greeks to the secular humanism of the 21st century. Traditional human thought also builds on the elementary principles of the world. Either the physical elements of the world or the metaphysical ponderings associated with them become the basis for an explanation of origins

and destinies. All such things reduce God to an impersonal force, a collective conscience, a collection of lesser beings or some such thing that falls short of what He has revealed Himself to be. Humanity tends to develop the god they wish to have and that affirms who they are. That is the bottom line of human religious tradition.

Christianity claims a God who has revealed Himself in written revelation and by becoming a man and living amongst humanity. Paul does not want the Colossians to exchange this God for a nebulous, conceptual series of beings fabricated by those who simply want a different god.

## **2:9 “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form,”**

With this statement Paul captures and repeats the realities associated with Jesus Christ. There are certain things that are true of Him. Because of these, certain things are true of those who have come to believe in Him. These follow in Paul’s discussion.

For the specific threat facing the faith of the Colossians, this statement was the rock in which they were to take refuge. Jesus is not just the full bodily expression of God, an idea that might diminish Paul’s meaning into something like “there could be no more of God expressed in human form.” He was not just full of God to the extent a human being could be. Rather, all the fullness of God, the complexities of his power and knowledge, His complete essence resides in the man Jesus Christ. Now granted, His willingness to take on human flesh involved stepping away from an existence in which He experienced all that those attributes entail, such as omnipresence. But the attributes themselves He did not lay aside. He is the full expression of the divine essence. The word fullness will be important with respect to what Paul will say about believers in the verse that follows.

This statement affirms that Christ did have a body that was physical and real. He didn’t just appear to have one—an idea the Gnostics would embrace. And of course the statement affirms that He was fully divine. All that characterizes God, all that is part of His essence we find in Christ. He was not a facsimile or a reproduction that reflected some of what one could find if he were to encounter God. He was the essence of God appearing in bodily form. There could be nothing more fully divine than Christ because the full portion of deity was in Him. It would be impossible for one more divine than Christ to appear. And since Christ is God’s only Son, it would be impossible for His equal to appear.

The first word of this verse, the conjunction rendered “for,” ties this statement on the essence of Christ to the thought that we should not be taken captive by human thought on the meaning of the universe we are in. All the optional theories are a monstrous step down from the person of Christ. To let go of Christ’s essence to be occupied with human ramblings on things divine would be the worst of spiritual compromises.

This verse captures the answer to the question “Why Christianity?” There could be no better direction given to man’s spiritual search than this crisp statement on Jesus’ essence. Since He is the fullness of God, all that can be known of God is found in Him. Why turn in any other direction? To ponder His behavior, His teachings, and His attitudes and emotions, all of which we have a printed, reliable record of, is to analyze and gain insight into the nature and character of God and all that He has brought into existence. It is all a watershed of truth with respect to understand ourselves and our world. Things like order, meaning, purpose, significance, pain and suffering—all that is to be known is colored in some way by what we can understand of the person of Christ.

## **2:10 “and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority.”**

Since Christ is God, new realities emerge for those who are joined to Him by His Spirit. In Him we have been made complete. The term rendered “made complete” also could be rendered “to fill up.” It is a perfect passive participle which means it is describing an ongoing state of being which has come about as a result of a completed action. The rendering of the NASB, “you have been made complete,” could be changed to “you have been filled up with Him.” Combining this with the thought of the previous verse we have a word play that expresses this: “Christ is filled up with God, and you have been filled up with Christ.” The implication is clear. We have been joined completely to God-filled up with Him! This captures perfectly what Paul wishes to remind the Colossians of so that they would not be drawn away to movements claiming to fill up what they might feel is lacking in their spiritual experience.

This fullness, or completeness, refers to what was lost in humanity through Adam’s fall, namely being joined to God. Apart from this partnership with our Creator something is missing from the design perspective. Once we are rejoined to God through the sacrifice of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, that missing element is restored. Then there is the process of learning to function by that design. The old habits ingrained in us, the patterns modeled by everyone around us, and our lack of data about God’s thoughts and ways, deter our full experience of this bond with God. But the fact remains that He has provided for us everything that pertains to life and Godliness (2 Pet 1:3). The shortfall we all experience is the thing that our perseverance and faithfulness, nurture and growth will address.

It is being “in Him” that makes our progress in faith and character a possibility. Apart from Him this bearing of fruit is impossible (John 15:5).

This new potential in us is because of who He is. So Paul links our completeness to the headship of Christ. There is no sphere of power or authority that is outside the realm of His sovereignty. That is not to imply that they do only what He says. It means that they do only what He allows, and that He takes action with respect to all that other authorities might initiate so that in the end His will results. As THE sovereign ruler He has embraced us and joined Himself to us. Because of this action He has taken and because of the fact that His action is unthwartable, we have been made complete. That state of being is firm and unalterable in terms of our right, our privilege, and our access.

## **2:11 “and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ;”**

It is common in God’s dealings with humanity for Him to borrow from our cultures things that become symbols that impart understanding to us of our relationship to Him. And so we have things like covenants, concepts like uncleanness, things like the serpent on the pole, the curtain in the temple, and thousands of others that can increase our understanding of ourselves and Him. We also are given ceremonies and rites designed not to enhance our standing with Him, but to enhance our understanding of Him. That is an important distinction.

Circumcision was such a rite. It was given to symbolize God's covenant to separate us from all that separates us from Him—to make us a people for Himself after His heart. And so it was symbolic of the whole journey of redemption and new birth. It spoke of belonging to this covenant community. It was a kind of brand. And so using circumcision as a metaphor, Paul describes our new birth. Circumcision was an appropriate metaphor because it was a “hot button” of the day. Wherever the gospel went, because of the presence of Jews, the false notion that believers must be circumcised to have the full experience of salvation soon followed. This rite, which only pictured new birth, tended to be described as the vehicle of new birth. It then added to the gospel.

Paul describes salvation as a spiritual circumcision performed by Christ. He is describing us before salvation as being uncircumcised. In this imagery our foreskin was “the body of flesh.” This refers to the fact that we were slaves to sin because of a magnetic set of impulses within that drew us consistently into the error of self-determination. These impulses are innate in every human being since Adam and are called “the flesh” by Paul. The flesh is not synonymous with the body, but is inherent in it and discloses itself through the deeds it engages the body in. Our bodies, in terms of pursuits we give them to and activities that we engage them in, are bodies of flesh, using the term flesh in this ethical sense. They are bodies that are driven by this set of desires resident in each human being. We could call these basic human instincts. The closest term we have in twenty first century American culture that describes this is what we refer to as being “ego driven.”

The “flesh” leads us into sin. It creates a cycle of sin that is continuous in us. We cannot escape sin because we cannot escape the flesh. And so in more imagery of Scripture, we are slaves to sin due to the flesh. It is the flesh that causes our bodies to go in the direction of serving sin (Rom 6:12-23). Collectively we bring this out in each other and are driven together by it. Satan, knowing this, is able to put things in front of that keep us pursuing passionately a course of independence from God (Eph 2:1-2). It is a hapless and hopeless lot that we bring on ourselves through evil.

The good news of the gospel is that God is moved with great compassion by the unfolding human tragedy. His solution is to personally intervene in humanity's behalf. This is our only hope because the flesh has rendered us powerless to alter our own course and to be re-united with our Creator. And so He died in our behalf and His death provided forgiveness for our sin. His Spirit now lives within each one who believes this good news.

In believers the old relationship between their flesh and their bodies has been severed by the Holy Spirit. They no longer need to be flesh driven, but through the Holy Spirit can be God-centered. Paul likens this to a circumcision. It is not done with hands, that is, it is not physical. It is spiritual. Paul wants this clear. He is not calling the Church to physical circumcision, but describing their spiritual circumcision. Christ severs us from the body of flesh. We no longer need to be merely creatures of instinctive desire. We can be freed from that whole course of living through the Holy Spirit that He has placed in us. It is a radical change in our make-up. We were spiritually dead, spiritually dull and insensitive to God. Our sinful desires were just too strong. Now we are spiritually alive, our spirits united to His. In the deepest part of us is now a flowing spring of all that is pure and true. Things are possible in and through our bodies now that never occurred to us before. We are a new creation (2 Cor 5:14-21).

**2:12 “having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”**

In many ways baptism is to the New Covenant community what circumcision was to the Old Covenant community. Both are symbolic acts that express identification with those who believe in Yahweh's actions to bring salvation to man and enter into restored relationship with him. Circumcision symbolized the separation of the Israelites out from among the other people groups by God as instruments of the revelation of Himself, his truth, and His salvation. Circumcision conveyed by its nature separation and distinction. Baptism symbolizes the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in which He unites us to Christ through our belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Baptism conveys by its nature Christ's death and resurrection and the cleansing power of that work of His toward us.

So thoroughly does baptism picture the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit that John the Baptist proclaimed that Jesus would baptize in the Holy Spirit (John 1:33). Paul embraces this language and elsewhere speaks of us being baptized by the Spirit into the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13). The Spirit did not baptize anyone in the literal sense of the term. The ceremonial act becomes the term for the invisible, spiritual work. That is the use of the term baptism in this verse. Baptism becomes a synonym for the experience of belief.

Paul is continuing to describing the realities that are true of us through the spiritual work of the Holy Spirit. He has now added a metaphor and is using the rite of baptism to speak to these realities. Our reality is that we are seen by God as being “in Christ,” meaning forever joined to Him.

Just as He died, God views the old, unforgiven slave to sin that we once were as having died. Just as Christ was buried, that old slave to sin was buried. Just as Christ was raised, so we have been raised, forgiven and united to Christ. As He is now destined to rule, so are we. This does not come about through our volunteering to be baptized. It comes about through our faith in the working of God. We believe that He raised Christ from the dead and in that embrace Christ's death as of God, meant for the bearing of our sin. That faith is brought about by the Holy Spirit and results in the instantaneous joining of our beings to God Himself.

**2:13 “And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions.”**

There are several times in Scripture where a single sentence captures our inability, our ignorance, our rebellion, and our neediness along with Christ's mercy, grace, forgiveness and power. This is such a sentence (see also Rom 5:8; 1 Jn 4:10). It speaks to the fact that God's efforts toward us were not focused on us because of our merit. Our salvation did not come due to a good moment or season that we put together. It came as a sovereign act of God. Even if from a human point of view there was a process involved and a great deal of time passed, the truth is that such a process became our experience at His initiation. That in the process leading up to our faith we may have become “better” by human standards does not change the reality of who we were when He began. Our salvation came when our moral shortfall was immense. And the truth is that at our best, our moral shortfall is immense. God's love was extended due to our hopelessness, not due to our goodness.

His salvation came to us because He rescued us. It did not come because we found Him. Paul's choice of words capture the entire scope of humanity's plight apart from God. There is the problem of our sinful actions, what we usually think of when we think of sin. Then there is also the problem of our sinfulness, that innate drive in us to serve ourselves rather than God, the desire Paul calls "the flesh." These two things, the guilt of our sinful deeds and our incapability due to our flesh render us "dead" in the spiritual sense. We are locked in a realm of existence that is apart from God. There is nothing in us that enables us to break out.

Though extremely offensive to God, this state of being we are in moves Him. This is due to His innate love for us. It is while we are in this offensive, vile, helpless and hopeless condition that He acts toward us.

God's action can be seen as administrative and legal, in that it involved proceedings, payments, and the satisfying of moral law and debt. But it was personal in that it involved God's own Son dying to satisfy all these legal demands. His action can be seen as broad and impersonal, in that it was taken for the benefit of millions who would choose to believe and so become its beneficiaries. But it was personal in that God would personally intervene in individual lives to bring about this belief. It is personal in that God's Spirit indwells each individual who so believes. It is personal in that He embraces each as a son and daughter, not simply collectively as a nation. We are alive together with Him and so His actions result in personal relationship with Him and with each other.

Believers are spiritually alive, and it all happens because of initiative taken by Him to forgive our transgressions. It is because of the availability of this forgiveness that life eternal, a whole different kind of life and living, can flow from God to us and through us.

## **2:14 "having cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having hailed it to the cross."**

Paul refers here to a certificate of debt. He tells what this consists of and its tone toward us. He is describing here what amounts to a moral promissory note that is due and payable due to a judgment against us. This certificate, actual or symbolic, documents the shortfall between the behavior we owe God and what we have given Him. Paul refers to it here as singular, but it relates to every member of humanity except Jesus Christ. Their moral plight is the same. They are named as moral debtors to God. Whether this is referring to an actual document or is simply an illustration cast in human terms is irrelevant. The point is that our condition is grim and our doom declared and impending.

The wording of this document expresses decrees against us. For all humanity there is a proclamation of condemnation. One has only to read the curses associated with disobedience to the Old Covenant to realize the hostile action that awaits all who are not forgiven (Deut 28:15-16). It is not just that there is loss of relationship with God. It is that God has decreed certain things against such as are not forgiven. He is hostile toward them and will move against them swiftly and with great severity on the day He has marked out as the time for judgment to begin (Is 2:12-22).

This hostile action that awaited us, this legal judgment against us, this outstanding warrant has been dealt with through the sacrificial death of Jesus. Some say that such certificates of debt when satisfied in the ancient world were nailed up and posted in a public place. There seems to be no consistent evidence of this however. But Paul's imagery captures such action in the case of this moral promissory note and solidly links its resolution to the cross of Christ. When Christ was nailed to the cross as payment for our sin, it amounted to the end of hostility between God and all who would believe, what we could call the community of the cross. This certificate of debt is no longer a factor in the case of their relationship to God. In a most public act, nailed to a cross, naked for all to see, God's own Son was sacrificed as the payment for the sins of all who would believe. There could have been no more definitive statement by God of the closure in the matter of our guilt and coming punishment. It is a statement of His love and commitment to us, of our redemption, of His resolve to recover a remnant of humanity to bring about His honor and glory through them.

**2:15 When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.”**

It seems certain that this verse is speaking of the resurrection of Jesus and His various presentations of Himself alive to reliable eye witnesses. The rulers and authorities likely include the Romans and the Jews as well as Satan and his demons. In the case of all of these their ultimate weapon is death. God disarmed them in the cross in that Christ was raised from the dead and in death He provided the means by which humanity could escape spiritual death and eternal separation from God (Heb 2:14-15). Humanity can be raised from spiritual death and so their resurrection from physical death is to eternal union with God not separation from Him.

In describing God as having made a public display of these rulers, very deliberate and definitive action is certainly in view. This could be a reference to something beyond post-resurrection appearances to His followers. That action alone would not seem strong enough to warrant these words. So this statement may give additional credence to the idea that Christ appeared in Sheol, demonstrated His resurrection both to believers and unbelievers, as well as to all the accompanying spiritual powers and authorities.

These tantalizing subjects can so occupy us in a verse like this that we do not focus enough on its main idea. Two words are very significant in this verse. They are the word disarmed, and the word triumphed. The mission of God in becoming a man, living and dying in behalf of humanity brought about these two important things. Through Jesus God disarmed the enemy and He triumphed over the enemy. There is no power or authority except what God ordains and allows to function (Rom 13:1-2). There is no threat to what God has planned to do and that includes what he plans to do for those who have believed in Him (Rom 8:31-39; 1 Cor 2:6-10).

Paul's point to the Colossians is that there could be nothing more profound to contemplate or possess than the person of Christ. To move from the exclusive embrace of Him is to move back into slavery. It is to subject oneself to spiritual authorities that have been disarmed, to pay tax to those who have been conquered and subdued. It is to be intimidated by a bluff and to be taken in by a scam. It is to be victimized by a protection racket! The danger to the Colossians and to us is real. It is a terrible mistake to fall back under the spell of the superstition you have escaped. That is Paul's primary message in these words.

Now, what about the tantalizing subject of what Jesus was occupied with between the time He uttered His last words, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit,” and when His body was raised from the dead on the third day. This is an intriguing subject though highly speculative. It raises collateral ones. Where do we go when we die? What are we conscious of? Do we have bodies? Are we active in God’s work? Are we even observers? The fact of the matter is that God has revealed very little about any of this.

Most of what we know is by what is implicit in the Scriptures rather than explicit. Therefore, we must state at the outset that we know very little about the so-called “intermediate state,” that period of time between our death and our resurrection, and we can say very little dogmatically about what Christ did during this time. In His case we surmise that because He was fully man, His experience of death was similar to that which normal humans experience. This seems to be confirmed by His promise to the thief hanging on a cross alongside Him, to whom He said, “Today, you shall be with me in paradise.” This would be the normal expectation of one who by faith was right with God. We imagine then, that due to His humanity He experienced just what any of His earthly peers would have experienced.

Christians have long suspected that because Christ was also fully divine, there may have been differences in His experience of the intermediate state and ours. Their speculation is fueled by two statements made in Scripture.

One is in Ephesians 4:9 where Paul writes, “‘When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives and He gave gifts to men.’ (Now this expression, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? . . .)” This verse is dealing with something that happened in conjunction with His ascension into heaven, which would put the event it is referring to in the general timeframe we are concerned with. It has led to speculation that after Jesus died and before He ascended into heaven, He did some work involving the freeing of captives somewhere in a region called the “lower parts of the earth.”

A second passage that many have related to this time period is found in 1 Peter 3:18-19. There it is said that in the spirit “He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient . . .” It has been popular among Christians to combine these two accounts and teach that after His death Christ preached the gospel to the spirits of unrighteous, condemned dead. They were given a second chance to respond, which many did, and so were rescued from eternal damnation and led instead into heaven.

This has given impetus to much more speculation and to actual formulation of beliefs in such things as purgatory. So the question of what happened on the second day is a little more important to think about than might be initially thought.

Again we must say that this is speculative work and controversial. There is no statement in Scripture that forms a detailed account of Christ’s experience between His death and bodily resurrection. There is nothing wrong with speculating. But when we do so we must reach a conclusion that harmonizes with all that the Scripture teaches on the subject. In this case our conclusion must agree with what the Scriptures clearly teach about life, death, salvation, and the opportunity for salvation. We will start with what we know to be true, and what is clear, and then move into the less clear passages cited earlier. Following then are some things that we know to be true and very clearly taught in Scripture that our speculation must support, not contradict.

We know that no person comes into the presence of God apart from Christ. Jesus Himself said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father except by me” (John 14:3). Peter

observed that “there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). It is His atoning work on the cross that conveys forgiveness to those who believe.

Knowing this, it is legitimate to speculate that thousands were granted salvation “on credit.” By this we mean that they were granted salvation based on their faith and that their sins would be actually atoned for in the future, in many cases thousands of years later, by the death of Christ. They were saved from sin’s penalty “on credit.” By this we mean that they were saved by His work, yet before it occurred in time and without knowing Christ. We should note that in using the term “credit,” we assign our reality of time to God who is a timeless being. So credit is a useful term to help our understanding, but in the strictest sense not a precise one. So we know beyond a shadow of doubt that no human can enter into the presence of God apart from the atoning work of Jesus Christ being applied to them.

There is a second thing related to life, death, and judgment that we know. A most important statement made by Scripture relative to these matters is in Hebrews 9:27. There we are told that “it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment.” This verse indicates that judgment is entered into once death is final. Now we know that there have been cases where people have been raised from the dead. They were so raised because they had not arrived yet at their appointed time. Once that appointed time comes, there is death. It is complete and final. After that there is judgment. Now what does this mean? It is not a statement of time in the sense that a person is judged immediately upon death. We know from the testimony of other Scripture that there is a specific time when men will be judged that remains in the future. So this verse is not talking about the actual appointment each person has with their Creator. Some will obviously wait many years for that event. Rather it is a statement that at death we are confirmed in whatever state we are in with no opportunity to change it.

We die and await judgment with no opportunity to change, compensate, or atone for anything we did in the course of our lives. Our lives will make the decision, our deaths will confirm it. The actual judgment will simply formalize and institute what has already been made evident.

We have now solidly affirmed two things. First, that in Christ alone sin is finally atoned for. Second, that there is no second chance once a person has finally died. Knowing these things we raise and deal with a question that will eventually guide our speculation of what Christ did between His death and resurrection. Is it possible that once Christ died and the atonement for sin was actually made, He brought about a great change in the intermediate state of believers?

It would seem from Scripture that will be cited in a moment, that before the atoning death of Christ, the spirits of God’s children who died went to a place called paradise, as Jesus promised the thief on the cross. It was a good place, a place of rest, but it was not heaven. They could not enter heaven, the abode of God, because their sin had not yet been atoned for.

Christ’s sacrifice had not yet been made. They could not come through Him to the Father, because the way had not yet been provided. Therefore when they died they went to what is referred to in the Old Testament as Sheol, the place of the dead. But they went to a part of Sheol that was good, reserved for the righteous dead. It was a place of rest and paradise. By the time of Christ’s death tens of thousands of righteous dead would have been in this place, unable to be fully in God’s presence because the sacrifice had not been made. On the other hand, the wicked dead went to the other part of Sheol which was a place of torment and dread. There they were confined awaiting judgment, with no opportunity to change their eventual fate.

Now, how do we know what we have said thus far is reasonable? We must say that it is not explicitly taught in Scripture, but it seems to be affirmed by Scripture. Much of this is solidly supported by the story told by Jesus of a godly and an ungodly man who died and their individual experiences after death in Luke 16:19-31. There is added evidence for these ideas in the contrasting outlook of death between an Old Testament speaker and a New Testament one. Jacob, speaking of his own death described himself as “going down to Sheol” (Genesis 37:35). Paul speaking of his potential death said, “we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord” (1 Corinthians 5:6-8, see also Philipians 1:23). This rather dramatic difference in perspective could be because a very special work had been done by Christ that impacted what we have termed the intermediate state.

We can now speculate as to a special work which Jesus may have done between His death and His resurrection. It is possible that having completed His atoning work on the cross, Jesus in spirit journeyed to the place of the righteous dead, that portion reserved in Sheol for them. There He presented Himself to them as “the Lamb of God” who was sent as the sacrifice for their sins, which by virtue of their faith they would affirm. Since their sins were now atoned for by His death, He could lead them out of that place to a better place where they would be consciously in His presence until their bodies were raised from the dead. A work of this nature could be what Paul is referring to in the verses cited earlier in Ephesians 4:8-9. When Christ eventually ascended into glory it is possible that He took with Him the spirits of all who had died before His time, who were captives of the era in which they lived. It is likely that the realm of the dead believer changed dramatically at Christ’s exaltation, just as the realm of the living believer on earth changed through the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit and the gifts He energized in the Church.

But we must not go too far in this speculation. The verse cited earlier from 1 Peter is a little more difficult to deal with and requires great care. It says that Christ in spirit “went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water” (1 Peter 3:19-20 NASB, italicized word were added by translators). There is nothing inherent in this verse or in its context to link Peter’s words to the words of Paul in Ephesians 4 or to the time period surrounding the resurrection. The two passages could easily be dealing with very different and separate events.

Five observations should be made about Peter’s actual testimony. First, no mention is made about when this proclamation by Christ occurred. Second, this proclamation is clearly made to unbelieving spirits. Third, they are either the spirits of a specific group of unbelievers, those from the time of Noah, or, they are a specific group of spiritual beings, the worst of the worse so to speak. In the latter case these would be a group of imprisoned demons who so corrupted humanity that they made the judgment of the flood necessary. Fourth, there is no indication that this proclamation led to them being freed. It is simply recorded that a proclamation was made to them by Christ in spirit. We have already established that any idea that unbelievers would receive another chance to believe after death goes against the testimony of Scripture. Judgment comes after death and as a result of death. Fifth, there is nothing said about what specifically was proclaimed. To suggest that the gospel was proclaimed is pure speculation.

These five observations severely limit what we can say about the incident reported by Peter. The most that can be legitimately said in trying to relate this text to the time period between Christ’s death and resurrection is to say that it is possible that He did go into the portion of Sheol reserved for unbelievers. He may have done this to demonstrate to all the powers of evil His utter triumph over them. In the process of doing this He might have made a triumphant proclamation of His

completed work on the cross. His purpose in doing so would have been to simply state His victory, not to grant them a second chance. If this were the case, His proclamation would have been a dramatic affirmation of His words to Peter that the gates of Hell would not triumph over His Church.

There are several other plausible explanations for Peter's words above. It is quite likely that Peter, James and John heard things from Jesus that no other human being heard. These words could refer to something which they heard about from Christ which is not otherwise known. We know that Christ existed before He became a man. He could have at any time made such a proclamation as this in spirit to such an audience. These verses could be a reference to such a proclamation whenever it occurred. Many have suggested, and it is reasonable, that these verses are a reference to the fact that Jesus' spirit was working through Noah and Noah made proclamation to that generation before they died. They did not respond so that their spirits are now imprisoned. There are in truth many different explanations that have been put forward with regard to these words written by Peter. The meaning of them remains illusive.

So what about the second day? What did Christ spend that time doing? We must reiterate that the truth is that we know very little about the activity of Christ between His death and resurrection. We suppose that because He was fully man, the normal experiences of the death of the righteous would be His, whatever those may be. We also realize that He was God and therefore unique. His death changed many things and that very likely included the so-called intermediate state. Whatever we believe Christ may have done with respect to the dead or the realm of the dead, we must be certain to embrace two ideas that the Scripture is definitive on. First, the only prescribed way of gaining one's way into the presence of God is through the atoning work of Christ. Second, there were no second chances given and there are no second chances given during the time that elapses between our death and resurrection.

This is all highly speculative, but does tie together some bits of information we are given, without violating the rest of the testimony of Scripture regarding the finality of death (Heb 9:27).

## **2:16 "Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day"**

There are many things which have a spiritual function and which may have a practical spiritual value in the lives of those well-grounded in doctrine and seasoned in the practical experience of the Spirit. However, just as commonly such things interfere with proper thinking about God and Christ.

They add to the truth of the Gospel and so harm faith rather than strengthen it. In verses 16-23 Paul addresses these kinds of things that attach themselves to the faith like parasites and to some degree alter it.

The problem seems to begin when we let people be our judges rather than Christ and His teachings. Now there is a fine line in this matter because we are to be submissive to human authority both in civil matters (1 Peter 2:13-17), and in Church matters (Hebrews 13:17). So it is not as simple as shutting out all outside influence but that of our own conscience. But this submission must never be mindless. It must be regulated by that which we know to be true. In the case of the Colossians, it was to be in line with what Paul had taught them. In our case it is all to align with the testimony of Scripture.

There are several things resident in our flesh which can make us victims of pseudo judges. They subject us to false guilt, and so turn us from what is pure and true. One of these things is the flesh's desire to be liked and accepted. It can cause us to compromise in order to meet this need for acceptance. Another of these is the flesh's desire to achieve and distinguish itself above others. Ritual and religious routine provide an avenue for this need to be met. Another of these is the flesh's reaction to past pain and rejection that brings us feelings of inadequacy. Well-defined procedures and structures allow us to know where we stand and feel better about ourselves. Another of these is the flesh's desire to belong. This makes us susceptible to strong leaders and growing movements, fads, and bandwagons. We must remember that following the flesh is never good. The "legal flesh," a desire to be well thought of, is not any better than the "illegal flesh," our more indulgent side. The flesh always leads us away from the Holy Spirit and so away from God.

When Paul says let no one act as your judge in regard to the things he lays out, he is providing a great guideline. We all need leaders, especially those of us that are spiritual leaders. But if those who lead us begin to attribute to food, drink, religious festival, new moon or Sabbath observance the ability to improve or maintain our standing with God, they have strayed from being led rightly themselves. This list is not exclusive. The principle given in the next verse shows that. But this list is a very good start. One of the things on it will generally capture the strain of things a problem leader is caught up in.

In Paul's day Judiazers, those attempting to impose the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament on the Christian Church, always brought teaching on the dietary regulations of the Old Testament. With that they also sought to impose the events of the Jewish religious calendar on Christians.

Today this has not totally disappeared. Those who do not understand the teachings of Jesus and the apostles impose selective regulations from the Old Testament on the Church. And so work on Sundays is prohibited in the name of "keeping the Sabbath," There is always a teaching popping up somewhere against the eating of pork.

Today we also have in place a number of Christian traditions that do not align with the teachings of the New Testament. We have developed a calendar full of Christian "Holy Days" and seasons. We have in some American evangelical circles denied consumption of alcoholic beverages. To reiterate, all such things may be of value in one's pursuit of the Spirit and may even be orchestrated by Him to such an end. But to be imposed on us by another as a kind of index of our spiritual condition is ridiculous. That is the practice Paul is speaking against in these verses. The essence of true spirituality is present when the Holy Spirit prompts thought and action in the free spirit of a person. That is spiritual activity, the sort that an imposed standard of spirituality actually quenches. This section of Scripture is meant to guard the readers against classic ritualism and its more pious twin, asceticism. Both generally become great enemies of true spirituality.

## **2:17 "things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ."**

The Old Testament is full of regulations on all of the things Paul mentioned in verse 17, food, drink and special days on the calendar. Paul gives a concise statement of how we are to view these things as we read of them. We would be wrong if we thought that the Old Testament was the record of a mistaken religion. There were certainly mistakes made in the practice of those

under the Old Covenant, but the Old Covenant itself with all its ceremonial regulations was established at the direction of God. Here Paul clarifies to us His purpose in doing so. It was to provide a shadow of what was to come, specifically of Christ. Now it is important to note that we should not view each particular thing as a shadow, but the collective thing as a shadow. There is one shadow, the individual parts contributing to the whole. So the prohibition against eating certain foods is not in itself a picture of Christ. Rather it provides some speck of detail in the whole, which is a shadow of Christ. It is not that Sabbath observance provides a picture of Christ. Rather it provides a speck of detail in the whole, which is a shadow of Christ. When we read the Old Testament, we are seeing details which combine together to give a rough representation of the person and work of Christ and His kingdom.

A major point of Paul's however is to depreciate the value of ritual and ceremony, even that of the Old Covenant. Together they form a shadow. That is all they do. Now a shadow reveals an outline shape. It reveals the existence of an object or person, but very little of its detail. Things like size are distorted, color is absent, even whether or not the object is living can be uncertain in a shadow. The object itself is of so much greater importance. It dismisses the testimony of the shadow or causes us to interpret the shadow differently. When we have the reality, in this case the person of Christ (literally in Paul's words, "the body is that of Christ"), why would we consider the shadow sacred. Why would we spend time and energy pondering what we can learn from it. Embrace and ponder the reality! That is the obvious message of Paul to the Colossians in the few words of this verse. His words are powerful and profound in their simplicity. They help us see through many complex schemes that can intimidate us and force their way into our thinking.

### **2:18 "Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind,"**

Just as we can be victimized financially by con-artists so we can be victimized spiritually by false teachers. They will receive their punishment, but God warns us of our responsibility to protect ourselves. The implication to that is sobering. We have a role in shielding ourselves and others and we must execute that role. We can be defrauded of our prize if we fail.

This prize Paul speaks of can only refer to the prize associated with good stewardship where God rewards us in this life and the next for our management of all that He has entrusted to us. This includes the treasure of our own mental capabilities and extends to our material things. All of it can be invested in the wrong things if we listen to the wrong people. These can keep us from that which God would love to bless us with, His grace that enables us to steward His truth and his property well.

What is our protection from this spiritual fraud? First, it is to know the truth well enough to be able to spot the counterfeit. This lifts things like meditation on God's word, the pursuit of the meaning of its words, and the perception of its ideas to a whole other level of priority and urgency.

Ignorance always creates vulnerability, and that is true in every realm including the spiritual realm. Second, we are protected through the ability to step outside our emotions in the moment and reach decisions based on what is true rather than the emotional appeal of the presentation. This ability is present in every human being. It can be abused to our endangerment, but can be set aside to our ruin. It is something the Holy Spirit will energize properly in us as we seek His

guidance. Fraudulent schemes always find their victims where there is ignorance and the unwillingness to see things as they are. Christians must equip themselves with the truth and the ability to apply it even when they don't like its implications, or they will be defrauded of reward from God.

Paul speaks of the trappings of some of the spiritual con artists that were operating in Colossae. The trappings are surprising, which is why fraud works. It always comes in deceptive packaging. These individuals delighted in self-abasement. Paul does not elaborate, but we can speculate that this involved some kind of show of false humility. Perhaps it was through clothing and grooming, perhaps through diet. Very likely it can be termed asceticism, the intentional depriving of oneself believing that this conveys greater spiritual power. Asceticism, the antithesis of grace, makes frequent appearances in all of the world's religions. It is difficult to combat because self-abasement always inspires admiration in us. We are extremely vulnerable to the influence of any who show a high capacity for discipline and who deprive themselves of pleasure. We associate this with goodness, humility and a pure heart and so are taken in.

Paul also speaks of the worship of angels. We do not know much by way of the particulars of this practice. Christians since that time have fallen into the practice of believing people become angels after death and the practice of praying to dead saints. So we know that such things appear to be what we slip toward if we do not hold ourselves to a pattern of belief and behavior (Phil 3:16-4:1). In the Church at Colosse this slippage was apparently a real danger, though one would think that the first three commandments of the Decalogue would forever insulate Jews and Christians from such a practice.

The next phrase adds an important piece of information that serves us very well in protecting ourselves against spiritual fraud. Paul represents these hucksters as taking their stand based on visions they have seen. The word vision is supplied by the translators, and appears legitimate. A mark of fraudulent spirituality is that it takes a direction other than that modeled by the Apostles and recorded on the pages of the New Testament. It does so because of additional material supposedly made available from God. This supposed new material comes through visions, encounters with angels, supposed lost books of the Bible, supposed appearances of saints or even of Jesus. It is a common theme—new knowledge and some phenomenon seen and experienced by a “sincere” leader. This has given birth to all the major religions and cults of the world from Islam to Mormonism. Angels, visions and new material are common threads. It all copies Christianity where we find things like the burning bush, the God-man, and the Damascus road experience of Paul. But contrary to these, the linkage in Scripture to these supposed visions is incomplete and lacks harmony. It doesn't match the pattern of God's legitimate revelation when examined closely.

Paul in his writings does not question the occurrence of spiritual phenomena. Here he says that these hucksters take their stand based on what they have seen. He does not use terms like “supposedly seen” or in our language “allegedly seen.” In Paul's thought spiritual experiences happened both among the godless and the godly. 1 Corinthians 12-14 are about shedding light on our ignorance about such “spirituals” or we could say spiritual phenomena. 1 Corinthians 12:1-3 is a great “short course” on the matter of helping us sort through the grab-bag of spiritual phenomena to find true movements of the Holy Spirit. We are spiritual beings and our physical world is immersed in an invisible spiritual reality. The result is spiritual experiences and phenomena. The challenge to our faith is not simply intellectual. It is spiritual. There are forces that can draw our intellect along to false conclusions. The standard of sound words laid down by the Apostles, preserved completely by the Holy Spirit through the writings of the New Testament, serves as our rule by which to judge all the ideas spawned by this spiritual activity.

Paul mentions next one of the forces that draws our intellect along to false conclusions. It is the flesh, our innate drive to be our own master and gratify our own desires whatever they might be. One of the things our flesh does within us is to “inflate us.” It loves imaginary scenarios that give us hero status. Then it loves to send us seeking those moments in real life.

It leads us to abandon what reality says about our abilities, strengths and weaknesses. We blame others and imagine conspiracy if proper “acclaim” does not come our way. In the spiritual realm it leads us to desire a following and the acclaim of having insight and deep spiritual understanding. These desires and imaginings make us vulnerable to the pseudo-spiritual experience. Either our own emotions produce it for us or evil beings do. Either way we are now armed with something that we can parlay into the attention and recognition we crave. But it is nothing, a vain pursuit. It came about through our own mind as it was driven along by the cravings of our own flesh.

In many this experience is moderated from what Paul describes here. There is no specific spiritual phenomena. There is no vision, no false doctrine. It’s all very sanitary. But the person seeks more than what their gifting and ability would bring them. They write books that have little to say. They are excessively driven and produce efficient organizational machines. They may even achieve some notoriety. But it is all over-inflation. It is just what happens in the world as men seek promotion and fame, but with a spiritual look.

The fleshly mind, a mind that is not subjected to the Holy Spirit, is capable of great deception. It can manipulate in amazing ways. In the end it manipulates itself and destroys its own ability to identify what is true and reject what is only imagination, wish and fantasy. Such people die bitter, convinced that life has robbed them, that they have never gotten the recognition they deserve. All their lives they have imagined an innate greatness, a certain destiny. They become increasingly frustrated that others don’t recognize it in them. It is a miserable way to live and die and everyone of us must deal with it. It is a great achievement to recognize this in ourselves and to give it no nurture. The flesh is never done, but it can be crucified in the moment (Gal 5:24).

## **2:19 “and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God.”**

From Christ comes that which allows Christians to minister health to each other. The result is growth, and the growth is clearly from God. Therefore the critical thing is to have a vibrant relationship to Christ. This involves submission and obedience but also the elements of healthy friendship like communication, honesty, loyalty and service. All of this is captured by the phrase “holding fast to the Head.”

The spiritual con artists that were troubling the Colossians had not held fast to Christ. They had let go of Him. In Christ’s own words they did not remain in Him and so could not bear fruit in keeping with Him (Jn 15:1-8). The result was that they were cut off from the very organism that by God’s decree and design promoted spiritual life, that is, His Church. They were speaking of the spiritual and they were promoting themselves as spiritual gurus, but they could not minister spiritual life because they had none.

We can only imagine Paul’s frustration at this scenario. Here is a church in Colosse made up of Spirit-filled people, intimately connected to Christ. There was a miraculous element to their life

together. They each contributed to one another's lives just the right thing at just the right time. They felt the growth that resulted in their personal character. They saw it in each other. They saw outsiders embracing their faith and becoming part of this kind of supernatural, organic process. It all was happening without pomp and ceremony. It was genuine, deep and powerful. Yet it was being threatened by these pseudo-spiritual leaders who were selling the idea that the Colossians did not yet have the real thing. It was the equivalent of taking someone who had experienced modern medicine to a witch doctor. It was a huge step backwards. It was working because of the ability of these religious hucksters to manipulate the truth and so sell their wares. We are suckers for routine, ritual, self-deprivation, for any merit system. Those trappings gratify our flesh. The angriest moments in the lives of true people of the Spirit and their sharpest words come when they see this kind of exchange unfolding, where the authentic is replaced by the routine and ritualistic (Matt 21:12-17; Matt 23; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48; John 2:13-22).

The growth that comes from God bears the impress of Christ, but is noteworthy in that it also bears the impress of many of His own family. The strength of that family is found only by broadening one's field of view to the whole body of Christ. There are a variety of expressions of it, which when dissected and analyzed all have the common DNA of Christ. It is not the Holy Spirit who produces gurus, or an independent, self-sufficient spirituality. He brings about health when there is among the Churches strongest leaders the dynamic of humility, interdependence, and accountability. The Church is healthiest where there is the cross pollination from the diverse perspectives within the bounds of orthodoxy. This healthy conversation invariably makes the Christian community expand and grow. The Church is no place to seek to prove one's exclusive hold on spirituality. That is the cry of the flesh for recognition and affirmation and unfortunately it is heard frequently in the Church.

The attempt was being made by some in Colosse to lead the Church in a wrong direction and for the wrong reasons. Paul emphasized that the real thing grows out of the work of Christ in all its members. The implication is that we are not missing the secrets that someone can open and reveal to us. What we are missing we will find through our mutual submission to one another as Christ moves and speaks in and through us.

## **2:20 "If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as,"**

Paul now applies the truth he referenced in verses 12-14. It is truth which is very easy to leave in the theoretical compartment of our minds and not move into the practical, moral, ethical decisions we confront in the moment. We died with Christ in at least two ways to the elementary principles of the world.

First, to believe in Christ as God's atoning sacrifice for our sin is to reject the universal human notion that we can and do save ourselves by our own acts of merit. So to believe in Christ's death is to die to classic religious ideas and philosophies of the world. We no longer believe they have any merit and have accepted the death of Christ as our only hope. This is the message of the Gospel.

Second, it is a biblical fact that when we believe in Christ, God views the old us as dead (Rom 6:1-11). The old us was that person who was by guilt of their sin separated from God. We are forgiven and so rejoined to Him, indwelt by His very Spirit. All of the elementary principles of the world, in particular the principles that relate to what we must DO to be right with God have

no bearing on us. They are irrelevant, because we have been declared righteous by Him. This is true of all the various “merit” systems developed by humanity. It is also true of those principles that governed the terms of Divine blessing under the terms of the Old Covenant. We are forgiven through the cross, because of faith. We are blessed with every spiritual blessing, and so freed from all obligation to ritual imposed by the law and every superstition imposed by ignorance.

Paul says specifically that for the Colossians to re-subject themselves to the ritual of the Law or to the various practices of the world’s religions, was for them to live as if they were in the world, or worldly. That is very important terminology. It means that it is possible to have a very separatist lifestyle, even monastic, yet be worldly! So the question becomes what kind of separation should we look for in ourselves as born again people?

When a Christian discussion of worldliness happens today, it is invariably such elementary principles as these that are embraced as proving one’s separation from the world. The truth is that the only outward demonstration of separation that is legitimate is that which emerges from who we have become inwardly. Legitimate separation is demonstrated in such things as an outlook of faith and trust in trial, by our willingness to serve rather than be served, by our decreasing need for accolades and status, and by our moral choices. It is an outward demonstration that we are dying to the self-obsession that characterized us before our new birth. An expression of the change in oneself brought about by the presence of God is orchestrated by the Spirit. If it is done by the Spirit, it might be too subtle for some tastes, as in the case of the false teachers in Colosse. But it will be genuine and it will be God’s design for the moment. So our choice is that of pleasing God or pleasing men, as it always is in this important matter.

## **2:21 “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!”**

These are the types of commands that human religious dogma often seek to implement in our lives. It is not humanism’s only disguise. Humanism can also push us in a direction of moral abandon and unrestrained pleasure. Most Christians however, like the Colossians, are more vulnerable to that which can be passed off as biblical, based on the regulations of the Old Covenant. They are vulnerable to that which appears pious, that which the nonbeliever sees as sincere but silly. And so they fake it, and use this kind of shortcut to credibility. In doing so they find themselves in the maze of misdirection that most shortcuts lead to. They and their movements create much that must be undone.

It seems quite likely that Paul was quoting a line here that the Colossians were familiar with. They had either heard it from the false teachers, or else Paul had given it to them as a test of false doctrine. It is a good phrase to know. It provides us with a good question by which to evaluate any system of thought being advocated. Does this teaching in question seek to address in people things like diet, cleanness or uncleanness that the Old Covenant was concerned with? Does it attempt to clean up the outward appearance or does it focus on thoughts and motives? If we would ask such a question we would successfully sort out much that is false teaching.

The black and white teaching of pietists and legalists has a certain appeal. It’s boundaries are clear. It feels right and the alternative feels like moral ambiguity. The trouble is it is creeping death. There is no struggle necessary to know the mind of the Lord in the moment, no need to do the hard work of developing an accurate view of the Scriptures. Plus it feels good. It is affirming. It makes one feel like part of an exclusive club—the chosen few. That is very appealing to the flesh. Such piety distinguishes one as being more than just one of a multitude of believers. They are part of the inner circle, the faithful few. This is a mentality that we must watch for in

ourselves. It is the most common of the lusts of the flesh, the one that led Adam and Eve to the fatal choice.

The leading of the Holy Spirit unites us with a diverse community of believers. We will find many who have arrived at the same conclusions as we have. The leading of the Spirit separates us from the world and all that is fleshly. Now that means we will always be in the minority. But we must not fall for that which shrinks this minority further to a select few. There was the equivalent of a mega-church in Israel when Elijah thought he was alone! This is a delicate matter to manage in our own thinking. We must always be prepared to stand alone, but we are vulnerable if we find ourselves seeking to distinguish ourselves from among the mainstream of believers.

“Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” That will always be a mantra of a demonic strain who seek to blind humanity to the truth of the gospel. It is a worldly fleshly message in a pious disguise, the perfect alternative to having to accept one’s own inability to save themselves. It is the substance of much of the diverse religious practice in world history. It is the polar opposite of the truth of the cross and the message of the gospel, yet easily takes root in the Church.

## **2:22 “(which all refer to things destined to perish with the using) in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men.”**

After the fall of man the knowledge of God was lost, as was the ability to instinctively know the mind and heart of God. So humanity was initially in a situation where they knew God existed but they had diminishing understanding of how to access Him or be restored to friendship with Him. With the passing of time this deteriorated further so that even knowledge of God’s existence was abandoned by many and lost to many.

God countered this growing darkness with revelation of Himself. As time past and the darkness grew, He revealed more of Himself. The revelation became more detailed and dramatic, culminating in Him becoming a man and living among men. This was followed by detailed accounts in writing by eye-witnesses who reported the detail of what they saw in Him and heard from Him. They applied it all to real life situations relationships, thought, morals, ethics, and everyday behavior.

This special revelation, this unveiling of the truth by Yahweh, was not flattering to humanity. It spoke against our self-centered pursuits. It called for our humble submission. It condemned actions independent of God. So most ignored and rejected it. They substituted their own imaginings, based on their own limited understanding and biased morality. The result has been an abundance of alternate thought on God, both His nature and His desire for man. There came to be many commands and detaching of human origin accepted as godly by most of humanity.

All of these religious systems developed among the various cultures of earth have much to say about “things destined to perish with the using.” By this phrase Paul is speaking of the things he has mentioned in verse 16 and referred to again in verse 21, things like what we eat, so called holy days, weeks or months, even the seasons of deprivation we might institute in normal religious practice. These practices all have to do with what comes and goes. Much of it is in the purely physical realm and concerns things that according to Jesus can neither defile us or make us holy (Mk. 7:14-23).

It is an important thought that Paul is reminding us of, that such religious practice accomplishes nothing for us in God's eyes. It is not just ineffective. It is irrelevant! That is a most important thing to know.

**2:23 “These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.”**

Paul acknowledges that from the strictly human point of view, evaluated with the normal teachings of man regarding God in mind, the teachings in question appear to be a “word of wisdom.” He adds to this a word that can be rendered “indeed,” or as the NASB has rendered it “to be sure.” This phrase “word of wisdom” consists of the same words he uses in 1 Corinthians 12:8 of activity of the Holy Spirit. A word of wisdom was a message spoken by someone in the Church at the prompting of the Spirit that gave practical direction as to the mind of God in a matter. It is one of the great things that occurs between believers when they fellowship together. However, such utterances must always be passed through the grid of Scripture by mature people to determine that they are truly of God's Spirit and not just of man's own spirit. Paul speaks here of the messages of these false teachers as appearing to be or feeling like a word of wisdom from the Holy Spirit.

But it is only because such messages that call for things like penance in us appeal to our own spirits, conditioned as they are by human ideas about God. These so-called words of wisdom do not align with what God has revealed of Himself and His thought for man. They grow out of a pseudo-piety, which is nothing more than a desire to distinguish oneself and elevate oneself above others.

Pseudo-piety has three elements, all of which appear noble and sincere to us. First, they consist of “self-made religion.” This is the NASB rendering of a compound word used only here that could be rendered “will worship.” It likely refers to the exercise of extreme levels of self-discipline, grinding out routine to distinguish oneself in some way. It is belief and reliance on the human will, the belief that moral weakness is essentially an issue of self-discipline which can and must be eliminated through sheer will power.

It is as the NASB has implied, self-made religion, personal holiness produced by a kind of focused willfulness or power of mind. It consists of rigorous, and so admirable routine. The problem is just what the word Paul coins for this implies. It is the worship and elevation of one's own will, which is clearly fleshly idolatry, absolutely contradicting to the message of the Gospel. So it is found to be pseudo-piety on this count.

The second characteristic of pseudo-piety is that it involves “self-abasement.” This term can refer to a façade of humility and lowliness (Col 2:18), or the admirable, Christ-like quality of humility (Phil. 2:3; Col. 3:12). Here it refers to the latter, the same kind of religious routine mentioned in verse 18, putting one's supposed humility on display. It was the outward embrace of humility in order to gain an advantage. So it was not humility at all. It was in truth self-promotion. This supposed sincerity of heart displayed in a very calculating way was just more of the flesh.

The third characteristic of pseudo-piety is that it involves severe treatment of the body. This is a classic element of human religion. It comes out of the embrace of the previous two. Depriving the body of things like food, shelter, clothing, and sex always seems to draw admiration and to authenticate sincerity. It is believed by many that depriving the body of such things will cure it

from its desire for them. But this has proved to be fallacious. The whole practice has usually degenerated into a façade behind which all manner of indulgence has been practiced. But severe treatment of the body remains a pillar of religious routine in all cultures. To many it serves as a spiritual ideal and even as an index of spirituality.

This verse ends with a remarkable statement. It says that such rigors are of NO value with respect to the indulgence of the flesh. The word rendered indulgence in the NASB is a word used only here in the New Testament. It is formed from the word used of filling up. It provides a good picture of our moral dilemma. Our preoccupation with ourselves and our desire to gratify ourselves is insatiable. It can never be filled up, though that is the quest of the natural man. We would call it a “black hole.” Paul is saying in these words that this gnawing quest within us cannot be thwarted through the classic approach of deprivation. Other teachings of Paul indicate that this is the exact lesson the era of the Law taught humanity through Israel (Rom. 7:7-25). The Law actually aggravated our sinfulness and made it spring into action. This illustrates the fact that when we attempt to control our fleshliness by law and rules and will-power it has the opposite effect. Now a particular rule may curb the presence of a particular sinful act. But that apparent success usually gives rise to pride, meets a fleshly need to be well thought of and looked up to and so actually indulges the flesh. In the end it has had no value in the fight against fleshly indulgence, and even becomes a respectable way of indulging the flesh.

All of this points to the dependency of humanity on God for their salvation. It is why the Gospel is such great news and our only hope. Our own sinfulness corrupts our every effort. When we aim at being righteous, the only outcome can be self-righteousness, which accentuates our lostness and confirms us in our state of alienation from God. Religious humanity outside the Gospel have certainly proved more resistant to truth than have the irreligious. Their depravity is equally apparent. Our own religion, no matter how seriously taken cannot gain for us the approval of God. It accentuates our offensiveness to Him.