

Prayers

To God

Ask the Lord your God for His deliverance from all your enemies, physical and spiritual

For myself

Seek the Lord's guidance about your appetites, whether for food or for any things else; pray that the Lord will bless you as you seek to change your ways to reflect His glory in your life.

For others

Weekly theme: the supply of power

We praise You, great Lord of all Creation, for the abundant means of power we find within Your creation, for the coal, oil, gas and nuclear power we use for generating electricity, as well as wind power, wave power and solar energy. Help us so to develop these benefits that we do not misuse them, or even over use them so that they cannot be known to future generations. You have allowed modern life to develop as it has; sustain our sources of power we pray: AMEN

Meditation

Let us allow the Lord to change us for the better;
Let us yield everything to Him and be His servants.

Let us repent before Him of every unworthy thought;
Let us deal with the issues that divide us without delay;
Let us forgive those who have hurt us unconditionally;
Let us give Satan no opportunity to control our feelings.

Let us listen to each other and abandon all selfishness;
Let us accept that Christ loves us showing no partiality;
Let us put love into action as we face life's challenges;
Let us find peace where the world cannot see it, in You.

Let us be happy in our faith and radiate the Spirit's joy!
Let us rejoice that He is coming again, for He is!

Bible Passage

Colossians 2:8-15

⁸ Make sure that no-one captivates you by means of philosophy, or the empty deceptions of human tradition about the supernatural make-up of the universe which have nothing to do with Christ.

⁹ For everything there is of God dwells in Him, physically, ¹⁰ and you have been made complete in Him, who has complete sovereignty over every ruler and authority. ¹¹ In him you were also circumcised not with a physical circumcision, but by the circumcision of Christ which does away with the physical body; ¹² for being buried with Him in baptism, you were also raised with Him through faith in the power of God, who raised Him from the dead. ¹³ For when you were dead in your sins and your physical uncircumcision, God made you alive in unity with Christ, when he forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴ destroying the record of our debts which legally stood against us: He took this away from us, nailing it to the Cross; ¹⁵ and disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in Christ.

Review

This truly powerful text has captivated Christians ever since it was written, as it packs into a few verses an incredible well of spiritual information about the nature of Jesus Christ and what He did for us on the Cross. You may be familiar with this passage because of its reference to the practice of baptism (2:11f.) but although this is important, it is not the main theme of Paul's writing at this point. Here, Paul describes the entire Christian message from a different perspective, and one that would have been understood and appreciated by the people at Colossae. Baptism does indeed encapsulate the whole Christian message, but Paul's emphasis here is on the cosmic significance of Christ in heavenly places (2:8,14,15)

Despite the previous powerful verses describing Christ in cosmic terms as the '*firstborn of all Creation*' (1:15), this passage is the true heart of Paul's letter to the Colossians. We know from Paul's letters in general that for him, the preaching of the Gospel was about declaring the death and resurrection of Christ, and this is the absolute priority of this passage. Reading the Greek text, we gain the feeling that Paul is in 'full flow', as if preaching, and in the subtle emphases of the passage and its use of language, perhaps we hear the voice of the great apostle come through here in a distinct and personal way. Many other passages of scripture touch on the theme of eternal salvation, but none express the Gospel in such radiantly triumphal terms as this, as Paul dismisses the philosophies and popular ideologies of his own day in favour of the salvation of the risen and glorified Christ.

In our scientific world today, it is hard for us to understand the extent to which the people outside of Judaism believed that their lives were powerfully affected by cosmic forces over which they had no control; the moon and stars, gods, authorities, the dead, for example. All these were thought to have a powerful influence over people's lives, and many people lived in genuine fear of what would happen if they offended the spiritual 'forces' or 'authorities' in the world. Jewish people had their own very different ancient beliefs of course, including the ritual of circumcision, regarded as the basic sign of God's chosen people; they were often tolerated because of their very ancient beliefs predating much Roman and Greek culture. But throughout this letter, and nowhere more so than here, Paul fought ferociously against all non-Christian philosophies and beliefs, castigating everything from fears about supernatural

bodies, to angels, to the Jewish ritual of circumcision. Nothing was of any importance or significance, save Christ.

As far as Paul was concerned, Jesus Christ was the authentic Son of God with a real and provable message about God's love and forgiveness. He declared all other beliefs insignificant and the product of no more than mere human thought, with no connection to God whatsoever, declaring, '*for everything there is of God dwells in Him (Christ), physically*' (2:9). Paul denounced any philosophy of life or religion, because for him, truth was only to be found in the reality of Jesus' work on the Cross. Because of this, he used graphic words to describe this, combining his theology of baptism with the work of Christ Himself and His cosmic significance; '*being buried with Him in baptism, you were also raised with Him through faith*' (2:12); '*destroying the record of our debts ... He took this away, nailing it to the Cross*' (2:14); '*disarming the rulers and authorities and making a public spectacle of them ...*' (2:15).

Few other Scriptures compare with the spiritual intensity of this great passage, which draws together such powerful phrases full of meaning and truth for God's people. But we should never forget that for Paul, the news about Jesus Christ was a truth to be both preached and lived, so that God's work might be done on earth for the ultimate good of all.

Going Deeper

There is so much to look at here; Paul's masterful dispatch of human philosophies, the way in which he shifts from dismissing circumcision to affirming baptism, and the triumphal way in which he describes the work of Christ on the Cross. Yet at each stage, Paul presents us with mysteries as well as solutions to our understanding of Jesus and Salvation; as we should only expect!

Empty philosophies and the fullness of God

Paul begins this passage by putting together most of what he had just been saying. Since his prayerful introduction (1:3-14), Paul had identified Jesus Christ as superior to all things in Creation and indeed present with God in Creation (1:15-20). He was concerned to challenge directly the false teaching that had come into the church which was probably twofold, an infiltration of the popular beliefs we have talked about above, combined with some Judaistic teaching which insisted that Gentiles be circumcised if they were to be part of God's 'chosen people' the Church. He then spent some time justifying himself (1:21f.), given that he had never been to Colossae and many Christians there had heard of Paul, but not met him. At the beginning of chapter 2, Paul sought to encourage the Colossian Christians with words about fellowship and mutual faith, his grounds for writing to them. In these parts of his letter, Paul spoke strongly, but with care, seeking to make sure that those who did not know him would accept what he had to say.

But then he stopped holding back. A floodgate in Paul's mind was opened, and out tumbled the words we have in our text. Verse 8 is a flat condemnation of every alternative to Christ on offer in the gentile Roman world he addressed. Firstly, Stoic and Epicurean philosophy which had been passed down over the centuries was described by Paul as mere 'human tradition' (2:8). Acts 17:18 describe Paul's previous encounter with such philosophies in Athens and makes clear his distaste for those who claimed to seek for the truth but were only really interested in 'hearing something new' (Acts 17:21). This is not unlike the manner in which philosophy and theology is taught academically today, in which it is easy to jump the academic hurdles in search of something new and obtain the status and qualifications with little interest in truth.

Paul almost certainly saw philosophy as demonic, as he also did of the other belief systems of the day which emphasised the mysteries of the different ruling orders of the universe, collectively called 'the fullness' ('pleroma' in Greek). Whenever you see words in Colossians such as 'everything', or 'all' or 'complete', it is a variation of this word in Greek, and Paul uses it purposefully to indicate that Christ is all you need to know, if you want to know 'the fullness' of everything. This is exactly what he said in verse 9, where the Greek reads literally, 'all the fullness of deity dwells in Him, bodily' (but I have translated it so that this can be understood properly today). This means that Christ is the only complete way of knowing everything there is to know about God, moreover, we are made 'complete in Him' (2:10) because our access to God is through Christ and Christ alone.

For Paul there was no other Gospel; in Christ, each of us possess by faith, 'all the fullness' of the truth about God. This message is profoundly liberating, and it remains true that uniquely in the Christian church, you will often find that people who have newly come to faith will have as great a grasp of its fundamental doctrines as those who have studied theology at the highest level. The key to this whole passage lies in the expression 'in Christ', or 'in Him', which occurs in different forms at least six times in the text. It indicates not just knowledge of what Jesus has done for us, but a personal identification with and commitment to what He has done for us, which is the theme of the rest of this passage.

Circumcision to Baptism

Paul's words in verse 11 have created some confusion. It is certainly not something we easily understand because circumcision is not an issue for the church today. There were those in Paul's day who thought that in order to be a Christian you had to be circumcised, and Paul was well known for arguing against this (see Gal. 5:6, Eph. 2:11). Paul began by indicating that 'in Him' (in Christ) there was no need for physical circumcision, but went on to say that we have a 'circumcision of Christ which does away with the physical body' (2:11). Initially, it sounds as if Paul was merely saying that we need a spiritual circumcision not a physical one, which was prophesied in the Old Testament, but not fulfilled until the New (Deut 10:16; 30:6). But it is more than that. Circumcision was a sign of acceptance as a member of God's chosen people in the Old Testament, and it seems likely that what Paul meant by this strange phrase 'doing away with the physical body' (2:11) was a reference to the death of Jesus which, as we now know, is the sign of the New Covenant of God. The death of Jesus was the new 'circumcision'.

This is important to recognise, for the passage goes on to speak of 'being buried with him in baptism' (2:12). Some have felt that this passage justifies calling baptism the new 'spiritual' circumcision, but this is not really what Paul was trying to say. He wanted his readers to understand that in the same way that a (male) Jew was identified by circumcision, a Christian was identified through their faith in Jesus Christ and His death. This, of course, is exactly what baptism is all about, and always has been. At baptism, we identify ourselves publicly with Christ, being 'buried with Him' and 'raised with Him' through water, which is a sign of both death and life. However baptism is administered, it is meaningless unless by so doing, we are identified with Christ in death, burial and resurrection.

The saving consequences of Christ's work

Within his letter, Paul then preached the consequences of this great transformation. It was no mystery, but as he had earlier declared, an open secret (1:26f.). Speaking to Gentiles who had never been circumcised, he told them of their true hope in Christ, speaking graphically of the forgiveness that Jesus had declared from the Cross (2:13). We who have read the account of what happened on the Cross know that Jesus said 'Father forgive them, for they know not what they do' (Luke 23:34) to all around him; the Jewish authorities who had engineered his death and the Gentile soldiers who crucified Him. Jesus' forgiveness was open and for all people who would receive it, and it was in this spirit that Paul preached it

to the Colossians. It is even more certain that Paul had the crucifixion in mind when speaking, for he went on to speak dramatically of the 'record of our debts' being 'nailed to the Cross'. The 'record' was a Roman accounting sheet, often used for tax, and a thing that Roman citizens dreaded as much as someone today filing a tax return! However, two things are possible for what Paul had in mind when he spoke of 'nailing it to the Cross', It could be that Paul thought of our sins as being carried on the Cross by Jesus' very body, in agreement with Peter ('He bore our sins in His body on the Cross' 1 Peter 2:24), or even that Paul knew of the charge of blasphemy that was nailed to the Cross when Jesus died (Matt 27:37 etc.) and used this to illustrate how Jesus died bearing our sins.

With rhetorical splendour, Paul announced the great truth of this work of Jesus Christ. His death had defeated all human or demonic claims to access to God. The very same Jesus who had been with God in Creation (1:15f.) had died an earthly death, something that real people had witnessed, and as a sinless man who was Himself God, he was able to do what no other philosophy, teaching, demonic beliefs or mystery religion could do, which was to offer all humanity direct access to God the Father. This was not just the triumph of the Gospel, it was the truth.

Discipleship

Application

The uniqueness of Christ

At the heart of what Paul says in this passage is the Gospel which we have had passed on to us as the Christian Faith. The unique thing about this passage is that it places Paul's arguments about the uniqueness of Christ together with what he says about the work of Christ, and the result is a powerful piece of writing which has far more to explore within it than we can ever discover by a devotional study as relatively short as this. If we are prepared to spend time with a passage such as this, we will find ourselves more firmly connected to the truths of our Faith, and we will face the fact that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is presented by Paul not just as the supreme religious option of his (or our) day, but as the truth. As such, we must either judge it as right or wrong.

Treating the Gospel as truth

There is a tendency for too many Christians today to treat faith, and the Bible, like a bookshop in which we can pick the parts we like and ignore the rest. This passage asks us to agree or disagree, and frankly, if we disagree, then the idea that we can call ourselves Christians is fanciful. There are indeed a number of points within this passage which present some uncertainties, and we could spend a long time debating exactly what they mean; for example, the meaning of baptism as found in this passage and what it means for our views of it today. But the general drift of Paul's argument is clear; Jesus is unique, and our only choice is to accept the claims made for Him in the Bible or reject them. There is no other form of Christian Faith.

Ideas for what to do

- I suggest that you read through this passage several times, and make sure you understand it as you go along. As you read it, you may find that you have to question what you read, but check out what it says against other Scriptures, and your faith should be confirmed as you begin to see the passage in a new light.

- Pray for those who find alternative religions attractive, and ask the Lord to help the church expose the false religions of our day that Satan uses to try and divert people from true faith.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Which parts of this passage of Scripture do you find helpful and clear? What do they say about your own faith?
2. What can the central verses (11-13) teach us by talking about circumcision, and what is the connection with baptism in your opinion?
3. What does it mean for you to know that Jesus has 'destroyed the record of our debts'?

Final Prayer

Glorious Lord, the truth of Your Gospel is amazing, for we have been touched by it and know it is true, and yet it presents us with a powerful challenge. Give us the courage to follow where it leads with all truthfulness and grace, and help us to value the guidance it gives. Through Jesus Christ our Lord; AMEN