

A scuba diver was describing to a man about being in water so deep and so dark that it's almost impossible to keep from becoming disoriented. The man thought about how terrifying that would be – being so far underwater, unable to see your hands in front of your face, losing your sense of direction, not knowing which way is up – panic engulfing you.

The man asked the scuba diver, “So what do you do in those moments?”

“I feel the bubbles,” the scuba diver answered.

“Feel the bubbles?” replied the man.

“That’s right. When it’s pitch-black and you have no idea which way to go, you reach up with your hand and feel the bubbles. They always go up. The bubbles always rise to the surface. When you can’t trust your feelings or your judgment, you can always trust and follow the bubbles to get you back to the top.”

Sometimes in life we too can get disoriented. We trust our feelings, we trust our own judgment, we think what we are doing is right, but if we ignore the gospel truth, we can be deceived and lose our way.

That was the Apostle Paul’s concern for the Colossians. False teachers had moved into the region and they were attempting to deceive and disorient these new believers with a blend of Christianity, and Judaism, and other philosophies.

Their false teaching was enticing. It was slick and subtle – meaning at first glance, their teaching seemed to make sense and appeared to be the truth. They spoke about Jesus, they used church lingo, they presented Christian-sounding ideas, and they claimed to be superior to the apostles, but if you followed the bubbles so to speak as Paul did, it was obvious that these false teachers had distorted the simple gospel truth that the Colossians had first learned.

In a nutshell, these false teachers denied the deity of Christ – they denied that Jesus was God in the flesh, and they denied that His finished work on the cross *alone* was sufficient to save. They claimed that if you really wanted to be accepted by God – if you really wanted to be saved, then Jesus was not enough – He was just a good starting point and you needed to do more to get your salvation done.

So, with all that going on, this prompts Paul to give a warning with some very clear teaching on *who Jesus is and what Jesus did*, and that brings us to **Colossians 2** beginning with **verse 8**, where he says,

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

In this passage, Paul gives a warning to the church – see to it that no one takes you **captive** which is picture of being *kidnapped* and *taken hostage* – something we hear about today. Paul sees the danger facing these Christians, and he says, see to it that you are not kidnapped and taken hostage by false **philosophy** and **empty deception** whose ideas come from the minds of people – ideas such as the legalistic traditions of men that are passed along like doctrine and no one dares to question them, and the principles of this wicked world that people tend to value and support.

That word **philosophy** in the Greek means the *love of wisdom* which seems to be a good thing, but when it lures people away from Christ, when it rejects the wisdom found God’s Word, then it becomes nothing but a vain imagination of the mind – it’s misguided, it really doesn’t help anyone to live or to die, and it’s deceptive. Someone has said, “*False philosophy is like a blind man looking in a dark room for a black cat that isn’t there*” – meaning there really is no desire for the truth.

And speaking of truth, today we are being told that you can have your truth and I can have my truth – apparently, everybody can have their own truth – which is generally a rejection or a distortion of “the truth” – God’s truth. As an example, a hot topic these days revolves around identity. If you are a biological male, you can identify as female, and if you are a biological female, you can identify as male – or to really take a giant leap into the abyss of deception, you can identify as an animal if you want. You can identify as a platypus. All of this is mind-boggling – there’s no basis in reality, there’s no basis in real truth, but even so, it’s gained a foothold in our society and people are falling for it.

To the Colossians, and to us, Paul would say it’s all empty. These ideas might seem enlightened, they may sound impressive, they might even appear liberating, but they’re hollow – they’re nothing but permissive and carnal illusions created by man and if digging a little deeper – they are inspired by evil spiritual forces. They don’t come from the Lord – instead, they are empty lies meant to mislead and carry people away into bondage.

That’s Paul warning – it’s clear and direct, and it leads us to **verse 9** where Paul simply responds to these lies with the truth by giving the clearest picture of who Jesus is and what He did. Speaking of Jesus, Paul says,

⁹ For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, ¹⁰ and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority;

Paul says that in Jesus, the **Deity** lives in bodily form – in human flesh, meaning the fullness of God, the totality of God – His divine powers, His attributes and character, His authority and His glory are in Jesus. Jesus is, always has been, and always will be God.

Jesus is fully God, and if you think that's something, look at **verse 10**. **In Him** – in Jesus who is fully God, you have been **made complete**. In your spiritual union with Jesus, you too have been brought to fullness and you don't need anything else. You are complete in Christ.

I like how Steven Cole explains this. He says, *“When you're born into this world, you're born complete. You don't grow arms and legs later, like a tadpole. You've got everything you'll ever need. You can't use it all until you grow in age and strength, but you've got the whole package right from the start. It's the same spiritually. You get everything in Christ the instant you're born again. You're joined to Him in such an intimate way that Paul refers to it as being “in Him.”*

As a Christian, you are **complete** in Jesus, and in Him you can't go any higher for He is **head over all**. You are in Him – you are complete and full in Him, you have all you need, and therefore, your spiritual growth is not by *addition* but by *nutrition*. You are being rooted and built up in Him – growing from the inside out – you have everything you need – and Paul would ask, **“Why, then, would you need anything else?”**

That's Paul's question, and it's a good question because apparently, the false teachers were telling the believers in Colossae that Jesus was not enough – they were not complete in Him, and they needed to submit to various acts of religious legalism to truly be accepted by God. That's what the Colossians were confronted with – it was a *Jesus plus* teaching – you need *Jesus plus* something else – something religious, something you do, to earn your salvation and to be accepted by God.

That's what the Colossians were facing – this *Jesus plus* teaching, and beginning with **verse 11**, Paul begins to poke holes in it. He says,

and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ;

So, Paul just said to the Colossian believers that they were complete, they were full in Christ, but these false teachers would say, “*So, you believe in Jesus – that’s great, but there are some additional steps you have to take to be accepted by God*” and one of these additional steps was apparently **circumcision**. So, let’s talk about that for a moment.

If you remember in the Old Testament, back in **Genesis** beginning with Abraham, God gave the Jewish people the sign of circumcision as a way of indicating that they were His chosen people. This was a physical *act* which symbolized a much greater spiritual *reality* of God’s covenant of faith with His people – a spiritual reality that over time the Jews completely missed. They focused on the physical act and they felt superior and secure and entitled with blessings because of it. The Jews just went through the motions – they did the *act*, but they completely missed the spiritual *reality* behind it – a reality they were often reminded of. Listen to what Moses said to God’s people in **Deuteronomy 30:6**. He said,

“Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.”

Now, much later in **Romans 2**, beginning with **verse 28**, Paul really hammers the point home. He says and I am reading this passage from the NLT,

28 For you are not a true Jew just because you were born of Jewish parents or because you have gone through the ceremony of circumcision. 29 No, a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God. And true circumcision is not merely obeying the letter of the law; rather, it is a change of heart produced by the Spirit. And a person with a changed heart seeks praise from God, not from people.

So yes, circumcision involved a physical *act*, but that *act* was only symbolic of a much greater spiritual *reality* that involved a change of heart – the turning away from sin and the being separated unto God.

To the Colossians, Paul says, for those who are complete in Christ, they have already been circumcised **without hands** – so from that we know Paul is definitely speaking about the circumcision of the heart, and it’s something that spiritually happens at the moment of salvation.

This is a spiritual circumcision of the heart, where God cuts away the carnal nature that had power over you. When you were born again, you received the circumcision of your heart – the cutting away of the sinful influence that dominated you, and in Christ, you can now say “no” to those things you used to say “yes” to. The temptation is still there – let’s make no mistake about that, but in Christ, we can say “no” to it. You are complete in Christ. He’s broken the dominance of sin that once governed your life. So, when it comes to circumcision, Paul would say that Christians are complete in Christ and that already includes the real circumcision made without hands – and thank God, for I want no part of that in my job description.

Now **verse 12** brings us to **baptism** – and the exact same principle applies. Paul says,

having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

The physical *act* of baptism, which is an act of obedience, is merely symbolic of a much greater spiritual *reality* that also takes place at the moment of salvation.

That word **baptism** means to immerse as one immerses fabric into dye to change its color. The dye completely permeates the fabric and it’s not just fabric anymore – it’s identified as colored fabric, and in that same spiritual sense we too are identifying with Christ.

When you were born again, immediately, you were spiritually immersed into the body of Christ. It’s a spiritual *reality* which is later symbolized by water baptism as an *act* of obedience, and just for clarification, water baptism is not an *act* you do to *be* saved – it’s something you do *because* you are saved. Again, it’s a physical *act* which is symbolic of a much greater spiritual *reality* – that being – in Him, whatever happened to Christ also happened to you.

In our spiritual union, in our spiritual connection with Christ, we identify with Him, and as such, Paul says that in Christ, we **have been buried with Him**. When He was buried, our old dominating sinful life was buried with Him. Our spiritual death was buried with Him, our separation from God was buried with Him – but it doesn’t stop there. If you continue with Paul’s thought, you were also **raised up** with Christ to a newness of life, and it’s in this new life that we walk with Jesus.

So, what is Paul telling the Colossians and what is he telling us? Well, it is this. We are complete in Christ, and at the moment of our salvation – as if we were transported way back in time – we shared in what Jesus accomplished through His death, burial, and resurrection.

Now, beginning with **verse 13**, Paul continues with his train of thought and he says,

¹³ When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, ¹⁴ having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

If I told you that I've been hanging out at the cemetery preaching to the dead, you would probably think, "*Bob has lost it!*" – and that might be the case, but in a very real sense, that's what we're doing whenever we speak to lost people about Jesus. Apart of Christ, people aren't just spiritually confused and misguided – they're dead.

And Paul says that we too were once dead. When we were without Christ, walking around, living our lives as if God did not matter, rejecting His grace and His forgiveness and His salvation, we too were dead. We were dead in our sins, separated from God, but we were made alive in Him, having been forgiven of **all** – *and circle that word for all means all* – **all our transgressions**. There is no more separation with God. He canceled, He blotted out, He wiped away the bill of debt that was held against us. All of it. He wiped away your debt. The debt was accurate, it was true, it was real, and it was legal for laws and commandments were broken by us, but it was all wiped away when Jesus bore our sins on the cross. The Father laid on Jesus all of our sins – every last one of them, sins of the past, sins of the present, and sins of the future. They were all **nailed** to the cross as if it was the Lord's crime.

On the cross, above the Lord's head was a board which read "*Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews.*" This board was supposed to state the crime for which the person being crucified had been charged with, but this is what Pilate had written. The Jewish religious leaders wanted the board changed to read, "*He said I am the King of the Jews*" to reflect the crime of blasphemy against God, and I say all of that to say this – that board could just as well have included all of your sins and all of my sins written down as crimes against God – and Jesus paid them all.

A 10-year-old boy wanted to be a pastor when he grew up. One day, when the family's black cat died, he had an opportunity to do some "practice preaching" by conducting a funeral.

The boy found a shoebox and put the kitten inside it. When he placed the cover on the box, however, the tail wouldn't fit in. So, he cut a hole in the lid so that the long furry tail could stick out. Then he rounded up his friends, preached a short sermon he had carefully prepared, and buried the cat in a shallow grave.

When the service was over, he noticed that the tip of the pet's tail was still sticking out of the ground. Every two- or three-days curiosity would get the better of him, and he would secretly pull up the cat by the tail and then rebury it. Eventually the tail came off, and the body finally remained buried.

How many of us do this with our forgiven sins? We confess our sins, but we continue to drag them up, even though God considers the ugly things buried once and for all. —Henry G. Bosch

Our sins were nailed to His cross, and now we are made alive in Christ – no longer dead and no longer separated from God. We are complete in Christ and we are alive in Him because He is alive. We can walk with Him, we can follow Him in obedience out of love – not out of fear, and we can leave the “*cat*” buried.

So, Jesus paid our sin debt in full and He wants the world to know it. Look at **verse 15**.

When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him.

This is an interesting picture painted for us by Paul. When he speaks of Jesus disarming the **rulers and authorities**, the picture is that of a Roman general's triumphal parade into the city. In the parade, the Roman general and his forces would proudly march down main street amongst a cheering crowd, and with them were the conquered enemy who are stripped of their armor and paraded in chains as spoils of war.

When Christ willingly gave His life on the cross to pay for our sins, Satan and his evil forces were stripped of their power over us. They can no longer rightfully accuse us, because Christ has paid the debt of our sin. They can no longer hold us captive through the fear of death, because Christ won the victory over Satan and

over death on the cross. His victory was confirmed when God raised Him from the dead. And we who believe are raised with Him – not fighting *for* victory but fighting *in* victory because Jesus has already won the battle for us.

So, when the enemy accuses you, when the enemy harasses you and tells you to dig up that dead cat, tell him to take it up with Jesus who has won the victory over sin, over death, and over Satan.

In Christ we are complete, and in Him we are alive and have everything we need. We are no longer dominated by the power of sin – we can say “*no*” to those things we once said “*yes*” to. Our sin debt has been paid in full. We are no longer separated from a holy God, and now by grace – not by fear, we are free to walk in a loving relationship with our Lord and Savior. Jesus is God and He *alone* did all we need for salvation, and to add anything to His completed work – even if it is a religious thing – would be a disgrace.

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