

Series: *Colossians 2 – Truth Above All*

Title: "Providential Preservation of Scripture: Your Sure Defense Against Man-Made Doctrines"
(Colossians 2:18-23, Matthew 5:18)

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 3/4/2012

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At the present time we are looking at Paul's great warning against the evil of man-made doctrines which is found at the end of Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen. Let me read that passage for you as we take up this teaching once again today. Colossians chapter two, beginning at verse eighteen:

Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God. Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations — "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle," which all concern things which perish with the using — according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh. (Colossians 2:18-23)

And so here we have the evil of man-made doctrines stated for us by the Holy Spirit through Paul. These things are false, he says. They are of no value to your Christian life. When you became a Christian you died to such things, Paul says. These things are dead to you. Don't entangle yourself with these dead things. Don't permit yourself to be entangled by those who teach such things. Don't make

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yourself subject to the commandments and doctrines of men – things that men have invented, things that have no basis in Scripture. Don't let any man teach you anything unless he teaches it on the sole authority of God's Word.

Paul reminds us earlier in chapter two that we need to put up, and keep up, a solid battle front against such teachings and against such teachers. Here is the positive statement in chapter two, verse seven: We must be rooted and built up in Christ and established in the faith. The problem with these false teachers, Paul says – the problem with those who invent their own doctrines – is that they are not holding onto the Head of the church, the Lord Jesus Christ. We, true believers, must hold onto the truth. We must hold onto the Head.

At the end of our last message, we saw that this is the very place, the very ground, on which Satan seeks to launch his most subtle and devastating attacks. This is the battleground. If Satan can shake your faith in the absolute and uncontestable truth of the Word of God, Satan has gained his evil foot in the door. And so Satan's foremost attack, Satan's most consistent attack, is on the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture.

The Church's Present Downgraded Position

We see the success of this attack in the thinking of many individual Christians and in the general position of the Evangelical church today. Satan has shaken the church's faith in the inerrancy of Scripture. The church today has changed the

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meaning of the term "inerrant." The church today has robbed that term of its Biblical meaning.

In our time, and in fact for more than a hundred years, most Evangelical churches and pastors and scholars have taken the position that the Bible we have in our hands today in the original languages is *not* free from error. They have taken the position that Scripture *was* only free from error in the original manuscripts, thousands of years ago. You find this position in the doctrinal statements of most Evangelical churches and educational institutions in our time.

Dear friends, here is the problem: The moment you begin to accept the false notion of a Bible that is less than absolutely inerrant for all time, at that moment you open the door to the Satanic evil of man-made doctrines, the very thing against which Paul is warning here in Colossians chapter two. In order to truly understand the evil of man-made doctrines, we must truly understand the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. We must understand that when we are dealing with man-made doctrines, ultimately we are dealing with an attack on the inerrancy of the Word of God.

Now, let me remind you what is behind this warning against man-made doctrines. Behind that warning, as we saw last time, is God's warning, from the beginning of the Bible to the end, against adding to or taking anything away from the pure Word of God.

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And so, in this part of our study, we are facing some serious and very practical questions. How can we obey God's commandment to adhere to His pure Word, His commandment not to turn away from it to the right hand or the left – how can we do that if God has not faithfully preserved His inerrant Word for us? How can we possibly know when we are adding to or taking away from God's Word unless there is an inerrant standard, in our hands today? The only way that Scripture can have absolute authority is if Scripture in the original languages is still available to God's people today, absolutely free from error.

The Great Fact Is Our Great Defense

The fact is, dear friends, that it is available to us. That is the theme I want to take up with you today. God has preserved His Word without error in the original languages. And so we do have, available to us, the ultimate safeguard against man-made doctrines. That ultimate safeguard is the sword of the Spirit, the pure Word of God.

So in the remainder of this message, let me address this vital question: How do we know that God has preserved His Word without error in the original languages? How can we be certain? We can be certain of it because we have no less authority for it than God's Word itself. God has promised to preserve His Word, free from error, down to the last detail. And God has carried out that promise in history.

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What exactly is God's promise? How far does it extend? Is it a general promise, or is it a very specific promise? Dear friends, as we shall see, God's promise is not merely a general promise or a qualified promise. It is a preservation promise that is as wide as the sixty-six books of the Bible, and it is a preservation promise that goes down all the way to the very letters of the text.

What Exactly Is God's Promise to Preserve His Word?

Let me first take you to some of the Scripture passages that tell us of the nature of God's promise to preserve His Word.

Psalm 119:89 – "Forever, O Lord, Your Word is settled in heaven." The word "settled" in the original Hebrew means that God's Word stands firm.

Isaiah 40:8 – "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever." The word "stands" in the original Hebrew means that God's Word is established, and unchanging, and enduring – forever.

Matthew 5:18 – Listen to the words of Jesus Himself – "For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled." I'll have more to say about this verse in a moment.

Listen also to Jesus' words in Matthew 24:35 – and these words are repeated in Mark 13:31 and Luke 21:33 – "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away." And in the original Greek the word that is translated

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“pass away” means that not one word of Scripture will be omitted or go unfulfilled.

Listen also to Jesus’ own words in John 10:35. He says that "the Scripture cannot be broken." The significance of the original Greek is that Scripture is something that is a unity. It is bound together in its totality. It cannot be broken apart so that any component of it can be lost or annulled through defilement. That cannot happen.

Dear friends, the same God who calls upon His people to obey the Bible alone in every area of life and ministry, the same God who calls upon His people to refuse to subject themselves to the bondage of man-made doctrines, that same all-powerful God has also made the vital promise concerning His Word that enables us to obey Him: He has promised to preserve His Word and to keep it pure in all ages. The same God who created and sustains the universe by the very Word of His power, has given and sustains His inspired, infallible, inerrant written Word by that same power.

This is not a limited promise. It is a promise that extends from the very first verse of Genesis to the very last verse of Revelation. It is a promise that extends not just to the original manuscripts, but to the preserved Word of God for all time and for all eternity. Those are the vast dimensions of the promise. That is the length, and the breadth, and the height of God’s promise.

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How Far Does God's Promise of Preservation Extend?

And dear friends, we also find that this promise of God is a deep promise. It extends to the very words of Scripture, and even to the very letters.

Let me call your attention back, once again, to one of the passages I mentioned a few moments ago – Matthew chapter five, verse eighteen. Listen again to the words of Jesus Himself – "For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled." "Not one jot or tittle" will fail. Now, what did Jesus mean by this? The word that we have translated "jot" in our English Bibles is the Hebrew word *yod*, or the Greek word *iota*. The jot or *yod* was the smallest letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The "tittle" was a tiny stroke that was added to letters of the Hebrew alphabet to indicate the specific meaning of a word in its context. Listen, friends: God's purpose and precision in the preservation of Scripture extends even to these minutest details. God's promise to preserve His Word is both a wide promise and a deep promise.

If you visit our website, teachingtheword.org, one of things you'll find in our Bible Knowledgebase section is an article that shows that every word of Scripture – even the tenses of verbs, and the use of a singular noun versus a plural noun – all of these things, all of these details, are absolutely vital in the revelation of the eternal plan of God.

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This underlines the fact that when it comes to the Word of God, any dilution, any compromise, is unacceptable. The Word of God reveals a tightly-woven system of truth. It reveals a highly interdependent system of doctrine. The Word of God reveals a system of truth and an infinitely detailed plan of redemption that existed in the mind of God from before the foundation of the universe. Proverbs chapter thirty, verse five, tells us that "every word of God" that makes up that indivisible body of revelation is "pure" – literally, it is refined to purity.

God Has Kept His Promise

And so, we have the promise of God. I will preserve My Word. I will preserve it in all of its tremendous detail and intricacy. Nothing will be lost. And we find this promise carried out in history.

Although we do not have the original manuscripts, it is clear that God has providentially preserved His pure Word in the original languages. There is more manuscript evidence for the authenticity of the Old and New Testaments than for any other book, ancient or modern. There are, for example, over 5,000 manuscripts of the books of the Greek New Testament. Some of them date from as early as 50 years after the time of the apostles. We also have the evidence of the extensive quotations of Scripture in the writings of the teachers of the early church, in the generations immediately after the apostles.

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Now, let me give you a comparison from the secular realm. Take, for example, the writings of the Greek philosopher Plato. There are only seven available manuscripts of the writings of Plato, and the earliest one is from 1,200 years after his death. Yet postmodern scholars rarely question the authenticity of the writings of Plato. But postmodern Evangelicals are constantly casting doubt on the authenticity of the New Testament!

Dear friends, this can be nothing but the subtle work of the Devil. Satan is the master of counterfeits. Satan is the one who masquerades as an angel of light. Jesus said that Satan is a liar and the father of the lie (John 8:44). Satan is the one who seeks to defile and destroy the pure, unadulterated Word of God. But even though Satan has produced his counterfeits, God has preserved the genuine text.

Let me just briefly outline for you some of the ways in which God's promise to preserve His Word has been carried out in the course of history.

Let me first address, very briefly, the preservation of the Hebrew text. Beginning with Moses, God made provisions for the preservation of the Hebrew text of the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). We find in the book of Deuteronomy that every Israelite was commanded to know the Torah and to teach it to his children (e.g., Deuteronomy 4:9, 6:6-9, 11:19). We also find that an original copy of the Torah was kept in the Ark of the Covenant (Deuteronomy 31:19-29) which was first in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple. And Hebrew historians tell us that over the succeeding centuries, manuscripts of the books of

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the rest of the Old Testament were added until they became a complete authoritative manuscript of the Old Testament.

At the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., Jewish scholars met at Yamnia, a place near the city of Joppa in Palestine. Here they began what became the work of the Masoretes. The Masoretes were Jewish scribes who preserved the authentic text of the Old Testament until the 11th century A.D. And then, other scribes took over the work until the 15th century. The vast majority of these scribes were not Christians, but nevertheless God used them to preserve His Word. These scribes were excruciatingly meticulous in making sure that the original text was precisely preserved in subsequent copies.

In the 16th century, a Jewish scholar name Jacob ben Chayim produced an authenticated version of the Masoretic text, and it came to be known as the Hebrew portion of the Received Text of the Bible. This is the source text for the Old Testament of the Geneva Bible that was used by the Pilgrims who came to America in the early 1600s. It was also the Old Testament source text for the King James Bible, and it was also one of the sources for the New King James Bible in the 1970s.

We also find providential preservation in the history of the Greek manuscript of the New Testament. We find this to be the case despite the fact that Satan has made great efforts over the centuries to produce corrupted counterfeits of the Greek text of the New Testament.

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Over 5,000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament exist today. Some of them date all the way back to the early decades after the apostles. Most of these manuscripts support what is called the Byzantine body of manuscripts. Beginning in the 1500s, scholars such as Erasmus, Stephens, and Beza used these manuscripts to compile the Greek New Testament portion of what is now called the Received Text of the Bible. In the process, they recognized that other texts – especially a group of Greek texts that had been promoted by the Vatican for several centuries – they recognized that these Vatican texts were in fact corrupted counterfeits.

The Protestant Reformers and their successors used the Received Text to produce the English Bibles that I mentioned a moment ago, among others. In the 1800s, the English scholar John Burgon did extensive research, and he proved that the Greek text used by the very early Christian church was the same as what is now known as the Received Text of the New Testament that we have in our hands today.

Divine Preservation: The Believing Church's Historic Position

We also find that solid belief in the doctrine of the Divine preservation of Scripture has been the historical position of the believing church.

We find identical words expressing this position in both the Presbyterian Westminster Confession of Faith, which was drawn up in 1646, and the Baptist London Confession of Faith that was produced in 1689. Both of them say this:

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The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, [notice] by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic...

Likewise, we find these words in a French Protestant Confession of Faith that was written a hundred years before these two, in 1559. That confession says this:

We believe that the Word contained in these books [the 66 books of the Bible in Hebrew and Greek] has proceeded from God, and receives its authority from Him alone, and not from men. And inasmuch as it is the rule of all truth, containing all that is necessary for the service of God and for our salvation, it is not lawful for men, nor even for angels, to add to it, to take away from it, or to change it. Whence it follows that no authority, whether of antiquity, or custom, or numbers, or human wisdom, or judgments, or proclamations, or edicts, or decrees, or councils, or visions, or miracles, should be opposed to these Holy Scriptures, but, on the contrary, all things should be examined, regulated, and reformed according to [providentially preserved Scripture].

These stalwarts of the faith believed God's promise to preserve His Word – not just in some general way but down to the very jot and tittle – and they treated His

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precious Word accordingly. This was their great defense against the evil tyranny of man-made doctrines. And dear friends, the same providentially preserved Word of God is our sure defense today.

About the Broadcast

The Scripture-Driven Church airs each week across the United States and around the world. Our goal is that of the Great Commission: to preach the Gospel to the world, and to equip believers to stand upon and live by the sole authority of God's Word, to the glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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