

(Colossians) Part Four - Col 2:6-23

by Douglas Moo

The sermon explores the fullness of Christ, the significance of baptism, and the relationship between circumcision and baptism in Colossians 2.

Duration: 1:09:22

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Romans 2:29, 1 Corinthians 10:2, Ephesians 2:5, Colossians 2:14

Topics: "Exposition"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the concept of fullness in the new experience of deliverance from the power of sin. He emphasizes that through our identification with Christ, we are given the ability to live a new life and become a new people. The preacher also highlights the fundamental work of Christ in delivering us from the penalty of sin. He encourages Christians to view the Bible as something to immerse themselves in, allowing its message and values to become a part of their souls. The sermon concludes with a discussion on how God forgives us and wipes out our debts through Christ.

Transcript

Well, I must say that I did sleep better last night. Although I did, a couple times I did awake and I did sense a slight shaking of the building. You know, kind of when a freight train is on the tracks a little distance away and you can still feel a bit of the vibration, so I don't know.

But we're very frustrated, as I'm sure you are, at how little of Colossians I have done. But I must say I made the deliberate decision when I looked at the kind of time I had and looked at Colossians and said I'd rather work a little bit more carefully through a fewer number of passages and just sort of try to skate over too much. So that was a deliberate decision for good or for ill, and there we are.

So I would like to think we can continue our study of 2.6 to 2.15, complete that, and then maybe jump ahead a bit into Chapter 3 here and there to see where Paul is taking some of this from an ethical perspective. I think that would be useful to get a little bit of picture of that as well. So if you would turn again to Colossians Chapter 2, I'd like to pick up on this theme that I think Paul is developing at this point in the letter, again, the point he makes here about Christ being the one in whom all the fullness of the deity dwells and the fullness we enjoy in him.

Paul, as I suggest now in these subsequent verses after that statement, is helping us to understand how it is that we have come to this fullness. What is this fullness? And in broad outlines, it seems to me then, as

we've begun to talk about the circumcision imagery in verses 11 to 12, the focus is on a fullness in terms of what we sometimes call the new experience of deliverance from the power of sin. He's talking here, I think, it's not explicit, but I'm going to try to argue the case this morning, essentially about the power to live a new life.

The ability that we are given by Christ in our identification with him to be a new people. And then in verses 13 to 15, where I think a little break comes between 12 and 13, he takes us back to the fundamental work of Christ in delivering us from what we call the penalty of sin. New life in terms of forgiveness, especially, is the theme, as we will see, of verses 13 to 15.

Now, I would like to explore with you a bit further this idea of our being circumcised with Christ. I would like to, again, make clear that in my mind, it is a very hard call to know whether, in the imagery of circumcision in this verse, Paul wants us to think of our identification with Christ in his circumcision, a metaphor for the death of Christ in which we participate, or whether he is drawing our attention, in a sense, to our conversion. When we come to Christ and experience our own circumcision performed by Christ, that latter is the direction the TNAV translation takes that you have before you.

Most English versions reflect something like that. But the alternative, again, that sees some reference to Christ's own metaphorical circumcision is a very valid option. One of the better commentaries, for instance, on Colossians, written by Peter O'Brien, I think a soul mate to many of us in terms of his general theological perspective, Moore College in Sydney, Australia, argues well for the identification of this as Christ's experience.

Again, without going into that debate any further than that, I am taking it as a way of talking about that in coming to Christ, we have what Paul calls this body of flesh, this enveloping power of flesh stripped off from us. Now, one or two of the brothers came up to me after the session last evening, I think it was, and engaged in the ministry of very, very cordial remonstrance, which I appreciate, because they were absolutely right in the point they make. I spoke incompletely or perhaps incautiously.

Of course, I did not mean that Paul is suggesting that when we come to Christ, the flesh is stripped off in the sense that we no longer have anything to do with it or never are bothered by it or never are tempted by it. Of course not, but rather I think the imagery that we have here in verse 11 is similar to the imagery Paul uses in Romans. All of my students accuse me of always going to Romans to talk about everything.

I confess, I do tend to do that. But there are worse places to go, I must say, that the imagery you remember there Paul develops when he talks about the flesh, particularly in Romans 8, that we are no longer in the flesh. That sort of defines who a Christian is.

We are no longer in the flesh, but he warns us, remember, don't have the mind of the flesh, don't walk according to the flesh. So in some sense, as a Christian, this power of the flesh, the worldly impulse, the anti-godly tendency, no longer dominates us. We don't live there.

That's not where we belong anymore. It doesn't dictate terms to us as it used to. Remember Paul also uses the language of slavery to get at that idea in Romans 6. But of course we are still able to be influenced by that flesh.

And so clearly when Paul uses the imagery here in verse 11, he doesn't intend to say the body of flesh is stripped off in a way that means we no longer have to worry about it. But he does want to, again,

encourage us by reminding us that in Christ, because of his work, no longer does flesh dominate us. That is not the one, again, who is Lord and Master any longer.

That's the imagery I see him using. Now, verse 12, baptism. What do we do with this? Well, you see the connection that Paul draws.

He talks about this circumcision of Christ. Again, in my view, the circumcision performed by Christ is a way, I think, that the TNAV translates appropriately so, if this is the correct interpretation. It's connected with our being buried with Christ in baptism.

In which baptism, I think, there is an ambiguity in the Greek text here. The second clause in verse 12 could also be translated in a sense, in Christ you were also raised with him. But it's more likely that Paul continues the reference to baptism.

You were buried with him in baptism, and you were raised with him in baptism. Partly because, as we'll see, this matches the pattern of Romans 6 that I think Paul is drawing from here. Romans, again, you see, everything gets back to Romans eventually, one way or another.

It's not true if you can't find it in Romans, is my theory. We were buried with Christ. We were raised with Christ.

And it's awkward for Paul to say, in Christ you were raised with Christ. You see, I just think that would be an odd thing for him to say. So I do think it is more likely here that the reference is to baptism in both members of verse 12.

Buried with him, raised with him. Now, just a couple of observations on this. First, why does baptism get involved here? It is clearly, first of all, in my view, water baptism.

This is not spirit baptism or something of that sort that some like to resort to. No, I don't think that works. I think this is water baptism.

And I think, again, that we find parallel here, importantly, in Romans 6 and 1 Corinthians 15, which I quoted last night. Fundamental, Paul says, to the tradition he inherited, the essence of the gospel. Christ died.

He was buried. He was raised. These fundamental events that stand as the inaugurating events of the new covenant era.

And so it's not at all unnatural, then, in a passage like Romans 6, when Paul is talking about our death to sin, our removal from sin's power and influence, that he will allude to our participation in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. And connects that with baptism in Romans 6. Now, it's at this point that many people, in my view, and I must say, especially in the Baptist tradition in general, have, in my view, misinterpreted this language. The language in Romans 6 and in Colossians 2 is not an attempt to symbolize the physical actions of baptism.

There is no hint of that in either of these texts. Nor can I find any evidence of that tradition until sometime in the second century of the Christian church. In other words, it is not the case, in my view, that we have any New Testament foundation to say that this language is intending to correspond to the physical actions of baptism, as we sometimes hear it presented.

We go down into the water, symbolizing our burial with Christ. We rise up from the water, symbolizing our resurrection with Christ. This is not what Paul is getting at by talking about Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.

He is not setting up an analogy in which he says, just as Christ died and was buried and raised, so also you are sort of metaphorically dead, buried, and raised when you undergo baptism. Now if you look carefully at both passages, baptism is the place where these things happen. We were buried with him in baptism, raised with him in baptism.

We're identified with Christ in and through water baptism, which immediately sets some of us who are not all that sacramental squirming. How can Paul say this kind of thing about water baptism? We all know he was a good, low-church Baptist. How could he say things like this about it? And so people again resort to, well, it's got to be spirit baptism.

It's got to be a metaphor, something of the sort. I think there's a better answer when we look at the New Testament as a whole. First of all, as Dr. Moore reminded us the other night, this is not the only place in the New Testament where baptism is set forth for us as a pretty significant event.

You remember looking at the 1 Peter 3 passage, which is another one of those that make us squirm. Baptism now saves you, and of course Dr. Moore appropriately noted how that's qualified in its context, but nevertheless, Paul - see, everything's Paul in Romans. Peter - Dr. Moore was making the same mistake, wasn't he? You see, it's a natural thing.

Peter says something there that I'll bet most of us would not be very comfortable in saying, no matter how much we qualified it. How many of you would be happy to stand up in front of your congregations and say, baptism saves you, no matter how much you then qualified it and explained it and so forth. And what I think, again, this does is present us with a striking possibility that at this point, the New Testament perspective on baptism and our usual way of thinking about baptism are not aligned as accurately as they might be.

I think that's what these kinds of statements in Scripture should force us to do. Yes, we need to interpret them in their context, we need to explain them in the larger biblical theological framework, but sometimes we are too quick to domesticate these difficult passages in Scripture and make them fit the scenario we've already adopted. We're just like the Pharisees in John 9. Great story.

In a sense, they keep saying to this poor fellow who has just had his sight restored, no, no, you can't see. Our theology makes it clear that no one like this Jesus guy could have healed your eyesight. You really can't see.

And all this poor fellow says, well, you might be right, but it sure seems like I can see. And so, again, we have to be careful of that tendency. As much as we need to have a theological system, as much as we need to interpret every passage of Scripture in the context of the system we're building, to always let Scripture come back and reshape and reconfigure that system.

If we don't do that, our professed claim to sin under the authority of the Bible doesn't mean very much. So we've got to keep doing that. So, again, at this point it does seem to be, in many passages of the New Testament, we are confronted with evidence of a prominence for baptism, not as a step of discipleship, but as a step in the conversion experience.

Baptism in the New Testament is not the first act of discipleship. It is the last act of conversion. And to me, that's just being faithful to what the New Testament is teaching, whether I like it or not.

Now, having said that, at the same time, we of course recognize, as we try to look at the balance of the New Testament as a whole, that there are maybe at most a dozen references to water baptism, and there are hundreds of references to faith. And so we have to be careful about maintaining a balance at this point. This is where some traditions have gone wrong.

They single out these, albeit very significant references, to water baptism or the Lord's Supper, and they elevate these in a way that seems to me to be fundamental, out of kilter with the New Testament as well. I've been helped immensely here by the earliest book of James Dunn, of New Perspective fame, in his book on the Holy Spirit, in which he develops the concept of what he calls conversion initiation. And he makes the case, and I'll just be very brief about this, that in the New Testament, faith, repentance, the gift of the Spirit, and water baptism are portrayed as kind of a series of events that are unified and are all in relationship to one another.

That this was a package, as the New Testament authors tended to present it. A person came to faith in Jesus Christ involving repentance, the gift of the Spirit was given to them, and they were baptized in water as a natural expression of that situation. And again, they were baptized pretty quickly.

Acts chapter 8, Peter did not tell the Ethiopian court official to come to Jerusalem and enroll in baptism classes once he came to faith in Christ. Hey, here's some water. Why can't I be baptized, you see? And I think, again, that reminds us of a way in which the New Testament views baptism that is not always in keeping with ours.

So what am I trying to say in all of this? Who knows? I confess it's easier to make some of these general points than to get down to the specifics. This much I feel comfortable in affirming, that number one, in these passages, water baptism is being used as the place where we meet Christ. We were buried with him in his grave.

We were raised with him, identified with him, and water baptism was the place where that happens. Water baptism, again, is not functioning as a symbol of those things. There's no way you can get that out of these texts.

Water baptism is the means by which, the place at which, our identification takes place. And so the power for us to lead a new life, you see, comes in our union with Christ, a theme that was dear to Calvin and is throughout the institutes and that we have sometimes lost a little bit too much in some contemporary versions of theology, in my view, because I think it solves a number of theological problems for us, union with Christ. Baptism, then, is functioning as a way of alluding to the entire process.

When Paul talks about baptism, as he does in these passages, as Peter talks about baptism in chapter 3 of his first epistle, it is not baptism in and of itself. It is baptism as the culminating experience of these other events, of faith and repentance and the gift of the Spirit. And so we must not divorce water baptism from these other things in any way, or baptism, of course, loses its significance.

Paul never dealt with the question that we so often have to deal with. No one ever asked him. The Corinthians never had a problem or said, Paul, what do we do with an unbaptized believer? It is a good question.

Why didn't someone ask Paul, we ask. How would he have responded to that? I think, just looking at the bulk of his theology and putting words in Paul's mouth, he would have said, well, if a person has genuinely come to faith in Christ, they're a Christian, they belong to the people of God, they're in the faith, but they're missing something, and they should be baptized in water as the sort of climax and the seal that comes upon that whole conversion experience. I believe God does work in baptism.

Some would then say, well, all right, baptism is a sacrament. It depends on what you mean by sacrament or sacramental. Well, if by that we mean an event through which God promises, when, again, carried out for people who love and believe in him, a ritual or an act by which God confers grace on us, yes, I'm happy to call baptism and the Lord's Supper a sacrament in that sense.

It's not just bare symbol. I'm not as winging it at this point. I'm more on Calvin's side on this point because I think he develops in his theology the concept of these events as not simply symbolic or even mainly symbolic, but events in which God and Christ does meet with us and confer something on us.

And so the next excellent question that someone asks is, well, what is it that the unbaptized believer is missing that the baptized believer has? I don't know. Ask somebody else. I've taken us this far.

Let someone else do the rest of the work. But the fact is, in my view, it's awfully difficult to tease that out of the New Testament per se. Very difficult.

I want to be very careful on this point. I don't want to say, oh, if you've got a believer who's not been baptized, they are really missing something substantial in their Christian life. No, I don't think that's the case at all.

Do I think that they are missing something that God does in his grace through baptism? Yes, I think I have to say that. What that is, I'm not sure again. But the closest I can come is to the sense of sealing, putting a seal upon this conversion experience as a point at which, in a sense, God stamps us with his approval, as it were, as an outward ritual.

It's something that can be great to point back to as well. I think that's why Paul might use it sometimes also the way he does. A lot of us don't know quite when we came to faith.

We know that we've crossed a line, but we don't know where to put that line in our timeline as humans in our history. But if we've been baptized, we can point to that, can't we? I can say, yeah, in April 1972, I was baptized in Greencastle, Indiana, by so-and-so. And I can go back to that.

Not that that event has power in and of itself, but it reminds me of the capstone to my own conversion process. And it is an event that kind of stands in that way as an event that we can come back to. One more issue, of course, with baptism is the way in which Paul here moves from circumcision to baptism.

What is he saying about the right of baptism in doing this? We have been circumcised, he says, in the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism. Doesn't this suggest that in Paul's view, baptism is the new covenant right corresponding to the old covenant circumcision? Perhaps, I'll come back to that. But let's first of all note that Paul does not draw any kind of direct connection between the two.

In verse 11, he talks about our being circumcised. And again, it's obviously a metaphor at this point. It is not literal circumcision, it is a metaphorical circumcision.

More than that, the connection of verse 11 and verse 12 is not, you were circumcised, which now corresponds to baptism. Rather, you were circumcised and that experience of being a shed of this overwhelming power of the flesh happens when you were buried with Christ and raised with him through baptism. You see, there is no direct connection of circumcision and baptism in our passage, even in a metaphorical sense.

Nevertheless, maybe one could say, yes, still, all that being said, is there not something of a parallel between these two? I'm not sure I want to deny that parallel entirely, but we need to draw the appropriate conclusions from it. If we mount the argument that would go something like this, as those who belong to God's old covenant were circumcised, so those who belong to God's new covenant should be baptized, I'm not entirely unhappy with that line of reasoning. But I would want to take it to the next step and then ask the question, how do you join the new covenant? By an act of personal faith.

Not by the faith of somebody else, not because you were born into a certain family, not because you were raised in a certain church. So if one wants to push the analogy at this point of circumcision and baptism, in a sense, I'm happy to do that and say, yes, let's pound the pulpit, everyone who belongs to the new covenant should be baptized as a sign of their admission to the covenant. But how do you join the covenant? By an act of personal faith, which is at that point somewhat distinct from the broader national ethnic connotations of the old covenant.

There's a difference in the covenants at this point that we need to recognize that has a lot to say about what we might call admission standards. Some of you may want to pick this up further in our question and answer time. Some of you might not.

The idea, again, of the with language that I've highlighted here in the print that you can't see is significant in this passage and again reminds us of the Roman VI language. It's a very interesting example. We talk about the in Christ language that dominates the first part of this paragraph and in some sense continues, and then Paul shifts to the with Christ language.

Both, again, certainly talk in broad terms about the significance of our union with Christ and, again, the realization that our new life is based on what happened to Christ and our participation in it. When he died, we died. When he was buried, we were buried.

When he was raised, we were raised. And it's important to keep in our minds that the freedom I have as a believer not to sin arises from my connection with those events in the life of Christ. It doesn't depend on whether I've read Scripture that morning.

It doesn't depend on whether I've gone through all the right motions. It doesn't depend on how I'm feeling. It doesn't depend on whether I've been to church that week.

All these things are, of course, important ways of reminding us of the significance of Christ in our lives. But we have to remember the foundation, the basis for the hope I have to please God, to lead a life worthy of him, to continue to live in him. All this language Paul is using in Colossians rests in my objective identification with Christ in God's sight.

That's the foundation. Now, having talked about this freedom from sin's power, verses 13 to 15 talk about the freedom from sin's penalty, if we can use that old way of putting the matter. And, again, I think there is a bit of a break between 12.

I keep trying to make sure I watch this and have my mouth up to the microphone here at the same time, so doing some gymnastics here to accomplish that. But you can see that I think there is a bit of a break here between 11 to 12, and then here beginning in 13 when you were dead in your sins and so forth. Language, again, that is very familiar from Ephesians, Chapter 2, of course.

And, again, the parallels between Ephesians and Colossians are obvious, as one of the brothers was pointing out yesterday in our question and answer session. And it's talking about forgiveness of sins again. Remember that idea that was present also in Colossians 1.14, where you have the kind of unusual identification of redemption in terms of the forgiveness of sins.

I say unusual because Paul never anywhere else talks about the forgiveness of sins. Interesting, isn't it? Kind of one of those Bible trivia things, you know. We make such a big deal about forgiveness of sins, you know, and surely it's a great theme in Paul.

But outside of these few passages, no references. In fact, this is one of the reasons that critical scholars think Paul could never have written a book like Colossians. It's just got too much stuff in it that's not authentically Pauline, you see.

Different from the real Paul of Romans and 1 Corinthians and Galatians and so forth. I suspect, rather, that Paul here knows that the false teachers are making a promise of forgiveness through their particular religious orientation. I suspect, and again this is often the case when you have a biblical author, of course, using language or concepts in one book that don't appear somewhere else.

Why do they appear there? Well, not because you've got a different author necessarily, but much more often because you've got an occasional situation that's being addressed. That's usually the reason why you have distinctive vocabulary and distinctive ideas. You know, if you track my teaching, boy, it's going to change a lot depending on who I'm talking to and what their problems are and what their issues are and what their background is.

Of course it is. Some of these biblical scholars, I think, pretend like all these New Testament writers were all people isolated on their separate islands out in the middle of an ocean somewhere and weren't part of real life at all. A little common sense goes a long way here, but common sense is not in great store among some of us in the academy.

At any rate, forgiveness of sins is something I suspect the false teachers were promising. They were saying, you really want to get your sins taken care of? You want to be forgiven? Come down here to the temple of Mithras. Come down here and experience this mystery religion initiation, which might be alluded to, in fact, later here in Chapter 2. We'll give you forgiveness.

We'll make sure your sins are taken care of. I think that's probably why Paul brings it in here. No, no, again, Christological, Christocentric.

Sins are taken care of definitively in Christ. We who are dead in our trespasses and in the uncircumcision of our flesh. TNAV, sinful nature here again.

I think probably on generally the right track, although I'm still not altogether comfortable with the language of sinful nature for flesh, but I'm not sure there's a good alternative. I know some of you say flesh, but let's not go there. I heard that, amen, and I'm ignoring it.

The idea here again is probably, I think, the fact that, okay, before we come to Christ, you know, our flesh dominates us. It's in that sense not been stripped off yet, and so it's talking about our incapacity as human beings. But, of course, particularly when you think of the parallel in Ephesians here, Chapter 2, it's also entirely possible to think here that Paul is saying, you know, you Gentiles, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, not part of the people of God, were in a sense uncircumcised.

Because you were Gentiles, you were outside, but now Christ has come to bring Gentiles as well as Jews into the kingdom, and you have experienced a circumcision. Remember how Paul can use circumcision that way in Philippians 3, kind of a polemical way. We are the circumcision now, you see.

We are the place where God is truly setting apart a people for his glory. At any rate, the main burden of the verse is clear enough. Out of that deadness, out of that state of spiritual condemnation and insensitivity, God has made us alive again with Christ, you see, with him.

When Christ was brought triumphantly to life, we in a sense were brought to life with him. And through our conversion, initiation, marked by baptism, we have been joined to those events in Christ's life, and we benefit from all the redemptive consequences. So our sins have been forgiven.

And then there's some beautiful metaphors here in 14 and 15. How did God forgive us? Well, background. He wiped out this IOU that stood against us.

The charge of our legal indebtedness, which is a fancier phrase and then accurate enough here in the TNIV. The kairographon is the Greek here. It's, again, a word that roughly, not exactly, we always have to be careful of these analogies, but roughly, and I think for our purposes, sufficiently, is like what we call an IOU.

It's as if we had all signed a document. Dear God, I owe you perfect obedience, signed Doug Moo. And there it is.

Here's what I owe God. And that certificate of indebtedness, that IOU, stands against me because Satan can take it and say, uh-uh, got this one. He has not fulfilled his obligation.

That IOU is what our text says has been wiped away, nailed to the cross in the metaphor that Paul uses here. And all of this is tied up with the law also probably. It's not absolutely clear.

But when Paul talks here about the language of, and cancel the charge where it goes, threw against us and condemned us, take away, nailed to the cross. Yeah, the charge or legal indebtedness, that phrase involves not only the IOU, but also the idea of decrees present in the Greek text here, a word that Paul uses again in the parallel Ephesians 2 passage very explicitly with reference to the law of Moses. And let me suggest, and I've just been influenced by a dissertation finished under my supervision just last month, a fine dissertation I hope is going to be published, reminding us that in Paul there is also this idea that the law of Moses in some way represents and is similar to the original law of God back in the Garden of Eden.

And this gets into some very interesting theological territory. Some of you people who know Reformed theology will know some of the issues of the covenant of works with Adam in the Garden and whether that's good biblical teaching or not and what that does to the structure of our theology and so on. I don't want to get into all of that.

I'm not even capable of doing so. But just to say that it does seem to me Scripture ultimately, while focusing so often on the law of Moses as the issue in the New Testament, sees the law of Moses as part of a bigger phenomenon, the law of God under which all human beings stand and that God's law stands then in that condemning function for all of us, all human beings. And it's that law in a sense that gives the IOU its power.

And so that is why it's so important for Christians no longer to be under the law, to have been set free from it, to have died to it, all this language that Paul uses in other situations. Again, some interesting biblical and systematic theological implications that could arise out of this would be fun to talk about. But you see what Paul is at least doing in our passage.

Full, complete, final forgiveness. Because that IOU, containing perhaps the law itself, has been nailed to the cross. It no longer has the power to condemn those who belong to Christ.

That which we could never have discharged in our own power has been taken and nailed to the cross by God himself. And then verse 15. I mentioned Satan a moment ago, you might remember, and you might wonder why.

Well, it's because of verse 15. You see, we come back to the powers again. Back up here, remember in verse 10? Wasn't it verse 10? Here I go with my verses again.

I'm never going to do this again. Yes, the great central part of the passage here, in Christ all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form. In Christ you've been brought to fullness.

In him you are also circumcised. That's how we would expect the sequence to go. This statement about Christ being the head over every power and authority doesn't seem to fit all that well in the sequence of Paul's thought here.

But again, I think what we see is the reflection of the problem in Colossi. As Paul keeps adding these statements about the reality of Christ's victory over these spiritual beings. And he uses the picture, of course, as many of you will know, in verse 15 of the Roman triumphal entry, a very significant matter in Roman imperial history.

A successful general who had waged a campaign in some foreign province against some group of heathen Celts or Goths or something would have the privilege of celebrating a triumph when he returned to Rome. He would enter the city in a chariot and people would applaud and he would be given honor. And behind him would march some of his soldiers who participated in the campaign.

But especially significant, behind him would also march prisoners of war he had taken in the campaign. He would lead them in triumph. This is where Paul takes the language here and in the 2 Corinthians 2 text, which uses the same language as well.

It pictures Christ as the victorious one leading behind him the ones who have been imprisoned and defeated. And that's the picture here of Christ and the powers in Christ and his victory on the cross. Note, not the resurrection but the cross, interestingly.

God won his victory over these spiritual powers. They are defeated enemies, dejectedly walking behind Christ in his triumphal procession. What an image this would have conveyed to first century people in the Roman Empire who, of course, living as far away as Colossae, would very unlikely have ever seen a

triumph, but certainly have heard about them.

The relationship then of what God has done for us in forgiving us our sins and the spiritual powers is obviously hinted at in a passage like this. Most of us, I think, will be aware of the various theories of the atonement that have arisen over the years in the history of Christianity. There has been lively discussion about which of those images is the most important one, which is the central one, and so forth.

I don't intend to get into that debate here. Some of you also know the well-known book by Gustav Alain, *Christus Victor*, who argued that this imagery of God triumphing over the powers in Christ is the main imagery for atonement throughout Christian history. He goes so far as to argue that was the main theory of atonement you find in Luther, which I frankly think is nonsense.

I'm no Lutheran scholar, but that's a stretch. I do think he is also wrong about seeing this as the most fundamental image of the atonement in Scripture. But he's certainly right in drawing our attention to this as a theme, which as many of you know is very prominent in the early fathers, who make a lot of this theme, this idea of our being redeemed from the power of Satan and God winning a victory over the powers, Satan holding us, in a sense, in his power, and something that goes on in the cross is God winning the victory over Satan, so he releases us from Satan's power.

All those themes, those are there in the early fathers, and there is basis for that to some extent in the New Testament and in a passage such as the one before us, that the powers do need to be defeated by God in Christ in order for us to come to this fullness of life in Christ. Now, our time is virtually over, but I want to just touch quickly on where some key points of the argument go from here. I just would feel a little bit better at least about doing that.

In 2.16-23, we have the key text in which Paul gives us a little bit more of a profile of the false teaching, and again, it's by no means a complete profile. There's a lot of stuff in there that we're not certain about. What is clear is that there's some kind of a Jewish element.

Verse 16 talks about Sabbath, New Moon celebration, and so forth, and I know a lot of you would like to talk with me for quite a while about those in our culture theologically who are judging you about Sabbath Day. Right? Some of you have suffered the slings and arrows of brethren who have a real problem with you not celebrating the Sabbath. Well, you know, just direct them to Colossians 2.16, I guess.

Don't let anyone judge you with regard to the Sabbath Day. Now, I realize that a number of you want to qualify that in terms of, well, Sabbath being observed in a certain context or with a certain set of other rituals and so forth. Don't think that finally washes here.

I think what we have here is just sort of the tip of the iceberg of Paul's greater understanding of the freedom from the law in its entirety that we enjoy as new covenant believers and the fact, therefore, that you cannot bring back these elements again. Later on in the same passage, Paul talks in the sense of the shadow, you see, which reminds us again of the Hebrews 10 language of the Old Testament and the law being a shadow of the reality that's now come in Christ. And, again, it seems to me there's a Jewish element in the false teaching in which these Colossian Christians are being told, yeah, you want a real spiritual fullness, you've got to pick up some of this Jewish stuff too.

You've got to add that in to your new covenant experience. Paul is having none of that. He isn't saying that, no, it's wrong if a Christian himself or herself decides to observe the Sabbath, but he is saying don't

let anyone tell you you've got to because that's the shadow that's not the reality.

That's a shadow that's gone with the coming of Christ. That's moving back to the old age again and so forth. But you can see the tenor of the discussion here is don't let people judge you.

Don't let them disqualify you by insisting on these things that they're insisting on. And I think just a very, very interesting little thing at the end of the passage here, verse 23 is a bear to translate. Don't even look at that in the Greek unless you want to give yourself an afternoon's worth of work and some headaches.

So it's not easy, but it seems that Paul is saying that these false teachers were really big on rules and regulations. And they were substituting their rules and regulations for vital connection with Christ the head, the one who supplies all of our spiritual vigor. And so I don't think Paul is saying rules and regulations are to be thrown out of the Christian life, but he's saying don't make them too important.

Don't make them too important. Your Christian life needs to be directed by God's transforming work of the Spirit from within, creating the mind of Christ in you, leading you to live a life that pleases him and that will honor him. That's got to be the main impulse of what it means to be a Christian.

We need to keep reminding ourselves of that because we live in an age that in response to the wild libertinism that we see out in our culture, sometimes tends in the church to try to combat that by what I would call spurious legalism. And, boy, we sometimes start talking too much about rules in our churches, I think, when we need rather to be helping our people come into a more vital union with Christ in which the Spirit is transforming their hearts and minds. At any rate, it's interesting that Paul comes back to this notion of the flesh here.

It's the word sarx here again in verse 23. And you see these false teachers again are saying you want to do battle with the sarx? You want to win out over the flesh? You need these rules. And Paul is saying they don't have any value for that.

They don't ultimately take care of this issue of the flesh because they only are treating the symptom and not the disease. So you might by your rules be able to get people to act in a certain way the right way. They're following the rule.

But if they don't have rules for all the other aspects of their lives, they're going to be lost and helpless, and they're not going to be able to fulfill Christ's will for them. They're not going to have any power to ultimately take care of the flesh. There's a battle, there's a power struggle going on, and rules and regulations, however good they might be, are not going to be the solution to that battle.

That battle has to be joined as we again come to know Christ and live in vital union with him and allow God's spirit to transform our very fundamental way of thinking. Just close with a strong statement that I sometimes again like to use, not because I mean it in the way I say it, but because I like to stir people up. You've been a good congregation.

You've stayed with me and so forth. When I sense a class beginning to drift, I'll just start saying more and more outrageous things until finally I get them back with me again. That's the best way sometimes to keep people with you.

It's either to get them cheering for stuff that they agree with you on, or get them really mad at you. But I sometimes will say to people, the goal of your Christian life should be to get to the point where you don't

need the Bible anymore. Okay, some of you are saying, I knew there was something wrong with this guy.

What did you learn at the conference this week? Well, there you've got something. But of course what I mean by that is that in terms of determining the direction of our lives as Christians, how we are to live out authentic Christian lives in this world, too many Christians take the approach, well, I need to find a verse in the Bible that's going to tell me what to do about this. We should view the Bible as something we sink our lives into, that we read and reread and reread until it becomes part of our soul to the point where we don't need it anymore because it's become part of us.

We've adopted its message, its values, its perspective, its worldview. It's done its work, sort of like the computer manuals that some people still read. I'm one of those people.

I get a new piece of software, I've got to read the manual because I'm 20th century. My kids would say, Dad, that's so 20th century. I know.

But obviously you want to get to the point, you don't need the manual anymore. You know how to work the software. It's internalized.

And there's, again, that goal that I would hope would be there in our ministries to be teaching Scripture and getting our people into Scripture in such a way that it becomes the fabric of their lives. It changes the very way they think at a fundamental level so when faced with an ethical issue they don't have to pause and say, I wonder what Jesus would do, or let me find a verse, but they would naturally respond in a way that honors God because that's who they are. That should be the goal of what you're trying to do with people, which is a long-term goal, frustrating to a lot of you because you have people in your church for a year and they move.

That's a huge problem in our era, isn't it, in terms of getting people to really come on board with some of these things. In a long-term kind of program, sometimes we don't have that long term with people. But I think that's what we should be after.

All right, I've talked long enough. Questions, comments on what I've said or stuff and questions I didn't get to. And Fred's already on his feet.

I guess he gets privileges here. What other Sabbath is there? The Babylonian Sabbath, is that what they're referring to? I don't understand how the word Sabbath is being used then in that context. In other words, as far as I can see in New Testament usage, there is no other use of the word Sabbath than that which is commanded by God and the law of Moses, Old Testament slash Jewish.

And if you're going to say, well, no, that's a reference to the Christian Sabbath, well, you're going to have to find evidence for me in the New Testament where that language is used, where it's used in a way different than the Sabbath. So I'm not persuaded. The other, for many people, it's a conversion.

I hope not. That's the analogy that Don Carson likes to use here. Oh, okay.

Yeah, yeah. But yeah, you're sure. I think it's an analogy that helps.

You know, this is why I am a teacher and not a preacher because I am not gifted with illustrations and metaphors and analogies, and I think that's a very effective part of preaching and teaching, too, for that matter. So I'm always trying to think of what could I use as an analogy for the way I view baptism here, and

I always come up with a blank. I think that's partially helpful, but of course none of us is going to say part of expected Christian conversion experience is to walk the aisle.

And so it doesn't have quite the same level of importance that baptism does, clearly, in that baptism is something all who come to Christ are to experience and something in which I think God is promising to work by his grace for us in a way that's obviously not true of the walking of the aisle. So to the extent that that is maybe a good illustration of how we can refer to a bigger event by one sort of physical outward aspect of it, yes, that might be a useful analogy, Fred. Well, again, I don't think sufficient ultimately because a lot of people have come to Christ with never walking the aisle, you see.

Yeah, I guess that's not what I mean. Okay, sorry. But is Paul the event of, because the symbol is so closely tied to the reality.

Yeah, I think I would go so far as to say we have what's called a synecdoche here, a part for the whole, that water baptism is a part of this complex of events, so Paul is referring to the complex events along with water baptism. But if you're wanting me to push the analogy to say Paul is using baptism to refer to conversion without including water baptism in it, no, I don't think the analogy is adequate then. I think water baptism is part of it, not the whole of it, but it is part of it and can't be omitted from what Paul is referring to.

Okay. Okay. Baptized.

I mean, in all the areas we take off of it, and this is in large, groping for growth many times in the difference between a baptized event. So the interesting thing to me was where it struck me the most was in the situation in the midst of the baptism. That's a very interesting observation.

I appreciate that. I can't say I've always seen that. I'm sure you wouldn't say you've always seen it either, but that's interesting to note.

I appreciate that word. Yes, sir. Can I follow up on Fred's question? Sure.

That's possible, although I, again, here I'm going to get myself in further hot waters if I needed to do any more. I'm not so sure that there is good evidence about baptism being the time of public declaration. A public declaration.

I don't know why Philip would have done that with the Ethiopian court official. You could always argue, well, he's going back to Ethiopia. There aren't too many churches there yet that are going to be able to give him the opportunity to be baptized in public or something.

But I know in churches I've been in, it's very much how Dr. Moore the other night described it very well. Okay, we're having a baptism service. We're going to baptize you.

I have no idea why we're doing it, but Jesus told us to, so here we go sort of thing. And often the best that I've heard in some of these contexts, this is the time when you can confess your faith publicly to the congregation. But you see that puts the matter on very much of a horizontal level.

Here's an opportunity for me to testify what God has done for me, to kind of take this step of public identification, as it were. I just don't see that that's what the New Testament is putting its emphasis on. Sure.

Certainly if we see it as a replacement, yes, that's going to be a big problem. Now I have to say that the churches I've been in, and it's been a long time since I've been in a church which did altar calls, I didn't see it as being a replacement for baptism. If it becomes that, yes, I would see it as a problem.

But, of course, the New Testament does not mandate the ways in which we seek publicly to convince people to come to Christ. And a public profession of faith is obviously something that is important, perhaps even emphasizing the New Testament in a number of places. There are a lot of ways we can do that validly, I think.

So I'm not going to speak against an altar call necessarily. I think it depends on how it's done, the context in which it's done, because sometimes that might be a way to accomplish that purpose for certain churches, certain times, places. Could it be that the... It's possible, I just don't see much New Testament basis for that idea.

I realize we're all, when I say not much New Testament basis, that's kind of an easy point to make, because the fact is the ultimate significance of water baptism has to be teased out at a deeper theological level. We've got to take the data of the New Testament and sort of put it together and then begin thinking theologically about what we do with all of that. So I realize that I can be criticized here for being a literalist in the worst sense of the word.

Well, if it's not clearly said in the New Testament, it's not true. We all know that there are theological implications driven out of the New Testament that we have to work with. But I'm not sure I see that again in quite that way.

I'm sorry, I saw a hand over here, and then I'll come back. I just had a question of... Yes, although of course the command there is not for people to be baptized, but for us to baptize. Yes, although I would want to hastily add that I would think it's a rather minor area of disobedience.

And I would be reluctant even to put it in the category of sin. Some of you are going to say, oh, come on, Moo, how can you have disobedience? It's not sin. But that's where I start to squirm very honestly, trying to cut a careful path between, on the one hand, giving baptism the significance I think it does have in the New Testament, but on the other hand, not making it such a big deal that we, in a sense, over-interpret the New Testament or take that one element out of the New Testament and elevate it to a point it shouldn't be elevated toward.

So I'm honestly continuing to squirm. A piece of bibliography, many of you will know it, but one of the best treatments from a biblical theological perspective is G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, a very, very fine treatment of the matter. Along the lines I'm suggesting here, it kind of comes out generally in the direction that I've suggested here to you.

So G.R. Beasley-Murray, of course you know he's a good scholar because he's got a hyphenated last name. To be a good scholar, you either have to have three initials or a hyphenated last name. And he does have a hyphenated last name.

So you know you can rely on good academic quality in the book. G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*. Now, sir? I want to say one quick thing.

You all recall Christian radio that would take somebody's word to say period to CFA. Is that the right way to do it? I'm not, actually. I know that's very common, actually.

And I understand why, particularly in our culture, where we have a very strong influence from sacramentarian traditions that view baptism in a certain way that we are rightly eager to distance ourselves from. So, you know, as Dr. Moore was saying the other night, we spend a lot of our time telling people what baptism isn't, and that's a misplaced emphasis, but often it needs to be there. But on my view, baptism should be, water baptism should be conjoined as closely as possible with our actual conversion.

And that if, indeed, it's something that God is doing for us, it doesn't depend on the degree of our understanding. My view is it should naturally take place as soon after one's conversion as possible. I think the fact we separate it so often makes it even more difficult for us to get the New Testament picture of the way these are, indeed, seen together.

So that would be my perspective there. Yeah, Tom. I'm tempted to think what I'm about.

It seems hard. It's possible, though, rites like baptism were very popular in the ancient world, actually. And it was more the question of in whose name have you been baptized, the name of which God.

In some countries, obviously, those work in the context of Islam, for instance. The step of water baptism is a deeply significant and absolutely life-shattering experience, in a sense, where you cut yourself off from your culture and so forth. But in the ancient Greco-Roman world, there were all kinds of rituals with water that various temples and religions were practicing.

So the step of baptism would not have been seen to be that big a deal. Just, oh, you know, what brand of religion have you identified with would be kind of more the question, I think. Fred, do we need to get to lunch? One more.

Is that going to be you? Oh, no, I thought you were. Ha, ha. Yeah.

Good. Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Yes. Hmm. Yeah.

That's a good point. Yeah, we don't have crocodiles, but unfortunately we have electricity. I don't know if you've heard that tragic news story about the person who was electrocuted in the course of being baptized.

But, well, Fred.

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