

“Colossians”

Summer Series 1

Lesson 3

“Colossians 2:1-15”

Objective: To understand the message that Paul meant to convey to his audience and then to come to understand what that message means for us today as those living in the 21st century. We will seek to ascertain what this message means and to determine how we are intended to live our lives as those who are disciples of Christ in our modern context in light of the message it contains. We will place special emphasis on application.

Materials: I will begin by examining carefully the Greek text of Colossians, examine other early translations such as the Syriac Peshitta, and any other sources along with the historical setting of the first century Roman world that can help us to understand the original meaning. I will then examine early interpretations and understandings and examine commentaries and modern interpretations to enlighten our understanding for our contextual situation.

Procedures

- 1.** We will begin by translating the text from Greek into English. I do not here give you that full translation here, though there are excerpts.
- 2.** We will examine the contextual setting and seek to understand as much as we possibly can about the historical, cultural and social settings in order to understand the message Paul intended and that God still intends for us.
- 3.** From here, we will seek to find out how to best apply the calling that Paul has for the early disciples to our modern contextual framework in order to do our very best to live as disciples of Christ in our modern era.
- 4.** We will seek to understand the attitudes that we are called to have as disciples and to reflect not only the actions that are the calling of a disciple, but also to learn how to form our attitudes to reflect our calling as followers of Jesus Christ.

As we begin lesson 3 of our series we note that Paul, in 1:23, provides the transition to the section that follows (1:24-2:5) where Paul describes his suffering as an apostle and the relationship of this suffering to the task allotted to him by God.¹ As has been noted previously, the chapters and verses are not always broken in the very best places. Chapter 2 continues a section that actually began in 1:24, but 2:1 does mark a transition within this section as Paul uses a transitional phrase that we find him using both positively, and negatively, in other places (“For I want you to know” cf. Romans 1:13; 11:25; 1 Corinthians 10:1; 11:3; 12:1; 2 Corinthians 1:8; 1 Thessalonians 4:13). Here in 2:1 it is used to expound the preceding remarks.²

It is important that the Christians at Colossae and Laodicea have the awareness, though they have never met Paul, that he is laboring on their behalf. The term “struggling” (ἀγών - *agon*³) is indicative of the effort that Paul is undertaking for them. This word is used of a “fight” or a “race” as in athletic competition, or

¹ Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, in The Word Biblical Commentary series, Vol. 44 (Waco TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1982), pp. 73-74.

² Markus Barth and Helmut Blake, trans. by Astrid B. Beck, *Colossians*, The Anchor Bible series, 34B (New Haven CT: The Anchor Yale Bible, 2005), pp. 270-274.

³ The origin of our English word “agony.”

contest. This is no light task for Paul; he is “struggling” for in “agony” for them.⁴ He makes it clear that he has not seen some of them “face to face” and yet he is still struggling on their behalf.

Verse 2 – In this verse, he goes on to indicate the reasoning behind his struggles, there is purpose behind them, they are not superfluous. He singles out at this point those who have not met him and emphasizes his desire for them. He wants their hearts to be encouraged, and for them to be “united” (συμβιβάζω - *sumbibadzo*) in love, not just any love but *agape* love. Paul uses the word for “united” here from which we get our word *symbiotic*. He wants them to be united with love in such a fashion that it means they provide benefit to each other as the two organisms do in a symbiotic relationship. The love feeds them and they benefit from the presence of this love in the way that symbiotic organisms benefit and sustain one another. They become inseparable from each another, and live as if they are a single organism.

This concept of being “united in love” stands as a subordinate clause to the main purpose clause of this verse, which is that they be “comforted”, “encouraged”, or “strengthened”

⁴ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries series (Downers Grove IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), p. 98.

(*παρακαλέω - parakaleo*). The word that Paul uses here indicates the comfort that the audience receives from God; brought about in some sense through Paul's Eschatological suffering. The comfort spoken of here is for more than merely emotional, or intellectual support for the readers, it is for the unique comfort that comes from God as Father and Creator. Paul is here arguing against individual and elitist spiritual practices that divide rather than create unity. The concept of unity will be picked up again later (3:11) as he expounds further on the barriers that separate people are removed through "love" (3:14).⁵

In a way that is different from the previous verses of Colossians, Paul here calls for them to draw together as a community, and it is in this drawing together in community that their hope rests. The encouragement elicited here is not a calling forth or a highlighting in a sequence of individuals being encouraged, and then bringing that to the group: Here the encouragement that is sought rests in the unity provoked through being "united in love" as a community of love.⁶ It is likely here

⁵ David W. Pao, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary Series: New Testament (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2012), pp. 136-137.

⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, in The New International Greek Commentary series (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), p. 130.

that when Paul speaks of the “assured understanding” (*πληροφορία - plerophoria*) the focus is on the exclusivity of Christ, since Paul appears to explain what this means using the expression with the phrase “knowledge of God’s mystery”, which is Christ. If this view is correct, the latter phrase regarding “God’s mystery” elaborates the former (“assured understanding”).⁷

Paul’s purpose in writing to the Colossians is that he wants them to know the “mystery of God” which is Christ Himself. To be sure, the Greek at the end of this sentence is extremely difficult and it has caused a tremendous amount of confusion; this can be seen also in the number of textual variants at this point in the verse.⁸ Altogether, there are fifteen textual variants at this point in the text. All of the variants can be explained as paraphrases. There are two possible interpretations that are conditioned by these possibilities. The possibilities are (1) “the mystery of the God of Christ”; (2) “the mystery of God, Christ”.⁹ One places the emphasis on God as being the mystery while the other places

⁷ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), pp. 167-168.

⁸ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, A Companion Volume to the UBS 3rd ed., Corrected ed. (London: United Bible Societies, 1975), p. 622.

⁹ Markus Barth and Helmut Blake, trans. by Astrid B. Beck, *Colossians*, pp. 280-281.

emphasis upon the mystery being Christ Himself. I think the following section clears up the confusion.

Verse 3 – This verse is intended to both comfort, and challenge, the readers. There is no need to search for wisdom or knowledge elsewhere. The repository of wisdom and knowledge is Christ, the one they already possess. At the same time, implicit here is a challenge to explore and take full ownership of the rich inheritance they have entered into. Christ sums up in himself all that the Jews envisioned of wisdom (cf. Proverbs 2:1-8). The Septuagint translation of this passage is echoed several times in this present passage. Christ Himself is the mystery of God; He is not a key to it, as though there is something more. Everything that we might want to ask about God and His purposes can, and must, now be answered; the answer rests in the crucified Messiah of God. The task left to the readers is to explore the depths of this already revealed treasure.¹⁰

Verse 4 – Paul states his reasoning for telling them this, and that is, in order that no one may deceive (*παραλογίζομαι - paralogizomai*) them using “persuasive speech” (*πιθανολογία -*

¹⁰ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 99.

pithanologia). This is something to which all human beings are particularly prone. From the beginning of creation, this has been a problem (cf. Genesis 3:1-5). The serpent used a form of wisdom to trick the women into making the wrong decision and to go against the direct command of God. Today we are subjected to a constant bombardment of those who spout “persuasive speech” and convince people that they actually possess wisdom. Paul here warns them of this in order to prepare them for the threat that will certainly come to them, if that threat is not already present.

Verse 5 – Paul is not able to be physically present with the Christians at Colossae, but there is urgency in the danger that they face and because of this urgency Paul writes to them. There is the sense that his physical presence would be preferable, but he conveys that he is very much with them in spirit as he seeks to prepare them for the coming struggles. He then proceeds to praise them for their “morale” (*τάξις - taxis*) and their “firmness” (*στερέωμα - stereoma*). Both of these terms appear in military contexts, the former denoting the positions, which the soldiers occupy. The latter term was used to describe a bulwark or a fortress. In this context *τάξις - taxis* refers to well ordered

Christian behavior in the community (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:40).

This word praises a community that had not been disturbed by sectarian divisions nor forsaken. The term *στερέωμα - stereoma* is used to describe the solidarity of their faith in Christ.¹¹ It is like a fortress of protection for them.

The faith denoted here is a living and dynamic faith rather than a mere factual, or intellectual faith. It can be seen to exist rather than simply believed to exist. This faith causes Paul to rejoice. This verse indicates that though the threat of heresy hung heavily over this church it had not yet made inroads in a manner that had caused the church to stray from the gospel. They are still basically sound.¹²

Verses 6-7 – Paul moves on now to further admonition of his audience starting from the perspective that they have already “received Christ Jesus the Lord”. This is the present reality of their situation, and nothing further is necessary to make this a factual actuality. Based on this locative reality, he calls upon his readers to “walk” (*περιπατέω - peripateō*) in him. This is the beginning of

¹¹ Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, p. 99.

¹² Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, p. 99.

the central section of this epistle. There is a process described here, that they have already “received”; now, they are called to “walk” in that reality. The opening statement here, and in verse 7, serves as a summary of all that is to follow and indeed of the entirety of the letter.¹³

It is important not to read back from our present understanding of what it means to “receive” Christ. Very often today to “receive” Christ is to become a Christian. Such a teaching is indeed a powerful New Testament teaching, but this is not Paul’s meaning here. The verb “receive” (παλαμβάνω - *paralambano*) is at times used in a technical sense in Judaism to refer to the transmission of teaching to one person or from one generation to another generation. There are also additional hints in the passage that suggest that he has the moment and the significance of immersion in mind as the point of the actual reception of Christ. The phrase “Christ Jesus the Lord” corresponds very closely to the early confessional formula “Jesus Christ is Lord” (Philippians 2:11; cf. Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians

¹³ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, pp. 100-103.

12:3), which those receiving Jesus Christ would profess at their immersion. Paul also explicitly mentions immersion in verse 12.¹⁴

Paul, in these verses, refers to the Christians at Colossae accepting the proclamation of Jesus the Lord, to which they responded in a confession of faith, and to their new status as members of the body of Christ (cf. 2:19). All of this was a part of the bold stand that they undertook as they were initiated into the Christian faith. Living in the environment in which they lived (pagan context), this was a courageous and bold action on their part.¹⁵ They were no longer able to blend into their society; they stood out as different, as oddities in their community context. There was a cost for them in professing faith in Christ. They are to “walk” in Christ, which is standard Jewish terminology for to live up to an ethical standard or expectation.

The new sort of behavior is now a possibility for those who have received Christ Jesus as Lord and for those who are “rooted”, and built up in Him and established in the faith. Each of these images, and those that follow have a particular point to make.

¹⁴ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, pp. 100-103.

¹⁵ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 103.

Rooted is imagery that is of a tree that is firmly rooted and established. Once a tree is planted and then takes root it is firm and will grow and prosper. The imagery of being “built up” is that of a house, or a building being set firmly on its foundations and then established as confirmed and settled. In what are they “rooted” and “built up”? In the soil and foundation of faith in which they are “established”. From where did these things flow into their lives? They flowed into their lives when they were taught. This acceptance of what they were taught initiated “thanksgiving” in them which is a characteristic of the Christian life.¹⁶

Verse 8 – For the first time this verse gives a very specific warning to the readers, challenging them “not” to be taken “captive” (*συλαγωγέω - sulagogeō*). Paul is once again pointing to the danger posed by false teachers and here to the specifics of what they bring. The word that he uses here for taking them “captive” provides dramatic and compelling imagery of the potential consequences of the dangers here. It should also be noted that some have thought that Paul uses this particular word

¹⁶ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 104.

sulagogo as a pun for *sunagoge* (synagogue). The implication of such a pun would then be to see that no one snatches you from the flock of Christ, in order to instead make you a captive of Judaism. Even if one were to identify the source of this heresy as to be from within Judaism it appears that he is directing his criticisms primarily at the mystic tradition within Judaism and not at the synagogue in general. In light of this, it seems unlikely that Paul aims at the synagogue in general with this participle.¹⁷

By Paul's usage of other military metaphors in this section it should not be surprising to find "take captive". The imagery here is also similar to the sayings of Jesus when he describes the binding of the strong man and robbing him of his possessions (Matthew 12:29; Mark 3:27; Luke 11:21-22). In this instance, Paul is applying the imagery to the false teachers taking the believers away from the gospel "into the slavery of error".¹⁸ The warning is to be watchful and avoid allowing this return to slavery to happen to them.

¹⁷ David W. Pao, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 158.

¹⁸ David W. Pao, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 158-159.

The mechanism of this capture into slavery is through “philosophy” (φιλοσοφία - *philosophia*) or “human wisdom”. Philosophy is literally a “love of wisdom” and is used to refer to a general love of knowledge (Plato, *Phaedo* 61a), philosophical traditions or teachings (Josephus, *The Life Against Apion* 1.14), sects (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18:11), and even religions (4 Maccabees 5:11). The labels attached to this human endeavor indicate a negative perception on the part of Paul toward such things.¹⁹ Some would say that this application is only in the past, but I think great care should be taken with that assumption as it lends itself to a level of arrogance which I think is at the heart of Paul’s criticism here. The danger of arrogance knows no specific era nor is any person or group immune to its poisonous bite. Arrogance separates us from one another and from our God.

Paul criticizes the concept that human knowledge somehow should be needed to lead those who have received the knowledge of God; through the delivery of the Gospel message about the crucified Christ, no other wisdom or knowledge is needed. Paul calls his readers to pursue Christ. This same arrogance, of which

¹⁹ David W. Pao, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 159.

Paul speaks, has been at the heart of sin from the beginning as humans have felt the need to pursue knowledge that they were told not to pursue in ways they were told not to pursue it (Genesis 3). In the place of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge that are already in the possession of the Colossians to pursue “human tradition” is to pursue something of no value by comparison to Christ. “Human tradition”, a phrase that will be picked up again in 2:22, evokes the polemic of both Isaiah (29:13²⁰) and Jesus (Mark 7:5ff.²¹) against the transformation of true and living religion into a set of ideas and rules that are purely human in origin, and in truth not spiritual.²²

Paul then attributes these deceitful elements of philosophy to what he describes as “the elemental spirits of the universe” (*κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου - kata ta stoicheia tou kosmou*).

Needless to say this obscure terminology has generated a

²⁰ **The Lord says: Since these people turn toward me with their mouths, and honor me with lip service while their heart is distant from me, and their fear of me is just a human command that has been memorized,** CEB.

²¹ **So the Pharisees and legal experts asked Jesus, “Why are your disciples not living according to the rules handed down by the elders but instead eat food with ritually unclean hands?” 7:6 He replied, “Isaiah really knew what he was talking about when he prophesied about you hypocrites. He wrote, This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far away from me. 7 Their worship of me is empty since they teach instructions that are human words. 7:8 You ignore God’s commandment while holding on to rules created by humans and handed down to you.” 9 Jesus continued, “Clearly, you are experts at rejecting God’s commandment in order to establish these rules.** CEB.

²² N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 106.

considerable amount of debate among scholars. The basic meaning of *στοιχεῖον* - *stoicheion* is “element” and in this context, dominated by the host of cosmic categories, the most obvious reference is to the elemental substances of which the cosmos was thought to be composed (earth, water, fire, and air). However, this is not the end of the story as can be demonstrated from the writings of Philo who understood that these elements could be perceived of as “spirits” or given the names of deities (Philo, *On the Contemplative Life* 3²³; *On the Decalogue* 53²⁴). The divinization of the elements was routine in the whole of the ancient Greco-Roman world.²⁵

It is not certain, that at the time of the writing of this letter, that the idea of perceiving *στοιχεῖα* - *stoicheia* as the stars, or heavenly powers was common. The earliest explicit reference to

²³ “Can we compare those who revere the elements, earth, water, air, fire, which have received different names from different peoples who call fire Hephaestus because it is kindled (ἐξάπτω), air Hera because it is lifted up (αἴρω) and exalted on high, water Poseidon perhaps because it is drunk (ποτός), and earth Demeter because it appears to be the mother of all plants and animals?” F. H. Colson, trans., *Philo*, Vol. IX, 363 (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 115.

²⁴ “For some have deified the four elements, earth, water, air and fire, others the sun, moon, planets and fixed stars, others again the heaven by itself, others the whole world. But the highest and the most august, the Begetter, the Ruler of the great World-city, the Commander-in-Chief of the invincible host, the Pilot who ever steers all things in safety, Him they have hidden from sight by the misleading titles assigned to the objects of worship mentioned above.” F. H. Colson, *Philo*, Vol. VII, 320 (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 33.

²⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 149.

this is usually considered to be *Testament of Solomon* (1st to 3rd century A.D.) 8:2-4²⁶ where seven demonic spirits identify themselves as **στοιχεῖα - stoicheia**. It is however, the case that here in Colossians and in Galatians there is the clear implication that the **στοιχεῖα - stoicheia** were associated with heavenly beings (Galatians 4:8-9²⁷; Colossians 2:10²⁸). It is also of note that it was commonplace within Judaism to think of stars as living beings

²⁶ “They replied, “We are heavenly bodies, rulers of this world of darkness.” 3 The first said, “I am Deception.” The second said, “I am Strife.” The third said, “I am Fate.” The fourth said, “I am Distress.” The fifth said, “I am Error.” The sixth said, “I am Power.” 4 The seventh said, “I am The Worst. Our stars in heaven look small, but we are named like gods. We change our position together and we live together, sometimes in Lydia, sometimes in Olympus, sometimes on the great mountain.” D. C. Duling, trans., “Testament of Solomon,” in James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library, Vol. 1 (New York NY: Doubleday, 1983), pp. 969-970.

²⁷ **At the time, when you didn't know God, you were enslaved by things that aren't gods by nature. 9 But now, after knowing God (or rather, being known by God), how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless world system? Do you want to be slaves to it again?** CEB.

²⁸ **And you have been filled by him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.** CEB.

(Judges 5:20²⁹; Job 38:7³⁰; Daniel 8:10³¹; *1 Enoch* 86:1³²;
Revelation 1:20³³; 8:10³⁴).³⁵

The implication is that Paul's readers will likely have held the view even as some do today that human beings had to live their lives under the influence, or the sway, of some form of primal, or cosmic forces. Precisely the same phrase is used in Galatians 4:3³⁶ and 4:9³⁷. There, it is linked succinctly to the Jewish law, which was itself understood to be a kind of power over Israel like a slave-custodian or guardian (Galatians 3:23-25³⁸;

²⁹ **The stars fought from the sky; from their orbits they fought against Sisera.** CEB.

³⁰ **while the morning stars sang in unison and all the divine beings shouted?** CEB.

³¹ **It grew as high as the heavenly forces, until it finally threw some of them and some of the stars down to the earth. Then it trampled on them.** CEB.

³² **Again I saw (a vision) with my own eyes as I was sleeping, and saw the lofty heaven; and as I looked, behold, a star fell down from heaven but (managed) to rise and eat and to be pastured among those cows.** E. Isaac, trans., "1 Enoch," in James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library, Vol. 1 (New York NY: Doubleday, 1983), p. 63.

³³ **As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and the seven gold lampstands, here is what they mean: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.** CEB.

³⁴ **Then the third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star, burning like a torch, fell from heaven. It fell on a third of the rivers and springs of water.** CEB.

³⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, pp. 149-150.

³⁶ **In the same way, when we were minors, we were also enslaved by this world's system.** CEB.

³⁷ **But now, after knowing God (or rather, being known by God), how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless world system? Do you want to be slaves to it again?** CEB.

³⁸ **Before faith came, we were guarded under the Law, locked up until faith that was coming would be revealed, 24 so that the Law became our custodian until Christ so that we might be made righteous by faith. 3:25 But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian.** CEB.

4:1-3³⁹, 9-10⁴⁰), and it was given through the agency of angels (3:19⁴¹). The close association of ideas here with the discussion of Jewish festivals (Colossians 2:16⁴²; cf. Galatians 4:10⁴³) and “worship of angels” (Colossians 2:18⁴⁴) strongly suggests that Paul is moving in both writings in the same realm of thought. It must be remembered that Jewish apocalyptic thought also refers to spirits as controlling the elements (*Jubilees* 2:2: “the angels of the spirit of fire, the angels of the spirit of the winds ...”; *1 Enoch* 75:1: “the leaders of the chiefs of thousands who are in charge of all the stars ...”; *2 Enoch* 4:1: “the rulers of the stellar orders ..., the angels who govern the stars ...”; *Testament of Abraham* 13:11: “the archangel Purouel, who has authority over fire ...”. *1 Enoch*

³⁹ I’m saying that as long as the heirs are minors, they are no different from slaves, though they really are the owners of everything. ² However, they are placed under trustees and guardians until the date set by the parents. ³ In the same way, when we were minors, we were also enslaved by this world’s system. CEB.

⁴⁰ But now, after knowing God (or rather, being known by God), how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless world system? Do you want to be slaves to it again? ¹⁰ You observe religious days and months and seasons and years. CEB.

⁴¹ So why was the Law given? It was added because of offenses, until the descendant would come to whom the promise had been made. It was put in place through angels by the hand of a mediator. CEB.

⁴² So don’t let anyone judge you about eating or drinking or about a festival, a new moon observance, or sabbaths. CEB.

⁴³ You observe religious days and months and seasons and years. CEB.

⁴⁴ Don’t let anyone who wants to practice harsh self-denial and worship angels rob you of the prize. They go into detail about what they have seen in visions and have become unjustifiably arrogant by their selfish way of thinking. CEB.

18:14-16⁴⁵ also speaks of stars bound and imprisoned for their transgression, and the Greek fragment of *Jubilees* 2:8 links “the placing of the stars ...” with the **στοιχεῖα - stoicheia**. There have also been some fragmentary horoscopes found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁴⁶ The key for Paul was the concept that these philosophies, or teachings, were not according to Christ.

Verses 9-10 – These next two verses give the main reason that the Colossians must not become ensnared by such philosophy, and that is because in Christ “all the fullness of deity dwells, bodily”. Part of the point here is that God took bodily form in Jesus, in solid reality. He thus fulfilled all the earlier foreshadowings, all the ancient promises that God had made about dwelling with his people. It needs to be made clear that in Greek there is a word for “divinity” that is quite distinct and different from the word used here (**θεότης - theotes**). The other word could be used of a being that would be of lesser standing

⁴⁵ (then) the angel said (to me), “This place is the (ultimate) end of heaven and earth: it is the prison house for the stars and the powers of heaven. 15 And the stars which roll over upon the fire, they are the ones which have transgressed the commandments of God from the beginning of their rising because they did not arrive punctually. 16 And he was wroth with them and bound them until the time of the completion of their sin in the year of mystery.” E. Isaac, trans., “1 Enoch,” in James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library, Vol. 1 (New York NY: Doubleday, 1983), p. 23.

⁴⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, pp. 150-151.

than God in some way, the word used here means that the one so described is of the same standing as God. The usage of this word allows Paul to do two things. First, he demonstrates that Christians have no need to pay homage to lesser supernatural beings, or to put it another way all other lords become idols when contrasted with Christ. Jesus is not one among the hierarchy of intermediary beings, angelic, or otherwise, or in some sense lesser sense divine. Jesus is uniquely God's presence and His very self incarnate.⁴⁷

Second, Paul wants to demonstrate that all the advantages of monotheism (which attracted a great many Gentiles by its contrast to the confused and unedifying pantheon of pagan gods) accrue to Christianity as they had to Judaism. Christ is not a second deity, a different deity: He is the full embodiment and full expression of the one God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Those who come to Christ have "fullness" (the same word for "fullness" here is behind the one used in verse 9 when speaking of Christ).

⁴⁷ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, pp. 107-108.

The parallels in Ephesians (1:23⁴⁸; 3:19⁴⁹) suggest that the meaning is that God intends to flood the lives of men and women, and ultimately all of creation, with his own love, power, and richness. This plan has already begun to take effect through Christ Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁰

Paul ends this section by reiterating that Christ is “the head of every ruler and authority”. It is likely that the reference here is to spiritual authorities as it was in 1:16. There is therefore no need to fear these powers as they stand under the authority of their head, Christ. All the fullness of deity resides in him.⁵¹ Of note here might be that the concern Paul addresses, with the Colossians, is primarily spiritual in nature rather than with elements of the physical realm such as immorality, greed, and so forth.

Verses 11-12 – The spiritual emphasis continues in these verses with Paul drawing upon the issue of circumcision, which

⁴⁸ **which is his body. His body, the church, is the fullness of Christ, who fills everything in every way.** CEB.

⁴⁹ **I ask that you'll know the love of Christ that is beyond knowledge so that you will be filled entirely with the fullness of God.** CEB.

⁵⁰ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 108.

⁵¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, p. 196.

would have been deeply associated with Judaism and he is emphasizing not the physical act of circumcision, but the spiritual act. This crucial mark of Jewish identity, this mark, which clearly distinguished those loyal to Judaism from the Hellenists, this element, which was used by Jews as their unique badge of identity, is taken by Paul and applied to the Christians at Colossae. For Christ, the originator of this circumcision, the reference here, is likely a reference to His crucifixion.⁵² The circumcision of Christ is His crucifixion. For the one who follows Him, the putting off of the flesh occurs, when they are buried with Him in immersion. This burial reflected, therefore, the death of the believer and then the resurrection of that person in Christ, through faith in the power of God when they rise from beneath the water. The same power that raised Christ from the tomb now raises up those undergoing immersion from the death, and initiates their burial into life, in Christ.


Verses 13-14 – Paul continues to explain to them what they have undergone, what they have already experienced in their acceptance of the gospel message. He starts with the state in

⁵² James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, pp. 153-157.

which they were before accepting the gospel, which was a state of death. They were dead in their trespasses and the uncircumcision of their flesh. God made them alive with Christ, when He forgave all their/our trespasses. At this point He erased the “record of our indebtedness” (χειρόγραφον - *cheirographon*) the record that stood against us with its dogmatic demands upon us. He set this record aside by nailing it to the cross and crucifying it. This message is at the heart of the gospel. This is the basis for their salvation and nothing more, or further, is needed.

Verse 15 – By doing this, God disarmed the “rulers and authorities”, not only that, but He made a public example of them, demonstrating His triumph over them. Neither the Colossians, nor anyone else should now be overawed by them, they are defeated. The phrase “triumphing over them” alludes to the practice of Roman generals who would march in triumph through the city of Rome displaying the booty of their victory and the conquered people marched in parade. The question left to us is exactly how does this apply to the “powers and authorities”?⁵³ I would suggest to you that this occurred in the raising of Christ

⁵³ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, pp. 119-123.




from the dead. At this point these enemies were defeated in what seemed to their greatest moment of triumph and in their greatest strength. Death no longer could be relied upon as the final word; and this was the greatest weapon and strength of the spiritual authorities and rulers, and now it has been crushed for all to see.

The Christian need not fear death, or anything else that these powers, or authorities might do to them. The enemy, and the enemy's greatest weapon has been led in triumphal procession for all the hosts of heaven to see in the moment of the resurrection of Christ.

Synopsis

Paul begins this section by letting the Colossian Christians know how much he is struggling for them, even those he has not met face to face. He does this so that their hearts will be encouraged and so that they will be “united” in love with him and with one another. This concept of unity, of being a group, is extremely important and it is all focused at the point of the mystery of God, which is Christ. It is here that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are located. He tells them all of this so that those who might use seemingly plausible arguments might not deceive them. He calls upon them to stand firm despite his absence from them in the body, and he praises them for their high morale and firmness of faith.

Starting at verse 6, he continues to encourage those who have received Christ Jesus to live their lives strongly rooted and established in faith, always with thanksgiving. He warns them not to be taken captive through philosophy, or human tradition, which he relates to the elemental spirits of the universe. These things are not according to Christ in whom the fullness of deity dwells



bodily. Our fullness, or completeness, comes in him who is above every ruler and every authority in the spiritual realm.

Paul then moves on to indicate that the Christians at Colossae had undergone spiritual circumcision when they were immersed into Jesus, and just as Christ had been raised from death so too that power was now at work in them. God forgave them of all of their trespasses, nailed those trespasses to the cross and erased their record of wrongs. He then made a public example of the rulers and authorities and their lack of power in His triumph over them with His resurrection from the dead. Their ultimate weapon proved to be a blunt instrument that lacked finality and real power.

Main Points

- Paul is concerned for the spiritual welfare of those at Colossae.
 - He warns them of the dangers of human traditions and philosophies.
 - Christ is the container that holds God's mystery.
 - He challenges them to live according to what they have received.
 - He explains the results of the gospel for them more fully.
 - They have been saved through spiritual circumcision and the erasing of their record of trespasses.
 - Christ has triumphed over the spiritual forces and demonstrated his victory publicly.
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Questions

1. Why do you think Paul emphasizes the idea of unity here?
How would you define unity?
2. What is the knowledge of God's mystery?
3. What are "plausible arguments"?
4. Why do you think Paul is so concerned about them being
deceived?
5. What do you think the Colossians had been taught, to which
Paul tells them cling?
6. What does it mean to be God?
7. What does Jesus teach us about God?
8. Why do you think baptism is mentioned here?
9. What does it mean to be dead in trespasses?
10. What does it mean for God to nail our record of trespasses to
the cross?
11. What is the greatest threat to the Colossians?
12. What do you think is the greatest threat to the Christian
message today?
13. What are some of the lies that people believe today that are
similar to those that Paul warns the Colossian Christians to be
aware of?

14. What are some ways that we can all promote unity in our daily lives?

15. What are some things that make you afraid?

16. How might your faith in Jesus remove your fears?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important to know what God has accomplished in Jesus Christ. This knowledge, empowers, enlightens, encourages, and enlivens our existence. In this knowledge is the potential to be joyful in all circumstances and in the midst of any trial. This understanding gives the ability to endure hardship, injustice, and intolerance from all sides. Paul wants his audience to understand that the source of confidence for the Christian is rooted in the creator, and the sustainer of the universe. What are some ways that you are encouraged in the midst of hardship?

Where is God in these words?

God is in these words revealing His heart, and His plans for humanity, and for all of creation. He seeks to redeem creation and to imbue it with a sense of destiny and purpose; His purpose and His plan. Paul seeks to warn his readers of the trials and deceit that are to come and to shore up their defenses against these assaults. These assaults on our faith sound reasonable and may even sound wise, but they are false and lead to death, not to life. What are some ways that you seek to protect yourself from the attacks of falsehood?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

The words of Paul here challenge his readers to live life with a sense of destiny and strength that is beyond the natural world and natural reason. He calls his readers to recognize the impact that God has already had on their existence and to continue to build on that progress and to cooperate with God. He challenges them to do this by explaining to them the reality of the hierarchy of the universe. What are some ways that you can see God actively involved in our world today?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

The word of God is calling us to live fearless lives, pursuing the will of God into actions that may be dangerous, and from a worldly perspective may even seem foolhardy. Paul calls upon his readers to live lives that reflect the new reality created in them by the resurrection of Jesus. How do you live your life differently because of the resurrection of Jesus?