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By the Book™ A Chapter by
Chapter Bible Study Series
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Let's Begin

Placing Jesus Christ in first place remains the core of the Christian faith. No person or thing can usurp the rightful place Jesus Christ possesses as Lord of the cosmos. In the chapter before us, Paul makes his opening statement, insisting upon the supremacy of Jesus Christ. He then unfolds four popular spiritual competitors, which relentlessly attempt to overthrow the Lordship of Christ.

As a masterful surgeon, Paul slices open each one to expose the counterfeit plan of salvation in every attempt to usurp God's revealed plan in the Bible. As we begin our study of Colossians 2, let's follow the outline below:

- I. Convincing Proofs of a Supreme Savior (vv. 1-7)**
- II. Counterfeit Plans for a Spurious Salvation (vv. 8-23)**

I. Convincing Proofs of a Supreme Savior (vv. 1-7)

These verses transition between the first and second emphasis of Colossians. Foremost on Paul's mind is the supremacy of Christ. Nevertheless, he is not shy about exposing the deficiencies of cults, as the next section of Scripture will show.

Paul opens his proof for the supremacy of Jesus with a *prayer*, "For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh; That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ; In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. And this I say, lest any man should beguile you with enticing words. For though I be absent in the flesh, yet am I with you in the spirit, joying and beholding your order, and the stedfastness of your faith in Christ" (vv. 1-5).

For Paul, his prayer was intense, rigorous, and focused. He describes his prayer as a "great conflict" within. Implied in this word is agony similar to the agony an athlete feels as he trains for world-class competition. Is prayer ever a spiritual striving in our lives? Too often I fear it is not the case.

What was the content of the Apostle's agony? Paul first was concerned with *appropriate truth* (vv. 1-3). He looked for both his and their "hearts" to be "comforted" as a result. Truth has a way of filling our hearts with spiritual solidity, offering a deep satisfaction to one's life with God. The description Paul gives for encouragement is to be "knit together in love" coupled with a "full assurance of understanding." Love is the thread that holds the body of Christ together. Further, Paul wrestled with God for a wealthy conviction of insight that only God can give. He sought a holy discernment to separate truth from error, a discernment that only Holy Scripture illuminated by the Holy Spirit could possibly bear.

Indeed no greater deterrent to Satan's substitutes could be found than in this simple formula: *Holy Scripture illuminated by God's Holy Spirit*. Only in Scripture is recorded the truth of Christ "In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge..." Our Lord Jesus is God's Divine Deposit. All we need is in Him. We never have all the answers, but we always know where answers are to be found—in Christ.

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Paul's second concern was to *avoid error* (vv. 4-5). Specifically, he did not want to lead the Colossians into error; that is, to "beguile" them through "enticing words." To be "beguiled" is to be deluded. In other words, it is to be deceived through "enticing" verbiage. One need only think of the persuasive rhetoric of high-dollar sales people or, perhaps more applicable here, the smooth words of a clever defense attorney who is able to tilt a jury's decision one way or another. Against such deceit the church is to stand strong, to be "stedfast" and not forfeit the truth.

Reflection Connection

If the Holy Spirit illumines the Holy Scripture, why are there so many interpretations of Scripture? Perhaps this would be a good opportunity for the Pastor to lead in a valuable discussion.

So, the first way Paul proves the supremacy of Jesus is with the content of his *prayer*. Second, Paul offers a *pattern* to prove the supremacy of Jesus. And, the pattern unfolds in a series of pictures Paul offers. He writes, "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving" (vv. 6-7). The Apostle now gets practical. He shows how the Christian life is presented in the New Testament (v. 6).

The Christian life has a definitive *beginning*. Paul spoke plainly of Christ being "received." So did the Apostle John (John 1:12). Hence, the Christian life begins not with receiving truth or even receiving doctrine. Instead it begins with receiving a person— Jesus Christ. Note also that one is to receive Jesus Christ *as Lord*. Becoming a Christian is not gaining a life insurance policy. Rather when one begins the Christian life, one surrenders to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

In addition, the beginning of the Christian life is supplemented by the Christian life *continuing*. In other words, we are to "walk ye in him." We live daily in Him the same way we received Him—*by faith*.

To display the pattern Paul explains, he uses a series of colorful pictures to illustrate the Christian life. For example, the Christian life is like a *planted tree*. Thus, we are "rooted and grounded" in Him. As our roots grow deeper into life's soil, we draw up spiritual nourishment from Him and through Him.

Also, the Apostle likens the Christian life to a *constructed building*. He exhorts us to be "built up" in Him. Christ is the structure which forms our life (cp. Rom. 8:29). A third picture Paul uses is the *flooding river*. We are to "abound" in "thanksgiving." The term "abound" implies an abundant overflow. Thanksgiving is to flood out of the banks of our life.

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II. Counterfeit Plans for a Spurious Salvation (vv. 8-23)

Now that Paul has begun his thoughts with the supremacy of Christ, he quickly moves on to engaging four counterfeit plans which lead only to spurious salvation.

The first counterfeit plan is intellectualism. Though Paul touched on this earlier, he now makes it his focus. He writes, “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power” (vv. 8-10).

Paul speaks of the futility of *pagan philosophy* (v. 8). Pagan philosophy has no room for God, the Bible, nor the cross of Christ. It regards all of the above as just sheer foolishness. Or, as Paul dubs it, “vain deceit.” The term “vain” means empty and void of all truth. Hence, “vain” deceit confuses the mind. It may be high-sounding, but “vain” deceit is high-sounding nonsense. Philosophy also can capture the heart. Paul’s warning is, it can “spoil” us. The term translated “spoil” was used in the military for the booty of war being carried off. In other words, Paul is suggesting that philosophy can carry us off, capturing our minds and make us slaves to a false system of truth.

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In addition, the false philosophies of the day are nothing more than human “traditions” substituted for God’s Word. There are good traditions (2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6) and bad traditions (Mark 7:8). Paul obviously was placing the human traditions here in with the unhealthy traditions to which Jesus referred. Traditions are reduced to “doctrines of demons” if any such tradition usurps the Word of God.

Even so, Paul does not discount philosophy altogether. In fact, he speaks of the *vitality of Christian philosophy* (vv. 9-10). In Christian philosophy, Christ gets pre-eminence in all things (cp. 1 Cor. 1:24, 30). The fullness of the Savior is foremost, “For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (v. 9). In short, Paul is affirming Jesus Christ as the very essence of God Himself. Christ was, is and ever will be God. No stronger statement on the deity of Christ is found in the New Testament. And, in doing so, Paul never loses sight of either His humanity (v. 11) or His deity. He is the “head of all principality and power,” and therefore we are complete in Him (v. 10).

The second counterfeit plan is ritualism (vv. 11-17). In and of itself, religious maxims or religious rituals are fine as ceremonial procedures. After all, God is not a God of confusion but order, and many times rituals and maxims tend to promote order. However, when ritual is viewed as meritorious work,



earning God's favor—perhaps even deserving God's favor—ritual has become a counterfeit plan which can only lead to spurious salvation.

In explaining the religious maxims, Paul uses twin sets of contrasts. First he contrasts *shadows* with *ritual* (vv. 11-12, 16). Paul makes a summary statement, "Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body *is* of Christ" (v. 17).

No outward ceremony can save a human being from God's judgment. Whether circumcision of the Jews under the Old Testament or baptism of Christians under the New Testament (vv. 11-12), religious ritual cannot save us from our sin. Incidentally, both Jewish circumcision and Christian baptism were God-given,

Paul contrasts substance with reality.

God commanded. Nevertheless neither ritual possessed the power to forgive sin or secure one for heaven, nor, as Paul makes clear, does "meat or drink" or keeping "new moons and Sabbaths." This serves as God's good news to sinners.

Second, Paul contrasts *substance* with *reality*. He writes, "And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it" (vv. 13-15).

According to the Apostle, Christ took the *grief* of our sin (v. 13). We who were dead are now alive and forgiven. Christ was the one sacrifice forever. Moreover, Christ took the *guilt* of our sin. Paul clearly states the guilt is "blotted out." The handwriting of our sin is smudged, marked over, and now remains unreadable. Jesus took it away. Finally, He took the *grip* of our sin; or, as Paul says, our sin has been "spoiled" (v. 15). The "principalities" made up of Satan and his hosts no longer have a grip on us. Instead Jesus has us in His hand, and His grip is solid (cp. John 10:28).

The third counterfeit plan is mysticism. The Medieval church had a strong tendency toward mysticism. In fact, people were fascinated with mysticism even in Paul's day. He writes, "Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he hath not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, And not holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God" (vv. 18-19).

Why are people fascinated by the mystical maze? Perhaps it is partly because of the unknown and partly because of the focus on the intensely spiritual. In Paul's understanding, he offers two approaches to mysticism. On the one hand there is the human experiential side and on the other is the Divine revelation side. We may be sure that no amount of human experience possesses the power to save a human soul. All such pursuits end in spiritual futility.

In addition, according to Paul, mysticism is characterized by three powerful components. First, a *pious humility* is present, what Paul dubs "voluntary humility." Note this humility is not Biblical humility. Instead it is human generated and consequently remains a subtle form of pride. Sometimes fasting takes on an aura of spirituality to create a sense of authenticity to this false humility.



Reflection Connection

Do you think mysticism is a particular problem the church faces today? Explain.

Next, mysticism has a *perilous reality*. In other words, it worships mystical beings, “angels” if you will (v. 18), while it “intrudes” into areas which call for a secret initiation. Secrecy and mysticism go hand in hand. Also any time there is an unhealthy focus on angelic beings, one may be sure Biblical Christianity is being abandoned. Finally, it boasts a *pompous mentality*. Or, as the Apostle puts it, it is “puffed up,” which is only a precursor to spiritual, sinful pride. Those who embrace mysticism often come across projecting spiritual snobbery, an attitude which suggests a hard distinction between the “haves” and the “have nots.”

The fourth counterfeit plan is legalism. Perhaps no human redemptive plan is more popular than the attempt to save ourselves because of the good we do, a salvation based on meritorious works. Such a plan is the core of every other religion outside historic Christianity. Only in the religion of Jesus do we find God lovingly reaching down to sinful humanity out of sheer, undeserved grace. Other plans outside Christ somehow universally involve sinful humans reaching up to God by their own initiative, an initiative inevitably leading to an eternal dead-end street.

Paul sums up the moral life counterfeit, “Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (Touch not; taste not; handle not; Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh” (vv. 20-23).

When looking at the moral life, there are two extremes. Polarized on the one side is *license*, the main thrust being complete moral freedom. Based upon the Biblical idea of Christian liberty (cp. Gal. 5:1), this view makes liberty into an excuse for sin. Sometimes proponents of this view are called “libertines” or “libertarians” (not to be confused with the socio-political view known as Libertarianism). On the other side, there is *legalism*, a moral condition, incidentally, which has plagued the church since Paul (cp. Gal. 2:14-21).

Legalism is the way of *outward regulation*. Paul speaks of the “rudiments of the world” and being “subject to ordinances.” Legalism is almost exclusively wed to what can be seen, the tangible. It insists on structured rules to which one is confined rather than moral norms derived from Scripture, illuminated and empowered to perform by the indwelling Holy Spirit. However, Jesus did not deliver us from one dungeon only to imprison us in another (cp. Gal. 3:3; 4:9; 5:1).

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Golden Greek Nugget

Paul insisted the Colossians be on guard lest “any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit...” (v. 8a). The Greek term translated “philosophy” is *philosophia*, and denotes the love and pursuit of wisdom. Surely Paul is counseling neither the Colossians nor us to avoid the pursuit of wisdom *per se*. Instead Paul is warning us to avoid a certain kind of alleged wisdom, a wisdom which focuses “after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ” (v. 8b). Unless Christ is the heart of our pursuit, any possible wisdom we may gain ends up being nonsense.

In addition, Paul may give the best description of legalism when he writes to those who pursue the moral life as a counterfeit plan of salvation, as being subject to the “commandments and doctrines of men.” Legalists inevitably end up making their own moral rules to follow rather than the Word of God. Such a pursuit reveals pride (“show of wisdom”) and focuses on the negative (“touch not”), but lacks the power of God because actions are performed in the “flesh.”

Contrasting legalism with Biblical Christianity, however, we gain a different perception entirely. Christianity is not the way of *outward regulation* but rather, *inward transformation*, what Paul means when he says believers are “dead with Christ” to the “rudiments” of the world and the “commandments and doctrines of men.” Why? Because we are new creatures made in Him (2 Cor. 5:17). We now march to the beat of another drummer. And, though we are “dead with Christ,” we are nonetheless required to live for Christ in continual sanctification now and eventual glorification in eternity.

Wrap Up

Paul's never-ending strategy was to make Jesus Christ preeminent in all things. His preaching, his apologetics, his soul-winning, and his prayer life all bore this out. Does the preeminence of Christ define our life? It should. And, no better time exists to deal with this deficiency right now if Christ is not supreme in our lives. Let's pray about that.

