

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

CONCLUSION

Like many of you I saw *Lord of the Rings* during the holiday. I loved the books so I was anxious to see the movie, and I wasn't disappointed. My favorite scene is when the hero of the story, Gandalf, a good wizard, stands his ground on a narrow bridge against a huge and ferocious demon called a Balrog. With his trembling companions watching, Gandalf stands tall and shouts at the top of his lungs, "You cannot pass!" Even his friends were startled at his fierce courage. The Balrog tried but he couldn't get by Gandalf, and he was destroyed as the bridge collapsed and he fell into the abyss. As his friends watched, Gandalf cried out to them, "Fly you fools!"

In this passage, Christ is our Gandalf who stands his ground and defeats the evil powers at great personal cost. But at the same time he says to us, "Fly you fools!" Fly from false teaching. But where do we fly? We fly to Christ. We understand who Christ is and who we are in him. In him we are complete. We have new life. We have forgiveness. We have victory.

The rulers and authorities are demonic powers arrayed against us. Paul paints a picture here of Christ as a military general. In Paul's day Roman generals would march into Rome after a great victory and bring all of the spoils, including conquered rulers, on display for all to see. Through the cross God has made a public spectacle of evil rulers. They still exist, but they're defeated. They're part of the train of Christ's victory parade.

What a paradox the cross of Jesus is. Think about it. On the cross, he was stripped naked, held up in public contempt, while others celebrated their triumph over him. But the paradox of the cross is that through it God was stripping them naked, and making a public spectacle of them, and leading them in his own triumphant procession! So the cross, this emblem of human shame, becomes for us the emblem of ultimate triumph over evil. That's why if you take the cross out of Christianity, you're left with nothing. He was emptied so we could be made full.



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How To Be Made Complete

SERIES: *Colossians: Complete in Christ*

We live in a world where it's hard to know what's real. It's easy to fool people and it's easy to be fooled. Some teenagers pulled a practical joke on some unsuspecting passersby in a large city. They stood on a busy street corner and stared intensely into the sky. One of them pointed while another said loudly, "It couldn't be!" A third friend then chimed in, "It is!" At this point, one or two people stopped and looked up in the same direction. The two boys continued to argue and more and more people stopped and looked in the sky. Then, one by one, the boys quietly slipped out of the crowd and gathered a few yards away to watch the result. By this time, some fifteen people were looking into the air. The crowd changed as new people came and others left. Twenty minutes later several people were still staring upward, looking up for something that, in fact, was not there.

We laugh at that kind of simple-minded deceit, but it goes to show that it's easy to fool people and it's easy to be fooled. Those boys could have started a new movement or religion. As a matter of fact, that's how some religions get started. People talk about some experience they've had, something they think they've discovered or seen. They get very excited and tell others to look in the same direction when in fact there's nothing there. But people gather around. New friends are made. New theories are developed. The group decides to gather on a regular basis. It's given a name. The sad thing is there's nothing there.

You don't have to be ignorant to be fooled. There are well-educated people who get sucked into staring at nothing. There are young men and women who have grown up in churches just like ours who find the camaraderie of staring into the sky exhilarating and join the ranks. That's why what the the Apostle Paul says to the Colossians in chapter two is so important. It's a stern warning to those who call themselves Christians to be careful what they buy into. Look at verse 8.

I. Don't be taken hostage by false teaching

“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.”

A. False teaching can take us hostage: There is great urgency behind these words. The Colossians were in great danger of being taken captive by false teaching. The phrase "take you captive" meant to be carried off as

prisoners were carried away by an army. It's like being taken hostage. If we're not careful, we can be taken hostage by philosophies that are false. It's not philosophy in and of itself that is wrong, it's a particular kind of philosophy that Paul describes as "empty deception."

B. False teaching is deceitful: It's philosophy that is first of all deceitful. You see, people don't know they're being taken hostage. They don't know there's nothing up there. It sounds good. It looks good. It feels good. It appears supremely rational. Smart people buy into it. It appears perfectly moral. Good people buy into it. It appears positively practical. Successful people buy into it. It can be all those things, but still based on deceit. It's like those Venus Fly Traps we used to use. We're like flies who get sucked into the sweetness, but it kills us.

C. False teaching is hollow: If we looked closely at it, we might stay away. That's why Paul says it's "empty" or "hollow." When you get to the heart of the teaching, there's no real content, no basis in reality. In the end, it doesn't deliver.

I heard about a farmer who had a horse that had a real problem with slobbering. It was a good horse but it just slobbered on everything it came into contact with. The farmer saw an advertisement in a farm magazine offering a cure for slobbering. Just send in \$20 and get the cure. The farmer scraped together the money and sent it in. A few weeks later he got a thin envelope in the mail. Inside was a single sheet of paper. He pulled out the piece of paper and read, "Teach your horse to spit." That's like so much of what's out there today. It's hollow. It doesn't deliver.

D. False teaching is based on human tradition: Part of the reason it doesn't deliver is that, as Paul says, it's based on "the tradition of men." This doesn't mean that all tradition is bad. There are some traditions handed down which are good and true. In v. 6 Paul talked about "having received Christ Jesus the Lord." That word "receive" meant to have a tradition handed down. We've received the tradition of Jesus as the Messiah and the Savior and the Lord and we should continue to walk in the truth of that tradition. That's a tradition which comes from God. But there are some traditions which are man-made and ultimately useless.

Have you ever noticed how baseball payers wear that black stuff under their eyes? It's supposed to reduce the glare from the sun. One popular smear is called "No Glare" and it's made of a sophisticated mixture of

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charcoal, paraffin, beeswax, and petrolatum. Dr. Oliver Schein, an ophthalmologist at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine did a study on it and concluded it does nothing. So why wear it? It's a tradition. Boog Powell wore it for 17 years in the Majors and said, "I don't remember it ever doing any good, but it looked cool." Joe Montana wore it. Now our sons wears it.

We can be taken hostage by something just because people we want to be like believe in it. There are religions and philosophies which come off as having this great pedigree but in fact they're useless.

E. False teaching is demonic: And dangerous! Paul says it's based on "the elementary principles of the world." Most scholars today agree that "elementary principles" should read "elementary spirits." The false teachers actually propagated teachings about angels or spirits who controlled the stars and in turn the fates of people and the world. Paul picks up on this and says these elementary spirits control the false teaching. They're fallen angels - demons. We think these are just harmless theories, but there is a demonic element behind false teaching. You don't mess with something like that. One flourishing group today has as it's main creed: "As God was, man is As God is, man can become." That sounds so good, but it's "a doctrine of demons." God didn't start out as a man and evolve into a god. Nor can we who start out as men evolve into gods! These things sound like harmless theories, minor disagreements among spiritually minded people, but they're demonic in nature.

Thus far everything Paul has said has been negative. He's told us what to avoid. By the way, it is our job to avoid it. Don't miss that. He commands you and me and says, "YOU see to it that no one takes YOU captive..." It's our responsibility to keep ourselves free from those who would take us hostage. There are measures we can take. What are they? How do we obey this command? Paul hints at the answer at the end of v. 8 where he says false teachers focus on all these things "rather than Christ." They may use the name of Christ. They may say they have accepted Christ. They may even claim to worship Christ, but it's not the same Christ we read about in the Bible. That's why Christ is the focus of the next few verses. Look at vv. 9-10.

II. Understand who Christ is and who we are in Him

"For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority;"

A. The fullness of deity: Paul focuses first on who Christ is. Here is the full Deity of Christ spelled out in simple terms. When he says "in Him" he means in Christ and no where else. It's not like all of us have a

God in us in the same way. That word "dwell" means God took up his permanent residence in Christ. He didn't just drop in, let him do a few miracles, and then leave. The exalted Christ was and is and will be forever the dwelling place of the fullness of God. All that God is - omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, holy, righteous, loving, merciful - all the fullness of God dwells in Christ. We're not talking about a divine spark, we're talking about his fullness. And the miracle is that fullness came near to us "in bodily form." This is what we celebrated at Christmas. The mystery of the incarnation; God becoming flesh and dwelling among us. This is what the false teachers in Colosse rejected. God could never dirty himself with flesh. He could only have contact with flesh through angelic spirits. That's why Paul says "he is the head of all rule and authority." In v. 15 he calls them "rulers and authorities." These are demonic spirits which the false teachers saw as angelic mediators. The false teachers focused on them rather than on Christ. Let me just say something here about angels. Angels are real, but don't focus on them. They're not worth it!

Do you see what Paul is saying? He's saying why would you trade in Christ for an angel, especially a fallen angel? When you can drink from the pure spring water at the mountain top, why would you prefer the muddy pools at its base? If you've eaten at the finest French restaurant in Paris, why would you be hankering after a mini-meal at McDonalds? If you've put on the finest silk clothing from the best designer, why would you insist on shopping down at the thrift shop? If you're married to the finest gentlemen in the world, why are you looking for love down in the local bar? If you really know who Christ is, you will know it doesn't get any better than that.

B. Christ's people have been made complete (full) in Him: But that's not all. Someone might say, "Even if I know who Christ is, what does that mean to me? How does that effect my life?" It's a good question. Paul says the way to keep from being taken hostage is not just to know who Christ is, but to know who YOU are in Him. Notice he says in v. 10, **"In Him YOU have been made complete."** The word "complete" is the same word used for "full" in v. 9. Paul is saying not only is God's fullness in Christ but in him we have been filled. The idea is that we can't hold in our puny selves the fullness of God, only Christ can. But because we're incorporated into Christ, we can become filled with his fullness.

Imagine standing at the shore of the Pacific Ocean. It stretches out for what seems like an eternity. Imagine taking a pint jar to the edge of the water and filling it up with seawater. In a sense, with just one movement you could fill that jar with the Pacific Ocean. But if you took that jar to Nebraska, to a person who had never seen the Pacific Ocean, and told him that here is the Pacific Ocean in this bottle, he really won't be able to understand the ocean as it really is. He won't see the sweep of distance, the power of the waves, the swelling of the surface, and the wonders of its depths. You just can't put that into a bottle. But if somehow the bottle changed, if somehow you could put the whole of the ocean

into the bottle, then we could really take the Pacific Ocean to Nebraska.

God has chosen to place the fullness of his deity in the person of Jesus. He is the only jar that can contain the vastness of God. But when WE come into relationship with him, somehow our capacity stretches. His capacity becomes our capacity, so that as we're filled with Christ we're filled with God.

If that's true, why go somewhere else to get filled? When Christ comes to live in you, you have all that you could possibly need or want. What is it you need? Do you need wisdom? You have his wisdom. Do you need strength? You have his strength. Do you need love? You have his love. You don't have just a part of his wisdom and strength and love, you don't have just a pint of it, you have the fullness of it. We don't always experience it because we fail to abide in him, but it's there. You see, it's one thing to know who Christ is, it's quite another to know who you are in him.

That's why Paul gets even more specific. Starting in v. 11 he spells out more of who we are because we have been incorporated into the jar of Christ. He says three things are true of us in him.

1. We were dead, buried and raised in Him: First, he says you've died, been buried, and been raised up. Look at vv. 11-12,

"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; 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."

Paul talks about our baptism in v. 12. Our baptism is symbolic of how we have been placed into Christ so that his death is our death, his burial is our burial, and his resurrection is our resurrection. Circumcision is used here as a metaphor for death. The "removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ" is talking about the stripping away of Christ's body on the cross. Through his death, we too are circumcised; we too die.

Not only that, but we've been buried with him. The burial of Christ sets the seal on his death; it finalizes it. The fact that we've been buried with him reminds us of the finality of our death. You can't bring back the old life. You can't go back and dig up the person you were.

In him we become new creatures. Just as Christ was raised up, we are raised up through faith in his power. We have new life in him and we're to live as those who serve God and not the flesh. Listen to what Paul says in Romans, "We were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead...we too might walk in newness of life." Death, burial, resurrection - that's what being baptized into Christ means.

One of my favorite movies is *Tender Mercies*. Robert Duvall plays a former country music star whose career is ruined by alcoholism. He ends up working at a run down motel for a widow with a young son. Eventually they get married and both the son and his new stepfather get baptized on the same day. As they drive home in a pickup truck, the boy says to him, "Everyone said I would feel like a changed person. I guess I do feel a little different, but not a whole lot different. Do you?" The stepfather thinks about it and says, "Not yet." Then the boy looks him up and down and says, "You don't look any different. You think I look any different?" Robert Duvall plays a man of few words, and he just says, "Not yet."

We may not look any different yet, but when we're dipped into Christ something changes. It may take time for that to be seen in our lives, but this is the foundation for how we change. We don't change through rules: "Don't wear this, don't taste that, don't go there." Those things never deal with the heart. We need more than rules to clean up our act. We need to die. We need to be buried. We need new life. We don't need reformation. We need regeneration. You only get that through Christ. That's the fullness he gives.

2. We are forgiven through Him: The second thing that's true of us in him is that our sins are forgiven. Look at vv. 13-14,

"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, having canceled 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 nailed it to the cross."

Notice what he says about our sins. He says they were like a certificate of debt on which were the decrees of God as proof of our failure to live up to our obligations. That certificate is hostile to us because we can't pay it off and we're in trouble. Have you ever owed a debt you couldn't pay? That's a terrible feeling. Our sins are a debt we owe to God and we can't begin to pay it off. We can't even pay the interest! We're stuck. There is no declaring bankruptcy on this one. But what did God do? God took that certificate and nailed it to the cross of Christ. That's what they used to do. When they crucified someone they nailed the charges against him right onto the cross for all to see. But in Christ God nailed YOUR certificate above HIS head! Every sin you ever committed was there. Every sin you will commit was there. All means all. He paid the debt for all our sins - past, present and future, so that certificate is gone, and we're completely clean in his sight.

3. We are triumphant because of Him: The last thing Paul says is true of us in him is that we're triumphant over evil powers. Look at v. 15,