

Victory on the cross

A study of Colossians 2:8–21

By Mike Morrison

Paul warns the believers in Colosse: **See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ (2:8).** The Colossians probably knew what Paul was talking about, but it is difficult for us to be sure.

From what he says in verses 21-23, the “philosophy” taught a variety of restrictive rules, or self-abasement. Verses 11 and 16 suggest that it included Jewish customs such as circumcision and sabbaths. In Gal. 4:3, Paul uses “basic principles of the world” to refer to Judaism. The Jewish historian Josephus uses the word “philosophy” to refer to different schools of Jewish thought.

In several cities, Paul struggled against people who tried to mix Jewish ideas into Christianity, and it is likely that this was also going on in Colosse. People had added human traditions to Judaism (Mark 7:8), and were trying to add them to the gospel. Paul is

- **having been buried with him in baptism**
- **and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead (2:11-12).**

Our baptism indicates that we were buried with him (Romans 6:3-4); our faith in God unites us with his resurrection; and with a repentant life, we fulfill the symbolic meaning of circumcision. Through Christ, we have the spiritual status of being circumcised. It is done *in him* and *by him* because of our union *with him*.

Enemies are defeated

Paul tells us what we were apart from Christ: **When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature... God solved this twin problem: He made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins (Colossians 2:13).** When we followed the desires of our flesh, we were spiritually dead and cut off from God—but in Christ, the sins


that separated us have been forgiven, and because they are gone, we live with Christ.

In verse 14, Paul describes this forgiveness: **having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was**

against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. “Written code” comes from the Greek word *cheirographon*, which often refers to a note of indebtedness. We are forgiven and given life because our debts (our sins) were cancelled by Christ. They were transferred to him on the cross, and paid in full.

The forgiveness we have in Christ is a strategic victory for us: **And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross (2:15).** Here Paul refers to the parades that victorious generals had—after disarming their enemies, they would take many of the conquered people as slaves, displaying them as booty from the conquest (see photo).

To most observers, it would seem that any crucified person had been conquered and publicly humiliated. Paul reverses that image, proclaiming that Jesus was the one who really won the battle. Because his death freed us from our debts, the “powers and authorities” lost the power they had over us. We owe them nothing,



“We are forgiven and given life because our sins were transferred to Christ on the cross, and paid in full.”

telling the Colossians that they shouldn’t fall for it. It might sound good on the outside, but it is empty on the inside.

Christians have something far better: **For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form (4:9).** Christ is fully divine, and he has (present tense) a human body. Through his incarnation, Jesus has brought humanity into the presence of God, into the life of the triune God. Jesus is not a halfway point on a pathway to God—he is all that we could ever hope for.

It is not only Christ, but we also **have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority (2:10).** Our salvation is complete in Christ. When we are in him, we are brought into divine life. We do not need anything else.

Paul explains how thoroughly we participate in Christ:

- **In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ,**



The Arch of Titus in Rome commemorates the Roman victory in the Jewish war (A.D. 66-70). This replica, in a museum in Israel, shows the Temple Menorah and Jewish slaves displayed as trophies of the victory. Photo used by permission from Beth Hatefutsot, The Nahum Goldmann Museum of the Jewish Diaspora.

and they are exposed as powerless imposters.

Because of Christ's victory, Paul writes: **Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day** (2:16). Since we are fully forgiven and fully qualified in Christ (1:12), we should not let anyone question our salvation due to our "failure" to obey rules about diet and days.

The false philosophy criticized the liberty that the Christians enjoyed, and Paul is saying, Pay no attention to their objections. You don't have to obey those rules because you have been given everything you need for salvation in Christ. You are forgiven, and that philosophy has no authority over you.

Those rules may have had some value before Christ came, but are not needed now: **These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ** (2:17). The dietary rules and sabbaths, like circumcision, symbolized a reality that we now have in Jesus. When we have the fullness, we don't need the silhouette.

False humility has no value

Paul said, "Do not let anyone judge you about diet and days." Now he gives a parallel admonition: **Do not let anyone...disqualify you for the prize** (2:18). No one can actually disqualify us, of course—Paul means that we shouldn't let anyone make us think that we have to keep special rules in order to qualify.

This unnamed person **delights in false humility and the worship of angels**. The rules may look humble, but in actuality, they arrogantly claim that Jesus did not do enough for us. This person probably does not worship angels directly, but may claim that certain behaviors will help people join the angels in their worship of God.

Paul reveals more about the false philosophy when he writes: **Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions** (2:18). The person (like various Jewish writers of the time) probably said he had visions of heaven, and although he offered humility, he was actually full of pride.

His focus had taken him away from Christ: **He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow** (2:19). Growth comes from Christ, not from secret information and special rules. This person is not helping the body grow.

Paul now uses another argument, building on what he has already written: **Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"?** (2:20-21). When Christ died to "the basic principles of this world," we died to those regulations, too. Those petty rules have no authority over us. Our victory does not come from our ability to keep rules—it comes from Christ on the cross. ●

Questions for discussion

- What deceptive ideas endanger Christian faith today? (v. 8)
- Does my union with Christ change the way I view myself? (vv. 11-12)
- If God forgave all my sins, why does the Lord's prayer include a request for forgiveness? (v. 13)
- What powers used to hold a grip on me? Does my life now show that I am freed? (v. 15)
- Has anyone ever tried to tell me that I wasn't qualified for salvation? (v. 18)