

## VIII. Christ's Triumph over the World

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Colossians 2:8-15

**Aim:** To rejoice that we in Christ we have the fullness of salvation, sharing in Christ's triumph over the spiritual powers of this world.

The church in Colossae had been infiltrated by new teachers, unscrupulous interlopers with an agenda very different from Paul's. Ever since that time, scholars have been at pains to establish just what these newcomers actually taught. We can, however, reconstruct some of its tenets from 2:8-23. It contained elements of philosophy (2:8-15), legalism (2:16-17), mysticism (2:18-19), and asceticism (2:20-23). This heresy also had components that were early forms of Gnosticism, the belief that there was a transcendent kind of knowledge beyond Christian doctrine known only to elite initiates who had ascended to that level. Most damning, though, was its teaching that Jesus was neither God nor the source of all truth. That was the frontal attack on His deity and sufficiency.

In 2:1-7, Paul exhorts the Colossians to maintain their allegiance to both the deity and complete sufficiency of Jesus Christ. He reminds them that, in contrast to the claims of the false teachers, in Christ 'are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (2:3). That statement is a profound summation of the sufficiency of the Lord Jesus. That positive teaching is counterbalanced with a negative treatment in 2:8-23, where Paul tells them what to avoid. In so doing, he fully refutes the claims of the Colossian errorists. Against their claim to a secret, superior knowledge, he has already pointed out that there is no hidden knowledge apart from Christ (2:3). Against their teaching that a series of lesser beings emanated from God, Paul emphasizes that 'all the fullness of Deity dwells' in Christ (2:9). They worshipped those emanations, which Paul describes in 2:15 as demonic beings, whom Christ has already conquered. He speaks against the falsity of ceremonial, ritualistic legalism and mysticism in 2:16-19. Finally, in 2:20-23 Paul rejects their asceticism, since it is 'of no value against fleshly indulgence' (2:23).

Paul gives here a model for dealing with heresy. He does not bitterly denounce the heresy by name. In fact, he does not even give it a name. Nor does he present in exhaustive detail what the heretics believed. He deals with the heresy by emphasizing those truths that refute its claims and similar claims by all other heresies in matter what their names. Any false system will collapse in the face of the truth.

This key paragraph begins with a warning about the false teachers (v. 8) but is then dominated by a theologically rich explanation of why the Colossians should reject this teaching. Again Paul picks up language and ideas found earlier in the letter. Verses 9-15 also elaborate the significance for believers of Christ's supremacy and exclusivity. Christ is the one universal Lord, and Christians, by identifying with Christ in faith, experience the benefits of that Lordship.

### A. Colossian Philosophy (2:8)

These false teachers did not act in an immoral way. In fact, they may well have lived lives that would be considered upright as far as worldly standards are concerned. However, their aim was

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to ‘take captive’ these Colossian believers. They used philosophy which depended on human tradition and the basic principles of this world.

Verses 8-10 contain a warning about the content of the false teaching. It is possible for seemingly healthy believers to be led astray. Paul found this to be eminently true of the Colossian church and issued a warning which described the danger and then prescribed the safeguard against spiritual seduction.

### 1. Captive

*Beware lest anyone cheat you...*

Paul calls the Colossians to constant watchfulness because danger is near, as the present tense imperative form of *blepō* (‘beware’, ‘watch out [for],’ or ‘see to it’) indicates.

The word ‘cheat’ is not the best translation of the Greek word that occurs only once in the New Testament. It actually means ‘take captive.’ *Sulagōgeō* is a compound word, made up of *sulē*, ‘booty,’ and *agō*, ‘to carry off.’ It literally means ‘to kidnap’ or ‘to carry off as booty, or spoil of war.’ It describes what happens when victorious soldiers seize booty from their defeated enemies, or even take their prisoners away as slaves. It vividly expresses the danger that the readers may be ‘carried off as plunder’ by an alien and fundamentally anti-Christian form of teaching.

Paul makes the assumption here that those who do not teach the authentic gospel are essentially spiritual predators. What this meant in Colossae was that the newcomers, while presenting their message as the way to spiritual liberty, would actually deprive believers of their freedom in Christ by enslaving them to a set of principles that were only superficially Christian. The same process can still be observed today. Christians can be led away from the simplicity of the gospel by unscrupulous teachers who pass their message off as the real thing by cloaking it with Christian terminology.

### 2. Philosophy

*...through philosophy...*

The word ‘philosophy’ comes from two Greek words, *phileō*, ‘to love,’ and *sophia*, ‘wisdom.’ Philosophy is the love and pursuit of wisdom. *Philosophia* appears only here in the New Testament. It is used here in a much broader sense than the academic discipline. In ancient times the word often meant a ‘world view, a set of convictions about the meaning of life,’ and could be applied to virtually any system of thought. Everything that had to do with theories about God and the world and the meaning of human life was called ‘philosophy’ at that time. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus used it in that way when he said that the Jews in his day had three philosophies. He meant the teachings of the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes. Seen from that angle, Christianity is a philosophy. In that sense, a philosophy or world view is a set of beliefs about God, the universe, and our place in it as human beings.

We must understand that Paul was not putting down philosophy per se, but only the kind of philosophy being propagated by the Colossian false teachers. What Paul was warning about was a dangerous philosophy made up of both Judaism and Greek Gnosticism. The Gnostics taught that a person must work his or her way up a long series of lesser gods, called emanations, before reaching the ultimate god. Here, false Jewish teachers combined Hebrew rites and ascetic regulations with their philosophy, as a better way to move up the spiritual ladder. The use of the

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definite article with *philosophia* shows that Paul was referring here to the specific beliefs of the Colossian errorists.

### 3. Empty Deceit

*...and empty deceit...*

The positive connotation of the word ‘philosophy’ suggest that it was probably the false teachers themselves who chose to describe their teaching in this way. Paul does not refute that claim but makes it clear just what kind of ‘philosophy’ it is: one that is ‘vain’ and characterized by ‘deceitfulness.’

The absence of both preposition and article in this second clause shows that *kenēs apatēs* (‘empty deception’) describes and qualifies ‘philosophy.’ *Kenēs* (‘empty’) means ‘hollo’ or ‘empty; in a physical sense; and so, in a metaphorical sense, refers to people or teachings that are ‘devoid of intellectual, moral, or spiritual value.’ *Apatēs* (‘deception’) means ‘a deceit, fraud, or trick.’ The philosophy of the Colossian false teachers was not what it appeared to be. It sounded good and seduced the minds of those deceived by it, but it was a vapid illusion. There is no value in such speculative human philosophy, no matter how deeply and profoundly religious it sounds.

Theirs was a man-made system. They were advocating something that was not only untrue, but also hollow, incorrect, and devoid of substance. It made great claims, but there was nothing in it.

### 4. Traditions of Men

*...according to the tradition of men...*

Paul then gives two sources for such speculation and contrasts with the true source of knowledge. Each of these three parallel prepositional phrases begins with the same preposition, *kata* (‘according to’), lending both rhythm and emphasis to the characterization.

‘The tradition of men’ is the first. ‘Tradition’ is *paradosis*, that which is given from one to another. Just because people have believed something and handed it down through the years does not make it true. Tradition usually serves merely to propagate error (cp. 1 Pe. 1:18). First-century Judaism is an example. The Jewish leaders and teachers had encrusted the Word of God with so many customs, rituals, and teachings that they were no longer able to distinguish it from the traditions of men (cp. Mark. 7:5-9).

‘Tradition’ is a word that sometimes makes evangelical Christians nervous. They are all too conscious that the Roman Catholic Church teaches that its traditions have the same weight as Scripture. There is, however, a proper tradition that Bible-loving Christians should appreciate and respect (cp. 2 Tim. 2:2). Passing on what Jesus taught clearly and faithfully from one generation to the next is tradition at its best.

Unfortunately, something quite different was taking place in Colossae. Paul detected fertile human imaginations at work. Far from transmitting the message of Jesus without embellishment or adulteration, the new teachers had distorted the gospel by inventing elements of their own. They presented their philosophy as having antiquity, dignity, and revelational character. When it comes to doctrine, we have no right to innovate.

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### 5. Basic Principles of the World

*...according to the basic principles of the world...*

A second source for this false philosophy is ‘the elementary principles of the world.’ The word translated ‘elementary principles’ (*stoicheia*) is an interesting one. It occurs here and again in verse 20 with reference to the false teaching, and also in Galatians 4:3 and, in a different formulation, Galatians 4:9. The other New Testament usages of the word are in 2 Peter 3:10, 12 and Hebrews 5:12.

The rarity of the expression makes it overwhelmingly likely that the phrase has the same meaning (at least in a general sense) in Galatians as in Colossians. It is also probable that the phrase is Paul’s own way of characterizing the teaching in each situation rather than the false teachers’ own label.

*Stoicheion* is a formal word, meaning ‘fundamental component’ or ‘element,’ and thus can take on a wide variety of specific senses, depending on the context used. It can, for instance, refer to the letters of the alphabet, the notes of a musical scale, or the propositions of geometry. But three meanings or applications of the word are particularly relevant.

#### *a) Fundamental Components*

First, in Paul’s day (and after), the word was most often used to describe the ‘fundamental components’ of the universe, the ‘elements’ from which all matter was composed – usually identified as air, earth, fire, and water (e.g., 2 Peter 3:10, 12). Although this was by far the dominant meaning of the word *stoicheia* in Paul’s day, it is unlikely that Paul is using that meaning here. A reference to simply material components does not fit in well with the false teaching that Paul describes in Galatians 4 and Colossians 2.

However, in view of the prevailing ancient worldview, a reference to the material elements of the universe in a religious text such as Colossians 2 would almost certainly include some reference to those deities or spirits who were so closely associated with the elements themselves. The Colossian ‘philosophy,’ by its preoccupation with rules about material things, was, in Paul’s view, treating them like the pagans did, as if they were fundamental cosmic powers that need to be placated. They were, in effect, putting them in the place of Christ. Douglas Moo believes this is the best explanation for the phrase, essentially giving it the meaning of the most common usage in Paul’s day.

#### *b) Basic Beliefs*

Second, the word was also used in the sense of the ‘essential principles’ of a particular area of study (cp. Hebrews 5:12). This meaning fits the context of both Colossians 2 and Galatians 4 well. In Galatians 4 Paul uses the maturation of a child as a metaphor for the course of salvation history. Israel under the law is like a child who has not yet received his or her inheritance. It would, then, be very natural for Paul to describe the law and its peculiar requirements – circumcision, abstinence from certain foods, the celebration of holy days – as ‘elementary principles’ that have now been put aside in the new era of salvation history. Similarly, whatever else we can learn from Colossians 2 about the false teaching, one thing is clear; it also stressed the observance of Jewish holy days (v. 16) and obedience to certain ‘rules’ (vv. 20-23).

*Stoicheia* (‘elementary principles’) refers primarily to the letters of the alphabet. It literally means ‘things in a row.’ Hence, Paul might be describing the false belief system of the Colossian errorists as rudimentary, too simplistic for mature spiritual adults. To accept their

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teaching would be to descend, to regress from the mature teaching of Scripture to the infantile teachings of an immature religion, based not on advanced thinking and wisdom but on silly and childish thoughts. To abandon biblical truth for empty philosophy is like returning to kindergarten after earning a doctorate.

This same phrase is also found in Galatians 4:3. There again, the element of immaturity is evident. Whether first-century Judaism, as in Galatians, or the false teaching threatening the Colossians, human religion is not advanced, erudite, higher, transcendent and lofty in its profundity. Rather, it is banal, elemental, and rudimentary.

### *c) Elemental Spirits*

Finally, *stoicheia* came to be used for spiritual beings. The main problem with this view is lexical; there is no evidence that the word *stoicheia* was used to refer to spiritual beings until the third century AD. However, many scholars are convinced that the word was being used this way already in Paul's day. Advocates of this view rightly note that the move from *stoicheia* as a reference to physical elements to *stoicheia* as a reference to spiritual beings would have been an easy one in the context of the ancient worldview.

Thus, by using *stoicheia*, Paul could be referring to the ancient world's belief in elemental spirits—either supposed emanations from God, or the spirit beings that the people of the ancient world associated with the stars and planets. These demonic spirits were thought to control the planetary spheres and thus men's lives—the world order. People who believed in astrology were caught in the grip of a rigid determinism. The influence of the stars and planets controlled their destiny, unless they had the secret knowledge necessary to escape that control. It was precisely such knowledge that the false teachers may have claimed.

There is good reason to believe that Paul means that the teaching of these men was according to the 'elemental spirits.' This fits in with Paul's insistence in verse 10 that Christ has authority over 'all principality and power' and his caution in verse 18 against undue preoccupation with angels. It would seem that the new teachers were concerned with the hidden forces that operate in the spiritual world. The Colossian teachers were putting themselves forward as experts in this area. They could persuade the benign powers, the angels to come to the aid of their clients and they could teach ways of warding off the evil machinations of the dark powers. Paul here argued that these evil forces were in control of this false doctrine and desired to bring the Colossians back into the bondage they knew before Christ.

## **6. Vs. Christ**

*...and not according to Christ.*

Whatever precise sense we end up giving to 'the elements of the world,' it is at any rate clear that the real sting in Paul's characterization of the false teachers comes in the third, negative description: it is not 'according to Christ.' In this short phrase the dominant theological teaching of the letter is brought to bear on the central purpose of the letter. Christ is the One in whom God exclusively is to be found, the One through whom the world was created and through whom it is redeemed, and the One who has decisively defeated all the hostile powers. Any teaching that in any way detracts from Christ's exclusive role is by definition both wrong and ineffective. The teachers themselves are probably not denying that Christ was central to God's saving purposes. They seem rather to be arguing that certain practices must be added on in order to achieve true spiritual fulfillment. But, for Paul, in this case, addition means subtraction: one

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cannot ‘add’ to Christ without, in effect, subtracting from His exclusive place in creation and salvation history.

Paul’s point was simply that this kind of preoccupation is unhealthy. Ultimately, He is the only true teacher. Other teachers only deserve our attention insofar as they accurately reflect what He has said.

### **B. Pauline Philosophy (Col. 2:9-15)**

The test of all philosophies and religious teachings is: are they based on Christ, His salvation, and His Word? In effect, verses 9-15 elaborate the negative ‘not according to Christ’ by detailing the flip, positive side: in Christ, and in Christ alone is found ‘the fullness of God’ (v. 9), and believers have been made ‘full’ in Him (vv. 10-15). From Colossians 2:9-15, Paul expounds in glorious detail what it really means to be ‘in Christ.’ He affirms the deity of Christ, and he says that all the fullness of this deity (i.e., God) lives in Christ in bodily form.

#### **1. Christ’s Fullness (2:9-10)**

##### *a) His Fullness (2:9)*

*For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily...*

Verse 9 is perhaps the most definitive statement of Christ’s deity in the epistles. It is the rock upon which all attempts to disprove Christ’s deity are shattered. Obviously, these heretics were saying Jesus was not God. This statement forever blasts the Gnostics’ idea that the fullness came through the emanations and angelic mediators.

Paul repeats the teaching he gave in 1:19. In contrast to 1:19, however, Paul explicitly indicates that the ‘fullness’ has to do with God by adding the qualification ‘of the Deity.’ *Theotēs* focuses on the divine nature, as opposed to the divine essence (which would be expressed with *theiotēs*).

*Plērōma* (‘fullness’) is the same term used in 1:19; it was a term used by the Colossian errorists. They believed the divine *plērōma* was divided in its expression among the various emanations. Paul, however, insists that all the fullness ‘of Deity,’ not a part of it, dwells in Christ. *Katoikeō* (‘dwells’) means ‘to settle down and be at home.’ The present tense indicates that the essence of Deity continually abides at home in Christ. Deity is a word emphasizing divine nature. That nature of God that continually abode in Jesus Christ was not some divine light that merely lit Him up for a while, but was not His own. He is fully God forever.

The Colossian false teachers also apparently taught a form of philosophic dualism, believing that spirit was good and matter was evil. Hence, it was unthinkable to them that God would take on a human body. Paul counters that false doctrine by emphasizing that all the fullness of Deity dwells in Christ ‘in bodily form’ (*sōmatikōs*). The focus is probably on the ‘bodily’ nature of God’s manifestation in Christ. He will forever be the God-Man. The wonderful fullness of Christ is still found in Him; it is ‘living’ in Him in bodily form.

Paul is not advocating the view, so common in his day, that true spirituality was to be found by abandoning or by strictly subduing the ‘body’ (see v. 23). Rather, God has chosen precisely a body in which to take residence and through that body, sacrificed on the cross (1:22; 2:15) and raised from the dead (2:13) to win the ultimate victory over the powers of darkness.

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Paul wanted to remind his readers that Jesus is wonderful beyond description. By suggesting that the believers in Colossae needed something in addition to Christ alone, they were being dismissive about the greatest person in the entire universe. When we consider Jesus, it is not as though God is merely present to some extent. Nothing of God is missing. The Almighty is present in Christ in all His attributes. And because ‘all the fullness of the Godhead’ is there in Christ, there is no more of God to be known than can be found in Him. You will not discover more of God by moving on from Christ. Leave Him behind, and you leave God behind. No fullness can exceed this.

### *b) Our Completeness (2:10a)*

*...and you are complete in Him ...*

Here we have an even more stupendous truth. Not only is all of the fullness of the deity found in Christ, but also every believer has been given fullness in Christ. His fullness is imparted to us; Christ, full of Deity, fills us. Christ can hold all the fullness of Deity; we cannot. But we are full of His fullness. If I were to take a pint jar and allow the ocean to rush into it, in an instant my jar would be filled with the fullness of the Pacific. But I could never put the fullness of the Pacific Ocean into my jar! Thinking of Christ, we realize that because He is infinite, He can hold all the fullness of Deity. And whenever one of us finite creatures dips the tiny vessel of our life into Him, we instantly become full of His fullness.

*Peplērōmenoi* (‘been made complete’) is a form of the verb *plēroō*, from which the noun *plērōma* is derived. Christ is the *plērōma* of God, and we are filled with His *plērōma* (cp. John 1:16). The perfect tense of the participle *peplērōmenoi* indicates that the results of our having been filled are eternal. This idea of ‘fullness’ was something that the false teachers were seeking to impart to the believers in Colossae. This is, no doubt, why Paul describes blessings in Christ in these terms, directly countering a claim of the false teachers. Perhaps they were saying, ‘We offer you the means to attain real spiritual fullness, to move on from Christ to a deeper spiritual experience.’ And against those claims, Paul asserts again the exclusivity of Christ. In Him, and Him alone, God has decisively and exhaustively revealed Himself. All that we can know or experience of God is therefore found in our relationship with Him.

If you have Jesus, there is nothing more to be had. We must understand that His fullness meets our individual needs. He gives us what the moment requires: wisdom, strength, courage. All true believers are complete in Christ and do not need the teachings of any cult or false teacher. The best way to avoid being taken in is to cultivate large views of the Son of God, to ensure that He fills our mental and spiritual horizon, that our hearts are full of Christ. To follow human wisdom is to be kidnapped by the emissaries of Satan and his false system, which leaves a person spiritually incomplete. To come to Christ is to come to the One who alone offers completeness. If you are full of Christ, and growing in that fullness, if you are overflowing with Christ, the Gnostic appeals of the empty philosophies of our age will bear little appeal to you. If you are full of Him, how can you want anything else?

### *c) His Headship (2:10b)*

*... who is the head of all principality and power.*

‘Power’ (*archē*) and ‘authority’ (*exousia*) refer to spiritual beings, as they did in 1:16 (cp. 2:15). ‘Head’ (*kephalē*) is a metaphor that undoubtedly includes the notion of ‘authority over.’ As the head is the animating and directing force of the body, so Christ is the source of the spiritual

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beings' existence (1:16) and the one who ultimately determines what they can and cannot do. Christians need not fear these 'powers,' therefore, because they are firmly under the control of their own 'head,' the One in whom all the fullness of Deity has come to reside.

He was not one of a series of lesser beings emanating from God, as the false teachers maintained. Rather, He is God Himself and thus the head over all the angelic realm.

### 2. The Triumph of Christ (Col. 2:11-15)

Jesus is both the most remarkable man who ever lived and God to the utmost degree. It follows that to become a Christian, to be united by faith to this glorious Savior, is an extraordinary privilege. The newcomers trying to seize control of the church in Colossae argued that something even greater lay beyond conversion. Paul's response in these verses is to describe conversion in such glowing terms that the very idea that there is something better to follow is shown up for the hollow nonsense that it is. Verses 11-15 elaborates on the 'fullness' that Christians experience in Christ.

#### a) *Circumcision (2:11)*

*In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ...*

Circumcision was only the outward demonstration that man was born sinful and needed cleansing. The cutting away of the male foreskin on the reproductive organ was a graphic way to demonstrate that man needed cleansing at the deepest level of his being. No other part of the human anatomy so demonstrates that depth of sin, inasmuch as that is the part of man that produces life—and all that he produces is sinful. Indeed, actual physical circumcision, as it was practiced in Old Testament days, was only ever meant to be an outward symbol of a greater spiritual circumcision or cleansing of the heart (cp. Dt. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 9:26; Rom. 2:28-29).

The fact that Paul chose to speak in these terms suggest that those who were out to capture the church at Colossae insisted that their followers should be circumcised. There was a similar emphasis among the churches of Galatia. The two situations, however, were actually quite different. In Galatia, church members from non-Jewish backgrounds were urged to undergo circumcision on the grounds that it was necessary for salvation, a view that Paul denounced as 'a different gospel' (Gal. 1:6).

In Colossae, it seems that circumcision was being pressed on people as a means of 'putting off the body of the sins of the flesh.' Those who advocated it saw it as a ritual of consecration. As baptism became the rite of initiation for all believers, circumcision was a second rite of initiation for all believers, for the elite handful who were serious about making a decisive break with sin. Submit to circumcision in this way, and you could congratulate yourself that you were no dabbler.

Paul's answer is that all this emphasis on circumcision was unnecessary. It was pointless, redundant. This is because there is a real sense in which every Christian, whether Jewish or otherwise, has been circumcised already. By this the apostle did not mean the medical procedure, but one 'made without hands' (*acheiropoiētes*); that is, a spiritual circumcision. 'Not made with hands' effectively means 'made by God.' Physical circumcision involves the rather violent cutting away of a piece of skin; the spiritual circumcision (done by Christ) is 'the putting

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off of the sinful nature.’ Just as Christ died – putting off not just a small piece of His flesh – but sacrificing His whole body – so we, through His death, have put off our sinful nature.

A number of commentators think the concept of circumcision is introduced here as a direct polemic against the false teaching. The false teachers, it is argued, must have been insisting on circumcision, leading Paul to counter their demand with the claim that Christians had, in fact, already undergone a ‘circumcision.’ There are two reasons to hesitate before concluding that the false teachers themselves had introduced circumcision into the debate. First, negatively, it is strange, had circumcision been a part of the false teachers’ program, that it is never directly countered anywhere in the letter, especially in 2:16-23. Second, positively, a sufficient explanation for Paul’s introduction of circumcision here is the apparent focus on conquering or subduing the flesh, or the body, that seems to have been an important component of the false teaching (cp. 2:23).

There are three basic possible interpretations of the end of verse 11. First, the reference might be to Christian conversion, pictured as a ‘circumcision’ performed on us by Christ, who removes not a piece of physical ‘flesh,’ but the enveloping, enervating power of our ‘fleshly’ nature or propensity. Second, in light of verse 12, where baptism is explicitly brought into the picture, Paul could be referring to baptism as the Christian equivalent to Old Testament/Jewish circumcision, the rite through which, or in conjunction with which, our bodies dominated by the flesh are ‘put off.’ Third, the reference could be to Christ’s own death, ‘circumcision’ being used as a metaphor for violent death, and ‘body of flesh’ (as in 1:22) referring to Christ’s own physical body, ‘stripped off’ when He died on the Christ. It is in and with Christ’s own death, then, that believers were themselves brought from death to life.

The first view outlined above is preferred by Moo: the circumcision of Christ is a metaphor for the conquering of the power of sin that takes place when a person comes to Christ. Seen in this way, Paul uses ‘circumcise’ as a metaphor for the transition from the old life to the new. The ‘body (*sōma*) of the flesh (*sarx*)’ refers to the sinful, fallen human nature totally dominating believers before salvation and has the same meaning as the ‘body of sin’ in Romans 6:6. The ‘old self,’ the person we were before conversion, was crucified with Christ. The ‘body of sin,’ formerly a vehicle for sin, has been rendered inoperative. In line with the circumcision metaphor, it is this body of flesh, not simply a piece of flesh (as in physical circumcision), that is ‘put off’ or ‘stripped off.’

In Colossae, the new teachers argued that physical circumcision was the proof of a man’s willingness to live the victorious life, a life of consistent victory over sin. Paul wanted his readers to understand that spiritual circumcision produces a clean break with sin of a different kind. Conversion does not mean that sin is gone for good in this life, but it does mean the end of sin as the dominant power in our hearts and minds.

Here is the fullness which Christ has given us. We are free to live life to its fullest—free from the domination of sin. Christians have been cleansed of that sinful dominance and been given a new nature created in righteousness. The Christian’s circumcision is not physical but spiritual.

### *b) Baptism (2:12)*

*...buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.*

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Just as the circumcision mentioned in verse 11 was not an operation with a knife, so too, the baptism mentioned in verse 12 is not a ritual involving water. Both verses speak of spiritual realities. Paul does not compare baptism with (literal) circumcision; he identifies baptism as the ‘place’ where our spiritual circumcision takes place. Paul’s logic runs like this: you have been spiritually ‘circumcised.’ This circumcision took place when you were buried with Christ and raised with Him. And this burial and resurrection with Christ happened when you were baptized.

Baptism pictures believers’ union with Christ. The rite of baptism takes the form of a burial, not in earth but water, and a reemergence. These correspond to what Paul describes in verse 12 and 13 as death and resurrection (cp. Rom. 6:4). Language like this tells us that conversion is a dramatic change. It is far more than a change of opinions, or even a change of lifestyle. Paul’s description of the change is breathtaking. The person the Christian once was has ceased to exist. A believer is a new person altogether. What happens to the new Christian is intimately and powerfully linked with the death and resurrection of Jesus. This resurrection is not future, but *now*. We were baptized into the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ; thus we have resurrection life now.

Having said that our resurrection ‘with Christ’ takes place ‘in baptism,’ Paul now adds that it also takes place ‘through your faith.’ This addition reminds us that baptism, while important in its own right as a natural component of ‘conversion-initiation,’ has no power apart from faith.

‘Working’ translates *energeia*, from which we get our English word ‘energy.’ It refers to God’s active power—the same power that raised Jesus from the dead.

### c) Resurrection (2:13a)

*And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him...*

Before we became Christians we were in a bad way. Paul describes his readers as having been ‘dead in ... trespasses,’ spiritually and morally lifeless and incapable of responding to God (cp. Eph. 2:1). This ‘death’ refers especially to condemnation, a present state that afflicts all humans in their natural state because of Adam’s ‘original’ sin (Rom. 5:12, 18-19). Unbelievers exist in the sphere or realm of spiritual death. To be spiritually dead means to be devoid of any sense, unable to respond to spiritual stimuli, just as to be physically dead means to be unable to respond to physical stimuli. It is to be so locked in sin’s grasp that one is unable to respond to God. Those who are spiritually dead are dominated by the world, the flesh, and Satan and possess no spiritual, eternal life.

The word for ‘sins’ is *paraptōmasin* is sometimes translated as ‘trespasses’ or ‘transgressions.’ This word originally had the sense ‘false step,’ and Paul uses it in several texts to refer to human sinning. It is doubtful, however, whether the word here has any different sense than the more usual *hamartia* (1:14). Both terms occur in the closely parallel Ephesians 2:1, 5.

They were also ‘uncircumcised.’ This word (*akrobystia*) means basically ‘foreskin,’ but came to be used among Jews, by natural extension, of people who possessed their foreskins, that is, who were uncircumcised – in a word, ‘Gentiles.’ ‘Flesh’ is *sarx*. The phrase ‘the uncircumcision of your flesh’ designates Gentiles, whose condition of uncircumcision demonstrated that they were outside the covenant (cp. Eph. 2:11-12). The Gentiles were therefore in a much worse state than the unbelieving Jews, who at least were a part of the covenant community that possessed the law of God. Paul’s use of the expression here would naturally suggest that the Colossian Christians

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were Gentiles. ‘Uncircumcised flesh’ is the condition that ‘Christ’s circumcision’ (2:11) removes, the condition of having ‘flesh’ – the sinful nature – that has not yet been stripped off.

Those who are not yet Christians don’t belong to the people of God. Every converted person was once like that. But that person has ceased to exist. He is quite dead and a new person has taken his place. Paul again stresses the believer’s union with Christ (cp. 2:10; 2:11; 2:12). Those who were hopelessly dead in sin receive new life through that union. Without Christ, we could do nothing to get life. There must be sovereign communication of life from God. God initiates the salvation process, because spiritually dead people cannot make themselves come alive.

As believers, we have not been merely renovated, or brushed up. We are new people with a radically new kind of life within. Conversion to Christ does not merely involve some cosmetic and superficial changes. It is a spiritual baptism in which we undergo a real death and a dramatic resurrection, having become brand new persons altogether.

### *d) Forgiveness (2:13b-14)*

*... having forgiven you all trespasses...*

In verses 11-12 Paul emphasized that salvation is complete apart from any religious ritual. In verses 13-14, he emphasizes that forgiveness is complete apart from any human work. The verb ‘forgave’ actually translates a participle that is connected to the verb ‘God made you alive with Christ.’ This is not partial or conditional forgiveness. Our forgiveness is total: ‘*all* our sins’ are forgiven.

Paul describes God’s forgiveness several ways in these verses.

### (1) Wiped Clean (2:14a)

*...having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us.*

First, we discover that the record of our past lives is cancelled. Nothing is more futile than trying to square accounts with God. But this is what forgiveness does. In a moment of high drama the records are wiped clean. All the incriminating evidence has been erased because our debt has been paid in full.

The list of our sins is long and detailed. It has been written down so that it can be used as evidence against us at the Day of Judgment. It is like an IOU signed by our own hand, promising to obey God. Our sins stand as conclusive evidence that we have failed to give God that allegiance, and so that document is ‘against us’ and ‘condemns us.’ Our lack of obedience announces our guilt. But God has taken that document and wiped it clean.

‘Certificate of debt’ translates *cheirographos*, which literally means ‘something written with the hand’ or ‘an autograph.’ It was used to refer to a certificate of indebtedness handwritten by the debtor in acknowledgement of his debt, or what we would call an ‘IOU.’

*Dogmasin* (‘decrees’ or ‘requirements’) is used in the LXX and the New Testament to refer to decrees issued by kings (e.g., the ‘decree’ of Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed; Luke 2:1). Ephesians 2:15 is the only other place where the word occurs in Paul. Here Paul uses it to describe the commands of the Mosaic law as consisting in ‘decrees.’

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All we humans had, as it were, ‘signed’ an IOU promising God perfect obedience, and this document has come to stand against us because of God’s ‘decrees’ that we have failed to keep. All peoples (including Gentiles, cp. Rom. 2:14-15) owe God a debt because they have violated His law. Paul emphasizes the negative verdict of the IOU by stating it twice: this certificate was ‘hostile to us,’ that is, it was enough to ‘condemn’ us to judgment and hell.

*Exaleiphō* (‘cancelled out’) means ‘to wipe off’ like erasing a blackboard (cp. Rev. 7:17, 21:4, where ‘God will *wipe away* every tear from their eyes’). Ancient documents were commonly written either on papyrus, a paper-like material made from the bulrush plant, or vellum, which was made from an animal’s hide. The ink used then had no acid in it and did not soak into the writing material. Since the ink remained on the surface, it could be wiped off if the scribe wanted to reuse the material.

### (2) Nailed to the Cross (2:14b)

*And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.*

Secondly, forgiveness means that the record of our past lives no longer applies to us. Christ took the IOUS and nailed them to the cross above His head, and then completely forgave us of all. It is by ‘nailing it to the cross’ that the IOU has been decisively removed from having any power over us. Through the cross, God has canceled the debt which was against us, and which stood against us. The third stanza of ‘It Is Well with My Soul’ captures this thought beautifully:

My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!  
My sin, not in part but the whole,  
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

The imagery probably has nothing to do with any ancient means of canceling debts but arises from the actual nature of Christ’s crucifixion. In a typical crucifixion, it was Roman practice to pin a notice called the *titulus* to the cross above the condemned man’s head. It gave the man’s name and the crime that he was accused of. It was proof that he was getting his just deserts. This very thing happened to Jesus. His name was affixed to the cross together with the explanation that he claimed to be King of the Jews (cp. John 19:19). This was displayed for all to see. In the same way, said Paul, it is as though the record of our past lives has been nailed to the cross where Jesus died. That being the case, it has nothing to do with us anymore. Because it was fastened above his head it will never be nailed above ours.

The Colossians were complete, whole, because they had been released from the bondage of guilt. This is why the Colossians were full. This is why they needed nothing else!

### e) *Victory (2:15)*

*Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.*

With this verse, Paul brings to a conclusion his explanation of how we have been brought to ‘fullness’ in Christ (v. 10). In a reflection of a key concern in Colossians, the verse ends as the section began, with a focus on the ‘powers and authorities.’ In verse 10, Paul asserted simply that Christ is the ‘head’ of those spiritual powers. Now he shows how that headship has been expressed, as God, through the cross of Christ, has won a victory over the rebellious powers.

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Thirdly, forgiveness means that the powers of evil are defeated foes. The ‘powers and authorities’ are the demonic powers arrayed against Christ and His Church. On the cross, Christ overcame the dreadful powers of sin, Satan, and this world. ‘Disarmed’ (*apekdyomai*) literally means ‘strip off’ or ‘take off [clothes]’ and occurs again in 3:9, where it refers to believers’ ‘stripping off’ the ‘old self.’ The redemptive work of Christ on the cross stripped Satan of his powers (cp. Heb. 2:14).

God’s victory over the spiritual powers did not remain a private matter; He ‘made a public spectacle’ of them. The verb has the sense ‘expose publicly’ (cp. the only other New Testament occurrence, Mt. 1:19, where Joseph chooses to divorce Mary quietly rather than ‘expose her to public disgrace’). This idea of public display is strongly accentuated with the participle *thriambeusas*, which alludes to the Roman custom of awarding victorious generals a ‘victory parade.’

The language of verse 15 takes us back to ancient Rome, where a successful military campaign was always followed by a triumph. At the head of the parade came the victorious general, followed by his regiments in their best parade uniform. During this procession, sweet spices were burned in the streets and petals were strewn on the road. The aroma of the spices and the scent of the flowers (which was released as the soldiers crushed them under their feet), was a sweet aroma to the victorious men. At the end came the prisoners of war, bedraggled and forlorn. It is this activity of ‘leading in triumphal procession’ that the verb refers to (cp. 2 Cor. 2:14, where Paul compares his service to Christ with being ‘led as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession’). Paul is pulling out all the stops to make as clear as he can that God has removed any claim that the spiritual powers might have over us, and that He has done so clearly and publicly.

Christ’s death on the cross disarmed or stripped the spiritual rulers and authorities of their powers, but it was in His resurrection and ascension that God put on public display the reality of that victory over the powers.

One thing that emerges from this letter is that the Colossians were obsessed with the unseen world. The new teachers offered advice on how to placate the dark forces. According to Paul, none of it was necessary. In the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, God the Father achieved a great victory over the evil powers of this world, making ‘a public spectacle of them.’ He wants us to see that though they still exist, they are defeated. Satan’s demons have been sentenced to be in the train of God’s victory parade. Thus, we need no longer fear the outcome of our battle with evil. Christ has conquered! We have conquered! And we *will* conquer! In view of all this, why look to anyone but Christ for fullness?

To worship such defeated and humiliated beings would be the height of folly. The cross is the answer to the Colossian errorists insistence on worshiping angelic beings. Though we still wrestle against the forces of evil (Eph. 6:12), they cannot be victorious. Christ, the crucified, risen Lord of all, reigns supreme in the universe. The death of Christ brings transformation, pardon, and victory. That adds up to complete salvation with complete forgiveness and triumph.

For next time: Read Colossians 2:16-23.