

# The Message of Colossians

by G. Campbell Morgan

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*The Colossian letter emphasizes the fullness of the Godhead in Christ and the filling of the saints in Him, warning against false philosophy, false mediation, and false confidence.*

**Topics:** "The Fullness of Christ", "Warnings Against False Teachings"

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## Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes the central teaching of Colossians, which is the fullness of the Godhead in Christ and the filling of the saints in Him. He warns against false philosophies, mediations, and confidences that can lead believers astray, urging the church to hold fast to the true doctrine of Christ. Morgan highlights that in Christ, believers are restored to their rightful place in creation, their relationship with God, and their fellowship with Him. The sermon underscores the importance of recognizing Christ as the source of all fullness and the necessity of maintaining a correct understanding of His nature and role. Ultimately, Morgan calls for a commitment to Christ that transcends human traditions and philosophies.

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## Transcript

### A. THE PERMANENT VALUES

I. The Central Teaching. ii. 9, 10a.

i. The Fullness of the Godhead in Christ.

a. Creation. The Origin of Life.

b. Resurrection. The Mastery of Death.

c. Peace. The Reconciliation of all.

ii. The Filling of the Saints in Christ.

a. Restored to their Place in Creation.

Kingship.

b. Restored to their Relation to God.

Subject.

c. Restored to their Fellowship with God.

Cooperation.

II. The Abiding Appeal. ii. 6.

i. False Philosophy. "Take heed ....." ii. 8.

The Tradition of Men. Speculation.

The Rudiments of the World. Materialism.

ii. False Mediation. "Let no man....". ii. 16-18.

Ceremonialism.

Spiritualism.

ii. False Confidence. "Why . . ." ii. 20-23.

Submission to human Opinion.

Ascetic Practices.

## B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

I. To the Church

i. The Matter of supreme Import to the Church of Christ for her Life and Service is that of her Doctrine of Christ.

ii. To hold fast the Head as He is revealed in this Letter will make impossible the Failures here also revealed.

II. To the Individual

i. A Christless Philosophy ends in Animalism.

ii. A Religion of added Intermediation despoils of the Prize.

iii. Asceticism is of no Value against the Flesh.

We must necessarily remind ourselves of the connection between this letter and that to the Ephesians. They have been spoken of as twin epistles, and that is a perfectly accurate description with regard to the positive doctrines with which they deal. They are complementary the one to the other, so much so that it is almost impossible to study one without studying the other. As in the Ephesian letter, the theme is that of the glory of the Church in her relation with Christ; in the Colossian letter, the theme is that of the glory of Christ as at the disposal of the Church. In the Ephesian letter we are led to the supreme height, from which it is possible to view the Church in its eternal character, and so to understand what its immediate conduct ought to be. In the Colossian letter the resources of the Church are revealed, and they are all centred in Christ.

While that is true there are differences between the two letters. I propose to refer to one of them only, by way of introduction. This letter to the Colossians cannot be read without a sense of argument, of conflict, of dangers, and of difficulties. All that was absent from the Ephesian letter; it was constructive, preeminently a document of teaching. By that I do not mean to say that the Colossian letter is not constructive; it is distinctly so, but we shall miss the complete message unless we recognize that it is corrective also. Through the letter we have a vision of the Church at Colossae, and are made conscious of the perils threatening it in the very subtle and insidious dangers which the apostle most evidently had in mind as he wrote. I am not proposing to deal with these in detail, for I do not think an explanation of the dangers constitutes the living message of the letter. We shall, however, be compelled to recognize them, because one vital value of the letter is that it is a corrective for certain perils which threatened the Church at Colossae, and which threaten the Church to-day. We may forget the local colouring, we may recognize that some of the matters dealt with have passed away; but the essential doctrines abide; and the perils still abide, and can only be corrected by these selfsame doctrines.

Let us first consider the essential message of the letter, as to its central teaching, and as to its abiding appeal.

The whole teaching of the Colossian letter is gathered up in the few brief words, "In Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and in Him ye are made full." (Col. ii.9, 10.) That is a composite sentence, having within it two supreme declarations. The first declaration is that "In Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily;" and the second is that "In Him ye are made full."

The fullness of the Godhead is in Christ; that is the Christian doctrine of the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. The saints are filled in Christ; that is the Christian doctrine of saintship. The facts are correlative and may thus be stated, The fullness of the Godhead is in Christ; The filling of the saints is in Christ; making a distinction between fullness and filling. The fullness of the Godhead is an eternal fact, and the apostle made use of, what I would term for the moment, the ever-present tense, when he wrote that the fullness of the Godhead bodily, not dwelt, or will dwell, but dwelleth. That is the constant present tense of essential Deity. God knows nothing of the limitation of time. When the apostle referred to the saints he used another word, filling. The fullness dwells in Him; but the saints are made full. He is not made full, He is full. The saints are not full, they are made full. Thus we have in two brief sentences the whole of the Christian doctrine with regard to Christ, and with regard to the Church of Christ. Consequently, the central teaching of the letter has to do with the fullness of the Godhead in Christ, and with the filling of the saints in Him.

In dealing with the first of these facts it is a matter, somewhat technical, yet full of interest, that the Greek word here translated "Godhead" occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. The word rendered Divinity in the Roman letter is radically different, and signifies an attribute of Deity which may be discovered in nature. This word refers not to an attribute, but to the essential fact of Deity. According to Augustine, Thayer also agreeing, the Latin Fathers had to create a word to convey the thought of the Greek word. The Latin word Divinitas did not meet the suggestiveness of the Greek word, and they made the word Deitas. That is a distinctively Christian word, unknown prior to Christianity. This word Deity best conveys the thought of the word translated Godhead.

That is a distinction which we must be very careful to make. It is not enough to say that Christ was Divine, to affirm belief in the Divinity of Christ. There is a sense in which every man is Divine; but it cannot be said of every man that he is Deity. Divinity is an attribute of Deity. Deity is the essential, peculiar, lonely nature

of God. That is the thought of the word used here. Here then we have the statement of the supreme fact concerning Christ, that the fullness, the pleroma of essential Godhead, dwelt in Him corporeally, that is in bodily manifestation.

In the context we have some phases of this fullness dealt with. The relation of Christ to creation is declared in the words, "The Firstborn of all creation; for in Him were all things created . . . all things have been created through Him ; . . . and He is before all things, and in Him all things consist." Christ is the Creator and Sustainer of the universal order.

The relation of Christ to Redemption is revealed in the declaration that He is not only First-born of all creation, but: "First-born from the dead." Resurrection presupposes death. Death is due to sin. Between the original creation and the resurrection there was the tragedy of sin and its issue of death. In resurrection He was Victor over these. The result is peace, reconciliation between all that had been separated as the result of sin.

Thus with clear vision the writer looked back as far as human eyes can look, through all the processes of the things in the midst of which he found himself ; he traced the material order back until he reached the beginning, and there he found Christ, the First-born of creation.

Again he looked and beheld the tragedy of evil, of sin, the rivers of darkness and of death sweeping through the centuries; until he saw death's power broken, the resurrection, life won out of death, and there again found Christ, God coming into the midst of human sin and human wrong, the First-born from among the dead.

Then he looked on, and where his gaze ended I cannot see, but his vision was that of an ultimate reconciliation of things on earth and things in heaven; and the Reconciler is this same Christ, Who is behind creation, and Who caused it to be; Who came into human history and broke the power of death. He is the Reconciler, having made peace through the blood of His Cross. These all are the activities of Deity and not of humanity. Humanity did not create, did not break the power of death, cannot produce peace and reconciliation where there is war and strife.

Having thus described the activities of Christ, he declared that "in Him dwelleth all the pleroma of the Godhead bodily," all the fullness of Deity; creating, rising out of death in triumph, reconciling to the utmost bound of the heavens. That is Paul's Christ That is the Christ of the Christian Church.

The second part of the central teaching is; "In Him ye are made full." In days when I am discouraged and very fearful by reason of my own frailty, and my own near-sightedness, I come back and read this statement, and then I break into song in celebration of this Christ of mine. I am made full in Him. There is nothing I need which is not to be found in Him.

Let us interpret the making full of the saint by the pleroma of the Saviour. Let us explain the filling of the human by the fullness of Deity. We will do so by the illustrations which the apostle used. This Christ is the Origin of creation, the Creator. We are made full in Him. That means that we are restored to our true place in the creation. It means that in Christ man regains his sceptre and his crown. Out of that fact grows part of our missionary responsibility. "Go ye into all the cosmos" ; not merely travel over the earth, that is not all; but go into the cosmos, into the creation, crying, groaning, sobbing, agonized creation; go into it and preach the evangel of that risen Christ, Who is Lord and Master, and the Redeemer of all creation. Every true Christian is restored to the place of dignity and rule in the creation of God. I know we do not realize it.

I know we are too often busy hunting among rubbish heaps, attracted by the glitter of straws. But the fact remains that in this sense we are made full in Him. He is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, of mountains and hills; of beasts, birds, and flowers; and we are made full in Him. We come into relation with all the kingdom of nature, in Christ, as we never can come into relationship with it, save under His dominion and power. The animals will have a better time if we live in Him. Flowers will become more beautiful under our touch if He energize it. All the glory and beauty of the cultivation of flowers has resulted from missionary enterprise. Nature runs riot in her beauty in the wilderness, where the foot of man comes not, and the hand of man does not touch; all the delicate and fine results of cultivation have come after the evangel to the creation. We are made full in Him, so that we are restored to our proper place in the creation. I begin there because Paul began there ; but that, glorious as it is, is the lowest thought of all.

Let us take a step further. We are made full in Him, in our restored relationship to God by the way of His resurrection. By His resurrection the very life of God is communicated to the spirit of man, so that he takes his right place as subject to God, bending before Him, not by the breaking of his will, but by the capture and constraint of the will, by the indwelling grace of the life of Christ. Thus we are made full in Him.

That leads us to the final fact, we are restored to fellowship with God in Him. Fellowship does not merely mean that we receive from God; it also means that which to me is more and more amazing, indeed the most amazing fact of all that we can give to God in service. I think every day I live, the thing about the grace of God which amazes me most, is not that He loves me, not that He saves me, but that He calls me to be a fellow-worker with Himself. Christ has made it possible for me to be a worker together with God. I can help Him .to bring in His Kingdom, to establish His righteousness, to hasten the day of His ultimate victory.

We are made full in Him; for it is in Christ that we are restored to our true place in creation; in Christ that we are restored to our true relation to God; in Christ that we are restored to that fellowship with God which means cooperation in all His purposes.

These are the central teachings of this letter, stated in broadest, barest outlines; the doctrine of the fullness of Christ; and the doctrine of the fullness of the saint in Him.

The abiding appeal is threefold.

"Take heed lest there shall be any one that maketh spoil of you through his philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (ii. 8).

"Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a feast day" (ii. 16). "Let no man rob you of your prize by a voluntary humility and worshipping of the angels" (ii. 18). "If ye died with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, do ye subject yourselves to ordinances? Handle not, nor taste, nor touch (all which things are to perish with the using), after the precepts and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will-worship, and humility, and severity to the body; but are not of any value against the indulgence of the flesh. If then ye were raised together with Christ, seek the things that are above." (ii.10 -iii.1).

It will at once be recognized that this threefold appeal is entirely dependent upon the great doctrines of the letter; that it is the necessary sequence and corollary of the provision made in Christ. The first note is a warning against false philosophy, the second is a warning against false mediation; and the third is a warning against false confidence.

The warning against a false philosophy ; "Take heed lest there shall be any one that maketh spoil of you through his philosophy and vain deceit" The warning against false mediation ; "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of a feast day, or a new moon, or a Sabbath day," and "Let no man rob you of your prize by a voluntary humility and worship ping of the angels" ; the mediation of ceremonialism, and the mediation of angel worship or symbolism in any form. The warning against false confidence; Why do you submit yourselves to ordinances and to severity to the body? These things are of no value against indulgence of things of the flesh. "Set your mind on the things that are above."

This false philosophy Paul summarized with a masterly hand as the tradition of men, the rudiments of the world; the tradition of men, speculation; the rudiments of the world, materialism. This philosophy is the result of human guessing; a philosophy which puts God out of His universe, and attempts to account for everything within the limitation of the material. Such false philosophy is to be corrected by recognition of the fact that Christ is the solution of the problem of the universe. There is no other solution. Beware of the philosophy which is vain deceit, which comes from the tradition of men; beware of it, because it is only speculation; because it is bounded by the cosmos, by the rudiments of the world, by elementary things, things having a beginning; you may call them atoms or electrons or anything you will, but if you attempt to account for the world by the world, then your philosophy is a philosophy of vain deceit. This is to be corrected by recognition of the fact that God through Christ is at the back of all eons and electrons. That is a philosophy characterized by dignity, by majesty. The vision of Christ as the First-born of creation, the Upholder of creation, gives a true view of the universe.

The next appeal is a warning against the false mediation of ceremonialism. Men will judge us in the matter of what we eat and drink, and as to whether we observe feasts, and new moons, and Sabbath days. They are shadows all; and we are to have done with them, because we have Christ, Who is the substance.

There is another false mediation, that of the worshipping of angels, a voluntary worshipping and humility which is of the essence of pride. With all this also we are to have done, by recognition of the fact that we need no intermediary, because we have access to the Lord Himself, direct, immediate communication with the Lord of all angels, the Master of all spirits. We are not to suffer ceremony or angel to come between us and Christ.

The final note of appeal is a warning against false confidences. The first is that of slavery to human opinion. If we have died with Christ from the rudiments of the world, we are not as though living, to subject ourselves to ordinances of men, which have no value against the indulgence of the flesh, and which are only matters of human opinion. Of such ordinances Paul gives an illustration in the words, "Handle not, nor taste, nor touch." I constantly hear Christian people saying that the Bible says, "Handle not, nor taste, nor touch." As a matter of fact the Bible teaches us that we are not to obey those who lay such restrictions upon us; and that, not in order that we may have licence to play with evil things, but because we are to take our commands from our living Lord, and not to allow anybody to interfere between us and Himself.

Another false confidence is that in ascetic practice. Severity to the body Paul dismisses as of no value against indulgence of the flesh. It is possible to wear a hair shirt and be sensual. It is possible to lacerate the body with whips and scourges and think indecently while we do it. We are risen with Christ; therefore we are to seek the upper things, to set our minds on the upper things; to have a true view of our Lord, to see Him Lord of creation, Master of death, Reconciler of the universe; and then by living union with Him, we shall need none of these things which never, yet made men spiritual. All the fullness of the Godhead is in Christ, and we are made full in Him!

A final word as to the application of these things to the Church of God to-day. The matter of supreme importance to the Church, for her life and service, is that of her doctrine of Christ. I know that is hardly the view of current philosophy. We are being told that it does not matter what a man thinks, it matters what a man is. Yes; but let us not forget that as a man thinks, so is he. The supreme matter for the Christian Church is what she thinks of Christ. It is not enough that our conceptions should be Christo-centric. The supreme question is, Who is the Christ at the centre? We may be Christo-centric, and yet not be Christian in the New Testament sense of the word. If the Christ at the centre be the Christ, Who is the First-born of creation, the First-born from the dead, in Whom is all the pleroma of Deity; then our position is Christian according to the New Testament.

To hold fast the Head as He is revealed in this letter will make impossible all the failures which are here revealed. To hold fast this Christ will make it impossible to accept a philosophy of the universe which is the result of speculation, and which begins and ends in the material. We cannot be New Testament Christians without believing that every blade of grass flashes with the glory of God in Christ. We cannot be New Testament Christians without seeing tokens of His majesty and His infinite glory in the delicate beauty of the pencilling of the flowers, and in the rolling rhythmic order of the system of the stars. The New Testament Christian cannot consent to any solution of the riddle of the universe which shuts out God and Christ.

This doctrine of Christ will as certainly put an end to all false mediation and false confidence. The New Testament Christian cannot be content with the mediation of ceremonialism in any form. The New Testament Christian will waste no time listening to the muttering of witches in the hope of discovering some secret of the spirit world, when it is possible to hold direct and immediate communication, in street and city, in the railway train, as well as in the sanctuary, with the Lord of angels, and the Master of all spiritual realms.

A Christless philosophy ends in animalism. Beware of it. A religion of added intermediation robs of the prize of religion. Beware of it. Asceticism is of no value against the flesh. Beware of it.

"Christ! I am Christ's! and let the name suffice you,

Ay, for me too He greatly hath sufficed:

Christ is the end, for Christ was the beginning,

Christ the beginning, for the end is Christ."

Whether we look up or down; back or on; to depth, height, length or breadth, we still see Christ, and all the pleroma of Deity resident within Him is our fullness; so that in Him, for to-day, for to-morrow, and forever, we are filled to the full.

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