

## Prayers

### **To God**

**Lord Jesus Christ, come into our world and bring Your deliverance. Through Your people the Church, confront the powers of evil which seek to destroy families, break up nations, exploit the world and destroy peace. May we not be found wanting in our call to defeat the evils of this world and challenge its powers and authorities with the Word of God. Come, Lord Jesus, come! AMEN**

### **For myself**

*Pray in thanksgiving for the n=,many blessings Christ has given you this very day.*

### **For others**

*Weekly theme: the supply of power*

*Pray for industry regulators who have the job of balancing the requirements of the power suppliers with the pressures of those who buy and sell power in its various forms, and the consumer who buys power to maintain the basics of home life.*

## Meditation

I glory in everything You do for me, Lord Jesus  
I find my true purpose in Your life.

You give me courage to endure life's struggles,  
To refuse to be conquered by trouble.

You give me a heart to watch out for the needy,  
Despite all my selfish inclinations.

You give me strength to stand firm in my faith ,  
And apply my beliefs in what I do.

You give me love when heart and will are tested;  
The ability to forgive when offended:

You give me the power to rise above the ordinary;  
To do what is greater, for Your glory!

You give me real hope and vision for the future

A hope in Your return - Your Kingdom come!

I glory in everything about You, Lord Jesus,  
As You do Your will through me.

## Bible Passage

### ***Colossians 2:16-23***

<sup>16</sup> Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or by how you observe festivals, new moon celebrations, or Sabbaths. <sup>17</sup> These are only a faint outline of the future, but the full reality is found in Christ. <sup>18</sup> Let no-one who takes delight in false humility and the worship of angels cheat you by insisting on certain practices because of their own visionary experience. This is the thoughtless arrogance of a natural way of thinking <sup>19</sup> which is unconnected to the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, develops and grows through God.

<sup>20</sup> If you have died with Christ at the hands of the powers of the universe, why do you live as though you belonged to the world and submit to its regulations: <sup>21</sup> 'Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!?' <sup>22</sup> All this is about things that perish with use, based on human doctrines and rules. <sup>23</sup> These things do indeed have an appearance of wisdom, through rigorous devotion, false humility, and austere standards of living; but they are of no value in controlling earthly desires.

## Review

Yesterday's passage of Colossians could be considered the high point of Paul's letter, as it explained both the nature of Christ and His work on the Cross. It is entirely typical of his letters that after he explained important details about the Christian faith, he followed this by writing about how that faith should be applied, and this what is contained within our passage today. This is indicated by the word 'therefore' at the beginning (2:16), for Paul then set about explaining what the Colossians should do in the light of the truths of the Gospel. Through this, we gain further insight into the beliefs and practices against which Paul taught. He was clearly concerned that the church at Colossae was being influenced by those who claimed special revelations (2:18), taught about what they should eat or drink (2:16,20,21), how they should worship at certain culturally important seasons (2:16), the worship of angels (2:18) and also certain disciplinary religious practices (2:23, sometimes called 'asceticism'). As a consequence of everything Paul had explained about the supreme uniqueness and complete work of Christ, he made his most obvious point straight away; all these things 'are only a faint outline of the future, but the full reality is found in Christ' (2:17).

Most of the rest of what Paul said in this passage was a powerful denunciation of any teaching which drew Christians away from anything other than Christ alone. He attacked what he called 'false humility' several times (2:18,23) because true humility was to be found in Christ; he attacked those whose faith was merely an expression of their own thinking and revelation (2:18); he attacked such processes of human reasoning (2:19); and he attacked those who, for whatever reason, went along with religious regulations which were derived from this teaching (2:21-22). You will even find within this text the sound of Paul's mocking voice as he castigated his opponents in the church; 'Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!' (2:21).

This astonishing broadside by Paul would have struck home at every point to those who read his letter in the church at Colossae. They knew more of the details of what lay behind these comments by Paul than we do, and we have to be careful, for although we can find some connections between what Paul said and our world today, some of what Paul said needs careful interpretation. We do indeed have our own problems today with how to give godly advice about what people eat and drink and how they observe religious festivals; but we do not have problems with people worshipping angels (although there are some strange beliefs and practices even within some churches). The most difficult part of what Paul had to say is his attack against the 'natural' processes of human thinking (2:18). In our own times, human thought and reasoning has developed into science, technology and commerce, which dominates and benefits vast numbers of people. But, if we look carefully, Paul's warnings still speak to us about the many religious beliefs people have.

The close link in Paul's teaching between theology (yesterday's passage, 2:8-15) and practice (today's passage, 2:16-23) is itself a powerful reminder to us that our faith is not just a matter of beliefs and ideas; it is a matter of what we do. It is therefore of great importance that we discover both what this passage meant when it was written, and what it can mean for us today.

## Going Deeper

A closer look at the text will show that it reveals more about the heresies that Paul was fighting against in his own day, but this text challenges us to consider what cultural and social practices draw us away from Christ in our own times. His words are also wisely cautionary about all manner of human religious practices.

### ***The heresy at Colossae***

Partially visible to us in English translations, but far more visible in the Greek, are words which clearly indicate to us the nature of what was being taught at Colossae. Up to this point in the letter, it has been obvious that the heretical teachers were claiming that they had special secrets or mysteries about access to God through angelic powers or other heavenly authorities (1:16, 2:8 etc.). Now, it appears that they had some kind of initiatory religious practices which they demanded of Christians. We know this from verse 18, because the word which is translated 'certain practices' is known to have been used in those days to refer to initiation ceremonies into various religious practices. Moreover, Paul is incensed that these were being used based upon people's own 'visionary experiences', as if what was happening was being manipulated by certain powerful people who claimed to have special powers and visions!

These religious practices were backed up by rules about eating and drinking, and how to celebrate regular festivals ('new moon festivals' – 2:16) and the Sabbath day. There is much debate as to whether these teachers were some kind of Jewish sect with beliefs that were something of a mix of Judaism and Greek philosophy; it might seem far-fetched if we did not have a large supply of documents from the famous 'Dead Sea Scrolls' which originated from a sect just like this and was based in the Judean desert, near the Dead Sea; the Essenes. Much of what Paul attacks in the letter to the Colossians would have seemed quite familiar to this group of people! Other practices which Paul attacked were 'human rules and doctrines' (2:22) which again, if we look at the Greek words closely reveal a form of what is called 'asceticism'. These religious practices involved 'punishing' the body because it was believed to be evil, and this was done by eating an austere diet, perhaps bread and water alone, denial of alcohol or drinks other than water, and abstinence from sex. These are

summed up by Paul in verse 21: 'Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!' (Note; the first of these phrases, 'don't handle', strongly implies sexual contact).

We look back on these practices with some scepticism today, but even now there are those who advocate Christian forms of asceticism, such as the vows of chastity made by priests and those in religious orders, and monks who live out meagre lives in various desert regions of the world, even to this day, in the belief that this is what God requires of them for their salvation or for the salvation of the world. It is not impossible that some of these practises enable Christian service or prayer, but the church has always been cautious about advocating strict asceticism for fear of exactly what Paul says here in Colossians; diverting attention away from Christ and the Gospel, which is intended to be God's liberation for the people of the world as well as the world itself, not bondage!

### ***The new life of Christ!***

Liberation is exactly what Paul preached by attacking the heresies at Colossae, for in Christ, we are set free from all the religious demands that come from human minds (2:18,22). Paul was adamant that because Christ was the only way to the Father, every other religious practice was the result of human thinking or imagination, and he immediately set about describing these; the rules about religious observance mentioned in verse 16, for example, were all well known to him from his background in Judaism, for example, abstinence from foods that were unclean or that had been offered to 'idols' (1 Cor 8). Elsewhere, Paul was careful to say that in such matters, people's sensibilities about food or drink should not be offended if this meant that the Gospel was compromised (see Romans 14:1-12). Here, however, he believed that rules about such things were impeding the Gospel; people were not at liberty in Christ if influential teachers were insisting that they did this or that with their food. Paul's denunciation of religious practices such as this and everything else mentioned in this text was regarded by many people in his day as equivalent to atheism!

At every point of his argument, Paul insisted that although the many religious practices of his day were 'only a faint outline of the future', the truth that he preached was that 'the full reality is found in Christ' (2:17). Later on, he made a telling remark by saying that the development of the religious practices he spoke against was the 'thoughtless arrogance of a natural way of thinking' (2:18). Paul knew the natural human tendency to be religious and to create religious systems which come from human experiences of the world; but whilst this reflects the human search for God, it does not reflect the truth of the Creator who made the world simply because such religion does not come from Him (2:19). True liberation is therefore found when we realise that salvation in Christ through baptism (2:11f.) is not another religious system, but the only human connection with the truth of the God who made the Universe. All other religious systems are human attempts to reach God, but Jesus Christ is the true and unique means whereby God has acted out of love to reach down to humanity. This is, and remains, the basic distinction between Christianity and all other forms of religion today, and everyone is invited to judge the truth of this claim. All who respond to the touch of God and accept this truth, are set free!

To make this point strongly, Paul used his famous illustration of the 'body' in verse 19. Christian Faith and discipleship could only be an organic development of the 'body' whose head was Christ (1:18). Paul fought for the whole of his Christian life against any human interference with the growth of the church which he saw as God's prerogative. His letters only give us scant good guidance about how we should run churches, and the wisdom of his caution lies in the fact that over the years, God's church has developed in different ways at different times, largely because whatever human rules we set down for our religious practice, the Bible, in particular the New Testament, gives us very few, if any. For Paul, the earthly powers and authorities of this world and the universe were responsible for the death of Christ

(2:20), and they were an impediment to faith and the teaching of them in the church was to him, an offence.

Paul's last, cutting argument was that forms of religion derived from 'human rules and doctrines' (2:22) simply cannot be of any value in the controlling of human desires; all they can ever do is to create the tensions of 'rigorous devotion' and 'false humility' (2:23) as people strain to achieve their own self imposed ends. God alone, through Jesus Christ can do this, because he is the one who has created all things, and if we submit ourselves to Him, He will guide us into all truth!

## Discipleship

### ***Application***

#### ***Holding on to different personal beliefs (heresy today!)***

Even today, it is easy to find people who have a wide variety of religious beliefs, inside and outside the church. We live in times when people generally feel free to experiment with religious belief, and it is not uncommon for us to hear of those who have tried this religion or that, seeking something that will satisfy their own desires, or their own perception of God. The challenge of Paul is to follow the truth, and face the claims of Jesus Christ and the truth of the Gospel. The Gospel is nothing if it is not about absolute truth; indeed, the absolute truth of God, and in the end there can only be one choice, between the truth that the Creator of the Universe has given us through the Gospel and what the world has to offer.

#### ***Challenging creeping pluralism within the church***

Whilst it is understandable that people outside the church will follow a wide variety of religious practices and may have not yet faced the challenge of the Gospel, it seems extraordinary that Christians will attach themselves to a wide variety of such beliefs as well, simply through social contact. In past generations, Christian missionaries have taken over cultural practices associated with the previous belief systems of the countries they have evangelised, but they have rededicated them to Christ and stripped them of their former meaning (various forms of Christmas celebrations, for example). In my own life, however, I have come across everything from those who call themselves 'Christian Buddhists' to people who claim to be Christians but will not take part in the life of the church with any other Christians, to those who sell occult objects, tarot cards etc. on church bookstalls as 'fun objects', and simply see no conflict between what they say and do and the faith in Christ that they (partly) claim. Christian faith can never be about appeasing the human desire for religion at a personal level; it is a response to the one and only living God.

Paul was clearly distressed by the way in which human teaching had entered the Colossian church, and his language reflects that deep concern. Perhaps it is time for the Christian church to be far more concerned about the purity of its beliefs and doctrines than it appears to be.

### ***Ideas for what to do***

- Try to place yourself also in the situation of someone who lives nearby but is not a Christian. Now, think carefully about what you take part in at church and write down a list of the things that are done that someone outside the church might easily observe as giving glory to God, and what might not!

- Pray for people today who are trying to engage with the difficult theological and intellectual issues of our day that do not appear on the surface to affect many people, but are still of great importance to God and to our witness as Christians in the world.

### **Questions (for use in groups)**

1. What 'human rules' do you think have come to dominate the life of the Church of God in our own times?
2. How do we demonstrate that Christ is at the centre of everything we experience in this world?
3. What other religious beliefs attract people away from Christian faith in your own country? How can we deal with this?

## **Final Prayer**

Clean us, Heavenly Father, from the dirt and rubbish that accumulates in our lives, often without our even knowing it. Give us the grace to accept Your cleansing, so that we are ready to throw away what needs to go, especially the accumulated debris of living. May we remain true to You Lord God, in the way we live our lives: AMEN