

**Women's Bible Study – Fall 2018**  
**Colossians 2:6-15: Because of Christ**  
**10/9/18 – Svea Merry**



Today, we begin a new section of the book of Colossians. Up until now, Paul has been laying a foundation that will support the rest of his letter. Gretchen walked us through his section about who believers are in Christ, Jann told us who Christ is, and last week Angie showed why suffering for the sake of sharing Christ with others is worth it. Today, he's going to shift his focus, though, and begin addressing the problem facing the Colossians.

And that problem was this: Culture was making them think they needed something more or other than Christ to be spiritually complete. And lest we think less of these Christian brothers and sisters, this isn't so unique to them. We deal with this too. Our culture also offers us numerous approaches and trendy strategies on how to find satisfaction spiritual fulfillment. We humans have a tendency to chase after gimmicks and tricks that promise to unlock the secrets of whatever we hope will bring us fulfillment. Every year, billions of dollars of self-help books and videos are sold, to Christians and non-Christians alike, and people flock to attend conferences promising to help you live your best life now. For some, this may be a spiritual search, hoping that new ways of meditating or communing with God might unlock something new. Others hope, even if subconsciously, that if they just buy the right thing, live in the place, or wear the right size, life will finally be at peace. We as humans seem hard-wired to chase after what someone tells us is the key for our happiness and fulfillment.

Are you there right now? Do you feel yourself searching for satisfaction, working hard to be good enough, or pouring all your energy in to living up to a standard whether it be God's standard or your own? Are you wondering if there's another way out there? A simple trick that if you just incorporated it into your life, everything would click into place? If so, the message that the Holy Spirit gave Paul to write to the Colossians is also a message that the Holy Spirit intends for you today too.

Do you remember from the first lecture I gave as an overview of this book, these poor palm trees? We learned that palm trees have roots which mesh into the soil around them creating a bottom-heavy anchor that holds the tree firmly in place, even the in the face of severe storms. But the key is that the palm has to be rooted in the right kind of soil for this to work. If it's not rooted in the right soil, like the tree on the right, it can topple over. The point was that our roots must be sunk into faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. Putting all of our trust in anything else such as the love found in our families or our determination and confidence in ourselves to be a good person, won't hold us. Without being rooted in Christ, we'll eventually topple over.

That's where Paul is going to start this section of his letter, with the necessity of being rooted in Jesus Christ.

**The Overarching Principle (2:6-7)**

Turn with me in your Bibles or open your favorite Bible app to Colossians 2, verses 6 and 7. These verses are often pointed to as the theme of the whole book of Colossians, and are a true bridge from the foundation Paul has laid up to this point, and where he's about to go with the rest of this letter. Colossians 2:6-7: *"So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, <sup>7</sup>rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness."*

I love those verses. Don't we want them to describe us? They can, as verse 6 begins, if we have received Christ Jesus as Lord. That's important, because everything I'm going to say today about the incredible blessings and assurances that we have through Christ only applies if you have accepted him as your Lord and Savior. If you are still investigating what it means to follow Christ, or if you are not sure if you've really taken this step yet, how exciting it would be if today is the day that you feel Christ welcoming you into his family. The day your roots take hold in the only soil that can hold you.

For all of us, though, let's think for a moment about what it means to receive Christ Jesus as Lord. Now, when we hear that, we probably assume that receiving Jesus refers to becoming a Christian. But this phrase about receiving "Christ Jesus as Lord" likely would have triggered something even more than that for the Colossians. In their day, Roman citizens were often required to declare Caesar as Lord, so when new converts made a public profession of their faith as they were baptized, declaring Christ Jesus as Lord, it was a powerful statement to all in their community that they were giving their lives over to Christ. Paul is using this language here to evoke the passion and excitement they felt when they first received and declared Christ as their Lord and Savior, similar to how a phrase like "for better or for worse" immediately makes us think of wedding vows.

Last week, Steve and I celebrated our wedding anniversary on a wonderful long weekend trip to Banff in Alberta, Canada. Not only was it a sweet time for the two of us to get away and recharge, it was where we had honeymooned 12 years ago. Being back in the place where our marriage began made it natural to reflect on how God has built up our marriage and strengthened us through all that He brought us through in the time we've been together.

As I hiked through these beautiful mountains last week, I couldn't help but connect those reflections with Paul's words here in these verses about being built up and strengthened in our faith as we live our lives in Christ. The Christian life, like a marriage, also usually begins with a commitment filled with optimism about the new life ahead. But just like marriages are tested and tried through the challenges of life, so is our relationship with Christ. And that is why Paul begins this section reminding us of the importance of staying steady on course, continuing to live our lives in him.

It starts with being rooted in Christ, but then what did we see after that? Paul gives us 3 phrases that reflect our ongoing life in Christ:

We are to be built up in him, which shows that Christian life is a work in process, we are continually being built up like a dream home lovingly maintained and renovated over time.

We are to be strengthened in the faith as taught, which some commentaries say could mean that we are strengthened by our faith, while others suggest this means we should seek to strengthen our faith. But these two options are not mutually exclusive, they work together in a beautiful circle. As we are strengthened in the faith, our faith strengthens us.

And lastly, we are to be overflowing with thankfulness. And this makes sense. If we are consciously aware of the wonderful things we are grateful for in our life in Christ, why would we wish for anything less?

### **The Problem (2:8)**

So now that we have this great overarching principle of continuing to live our lives rooted in Christ our Lord, being built up, strengthened in the faith, and overflowing with thankfulness, we're ready to talk more about the problem in the Colossian church.

Last week, we saw the first hint of their problem in chapter 2, verse 4 when Paul said, "*I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments.*" And in today's passage he develops the idea a bit more. Look at verse 8, "*See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.*"

Now, Paul is not saying that philosophy itself is wrong, or that we should reject our God-given ability to think critically or to benefit from the intelligence of others. And unfortunately he wasn't very clear about what he meant by "elemental spiritual forces of this world." Some think he was referring to a Greek practice that worshiped the primary elements of fire, earth, water, and air, but others see these spiritual forces as Satan's demonic forces seeking to pull Christians away from their confidence in the truths of Christ. Either way, though, what he is warning against is the destruction of following any ideas of what makes one spiritually complete apart from Christ.

And this is pretty easy to discern if someone is telling you that in order to have fellowship with God, you need to cleanse your aura with crystals, or prove your devotion through a pilgrimage to Mecca, or work hard in this life so you don't come back as a bug in the next. But what about when the ideas sound more Christian-like? Many Mormon beliefs and practices of the Jehovah's Witnesses seem quite in line with Scripture and encourage people towards lives of wonderful family values and community engagement. How can we discern where these philosophies are going astray? I'll suggest for you a simple test. Ask if anything other than belief in Christ is necessary for our salvation. Something is not right they say "Faith in Christ is fine as far as it goes, but you are not really right with God, accepted by God, or protected by God unless you also do or believe X, Y, or Z." If it is suggested that you have to do more or be more apart from Christ, it is one of these empty and hollow philosophies Paul warns against.

But I think it's important for us to ask why the Colossian Christians were vulnerable to these other ideas about how one is spiritually right with God, and even more relevantly, what makes us vulnerable to the same thing today? What is it that makes us vulnerable to someone else's great idea for what will improve our lives, our health, our relationships, or our spirituality?

Maybe you have some of your own ideas, but I'm going to suggest three possible reasons, and I've listed them on your outline as three questions we may ask that would lead us to wonder if we need more than simply the gospel. First, we may wonder, "What if there's something better out there?" and we dabble in other spiritual practices in order to have all our bases covered. Second, we may wonder, "What if I'm not enough for God?" What if I'm a disappointment to Him or He wishes I were more like someone else?" which may lead us to hide from Him or to chase after something which seems more achievable. And third, "What if I haven't done everything I should to earn His love or approval?" which may leave us feeling like we have to work harder or be better or maybe even make us feel so unworthy that we may want to give up completely.

These questions are deeply personal, but I think they are questions that most of us have asked ourselves from time to time. And I'm glad that today's passage gives us a chance to discuss them.

### **Question #1**

The great news is that the next several verses have outstanding and very encouraging answers to these very questions! Let's start with the first one. **What if there's something better out there?**

I think this is a natural question and one which is ingrained in our human way of thinking right? We start this thinking as little kids. Look at this little guy with the cool rainbow popsicle. He probably picked that out himself and was super excited about it until he saw his sister's bigger ice cream cone. We are hard-wired to want more. Now, we may like to think we're more sophisticated than little kids, but if we didn't still think this way, would HGTV exist? Isn't that the whole point of much of our entertainment? To see if someone else's home or lifestyle is better than what we have and to make us dream about how we could have better for ourselves? With this kind of thinking so ingrained in us, isn't it logical that even we as Christians who love God could be vulnerable to wondering if there is something new and improved or upgraded or simply better out there for our spiritual lives?

Well, what would reassure you that your belief in Christ can withstand any possibility of there being something better out there? Verses 9 and 10 suggest for us that the answer is found in knowing who Christ is. Let's read them. *"For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, <sup>10</sup> and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority."*

Let's break that apart and see what it means. "In Christ, all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form." This is an incredible statement. This man Jesus Christ, who was an actual person in history verified not just by our Bible but by other historical documents of the time as well, was not simply a great teacher or prophet, he was God in bodily form. Paul's emphasis that he lived in bodily form doesn't just point to the fact that he was a living, breathing person like you and me, it's also meant to affirm the complete reality of his existence. He wasn't a supernatural being, an angel or one of the many lower-case gods worshipped in the Greek or Roman empires, he was a real person like you and me. But verse 9 also says, "all the fullness of the Deity lives in him." Think about what it means for something to be full. Can you fit anything into a jar completely filled with sand? Can you add anything into a glass that is full to the brim? Jesus was also fully God. Remember

back in chapter 1 we saw that Jesus was the visible form of the invisible God. I loved what Jann had to say about this when she said, if you want to know how God would handle something or how He feels about it, look to Jesus, because Jesus is God with us, God we can see and relate to. And verse 19 of chapter 1 told us that not only was Jesus filled with the fulness of God, God was pleased about this because it was His plan all along for how He would bring us back into a peaceful relationship with Himself.

And not only that, verse 10 tells us that Christ is the head over every power and authority. There is no one on earth then or now or in the future, who will ever have any kind of superiority to Christ.

So I ask you, what could possibly be better? If you were one of the Colossians, why would you ever be tempted to worship one of the many made-up Greek or Roman gods when you could worship the real God. The God who came to save us through the person of Jesus Christ? And for us today? Why would we ever be tempted by anything less when Christ is superior to every power or authority?

The truth we've been learning is that Christ, who created everything in the Universe through and for himself, who holds everything together, and who is the head of all things, invites us into loving fellowship with Himself. This Christ, the One in whom God dwells fully, came to live with us and make it possible for us live with God. And he did this through his death and resurrection so that we too can be raised to new life after we die. All we have to do is to accept His gracious offering.

## **Question #2**

But maybe that would lead you to ask the second question on your outline. What if I'm not enough for God? That's a reasonable question, isn't it? I mean, it's a pretty incredible offer that God gives us, isn't it? I mean, imagine if the Queen of England mailed you an invitation that said, "I have chosen you to come and live with me in the palace as my daughter, and you will be given all of the rights and privileges and inheritances of my other children. I'll even provide your clothing, accommodations, and arrange to get you here. And lest you're afraid of the publicity and strains of my kingdom, once you're here, I'll shield and protect you from anything that could harm or upset you. All you have to do is accept my offer." Wouldn't that be amazing? I don't know about you, but I think what might hold me back from accepting that kind of an offer would be that I might not feel worthy of it. I mean, what I got to Buckingham Palace and the Queen discovered I wasn't all that she'd hoped for in a daughter, or what if I couldn't live up to her standards? Now, if that is how we might feel about this kind of a far-fetched offer from the Queen of England, how much more awesome is this offer from the King of the Universe? Do you ever fear that God may someday decide you're not enough for Him or worthy of what Christ did for you?

I sometimes test out early drafts of these lectures on my husband or kids to get their input, and when I ran that last paragraph by one of my sons, and asked him that question I just asked you, he said, "Well I wasn't worried about that before but I am now! Thanks a lot, Mom!"

But the good news is that Paul explains to us next why we need not ever worry about being enough for God. Let's go back to Colossians 2, and see something again from verse 10. "*In Christ you have been brought to fullness.*"

Here's that word again, fullness. In the same sense that Christ was filled to the brim as the one who was both fully man but also fully God, so we are filled to the brim by Christ with all that God wants us to be.

But you may say, well what does that mean? I mean, it sounds nice to say I'm filled to the brim with what God wants me to be through Christ, but I'm not sure I see it. It sure would be nice if God would give me some kind of a sign that He truly has done this for me and that I am fully worthy of Him. And God says, "You want a sign? I'll give you 2!"

Paul will go on to tell us how God has accepted us through the signs of circumcision and of baptism. Before we read these verses, though, let me give you some background that I hope will bring out their significance even more.

Now, if you're like me, when a word like circumcision starts flying around, I kind of want to shrink back and go "eww." But hang with me and let's embrace the "eww," and talk about circumcision for a minute, because I think it'll be worth it. As you probably know, circumcision refers to cutting off the foreskin covering the penis, and is a custom usually performed in the days immediately following birth. Today, many males are circumcised for marginally hygienic benefits, but the practice's origin remains tied up in religious and cultural tradition.

In the time of the writing of Colossians, circumcision was nearly synonymous with being Jewish. In fact, some verses of the Bible, when referring to Gentiles, or non-Jews, simply refer to them as the uncircumcised. Why is this?

When God made His covenant, or His promise, to Abraham, in Genesis 17 He directed Abraham, and every male after him, to be circumcised as a sign of that covenant. It was common practice for blood to be shed at the signing of a covenant, symbolizing the seriousness of the oath being taken, and pointing to the demise of a person for failing to live up to the agreement.

Not to be indelicate, but don't you wonder why God chose this particular part of Abraham's body to be cut? Please tell me I'm not the only one who wonders these kinds of things. I did some study on this, and some scholars suggest that because Abraham and his wife had been infertile up to this point, and because God promised in this covenant to make him the father of many nations, that cutting this part of his body so associated with fertility was a tangible demonstration of saying to God, "I trust you to come through on your promise and am dependent on you to make it happen." And from that point on, circumcision was the sign of being a part of that Covenant that God made with Abraham and was the defining characteristic of being part of the Hebrew people of God.

As I was pondering these things, trying to figure out why circumcision was a thing with God, I asked my husband about it. He was a great help to me because in his line of work as a family doctor, he regularly performs circumcisions on newborns. In fact, he provided me with a video to show you all what this procedure looks like in real life in case you've

never seen it before. Now, you'll all be relieved to know that I am not going to show that to you! I have better judgment than that! Trust me, having seen it myself, unless you are in the medical field and have to participate in this, you do not need those images in your memory bank.

But here is something interesting. Steve told me that circumcision is an extraordinarily unique procedure. The foreskin is the only part of the body that can be permanently cut off without significant bleeding or infection risk, and in addition to that, it's the only body part that not only can someone lose without harm, removing it even has some potential benefits. After hearing these things, I gained a whole new respect for God's design for this as a tangible sign for His people.

Now was it a perfect sign? No, there are a few glaring issues with it. First and foremost, unless a man has snuck into this room that I'm not seeing, every one of us here lacks the "equipment" required to participate in this sign. But even more importantly, this sign was tied to the Covenant made with Abraham, and when Jesus came, that covenant had been fulfilled and was no longer in effect, making this sign obsolete. This was a huge controversy in the earliest generations of the Christian church. The majority of the first Christians were originally Jews, and some of them believed it was essential that new followers of Christ become circumcised, as the Jews had, before they could be fully part of the Christian community. Others passionately opposed this saying that not only was this not necessary, it was wrong to put demands on people that God was not asking of them anymore. Acts 15 describes how Paul, along with other apostles in the brand new church debated this issue and resolved it, and Paul's letter to the Galatians focuses on why it is wrong for these "Judiazing" Christians to demand that anyone be circumcised.

But here in this letter, Paul refers to a better circumcision. A circumcision not limited only to men, not intended only for the Jews, not meant simply as a sign, but one meant to truly change us. Look at verse 11. *<sup>11</sup> In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self-ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ,*"

Why is this significant? Because this means we don't have to worry if we're enough for God. This is saying that this sign of circumcision that Jewish men used to perform in order to let people know that they belonged to God, God now performs spiritually on every one of us who believes as the sign that He has accepted as one who belongs to Him. You see, when Christ died on the cross, with his own dear flesh ripped and torn by the lashes of the torturous whipping he'd endured, he took our sinful fleshly nature on himself. He hung there, cut and bleeding, offering his own innocent body as a sacrifice, and in doing so saved all of us from the destruction that we deserve because of our sinfulness.

When Paul here says in verse 11 that we were spiritually circumcised and the fleshly, sinful part of us was cut away by what Christ has done, he's saying we never ever have to worry if we're enough for God because God has given us this sign that we belong to Him through Christ. And though we may not feel like we're enough for God, Jesus Christ His only Son is most definitely enough. And when we accept what Christ did for us through his death on the cross, God says, "You're mine. I have spiritually cut away everything that was sinful, dark, and ugly in you."

But it gets even better. If circumcision was the sign that the Jews belonged to God, is there a sign now of Christian belonging to God? Yes! Baptism. When a believer is baptized, he or she is making a public statement of their faith in Christ. As they are submerged into the water, it is a symbol of dying to one's old self, and then as they come up out of the water, it is as if they are being resurrected like Christ to their new life. Now look at verse 12: *"<sup>12</sup> having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead."*

Friends, these two verses are saying that we who believe in Christ had the ugly, sinful parts of us circumcised, cut and stripped away, when he died on the cross, and just like he was resurrected, we are raised to new life in him through our faith in God. We never have to worry if we're enough for God because God has made us all He needs us to be not through what we do, but through what Christ did. And in case we feel like we need a sign, He's saying here that He Himself has overlaid on us the two signs of circumcision and baptism to prove that we belong to Him.

But when you hear it said that God has cut away and killed the sinful part of you and raised you to a perfect new life, does it concern you that you still struggle with sin? Are there are still parts of your life where you feel like your fleshly self still fights to rule over you? I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but if I did, I would think that every one of us would raise our hands if we're honest, because we do still struggle with sin, even though Christ has already dealt with it. And this can trip us up just as it was tripping up the Colossians who were feeling like maybe they needed to do more in their spirituality. The people around them were promising bigger and better paths to a greater spirituality and they were wondering if they should jump on board. And we too sometimes wonder if we need to do more, to be a better person, to spend more time in church, to give more, or can even begin to entertain other forms of spirituality just to cover our bases.

When we wrestle with this, it's natural to ask the third question on your outline, "What if I haven't done everything I should?"

Fortunately, what we're about to see is that we do not need to worry about this either because Christ in God has done everything for us. Look at verse 13. *"<sup>13</sup> When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ."* Don't miss something really important here. Not only is this verse reaffirming that you as a believer have been made alive with Christ, who did it? God! You don't have to figure out how to do this yourself, He does it for you. And this is even more amazing: When does it say that God did this? Was it after you cleaned up your act and became a pretty good person? Was it when you finally learned where every book of the Bible is located and memorized your favorite verse? Was it when you finally made it to church every Sunday for six months in a row? No. God made you alive in Christ even when you were still dead in your sins.

Romans 5:8 puts it this way, *"But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

Friends, our new life in Christ isn't based on what we have done. It is based on what He has done for us. We don't have to earn it. We simply believe and be thankful for this gracious gift.

Sound too good to be true? Think of adoption. When parents adopt a new child, often doing so without even having met the child beforehand, did that little boy or girl do anything to earn a place in their new family? No. The parents had a desire to share their love with another and claimed that child and did everything necessary to make the child legally theirs. So it is with God. The Father, Son and Spirit reach out to us in love and adopt us into the family of God through Christ's work on the cross. Through this, we are given a new life, an escape from the despair and hopelessness of our prior state and instead given a place in God's family with all of the rights and privileges and inheritances. Not because of what we've done, but simply because God has lavished His love on us. The rest of verse 13 and 14 say, *"He forgave us all our sins, <sup>14</sup> having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross."*

He nailed it to the cross. Everything we ever did or still will do that gets in the way of our peaceful relationship with God is canceled out, has been nailed to the cross, and was destroyed in advance when Christ died. Even though we're still stumbling our way through life, Christ's work on our behalf is already done. We don't have to ever worry about trying to be enough, Christ is enough for us. God adopted us and provided everything we need to be His daughters. All we have to do is believe and confess him as Lord, rooting ourselves in Him.

And in light of that, let's go back to how this passage began. Remember those first verses we started with, verses 6 and 7, all about continuing to live in Christ? To be rooted in Him, built up in him, strengthened in our faith, and overflowing with thankfulness? I want to show you something amazing.

Perhaps the most astute English majors of you out there might have noticed something about the language here, but it's easier to tell in the original Greek language that Paul wrote this in, that when he says that we need to be rooted and built up in Christ, and to be strengthened in the faith we were taught, these are all written in the passive voice. In other words, he is saying these are things done to us. These are not things that we have to actively do in our own power. In other words, he's saying continue to live your lives in Christ knowing that Christ is building you up, that Christ is strengthening you in the faith you've been taught. The only active thing Paul tells us to do, is to overflow with thankfulness.

Isn't that incredible? Dear sisters, not only has Christ made us worthy and done everything for us for our salvation, it is through him that we continue to live our lives of faith. His strength and power is ours for this life. We simply accept him as the Lord of our lives and in our joyful relief, let the gratitude within us overflow. It's beautiful, isn't it? What other religion, spiritual philosophy, or humanly-invented gimmick could ever compete with that? You have Christ. Nothing else compares.

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