

Truth for Today

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Paul's Letter to the Colossians: You are complete in Him - Colossians 2:4-23

The Apostle Paul was a good teacher. First, he commends what is commendable. He starts from a point on which there is common agreement. He then uses that as a springboard for further progress. This comes through clearly in the portion we have today in Colossians 2:4-23.

The four propositions

Many years ago, I attended a Bible discussion group on this scripture. The opening statement was this. "The teaching of Colossians 2 hangs upon four prepositions." Quick as a flash, a very earnest Christian gentleman, much used of God in the preaching of the gospel, jumped in. He was always very direct. His eyes twinkled as he said, "Can I learn the teaching of this chapter if I don't know what a preposition is?" I cannot remember the actual answer given. I do remember that he was assured that every Christian is able to learn all that he needs to know, even if he isn't familiar with some of the more technical terms some people use. However, for those who are interested, and are not put off by the words, it is certainly true to say that the teaching of the chapter is crystallised in the use made of four prepositions included in the text.

To get our bearings, Colossians 1 teaches us that primarily, the basis and focal point of Christianity is the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the value to God of the work of the Lord Jesus upon the cross of Calvary.

Basically, Colossians 2 tells us about what is true of the Christian and for the Christian because of its relationship to and association with the Lord Jesus Christ. This teaching can be summarised under four headings taken from the text itself:

1. In Colossians 2:11, "*Ye are circumcised in Him*"
2. In Colossians 2:12, "*We are buried with Him in baptism*"
3. In Colossians 2:17, "*the body is of Christ*"
4. In Colossians 2:19, "*From Him, the Head, all the body by joints and bands, has nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God.*"

Putting it even more succinctly, the teaching is concentrated into what we are:

1. in Him (Colossians 2:11);
2. with Him (Colossians 2:12);
3. of Him (Colossians 2:17); and
4. what we receive from Him (Colossians 2:19).

Hence the reference to the four prepositions.

Jewish ordinances and Grecian philosophy

Why is the teaching concentrated in this way? The Colossian Christians were exposed to a two-pronged attack. Colossians 2:8 says, "*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.*"

First of all, in Colossians 2:16-17, Paul says, "*Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath, which are a shadow of things to come.*" That is, there were those who tried to tell them that Christianity involved keeping to a set of rules, in particular, Jewish ordinances.

Secondly, we read in Colossians 2:18, "*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.*" That is, don't be deceived by Grecian philosophy. What these philosophers said sounded quite reasonable to those brought up under a Greek culture. This seemed to be their line of reasoning.

God is so great, so majestic, so powerful, so infinite in His person, that mere man, well down the scale of created beings, could not possibly know God in person. In between God and man, they said there were various steps and stairs of intermediate beings, greater than man, but less than God. They claimed to be in touch with these intermediate beings, principalities and powers, as the Bible terms them. The most dangerous part of their philosophy was that concerning the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. They recognised that He was much more than an ordinary man. They agreed that He was the greatest Person in the universe apart from God. But that was their great error. It is not sufficient to say that He is almost but not quite God. He is God, in Person, and there is none greater. The marvel is that He Who is really God became a real man. He voluntarily entered into a condition in which it was possible for Him to die. Read Hebrews 2:9.

To put the Epistle to the Colossians into perspective, there are two vital statements in the text.

1. Colossians 1:19 - *"It pleased the Father that in Him should all fullness dwell."* That is, the Lord Jesus is no less glorious in Person having become a man than He was before He became a man, in what we may call abstract deity.
2. Colossians 2:9 - *"in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily."* That is, now He has gone back to heaven as a man, He is no less a Person than He ever was: whether in Deity before He came into the world, or when He lived in the world as a real man. These are tremendous concepts we do well to think about and pray over.

Deeper mysteries?

Another major error pressed upon the Colossian Christians was along these lines. Jesus is a great and wonderful person. Not quite God, but a great person nevertheless. In coming to Him, the Colossians had done well, really well. However, they, the Grecian philosophers, could teach the Christians much more wonderful things and explain to them even more wonderful mysteries, if only the Colossians would accept that there was much more they needed to learn which only these philosophers could teach them.

This is where the Apostle Paul had to step in and put his foot down. "Just a minute," he said. "Hold on. That can't be right." He went right back to the beginning. "You are Christians. You have received Christ, by faith. You certainly have much to learn. But you will only make progress by continuing in the same way you began."

Colossians 2:6 says, *"As you have therefore received the Lord Jesus, so walk in Him."* How had they received Him? As the only One Who could meet their need! At that time, their greatest need was to have their sins forgiven. As the One Who had died for their sins, He was the only One who could do that. And He had, for everyone who trusted Him as Saviour and confessed Him as Lord. That was the greatest need they would ever have, the need of salvation. And He had fully met that need.

Now Paul says, "The One Who met your greatest need is well equipped to meet every other need you will ever have. There is nothing you really need that He cannot supply, if you live in full dependence upon Him. There He is, in heaven, the mighty God, and a real man. He is all-glorious. There is nothing He cannot do. Everything you could ever need is found in Him." *"Ye are complete in Him"*, (Colossians 2:10).

The philosophers said, "We are in touch with great beings, principalities and powers. Come to us. We will teach you." Paul says, "Jesus is the head of all principality and power. He controls them all. Why be over-concerned with lesser beings when you are in touch with the Greatest of all beings?" At best, the principalities and powers are created beings. The Lord Jesus is the Creator and Sustainer of all creation, and every creature in it.

Complete in Him

Having put that into proper perspective, Paul then expounds in more detail what he meant when he said, *"Ye are complete in Him"* (Colossians 2:10) Before we look at the detail, there is a very important factor we must consider. It is one thing to say, *"Ye are complete in Him"* (Colossians 2:10), that, in itself, implies, "You cannot be complete without Him." In other words, if you leave Him out of your life, you can never live a full life. There will always be something lacking. Christ personally is absolutely vital to the life of the committed Christian. 'This is where the four prepositions of Colossians 2 come in, highlighting what we have as Christian believers in virtue of our links, our association with our Lord Jesus Christ.

First of all, then let us look at Colossians 2:11. *"In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands in the putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ."* Circumcision is a clean cut, a complete cutting off. It was a sign given to the people of Israel to confirm to them that God had cut them off

completely from Egypt (see Genesis 17:9-14). Pharaoh no longer had any claim upon them. God had delivered them once and for all from the power of Egypt and Pharaoh. The application is clear. Sin and Satan no longer have any real claim on the Christian. Why? Because, in the sight of God, the Christian has been cut off completely from his sins, and the penalty due because of them, but not in virtue of anything the Christian is in himself or anything he has done for himself.

The cutting off is in virtue of the cutting off of Christ, in death, upon the cross of Calvary. Does scripture say so? Yes, indeed! Remember Psalm 102:24, *"Take me not away [cut me not off] in the midst of my days."* This was the cry prophetically attributed to the Lord as He anticipated the cross. In the garden of Gethsemane, He prayed, *"Father save Me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify Thy Name"* (John 12:27-28). But scripture had already said in Isaiah 53:8, *"He was cut off out of the land of the living."* Then, Daniel 9:26 says, *"Messiah shall be cut off."* So, in God's judgement, all who trust Christ as Saviour have been cut off, severed completely, by God, from all fear of penalty for their sins. Colossians 2:11 could well be translated, "You are cut off from the judgement of God because Christ was cut off in death on your behalf at Calvary." Christ has borne the burden, paid the price, discharged the debt, accepted the punishment on their behalf. Now there is no fear of judgement for those who trust in Christ (see Romans 8:1).

Baptism

Secondly, Colossians 2:12 reads, *"Buried with Him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with Him through faith of the operation of God, Who hath raised Him from the dead."* If circumcision is a complete cutting off, baptism is a going out of sight, as when a body is buried. Baptism identifies us with Christ in His death. It symbolises the fact that, in God's sight, the old life, the life of sin, has been brought to a complete end in the death of Christ. Further, in so far as we are linked with Christ Who is risen from among the dead, we now have a new life to live which glorifies God, and a new power, the power of the Holy Spirit, in which and by which to live it. How graphic the picture is!

Shadow and substance

Thirdly, Colossians 2:14-17 tell us that Jewish ordinances are but *"a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ"* (Colossians 2:17). There is as much difference between Judaism and Christianity as between shadow and substance. There is a well known and well founded expression, 'Coming events cast their shadow before them.' God allows things to happen which give us an idea of things which, in their fullness, God will bring in, or allow to happen, later. Paul says here, "Don't be put off by the shadowy outline which is Judaism. Enjoy the reality and fullness found in Christ." There again, this feature of the Colossian Epistle comes through. Christ is the fullness of God, in the glory of His own Person. All fullness resides in Him.

Hold the Head

Fourthly, in Colossians 2:19, Paul exhorts the Colossians to *"hold the Head, from [Whom] all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God."* This is one of the most important statements in the letter. Paul puts it in a negative way, pointing out the folly of *"not holding the Head..."* in reality exhorting them to "hold the Head." What does that involve? Something like this. Christ is our Head. We have put ourselves under His control. He has every resource at His command. He makes them all available to us if we will come to Him and receive them from Him. As a plant needs regular, sustained nourishment to grow and develop, so the Christian can and must grow and develop spiritually. To do so, spiritual nourishment must be drawn from Christ Himself, no doubt in the power of the Holy Spirit, through the agency of the Word of God. As we encourage the children to sing:

*"Read your Bible,
Pray every day,
And you'll grow."*

(Anon)

Christ is everything

Finally, in Colossians 2:20-23 Paul reminds the Colossians, and us, not to waste time on lesser things, or lesser beings. Christ is everything to the Christian. He is the source and provider of everything we could ever rightly desire. Let us not be satisfied with less than the best. As the unknown poet said, "I have Christ, what want I more?"

Spiritual growth in a Christian is like physical growth in a baby or a child. Take a balanced diet of good wholesome food, take a reasonable amount of suitable exercise, and growth and development will take place. We may not understand all the processes involved. Most of us do not know or understand the long technical terms used by the experts. But putting into practice a system which has been proved to work, it will happen. Again, I say,

*“Read your Bible,
Pray every day,
And you'll grow.”*

(Anon)

Summary

Pulling together, then, the teaching of Colossians 2:4-23, we have this:

1. Christ is God. Christ is man. Christ is alive in heaven.
2. Christ is absolutely essential to every Christian. We cannot manage without Him. Indeed, without Him we have nothing and we are nothing.
3. Because we have trusted Christ as Saviour, and confessed Him as Lord, God has accepted the death of Christ as being on our behalf. We need have no fear in respect of the day of judgement. Every one of our sins has been blotted out.
4. In God's sight, our old life of sin has been brought to an end in the death of Christ. Because Christ is alive from among the dead, a new way of life has been opened up for us and to us.
5. We don't need any of the religious or philosophical paraphernalia of this world to bolster our spiritual lives. Christ is everything. If we have Him, potentially we have everything. All we need finds its source and origin in Him.
6. He is the willing provider of all that we might ever need. We draw from Him all that we need to promote our spiritual health, prosperity, growth and development. God grant that we draw freely, from Christ, all we shall ever need, and give God the praise and worship from grateful hearts.

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