

SERIES Reading Paul's Mail: Colossians  
 SERMON **Servants, but No Longer Captive (Col 1.23–2.15)**  
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 LOCATION Church of Christ at Manor Woods (Rockville, MD)  
 DATE 06-Nov-2022

Sometimes we need to be confronted with hard-hitting truth:

“If Jesus had preached the same message that ministers preach today, He would never have been crucified.” (Leonard Ravenhill)

“The only people who want to change the gospel are those who are unchanged by it.” (Leonard Ravenhill)

“The sad irony of our day is we can be deeply committed to being a Christian but not be deeply formed by Christ” (pastor, Rich Villodas)

—PRAY—

## SERVANTS, BUT NO LONGER CAPTIVE

Last week, we explored Paul's declaration of the superiority of Christ over all things as well as how it is only in Christ—being who He is—that we can have the assurance of true salvation, forgiveness, freedom, and restoration with God. And Paul declares all of that glorious and life-changing truth to set up what he needs to say next to the Colossians. But before we focus on that, we need to back up just a little and give attention to a vital point.

### a. Ongoing Faithfulness to the Radical Change of Life

After Paul says what he does about the true identity of Christ in vv.15–20, he stresses the radical change that's taken place in the lives of believers. Beginning in v.21, Paul declares: “And you were at one time strangers and enemies in your minds as expressed through your evil deeds, but now He has reconciled you by His physical body through death to present you holy, without blemish, and blameless before Him” (Col 1.21–23a). At the very least, we should recognize the categorical distinction between the old sinful life we created and the new holy and blameless life Christ recreated.

And we should also recognize that there can be no leading of a double-life. We can't claim to be new creations in Christ while at the same living out the ways of the old self. Paul makes that abundantly clear in Gal 5.16–18. However, there's something else about this radical change in life that cannot be missed. And it's something that follows directly from the truth that living a double-life (*a spiritual* Weekend at Bernie's) is not acceptable. Beginning in v.22: “but now He has reconciled you by His physical body through death to present you holy, without blemish, and blameless before Him—if indeed you remain in the faith, established and firm, without shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard” (Col 1.22–23a).

While admittedly tricky passage, the basic meaning is clear. The ability to remain no longer slaves, no longer enemies of God, and to remain reconciled, unblemished, and blameless before God is conditioned upon remaining faithful, established, firm, and without shifting from the hope of the true gospel about the true Christ that was revealed, heard, and believed. Thus, we cannot claim to surrender the old life for the new, and hope to receive the reward of

the new life while we continue to be drawn to the old life that God condemns. Or to use Paul's imagery: no matter what we might say or profess, we cannot have Christ's new-life of freedom if we continue to live in our old-life of slavery. To say otherwise is to accept, endorse, and live by a false gospel about a false Christ. But such a gospel and such a Christ cannot save. Only the true gospel of the true Christ can do that.

### **b. Commitment to Serve in God's Kingdom on Earth**

And not only us that truth what the Colossians heard, accepted, believed, and now seek to live out, but it's the same truth that defines everything about Paul. Thus, he says: **"This gospel has also been preached in all creation under heaven, and I, Paul, have become its servant"** (Col 1.23b). The term here for "servant" is **διάκονος** (*diakonos*), which also means "minister"—i.e., one who serves the needs of others. It's from this we get the word, "deacon." A gospel-servant is how Paul not only sees himself but also the role he's been called to fulfill in God's kingdom. Thus, serving God by proclaiming the true gospel about the true Christ is not simply a task Paul performs or a job description he upholds. It's who he is and how he lives for Christ. And he will faithfully live that identity and calling for God's glory, no matter what.

In fact, we see that full-blown commitment to serve in that way in the next verse: **"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for you, and I fill up in my physical body—for the sake of His body, the church—what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ"** (Col 1.24). Two things here are often missed and misunderstood. First, from his prayer of thanksgiving about the freedom believers have in Christ, along with the gospel-defined truth about how that freedom has come about because of who Christ truly is and what He's truly done, as well as the declared commitment to proclaim that gospel message throughout the world (*i.e., the Roman Empire*), there is a bit of irony in what Paul says. And it certainly wouldn't have been lost on the original readers. When he writes to the Colossian church, Paul's in jail (*cf. Col 4.10, 18*).

Why? Because of his unyielding faithfulness to the one true Savior, King, and Lord who called, commissioned, and empowered him to spread the life-changing gospel to all nations—especially the Roman Empire. That paragon of political corruption, moral depravity (*especially at the highest levels, but certainly not exclusive to them*), cultural structuring that devalued the majority of its people (*namely anyone below the controlling 1–5% of elites, but especially women and children, who were often seen and treated as disposable*), and social injustices that defied true justice (*the lower-classes, and especially the poor, were effectively indentured servants who padded the coffers of the elites, and those considered less-than had no voice in society or right to speak out or make changes*).

This is the Empire that prided itself on its sales-pitch: **"We promise to give to the people a life of unity and peace throughout the world."** But the dark and dirty secret about that otherwise good, promised gift is that it came with a steep price. "Unity" meant enforced "uniformity" to the will and desires of the powerful elites, and "peace" happened by the tip of the sword along with overreaching control of the masses. Control that said: honor the resident in charge without question, do what we tell you, and don't rock the imperial boat or we'll raise taxes, take your stuff (*maybe even your children*), enslave you, silence you, or simply kill you. If Paul ever needed a small illustration of what the dominion of darkness looks like in real time (*or what it can do in human experience*), he didn't need to look very far to find one.

And it's because Paul used the voice given to him by the One who is truth, morality, and justice, along with exercising the right given to him by the One who is the eternally sovereign Lord and King over all things to declare the true gospel about the true Savior of the world—the one who unites all in His name, graciously gives true peace, and bestows immeasurable worth to those who belong to Him—that's why Paul's in jail. And that's the irony. One who is no longer captive to the tyrannical dominion of sin and evil is now imprisoned in a tyrannical Empire that remains captive in the dominion of sin and evil.

And Paul's imprisoned in that Empire because he dared to speak of the One who has overcome the world, defeated darkness, and who can truly set people free—without whom the sentence in the dominion of darkness is eternal and inescapable. But here's what we must see: being held as temporary prisoner in a man-made prison within a mere earthly Empire does not stop Paul from seeking ways to fulfill his God-given calling upon his life. And it does not stop him from encouraging fellow-believers who are beginning their new life as God's people to continue praising God for the true freedom that have in Christ Jesus because of His saving, redeeming rescue from the dominion of darkness and into His kingdom of glory.

That raises a question for us, and we're at a point in our history and culture (*again*) where the church needs to honestly consider and provide an answer: how often do we find it easier to complain or be distraught in daily our lives because of our experiences with temporal and this-worldly inconveniences, struggles, or hardships, instead of worshipfully giving thanks to God in all things—especially for the eternal and new-creation peace He provides? A life that joyfully declares: **“No matter what this world—characterized, if not governed by the dominion of darkness—might do or say, I have the unassailable assurance of Christ's freedom, His victory over all things, and the hope of uninterrupted, everlasting communion with Him in His eternal kingdom of peace.”** What difference would it make to those around us if we truly lived in ways that showed the life-changing difference Christ has made within us? A difference characterized by His grace, forgiveness, and redemption?

While we think on that, let's consider the second key thing about this text. Notice that along with his commitment to serving in God's kingdom at all times, Paul reveals his willingness to enter into and live out that service with the knowledge that it involves suffering. In fact, he says his suffering is cause for rejoicing—not because he's some twisted individual who enjoys painful experiences, but because he knows what the enduring of suffering means as it relates to the call of the gospel. A meaning Paul provides when he says: in my sufferings, **“I fill up in my physical body—for the sake of His body, the church—what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ”** (Col 1.24). And here's where things can be (*and have been*) misunderstood.

While most English translations use “suffering” in both places in this verse, that misses what Paul does—or the subtle, yet specific change he makes. When speaking of his own **“sufferings,”** Paul uses the general term **πάθημα** (*pathēma*), which often refers to experiencing calamities, misfortunes, or occurrences in life that are not good. A term that could be summarized by an old, popular bumper-sticker. But when Paul speaks about **“the sufferings of Christ,”** he uses the more descriptive term, **θλίψις** (*thlipsis*), usually rendered as **“affliction,” “oppression,” “persecution,”** and the commonly known but poorly understood: **“tribulation.”**

And as the NT clearly shows, **θλίψις** is a present reality for all who belong to and serve in God's kingdom-on-earth and it will remain so until the return of Christ. An ongoing reality that

Christ Himself said will be the case for true disciples—i.e., they, like Christ, will experience calamities or misfortunes through affliction, oppression, persecution, and tribulation because of their allegiance to Christ and the gospel. They will be rejected, hated, not tolerated, and ill-treated because they belong to Christ and not the world. Now, here’s why it’s important for understanding v.24, not to mention where he will go next.

Contrary to what some have assumed (*and even taught within the church*), when Paul says his own sufferings “fill up...what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ,” he is not saying: “Christ’s redemption on the cross only covers so much of the need (or cost) for forgiveness, and it’s now up to me (or some other saintly person on my behalf) to cover the rest through personal efforts and suffering.” Not only is **θλίψις** never used for the cross or Christ’s redeeming work, but also that entire line of thought is both an extremely low-view of Christ (*and the fullness of His atoning work*) and a contradiction of God’s own revelation—both written and incarnate. Instead, and based on the specific terms, “fill up” (**ἀνταναπληρόω** [*antanaplēroō*])<sup>1</sup> and “lacking” (**ὑστέρημα** [*husterēma*]), Paul is declaring that—as both an image-bearer and representative of Christ—his own life and ministry will be filled with sharing in the calamities or misfortunes through affliction, oppression, persecution, and tribulation because of his allegiance to Christ and the gospel.

And that knowledge of sharing in suffering for Christ and the gospel is what causes Paul to rejoice always. Not because he’s twisted in his mind, or seeking to secure a place in heaven through his own good works or personal efforts, but because he knows the suffering he experiences in this life—at the hands of those who belong to the world—proves he’s faithfully serving Christ alone by declaring the gospel’s message of true freedom in God’s eternal kingdom. As Jesus said: “If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. However, because you do not belong to the world, but I chose you out of the world, for this reason the world hates you” (Jn 15.19). When we faithfully stand for Christ, we necessarily stand apart from the world. And when we faithfully proclaim the true gospel about the true Christ, we openly denounce any and every false gospel about any and every false Christ.

And how can we know we’re faithfully standing and proclaiming the truth? Simple: if the unbelieving and sinful world around us applauds the gospel we preach because it presents a Christ who affirms their unbelief and sin, then we’re preaching the wrong gospel about the wrong Christ. And the wrongness about both is never absolved by appealing to emotion- or feelings-based claims that God sees and loves you exactly as you are, so there is no need to change anything but instead there is cause for celebration in who you truly are. Such an appeal is not only an extremely low-view of God but also a flat contradiction of His revealed truth—both written and incarnate.

Scripture says: God does see us as we truly are. But Scripture also says what we truly are: we are God’s enemies because of our sinful rebellion and faithlessness, both of which He hates (*with a righteous and just hatred*) and both imprison and separate us from Him. Our true selves are unfit, unqualified, and unworthy to be in His presence. And unless there’s some radical change or remedy, that separation will remain forever. And Scripture declares: that

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<sup>1</sup> This is an exceptionally rare word in Greek literature—only appearing once in the NT, and c.6 times in other ancient texts, with only one of those being a Christian writing. The term carries the idea of establishing a balance between otherwise separate objects or ideas. In Demosthenes, it’s used when explaining how ships are to be manned: “always attaching to the wealthiest man those who the poorest, to keep the balance [**ἀνταναπληροῦντας**]” (*On the Navy*, 17).

change or remedy is not something we could ever do. However, that's where the joyful news of the true gospel is revealed. It is because of God's perfect and gracious love for us that He does not want us to remain in faithless, sinful rebellion which makes us imprisoned, separated enemies. (*His true love would not be true or love if He left us where we were*). His perfect, gracious, and self-sacrificing love for us rescues us from who and where we were and gives us a new identity and a new home to be lived faithfully with Him for eternity.

But as Paul said in Rom 1 and Eph 4: it's because of the hardness of hearts and darkness of minds that those who love the world cannot see and know the life-changing blessing of the true gospel about the truth Christ. They prefer their captivity to their own self-determined identity, will, desires, pleasures, and good-life over the God-designed freedom given to those whose identity and life are defined by the One who is truly good. They prefer to exchange the truth for the lie. The lie that they are the measure of all things—the ones who can determine what is real and what is not, what is good and what is not<sup>2</sup>—thus allowing them to become gods and lords over their own lives. The same alluring and enticing sale-pitch Satan used in the Garden of Eden when he promised Adam and Eve they could become like God. And it's the same lie that continues to be proclaimed as truth in the world and even the church today.

However, despite the refusal to see and have God's new life in Christ, those who belong to Christ—those set free—must remain faithful to the commission to go out into the world “[and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything \[Christ\] commanded](#)” (Mt 28.19–20a). Not just when it's convenient, problem-free, and the result is a given. But always, and especially when it's hard and not-welcomed. More to the point: suffering, affliction, rejection, and attempts at silencing are never reason to quit Christ, His commission, and the life of true discipleship. They are instead expected experiences of those who remain faithful to Christ and to serving His kingdom-on-earth. They are the reminders that what we faithfully do for Christ is a reflection of what He truly and faithfully did for us.

And all of this continues to serve as a wake-up for the church. Are we prepared to serve in God's kingdom, knowing full-well that doing so will bring with it experiences of suffering, ridicule, shame, persecution, canceling, or something worse? Is the reality of Christ's kingdom-on-earth and our adoption into God's eternal household more valuable than the temporal comforts, acceptance, and self-gratifying pleasures promised by a fallen, broken, and sinful world? And are we ready to stand firm and uncompromisingly declare the only truth there is about who God is and all that He has done for us in Christ? These are not questions reserved only for leaders in the church—as though the responsibility rests solely on their shoulders. Instead, they are questions for the whole church, because the call the make disciples of all nations was given to the disciples—i.e., all who belong to Christ.

And the more we read through Paul's letter to the Colossians, we see the relevance of such questions for them and Paul's own commitment to the answers he's already given to those kinds of questions. Thus, Paul is modeling for the Colossians what he desires them to do—not for him; but for Christ, His calling, and for the good of the church. And this especially the case for being steadfast and uncompromising. Look at what Paul says next: “[I became a](#)

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<sup>2</sup> An ever-so-slight reworking of what Protagoras said in the 5th century BC—see Plato, *Theaetetus*, 152a.

servant of the church according to the stewardship from God<sup>3</sup>—given to me for you—in order to complete the word of God, that is, the mystery that has been kept hidden from ages and generations, but has now been revealed to His saints” (Col 1.25–26).

Now, the term for “mystery” is **μυστήριον** (*mustērion*), which elsewhere in Scripture (*in both Testaments*) describes God’s otherwise “hidden” knowledge not about some “plan-b” as it relates to salvation, an entirely distinct people, and the establishment of His kingdoms.<sup>4</sup> Instead, the “mystery” involves what God only knows concerning the climax of salvation—i.e., the true and complete fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham.<sup>5</sup> The promise of establishing him as the father of a chosen nation, and that through him (*and Israel*) God would bless of all nations (*i.e., Gentiles*). The promise or plan was always known, but the way in which it would be fulfilled (*not to mention the full extent of what it means, especially as it relates to the Israel-Gentile relationship*); that was the mystery. And because it was a mystery, there was plenty of speculation and expectation based on that. Specifically, the Gentiles would be made subservient to Israel, who would reign as the perfect and rightful nation of all nations.

Just as man-made traditions are not God’s revealed, inspired word, the same is true for personal opinions and speculations—especially when they conflict with God’s revelation of the mystery concerning His design for salvation. Paul says in Gal 4: “**when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption of sons**” (4.4–5, NASB). At the very least, this means that God coming to this world as the incarnate Son was for the purpose of fulfilling what the Law requires for true and complete atonement of sins, and fulfilling the promise given to Abraham that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens. But notice these descendants are not exclusively blood-related. (As Paul says: “**not all those who are descended from Israel are Israel, nor are all of Abraham’s descendants [his] children**” [Rom 9.6b–7a]). There is an adoption of others into that Abrahamic blood-line.

So, who are the others? If we know the consistent truth of Scripture, we’re not surprised. But if we’re unfamiliar with the consistent message, Paul in Eph 2 provides the needed help: before the knowledge of the saving work of Christ, “**you [Gentiles] were at that time without**

<sup>3</sup> The phrase here is, **τὴν οἰκονομίαν τοῦ θεοῦ** (*tēn oikonomian tou theou*), which refers to the management of God’s household-kingdom-on-earth, according to His design.

<sup>4</sup> The idea of a “plan-b” relating to God’s scheme of salvation, the emergence of an entirely distinct people with whom God will deal graciously in Christ, and the establishment of His kingdoms (one for Israel, and another for the church) is **not** the revealed testimony of Scripture. Instead, it is the result of the considerably later method of reading Scripture known as Dispensationalism.

<sup>5</sup> Do not miss the specific claim of Paul: his “stewardship”—given to him by God for the church—is **πληρῶσαι τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ** (*plērōsai ton logon tou theou*), with **πληρῶω** (*plērōō*) meaning “complete” or (in most cases in the NT) “fulfill.” This is not term to use if one were arguing for something new or something being introduced because the original plan went sideways—which is the belief of the Classic and Revised forms of Dispensationalism. Instead, this is the term to use if one wanted to show not just continuity with what’s happening but also singularity of purpose. And that’s what Paul is doing here in Col 1.25–26. And what is Paul saying is being completed or fulfilled? It’s found in vv.26–27: “**the mystery** that has been kept hidden from ages and from generations” (**τὸ μυστήριον τὸ ἀποκεκρυμμένον ἀπὸ τῶν αἰώνων καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν γενεῶν** [*to mustērion to apokekrummenon apo tōn kai apo tōn geneōn*]). Implication: the plan was already made; it just hadn’t been known to anyone other than God. However, as Paul says: “**but now it has been revealed to His saints**” (**νῦν δὲ ἐφανερώθη τοῖς ἁγίοις αὐτοῦ** [*nun de ephanerōthē tois hagiois autou*])—the existing, unknown is made known (by God’s decision and doing) to those who belong to Him. But what is the revealed mystery and who’s included in that belonging to God? Paul answers: the existing plan—before unknown but now revealed—is that “God intended to make to them the glorious riches of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you—the hope of glory” (**οἷς ἠθέλησεν ὁ θεὸς γνωρίσαι τί τὸ πλοῦτος τῆς δόξης τοῦ μυστηρίου τούτου ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, ὅς ἐστιν Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν, ἡ ἐλπίς τῆς δόξης** [*hois ethelēsen ho theos gnōrisai ti to ploutos tēs doxēs tou mustēriou toutou en tois ethnesin, hos estin Christos en humin, hē elpis tēs doxēs*]).

the Messiah, alienated from the citizenship of Israel and strangers to the covenant promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ you [*Gentiles*] who used to be far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He is our peace, the one who made both groups into one and who destroyed the middle wall of partition” (Eph 2.12–14). Don’t miss the stress on the freedom bought with the blood of Christ and the work of reconciliation for those who now belong to Christ because of their faith in Him alone as the true Savior, Redeemer, Lord, and King.

A work of reconciliation that does not prioritize one race of people over another. Rather, it is a gracious blessing made available to all people (*Israel and Gentiles*), so that all who submit to Christ’s lordship and saving-redemption might be united as one new people—equal in identity, nature, and status before God, and thus co-citizens of His eternal kingdom and co-heirs of His promises. This is what Paul wants all to understand, as he goes on to say in Eph 3: this unifying, peace-making, and blessing-giving work of God is “the mystery of Christ (which was not disclosed to people in former generations as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit), namely, that through the gospel the Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph 3.4–6). This is not some “plan-b” on God’s part. This is the fulfillment of His original, intended design for the world.

And because this is the fulfilled promise of God’s saving-redemption, in the way He decided before creation, not to mention the extent of its intended blessing; all human opinions and speculations must give way to God’s revealed truth—both written and especially incarnate. The truth that says: for those who belong to God in Christ—those who have been redeemed, remade, and restored—there is true unity and peace. There is nothing that divides or defines us. Or as Paul says in Gal 3: “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female—for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3.27–29). We are brothers and sisters in Christ. We’re family.

And all of this stands behind what Paul declares to the Colossian believers. Look at what he says in rest of Col 1, beginning again with v.25: “I became a servant of the church according to the stewardship from God—given to me for you—in order to complete the word of God, that is, the mystery that has been kept hidden from ages and generations, but has now been revealed to His saints. God wanted to make known to them the glorious riches of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim Him by instructing and teaching all people with all wisdom so that we may present every person mature in Christ. Toward this goal I also labor, struggling according to His power that powerfully works in me”” (Col 1.25–27).

First of all: don’t miss Paul’s recognition of his complete dependence upon God to enable him to do what he does for the sake of the kingdom. And that is something we need to recognize about ourselves. None of what we do for God is about us, and all of what we do for His kingdom could not be done apart from His power. But there’s something else about this text. Let’s avoid the temptation of reading this as Paul merely waxing on theological ideas to make people feel warm and fuzzy inside. Or only offering something that’s meant to be kept in the abstract or only in one’s mind. Instead, Paul joyfully gives a theological declaration of a divine,

liberating work accomplished in the world that has radically changed everything about who we are and how we live. And all of it being revealed in Christ and sustained in the life of believers through the ongoing teaching of gospel-truth. When taken together, this illustrates what it means to be firmly established in one's faith and faithful allegiance to Christ alone.

Or we could say: it's the distinction Jesus makes between the seed that falls on insufficient grounds and the seed that falls on good soil. The seed on the path, which has no root system, is the person who has no understanding of the gospel, and so it's easily snatched away. The seed on the rocky ground gains some footing, but nothing deep and sustaining, which means: "when trouble or persecution comes because of the word, immediately he falls away" (Mt 13.21). He or she quits because of experiences with calamities or misfortunes through affliction, oppression, persecution, and tribulation because of a claimed allegiance to the gospel. The seed among the thorns "is the person who hears the word, but worldly cares and the seductiveness of wealth choke the word, so it produces nothing" (Mt 13.22). It is only the seed in the good soil that grows and produces fruit in accordance with God's design.

Or to use the imagery that sets us up for where we need to go next: it's the distinction Christ makes between the one who builds his house on a foundation of sand versus the one who builds on the foundation of stone (*and just for kicks: the term for stone here is, πέτρα, which can mean either bedrock or even a cliff*). The one who builds on the sand is the one who rejects Christ and His teaching, and because of that he (*or she*) will easily be defeated by the storms (*or tribulations*) of life (Mt 7.26–27). However, the one who builds on the rock is the one who accepts Christ and His teaching, and because of that he (*or she*) will not be defeated by the storms (*or tribulations*) of life (Mt 7.24–25). Thus, a decision must be made: will our lives be established on Him and His truth, or will they be established on the self and personal truth? Only one of the two ways results in salvation, and only one of the two ways is faithful to and consistent with Christ's expectation for those who truly belong to Him.

### c. No Compromise on Truth

There can be no have-it-both-ways. There can be no "I did it my way." And there can be no compromise on truth. And that leads us to the final portion of our text for this morning, which also sets us up for next week. This is the point where Paul explains the reason for writing to the Colossians as well as how what he's said thus far has real-life relevance or application. Look at how he begins: "For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for those who have not met me face to face. My goal is that their hearts, having been knit together in love, may be encouraged, and that they may have all the riches that assurance brings in their understanding of the knowledge of the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2.1–3).

What Paul says here equally applies to us. Notice the emphasis on relational unity in Christ—the household of God's redeemed people. For those who belong to Christ, we are brothers and sisters. We're family. And family takes care of each other. Thus, notice the stress on encouraging one another (*i.e., building each other up in Christ, which is a Bible-way of saying: truly invest in the lives of fellow believers*), and being assured of God's eternal blessing upon us. This should easily remind us of the two prayers at the start of the letter. But especially do not miss the call to be rooted in the "understanding of the knowledge of the mystery of God, namely Christ" (Col 2.2—emphasis added)—meaning: Christ and His saving work (*together*) is the mystery now revealed. Neither is merely a part of the revelation, nor is He simply a friendly



announcer of it. Christ is the revelation, and He is the One who fulfills it. Knowledge of that true Christ of the true gospel is what's foundational for initial belief and ongoing faithfulness.

And all of that means: our faith in who Christ is, all that He has done, and the teaching He's left for us to follow (*in fact: commanded us to obey*); that faith is rooted not in wishful thinking, emotional highs, mystical delusions, or archaic notions that belong to the pre-scientific, pre-Rationalism, and pre-Enlightenment age. Instead, faith is necessarily rooted in God's revealed truth—both written and incarnate. Thus, our faith must be anchored to the One who is the true measure of all things, the true definer of what is real and what is not, what is good and what is not, what is truth and what is falsehood and lies, what is holy and what is sinful. And if our faith is anchored to God alone and is to be defined by His perfect truth and knowledge, then our faith must be an informed and understood faith. One that comes from a commitment to abide with Christ and to know Him deeply.

A commitment that cannot be fulfilled or sustained with only a quick prayer before a meal, only a 5-minute devotional every now and then, only an hour-a-week Sunday worship, getting decked-out on special holidays, or taking a religion class at College—mainly because it seemed like a good idea, or because we want to show others we're trying to do better (*but knowing full-well: that class will be the extent of the effort*). Look at like this: if any marriage counselor said that level of commitment and togetherness is the key for a healthy, growing, and meaningful marriage; we would think that counselor needs to seek serious counseling. Or let's be more direct: if we saw any marriage that was defined by that level of commitment and togetherness, would we really be surprised when the whole thing falls apart? A falling apart easily achieved because there was no real foundation. Nothing to secure the "house" from the storms of disagreement, conflict, or external temptations.

Now, here's the hard-hitting part: why do we often treat Christianity differently? Where the extreme low-levels of commitment and the lip-service claims of love and devotion are upheld as the height of spirituality and the paragon of an authentic relationship with God. (*Spoiler alert: Scripture reveals that God never accepts that facade of a relationship—one portrayed with the imagery of a marriage, and the people's faithlessness described as infidelity*). Or to be more direct once again: when someone has low-levels of commitment and togetherness, and is only interested in doing the bare minimum when it comes to having a faith in God; why are we often surprised when that relationship with God falls apart? A falling apart easily achieved because there was no real, meaningful foundation. Nothing to secure the "house" from the world's storms of criticism, ridicule, conflicting opinions or worldviews, deceptions, lies, false teachings, or external temptations.

But here's the thing: we can't really be surprised by this, because Jesus said this is what will happen when one rejects who He is, His work, His will, and His teaching and then proceeds to build on the foundation of self-given identity, self-interest, self-effort, and personal truth. That is not a healthy, growing, and meaningful commitment to abiding with Christ and knowing Him deeply, nor is that a picture of faithfulness to the true Christ of the true gospel. But when there is faithfulness to the true Christ of the true gospel, there will be a meaningful commitment to abiding with Christ and knowing Him deeply, which will be built, upheld, and sustained on the foundation of His identity, His will, His redemptive-work, and His absolute truth. Truth that perfectly reveals who He truly is and what He's done, as well as who we are

now and how we are to live because of Him. A faith-filled knowledge that will enable to stand secure in the face of life's storms as well as to recognize threats against the faith.

Which is exactly where Paul goes next, which at first seems like a bit of A.D.D., but is better seen as another theological “sandwich.” In the “meat section” of vv.5–7, Paul speaks a word of encouragement along with a summons for ongoing faithfulness: “For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your morale and the firmness<sup>6</sup> of your faith in Christ. Therefore, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in Him, rooted and built up in Him and firm<sup>7</sup> in your faith just as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness” (Col 2.5–7). Again, notice the necessary call for faith being firmly established on the truth of God's revelation—both written and incarnate—and how that truth alone is what defines the faithful new-creation life in Christ. A life of true freedom because of His saving redemption.

Then comes the reason for what Paul needs to do next—something that he does with the authority of a God-appointed apostle of Jesus Christ but also from the heart of a pastor who cares deeply for the church. He calls for them to be resolute and not compromise on the truth of who Christ is and all that He's done. Look with me at vv. 4 and 8, the “bread section,” which contain a rather strong warning: “I say this so that no one will deceive you through arguments that sound reasonable.... Be careful not to allow anyone to captivate you through an empty, deceitful philosophy that is according to human traditions and the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ” (Col 2.4, 8). Deception via reasonable-sounding arguments has been the strategy of the dominion of darkness since the Garden of Eden, and Satan will ride that pony until Christ returns. And as seen in the Colossian letter (*and others in the NT*), the deceptive, reasonable-sounding arguments address the true identity of Christ and the true extent of His redeeming work.

Claims that rob Christ of His full divinity and reduce Him to just another prophet, moral teacher, social reformer, or even the champion of inclusion, affirmation, and tolerance who doesn't require repentance or speak judgement against anyone. Or they rob Christ of His full humanity and uphold Him as the perfect spiritual being who would not dare taint or spoil His perfection by taking on human form. Thus, He only appears to be human on earth, and does so for the sake of revealing God's plan and inspiring belief. Or they devalue the cross as the means by which God provides complete atonement, forgiveness, redemption for sin and secures release from the dominion of darkness to bring us into His kingdom of eternal glory.

A devaluing that leads to claims like: Christ's sacrifice for sins only pays so much of our debt to God, so we must do all that we can in this life to cover the rest—through our good works

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<sup>6</sup> See the next footnote.

<sup>7</sup> Again, Paul makes a subtle shift in the language that's easily missed in translation. In v.5, he speaks of the “firmness” of the Colossians' faith, using the term **στερέωμα** (*stereōma*). While it's only found here in the entire NT, elsewhere in Greek literature (including the Septuagint—i.e., the Greek translation of the OT) it refers to the overall, ordered/designed structure of something or even the sky/heavens above that contain the earth/creation within it. In philosophical and/or moral contexts, it refers to a state-of-being or condition characterized by an attribute—in this case, “faith in Christ.” Thus, Paul is rejoicing because that overall “structure” of faithfulness to Christ is what surrounds the life the Colossian believers have because of Him—the Creator of all things. Then in v.7, Paul speaks of being “rooted and built up in Him and firm” in faith, using the term **βεβαίω** (*bebaioō*). This is a more common term than **στερέωμα** (*stereōma*), and its focus deals with something as confirmed or established beyond doubt. When it's applied to individuals, it carried the meaning of making him/her secured, established, or fortified in commitment—or in this case, “faith.” Thus, with the switch in terms but employing both for his point, Paul is calling on the Colossians believers not only to live in the “world” of faith in Christ but also for that same faith to be that which defines—or secures—who they are as a part of that “world.”

and deeds of piety before we can obtain the fulness of God’s grace. (*And if we fail to do so in this life, maybe someone will strive for us on our behalf*). Or claims that assert: because Christ’s sacrifice for sins is so complete, because He’s so loving, gracious, and forgiving, and because we know that our “good” souls are secure and will one day be released from being bound to this “evil” body; it doesn’t matter if we continue to engage in sinful habits or lifestyles. They don’t matter because we know Christ will overlook and forgive those things, and we know those things only affect the flesh and not the soul.

We could easily continue with more claims like these, but here’s the point: each one was found in the early days of the church, each one can be found throughout the history of the church, and each one continues to be found in the church today. And in all of these times, they are offered as the truth, what God really means, how God wants us to see Himself and ourselves, and why can now live freely—as we see fit—in this newly offered reality. And in all of these times, these claims are readily accepted as truth because the arguments used to promote them “sound reasonable.” Their superficial appeal is what makes them worthy of acceptance, which is easily given by those who don’t know God’s truth rightly and who fail to discern that behind the mask of reasonableness is the face of wicked, deceptive foolishness. They are the ones, as Paul says, who are easily “captivated” by personal, or human-centered truth (*based on man-made traditions or ideas about piety, holiness, and salvation*).

In fact, the term for “captivate” (συλλαγωγέω [*sulagōgeō*]) exposes the method and purpose of what the false teachers are doing. While the meaning here in Col 2.8 refers to being led astray from the truth; this term, which is exceptionally rare in Greek literature, gives the picture of something or someone being carried off as a spoil of war—especially people being taken captive as slaves because they’ve been overpowered and defeated. This reveals the seriousness of what Paul says to the Colossians—or why he gives such a strong warning, which is based on the necessity “to remain in the faith, established and firm, without shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard” (Col 1.23a). They cannot—and neither can we—compromise on God’s truth by exchanging it for the lies cunningly delivered from the dominion of darkness. A dominion not interested in giving freedom but enslavement—yet, sold under the alluring sales-pitch that says, “here you can freely be your true self.” A true self that Scripture says makes one an enemy of God.

But for those of us who do know God’s true freedom in Christ (*because of His perfect, complete, and once-for-all saving redemption—which covers the entire debt*), who know His true Word rightly, and who are able to discern falsehoods spoken in the name of Christ; we are the ones who will not be led astray, captivated, and delivered (*again*) into a life of slavery and separation from God. We are the ones who know that nothing we could ever do, and no one else in heaven or on earth could ever do on our behalf, will be sufficient to make us worthy before the holy and righteous God. And we are certainly the ones who know that any false gospel about a false Christ that says otherwise will never result in forgiveness, salvation, redemption, restoration, and eternal life with God. And a vital way for all of that knowledge to sustain faithful allegiance to Christ alone is for it to be established (*or built*) upon the true Christ of the true gospel. Thus, Paul says in vv.9–15:

“For in Him all the fullness of deity lives in bodily form, and you have been filled in Him, who is the head over every ruler and authority. In Him you also were circumcised—not, however, with a circumcision performed by human hands, but by the removal of the fleshly

body, that is, through the circumcision done by Christ. Having been buried with Him in baptism, you also have been raised with Him through your faith in the power of God who raised Him from the dead. And even though you were dead in your transgressions and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, He nevertheless made you alive with Him, having forgiven all your transgressions. He has destroyed what was against us, a certificate of indebtedness expressed in decrees opposed to us. He has taken it away by nailing it to the cross. Disarming the rulers and authorities, He has made a public disgrace of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”

Christ has exposed all other claims to supremacy over life and all other (*so-called*) roads to salvation as dethroned and dead-ends. There is only One King over all of life and only one Way to having it eternally, and that is our victorious redeeming-Savior, Jesus Christ: the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. It is only through Him that we have the assurance of rescue from enslavement to the dominion of darkness. And it is in Him alone that we have the secured hope of everlasting freedom in His glorious kingdom.