

Alive in Christ

An Exegetical Study of Colossians 2:6-15

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Introduction

Some parts of the Bible, such as the historical narratives, are not as in depth as others. The section before us from Paul's letter to the Colossians is "meat," as opposed to "milk."¹ In ten verses, Paul presents to us some of the most profound and critical teachings of the Christian faith. We have before us a clear presentation of law and gospel. Christ and his work are clearly proclaimed. We are encouraged to grow in our Christian faith and life. We are presented with scriptural truths on which to build. Several verses are basic passages cited frequently when articulating various Christian doctrines. In other words, there is a lot packed into these ten verses.

But that is the joy of studying the Bible in depth. We get to unpack the truths of our salvation God is teaching us. We get to enjoy the Spirit's work in us so that we grow deeper in knowledge and closer to Jesus. Our spiritual life becomes more vibrant because we are led to see our living Savior more and more. Perhaps that provides a good overall theme for the verses before us. Alive in Christ. Alive because through the Word we are connected to the living Christ who died and rose again. Alive because through the Word we grow in our spiritual life of faith. Alive because through the Word we increase in our Christian living. May the Spirit bless us in our study of his Word so that we see how we are alive in Christ.

Exegesis and Commentary

2:6 Ὡς οὖν παρελάβετε τὸν Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον, ἐν αὐτῷ περιπατεῖτε,

Therefore, since you received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to conduct your life in him,

(NIV) *So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him,*

(ESV) *Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him,*

Paul had just commended the Colossian Christians on "how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is."² The news of their Christian faith and faithful living has brought joy to Paul. Based on that good report, he now encourages them to continue in their Christian faith and life.

They had been brought to faith. That had already occurred (aorist tense of *παρελάβετε*) in the past. They had received Jesus and all the blessings he had won for them and given them. Paul uses the same word to describe faith as John uses in his Gospel, although John uses it in a negative sense. "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."³ God promises and gives. Faith receives.

What does faith receive? "τὸν Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν τὸν κύριον." Paul uses Jesus' entire name and title. He is "the Christ," the One God chose from eternity to carry out his plan of salvation. He is Jesus because he came to "save his people from their sins."⁴ He is the Lord, the one true God, who is completely independent, constant and faithful.⁵ These three titles summarize who Jesus is and what he came to do.

¹ Heb 5:11-6:2.

² Col 2:5b.

³ Jn 1:11.

⁴ Mt 1:21.

⁵ Dt 6:4; Ex 34:6-7.

They encapsulate the object of our faith. We believe in Jesus, the Christ, our Lord. We receive the blessings he has won and gives. As ministers of the gospel, these titles and names are the core of what we preach and teach.

The Colossians Christians had received Jesus as the Lord. They believed he was God's Anointed One. Along with faith goes life. They are to continue living their life as his people (*περιπατεῖτε*, present imperative). Literally, they are to continue "walking." Their daily life is to follow the path God sets out in his Word.⁶ But this "walking" can only take place when a person is "*ἐν αὐτῷ*." This prepositional phrase is in emphatic position. The only way anyone can live a Christian life is by a connection with Christ. Connection with Christ only comes through the Word and Sacraments.

Paul is making the same point Jesus did when he said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you."⁷ We can only live as Christians when we are connected to Jesus by faith in him. That connection is worked through the gospel, the words of Jesus. To continue living as God's people, we need to continue remaining in God's Word.

2:7 ἑρριζωμένοι καὶ ἐποικοδομούμενοι ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ βεβαιούμενοι τῇ πίστει καθὼς ἐδιδάχθητε, περισσεύοντες ἐν εὐχαριστίᾳ.

by being rooted and continuing to build up in him and by being strengthened in the faith, just as you were taught, by abounding in thanksgiving.

(NIV) *rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.*

(ESV) *rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.*

Paul uses four participles to add to his description of believers who have received Jesus as their Lord by faith and are now to continue living as his people. All four of these can be best taken as means. This is how we are continuing to live in Christ. First, we are rooted in him. This happened in the past, when we were brought to faith, but it has ongoing results (*ἑρριζωμένοι*, perfect participle). This has been done to us by the Holy Spirit (passive). Our faith has been sunk deep into Christ. Paul uses some of the same picture language that the psalmist used in Psalm 1⁸ and that Jesus used in his parable of the sower.⁹ When the person who heard the Word didn't have his faith sunk deeply into the Word, faith faltered when trouble came. People who hear the Word and believe have their faith rooted in Christ. This enables us to withstand the trials, temptations, worries and stress of life.

Second, we are being built up in him. This is an ongoing situation (*ἐποικοδομούμενοι*, present participle). Again, this has been given to us by the Holy Spirit (passive). The picture is constructing a building upon a specific location.¹⁰ We were rooted in Christ. We are being built upon Christ. Paul uses the same

⁶ Ps 119:105.

⁷ Jn 15:5-7.

⁸ Ps 1:3.

⁹ Mt 13:1-23; Lk 8:1-15.

¹⁰ Louw and Nida.

word when he writes to the Ephesians that we are “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.”¹¹ Jesus uses a related word when he talks about the wise man building his house on the rock of Jesus’ words¹² and when he speaks of building his church on the solid foundation of the confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.¹³ Peter picks up on the same thoughts when he says that believers “like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”¹⁴ Believers, individually and collectively as part of the growing church, are described as being built on the foundation of Christ. Since he is only revealed in the Word, both Paul and Jesus can speak about the foundation being the Word of God. Any other foundation is like “sinking sand.” Throughout the New Testament, we see the consistent emphasis on building our faith on Christ who is proclaimed in the Word. By continuing to be built on Christ through the hearing of his Word, we will be able to continue living in Christ.

Third, we are being strengthened or confirmed in the faith (*βεβαιούμενοι*, present participle). Again, note that this is done to us by the Holy Spirit (passive). While this third participle is also another means by which we are able to continue living in Christ, it is also the result of the first two. Since we are rooted and being built up in Christ, we are being confirmed in what we believe (*τῇ πίστει*). We are being strengthened in our certainty of the specific body of teaching which God reveals in his Word as the object of our faith. This is what the Colossians Christians had been taught (*καθὼς ἐδιδάχθητε*). Paul is speaking of a growing certainty of our salvation which only comes as we are more firmly rooted in the Word and built on Christ. The more we are in the Word, hearing the gospel, recalling and reliving our baptism through confession and absolution, receiving the Lord’s Supper, the more we are strengthened in the faith. We grow ever more secure in our salvation. We are more and more convinced of the truth of God’s Word and what it means for us. God wants us to be certain that we have forgiveness and eternal life. This certainty enables us to withstand Satan’s accusations and temptations. This keeps us firm when doubts assail us. This emboldens us to proclaim Christ with courage and confidence. This strengthens us when we become weary and worn out in our ministry work. This comforts us when we have to walk through death’s dark valley.

Finally, this will lead us to continually abound and overflow in thankfulness (*περισσεύοντες ἐν εὐχαριστίᾳ*, present participle). Again, on the one hand this is the fourth in the series of participles, so it can be taken as a means idea. We continue to live in Christ by overflowing in thankfulness. On the other hand, there is another result idea as well. The confidence of the heart will be seen in thankful attitudes, words and actions (active). Paul builds on the previous verse. Just as faith shows itself in the Christian’s walk through this life, so when we are rooted and built up in Christ and established more securely in the faith, we just have to give thanks. We have to declare his praises.¹⁵ This is why we want to continue to live in Christ. He has changed our lives. He has given us the certain hope of heaven. Our thanksgiving overflows continually.

It is hard to miss Paul’s emphasis to us on the importance of the ongoing growth and nurture of our faith. The “confirmation syndrome” should not have a place in the Christian church. The different pictures of that growth in connection with the encouragement to continue living in Christ and coupled with the warning in the next verse show the need and blessings of being strengthened in the faith. Paul’s emphasis on the teachings we have learned should ring clearly with us about the place of Christian education in the church’s mission and ministry. He echoes Jesus’ Great Commission recorded in Matthew. “Therefore go

¹¹ Eph 2:20.

¹² Mt 7:24-27.

¹³ Mt 16:18.

¹⁴ 1 Pt 2:5.

¹⁵ 1 Pt 2:9.

and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”¹⁶ The philosophy that the saved do not need to be fed and nurtured, as is often the case with churches that follow a “seeker sensitive” model of ministry, falls short of a full understanding of the mission of Christ’s church. Paul will come back to this thought in chapter 3. “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”¹⁷ As ministers of the gospel, we are carrying out the Great Commission and being evangelists when we preach and teach the Word faithfully and administer the sacraments correctly so that God’s people are “rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.”¹⁸

8 Βλέπετε μή τις ὑμᾶς ἔσται ὁ συλαγωγῶν διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου καὶ οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν.

Be continually watching out that no one is carrying you off as spoils by the philosophy, that is, empty deceit, in line with the traditions of men, in line with the basic principles of the world and not in line with Christ;

(NIV) *See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.*

(ESV) *See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.*

Paul gives another command. The lack of a connective draws attention to this command. Paul is serious about what he is telling them. Their ability to heed the warning Paul gives here hinges on being rooted and built up in Christ. Paul urges a constant watchfulness (Βλέπετε, present imperative), the need to be paying attention to what they were hearing. Paul gives this warning because the Colossian Christians were coming under attack from false teachings. Βλέπετε μή with the future indicative (ἔσται) instead of a subjunctive is a rare construction and suggests that the danger is very serious and imminent.¹⁹ These false teachings threatened to control their spiritual lives and make them captives, like an enemy carrying them off as the spoils of victory (ὁ συλαγωγῶν).

Paul explains the means by which these false teachers were working. They were using the kind of philosophy which was empty deceit (διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης, explanatory use of καὶ). This was a love of human wisdom as opposed to the divine wisdom of God’s Word. This was a message that deceived people as opposed to God’s divine truth. This was a message that promised spiritual fulfillment but only gave emptiness, as opposed to the message of the cross which is foolishness to those who are believe, but is the wisdom and power of God.²⁰

Paul further describes this empty, deceiving philosophy as being “in line with the traditions of men” (κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων). Παράδοσις is sometimes used by Paul in the positive sense of the

¹⁶ Mt 28:19-20a.

¹⁷ Col 3:16-17.

¹⁸ Col 2:7.

¹⁹ Gerlach, pg 2.

²⁰ 1 Co 1:22-25.

Christian teaching that has been handed down.²¹ This would be what Paul taught when he went out on his missionary journeys. This is what his hearers were to hold on to and believe. The term is also used to refer to the rabbinic laws that supplemented God's revealed law.²² Jesus spoke negatively of these man-made traditions because the Pharisees regarded them as equal to God's laws. The false teaching Paul is speaking about has the same characteristic. It has a human source, not a divine source. It stands opposed to God's revealed teaching.

Another prepositional phrase is used to further describe this "philosophy, that is, empty deceit, in line with the traditions of men." It is also "in line with the basic principles of the world" (κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου). "The basic principles of the world" is parallel to "the traditions of men." And it is the opposite of Christ and everything he has done (καὶ οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν). In Greek usage, στοιχεῖα was something that belongs to a series. It came to mean the basic materials that constitute the universe, and even took the meaning of "star."²³ The context, as well as Paul's usage of the phrase in Galatians 4:3 ("So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world."), help us see that Paul is talking about the basic ideas that govern how sinful human beings see their spirituality. He is really talking about the *opinion legis*. "What must I do to be saved?" is the constant question of the sinful nature. The sinful nature then tries to come up with some attainable laws to do in order to save himself. God's law is too holy, too demanding. The Apology, referencing this passage, states, "People judge by nature that God should be appeased by works. Nor does reason see a righteousness other than the righteousness of the Law, understood in a civil sense. So there have always been some who have taught this earthly righteousness alone to the exclusion of the righteousness of faith. Such teachers will always exist."²⁴

Finally, every false teaching is opposed to Christ and the good news of his saving work. Every false teaching chips away at the certainty of our salvation by injecting human efforts into the salvation equation. That's the basic spiritual thinking of the sinful world. That's man-made religious tradition. If we accept such false teaching, we can shipwreck our faith and lose God's grace. That's why Paul gives such a stern warning to be ever alert to the danger of false teaching.

9 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικεῖ πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τῆς θεότητος σωματικῶς,

For in him dwells all the fullness of the Deity bodily

(NIV) *For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,*

(ESV) *For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,*

The reason why we need to watch out for these deceptive and empty false teachings that are not in line with Christ is because of who Christ is. In Christ all the full contents (πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα) of the divine nature (τῆς θεότητος) continues to dwell (κατοικεῖ, present) in bodily form (σωματικῶς). Why does this make such a difference? In Christ, who is both God and man, is how God chose to deal with our sins. This is completely opposite from the basic principles of the world which tell us to deal with our sins ourselves. To go after these man-made traditions would be to throw away everything Christ is and has done for us.

²¹ For example, 1 Co 11:2; 2 Th 2:15.

²² Mark 7:1ff; Matthew 15:1ff

²³ Kittel.

²⁴ Apology V:273.

This is one of the *sedes doctrinae* for the teaching of the two natures of Christ. In a few simple words, Paul states the mystery of the incarnation. The true God became fully human. The Son took a human body and remains truly human even today. Every characteristic of God is contained in the physical body of Jesus. Paul's use of *πάν* with *τὸ πλήρωμα* especially emphasizes this. There is nothing that the divine nature is and has that the incarnate Christ is missing.²⁵ This is true in both his state of humiliation and state of exaltation.

In his *Biblical Christology*, John Schaller cites this passage thirteen times, more than any other passage. Several of Schaller's theses are worth noting. Regarding the fact that the God-man, Jesus, is one person, yet two natures, Schaller writes:

According to the Scriptures, the Redeemer is *true God*, of one essence with the Father and the Holy Ghost, and also *true man*, like unto us in all things, sin alone excepted. Thus he is *one person in two natures*; his human nature, however, *does not subsist for itself*, but was *received into the personality of the divine nature*.²⁶

In other words, the Christ's divine nature existed from eternity. In time, at the incarnation, he took on human flesh. As a result, the two natures are in "a most intimate and indissoluble union"²⁷ which is beyond our human understanding. Schaller, however, explains how the two natures are related and the result.

As an immediate and necessary consequence of the union of the two natures in Christ, the Scriptures teach the *communication* of each of these natures to the other, so that the human nature is truly the nature of the Son of God, the divine nature is the nature of the Son of man. Thus the personal propositions become possible and true; *God is man – this man is God*.²⁸

Since these two propositions stand, the person of Christ shares in the attributes of each nature. While the Lutheran dogmaticians and the Formula of Concord go into lengthy discussions about the communication of attributes,²⁹ Schaller gives a nice summary.

Another important result of the personal union of the two natures in Christ is the fact attested in Scripture, that the *attributes (idioms)* of each nature are actually communicated to the other nature, so that a perfect *communication of attributes* exists between the two natures.³⁰

This is such a mystery because God and man are so different. God is the source of life; man has to be born. God is eternal; man has a beginning and end. God is omniscient; man has to learn and has limitations in the capacity for knowledge. God is omnipresent; man is confined to time and space. God is omnipotent; man has weakness. God is spirit; man has a physical body, as well as a spiritual soul.

This mystery is vital to God's plan to reverse the fall into sin. A substitute was needed, so the Savior had to be one of us, a true human being. Our Savior needed to be subject to the Law, just as we are.³¹ He

²⁵ The "communication of the natures" and the "communication of attributes."

²⁶ Schaller, pg 47.

²⁷ Schaller, pg 56.

²⁸ Schaller, pg 59.

²⁹ They divide the discussion into three groups: genus idiomaticum; genus majesticum; genus apotelesmaticum.

³⁰ Schaller, pg 63.

³¹ Ga 4:4.

needed to suffer the death we deserved.³² But just being a human being would not be enough.³³ He also needed to be true God so that he could fulfill the law perfectly in our place³⁴ and be the perfect sacrifice for the guilty.³⁵ He needed to be true God so that his death would have value for all people.³⁶ Paul's summary to Timothy is profound. "Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory."³⁷

The devil knows how vital this teaching is for the Christian faith. It is the very core of the one true faith. That is why he has attacked this teaching from the very beginning. The false teachers plaguing the Colossian church apparently questioned the mystery of Jesus' person, especially his divine nature. From John's Gospel and letters, it is apparent that the early Gnostic heresy denied the two natures of Christ. Some of the heresies in the earliest centuries of Christianity denied in different ways the mystery of the incarnation.³⁸ Zwingli's and Calvin's attempts to rationally understand and explain Jesus' two natures has led to a continuing denial of the real presence in Lord's Supper among most Protestant churches.³⁹ Denial of the biblical doctrine of Christology puts the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons outside the pale of Christendom.

Because the right understanding of Jesus' two natures is so critical to our eternal salvation, we are careful to confess this doctrine clearly and often. "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation, he come down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and became fully human" (Nicene Creed).⁴⁰ "We believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son, is both God and man. He is God, eternally begotten from the nature of the Father, and he is man, born in time from the nature of his mother, fully God, fully man, with rational soul and human flesh, equal to the Father as to his deity, less than the Father as to his humanity; and though he is both God and man, Christ is not two persons, but one, one, not by changing the deity into flesh, but by taking the humanity into God; one, indeed, not by mixture of the natures, but by unity in one person; for just as the rational soul and flesh are one human being, so God and man are one Christ" (Athanasian Creed).⁴¹ "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord" (Small Catechism).⁴²

10 καὶ ἐστὲ ἐν αὐτῷ πεπληρωμένοι, ὅς ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας.

³² Heb 2:14.

³³ Psalm 49:7-8.

³⁴ Heb 4:15.

³⁵ 1 Pt 1:18-19.

³⁶ 1 Jn 1:7; 1 Jn 2:2.

³⁷ 1 Ti 3:16.

³⁸ For example, Arianism: Jesus was not the Son of God from eternity, but created; Appollanarianism: Christ had no human soul; the divine nature took the place of the soul; Docetism: Christ's body was not real.

³⁹ "Calvin was insistent that Jesus was the God-man. But he was equally insistent that *finitum non est capax infiniti*. He therefore denied the communication of the divine attributes to the Savior's human nature. Thus according to Calvin, Jesus possesses divine attributes only according to his divine nature." The Christological propositions, 'God is man' and 'This man is God,' are therefore invalid (See FC, Epit. VIII, 25, antithesis 6). And the ascended Lord is limited by his human nature to a specific place at God's right hand (See FC, Epit. VIII, 30, antithesis 11)." Gerlach, pg 1.

⁴⁰ *Christian Worship*, pg 18, 31.

⁴¹ *Christian Worship*, pg 133.

⁴² *Luther's Catechism*, pg 5.

and you have been given fullness in him, who is the head of every power and authority.

(NIV) and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.

(ESV) and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

Paul uses a little play on words. The first reason for being careful not to give in to false teachings that are not in line with Christ is because the fullness of God dwells in Christ's physical body. The second reason is that the Colossians Christians have been given fullness in Christ (ἐστὲ ἐν αὐτῷ πεπληρωμένοι, perfect passive periphrastic construction). The full contents of what Christ has done as the God-man has been given to us by faith in Christ alone. In a way, Paul is rephrasing what he said in 2:6 about receiving Christ Jesus the Lord. Here he is emphasizing that there is no spiritual blessing that is lacking when we are "in him." Those blessings are lost when we are outside of Christ, when we reject him. But in Christ we have every spiritual blessing that he has won for us.

Christ can give these blessings to those who are in him because he rules all things in heaven and earth. ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας can sometimes be limited to the demonic forces of hell, as we will see in 2:15. But the words can also have a broader meaning, determined by the context. This is the shorter version of what Paul says of Christ in Ephesians 1:22-23 ("And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.") and earlier in Colossians 1:15-18 ("He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.") Every power and authority in the spiritual realms, every power and authority in the natural world, every power and authority of government is subject to Christ, even if they do not realize or acknowledge the fact.

Do we always see how comforting this truth is? Especially when we are worried and bothered by the direction our government might be taking. Or when we see natural disasters that cause loss of life and suffering. Or when the economy seems bleak. Or our health is not what we would like it to be. Or we are not meeting expectations that we or others have set. Or we are falling short in our lives of sanctification and the guilt is piling up. Or we are struggling in our ministry. We have been given the fullness of blessings in Christ. He is the head over everything. There is no power or law or demon or disaster or disease that can take away those blessings because Christ is head over everything. He has the final say. It is significant that we conclude so many of our prayers with the phrase describing Jesus, "who lives and reigns, now and forever." This is not just a nice phrase so everyone can get ready to sing or say "Amen." This is why we can pray with confidence. Jesus will answer in the way that is best for our spiritual lives. He lives and reigns over everything. He will give us every blessing he knows we need to the fullest.

11 Ἐν ᾧ καὶ περιετμήθητε περιτομῇ ἀχειροποιήτῳ ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός, ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ,

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision not done by human hands in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ,

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

(ESV) In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ,

Paul has a way of piling up his points one on top of the other. He uses participles, relative clauses and prepositional phrases. One thought often links to another. It shows that Paul is excited about what he is writing. What he is sharing is of the utmost importance. He is pouring out his thoughts. The remaining verses are an example of this.

Paul builds off of what he has just said about Christ being the head over every power and authority with the prepositional phrase (Ἐν ᾧ). But he is going in a little different direction. He is showing different facets of the fullness we have been given in Christ. It involves a cutting off (περιετμήθητε, perfect passive). Apparently, another aspect of the Colossian heresy, one of those “traditions of men,” was the insistence that circumcision was needed to be a real Christian. This is really no different from the false teaching that plagued the Galatians. Paul’s reference to other Old Testament ceremonial laws in 2:16 (“Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.”) lends further credence to this idea.

If the Colossians were hearing so much about circumcision, Paul points them to a different kind of circumcision. This was not the surgical removal of a piece of flesh from the male anatomy (περιτομῆ ἀχειροποιήτῳ) which would take place on the eighth day of a Jewish boy’s life. Rather, Paul speaks about a stripping off or undressing (ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει) of a different kind of body. He piles up the thought with the two genitives (τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός). The second genitive is descriptive. This body that is stripped off or disrobed is our flesh, our sinful nature. Paul routinely uses these words, especially σάρξ, to refer to the old sinful nature that plagues every person and still resides in every Christian.

Paul adds another prepositional phrase to further clarify this stripping away of the sinful nature (ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ). Christ is the one who does this spiritual circumcision (subjective genitive). It does not and cannot happen apart from Christ. Again, we can see Paul building one thought upon another. He will use similar language later in Colossians 3:9 (“Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices”). There he talks about putting off the old self in connection with our lives of sanctification. Here he is about to emphasize how that putting off takes place. The prepositional phrase (Ἐν ᾧ) at the beginning of this verse and the genitive at the end (τοῦ Χριστοῦ) center this stripping away of the sinful nature squarely on Christ.

12 συνταφέντες αὐτῷ ἐν τῷ βαπτισμῷ, ἐν ᾧ καὶ συνηγέρθητε διὰ τῆς πίστεως τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἐγείραντος αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν·

by being buried with him in baptism, in which also you were raised through faith worked by the power of God who raised him from the dead;

(NIV) having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

(ESV) having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

One unique aspect of the Greek language is the flexibility of the participle. It can be used in an adverbial sense, as a modifier to a noun, or even the noun itself in an extended clause, or as a main verb in a periphrastic construction. In an adverbial function, it can modify a verb in terms of means, time, cause, condition, result, or even purpose. The fact that a participle is a verb form to begin with means that the tense will have a time idea with it. One participle can actually have the force of more than one usage at the same time. An adverbial participle clause can be translated with different usages, depending on context.

The participle at the beginning of this verse is an example of that (συνταφέντες, aorist passive participle). It can be taken as a means or a temporal idea. The stripping away of the flesh happened by means of being buried with Christ in baptism or when we were buried with Christ in baptism. Because Paul is speaking about a means of grace, the means usage is the best interpretation, although a temporal idea is still indicated with the aorist tense of the participle, since it has the force that this is an event that happened. It is an accomplished fact.

Paul extends the thought of the previous verse with this participial clause. The way this stripping away of the sinful nature took place was that we were buried with Christ (ἀντῷ) in baptism (ἐν τῷ βαπτισμῷ). This flows from what Paul had said in the previous verse about this circumcision being done by Christ. We were so intimately connected to Christ in baptism that our flesh was buried with his crucified body. It was rendered powerless to control our living.

Burial of the flesh is not all that baptism does for us. There is more than just a death. There is also life. In baptism (ἐν ᾧ καὶ) we were also raised to a new life. This new life is through faith (διὰ τῆς πίστεως). The article could also stress that this is “the faith,” the specific belief in Jesus as our Savior. This faith is not something that we do. The two genitives which follow (τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ θεοῦ) describe this faith. It is the kind of faith that is a result of the effective working of God. τῆς ἐνεργείας is where we get our word “energy.” This word has a different focus than δύναμις, which stress the ability to exercise the power or the intended results of the exercise of power.⁴³ τῆς ἐνεργείας focuses on the energy or work involved. In other words, this faith has nothing to do with our work and everything to do with God’s power at work in us. Both the NIV and ESV mistranslate this genitive by making it the object of our faith. Considering the context of these verses, we are entirely passive and God is entirely active. Taking these two genitives as (τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ θεοῦ) as a descriptive followed by a subjective genitive fits the context and flow of Paul’s thought.

He adds one more clause on top of all this by describing God as the One who has raised Christ from the dead (τοῦ ἐγείραντος αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν, aorist active participle).⁴⁴ God is the source of life. God has the power to give life to the dead. The Bible speaks of both God raising Jesus and Jesus raising himself. It is another glimpse into the mystery of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. The same power that raised Christ from the dead has worked faith in us. We are raised in baptism because Jesus was raised on Easter. Again, baptism connects us to Jesus’ resurrection. Our new life is tied to his exalted life. The God who performed the miracle of raising Jesus from the dead was actively at work to give us the miracle of faith in Jesus.

What Paul does in these two verses is the same as he does in several other places in his letters. He shows how we are connected through baptism with Christ and the new life Christ’s work gives us. In Romans 6, he uses similar imagery to this verse. “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in

⁴³ Louw and Nida.

⁴⁴ Note also the alliteration of the Greek.

order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”⁴⁵ In Ephesians, he uses the picture of cleansing to show how baptism applies Jesus’ saving work to us. “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”⁴⁶ In Galatians, he depicts the connection between faith, baptism and being clothed with Christ. “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”⁴⁷ (Galatians 3:26-27). The result is that we are children of God with all the rights, privileges and blessings that go with that status. In his letter to Titus, Paul introduces the work of the Holy Spirit, again linking baptism, new life, and the blessings Jesus has won. “[God] saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.”⁴⁸

In every one of these places, we see that baptism is not a mere symbol of what God does for us. It is not just a ceremony done to connect someone outwardly to a church. God is at work through baptism. He is connecting us to Christ’s death and resurrection. All of his mercy and grace are directed at the person being baptized. The Holy Spirit is giving the new life of faith in Jesus. The results are amazing: buried and raised with Christ; clothed with Christ; washed clean of sin; a forgiven, believing child of God; an heir of eternal life.

Lutheran theologians have seen in this verse a connection between circumcision and baptism.⁴⁹ Circumcision is recognized as the “sacrament” of the Old Testament which incorporated Jewish baby boys into the covenant promise. Like baptism, it was commanded by God. It was an outward action attached to God’s promise. It gave spiritual blessings. The problem in the early church is that circumcision was seen by some Judaizers as a requirement for membership in the New Testament church.⁵⁰ Whether this was part of the Colossians heresy or not we cannot be entirely sure, but we do know that Paul had to deal with this problem in other places, like Galatia. It was the crux of the controversy at the Council of Jerusalem.⁵¹ With this verse, Paul really shows the superiority of baptism over circumcision. Circumcision looked ahead. Baptism is based on what Christ has done. Circumcision was limited to Jewish boys. Baptism is for all nations, all genders, all ages. Circumcision had an emphasis on the outward cutting away of the flesh by human hands. Baptism stripped away the power of the sinful nature and this was done by Christ because we are clothed in Christ at baptism.

Gaylin Schmeling summarizes these thoughts nicely in his *People’s Bible Teachings* book, *Baptism: My Adoption into God’s Family.*”

Paul shows how baptism is superior to the Old Testament type in three ways. First, baptism is a circumcision made without hands. Paul emphasizes that baptism is God’s activity. Baptism is not done by humans, a man-made thing. God’s hand creates people anew. Second, baptism is the “putting off of the sinful nature.” In circumcision only the tiny foreskin was removed, signifying the putting off of the old self. But in baptism the

⁴⁵ Ro 6:3-4.

⁴⁶ Eph 5:25-27.

⁴⁷ Ga 3:26-27.

⁴⁸ Ti 3:5-7.

⁴⁹ For example, Pieper and Lange.

⁵⁰ This is another example of the human traditions and basic principles of the world Paul warned against in Colossians 2:10. What God intended as a means of grace people had turned into a legalistic requirement. What God had set aside with the coming of Christ some were still clinging to as their part in salvation.

⁵¹ Acts 15.

whole body of the sinful flesh, the whole sinful nature, is drowned and buried with Christ. In baptism the sinner is declared to be a saint. Third, Paul calls baptism “the circumcision done by Christ.” Christ himself instituted baptism. Christ brought the new covenant, which superseded the old, and replaced the circumcision given to Abraham with the baptism given by Christ himself. In baptism we participate in his death and resurrection, and thus we die to sin and rise to a whole new kind of life. Circumcision pointed forward to the Savior and conveyed his forgiveness in the Old Testament. In baptism the Incarnate One is present and unites us with himself and gives us full and complete salvation.⁵²

The connection Paul makes between circumcision and baptism has also been seen as another evidence of the biblical practice of infant baptism. Lyle Lange states succinctly, “Here we must also note the parallel of circumcision in the Old Testament and Baptism in the New Testament (as Paul notes it in Col 2:11,12). Circumcision was to be performed on all males on the eighth day. Baptism has taken the place of circumcision. There is no command to baptize on the eighth day, but the parallel between the circumcision of infant and the baptism of infants is clear.”⁵³ Andrew Das, the author of *Baptized into God’s Family: The Doctrine of Infant Baptism for Today*, spends an entire chapter noting the parallels between circumcision and baptism and how these support the practice of infant baptism.⁵⁴ His remarks are interesting and valuable to review. His concluding comments are worth our hearing here.

The reason our Lord commanded circumcision so strongly was that people were taking God’s grace for granted. They were treating circumcision, a seal of faith given by God, with contempt. If the people of Israel took the sign of God’s grace for granted, weren’t they also showing their disregard for that saving grace itself?

Wouldn’t our Lord want us, then, to take baptism seriously? To reject baptism is to reject the loving Father who gave this gift to his children. We should not abuse this gift. Neither baptism nor circumcision were ever part of God’s Law, proper. They are expressions of his love. God gave man baptism as a seal of faith in Jesus Christ. Baptism thus shows that we are members of his special family. Shouldn’t infants be given the seal that shows that they are part of God’s family? After all, aren’t they heirs to the promise in Christ as well?⁵⁵

We serve our people well when we remind them of their baptism as often as we can in as many different ways as we can. The Order of Baptism in *Christian Worship* is helpful because it draws the connection between baptism and the daily putting off of our sinful nature and putting on of our new life through confession and absolution.⁵⁶ Using a paschal candle can reinforce the link Paul makes between Jesus’ resurrection, our baptism and a Christian’s sure hope in death.⁵⁷ *Christian Worship: Occasional Services* has an order for “Remembrance of Baptism,” which basically has the congregation repeat the confession of faith and some of the promises made at confirmation with an emphasis on baptism. *Christian Worship: Supplement* has the “Gathering Rite on Holy Baptism” which incorporates the confession of sins with the singing of “Baptized into Your Name Most Holy” and responsive readings about baptism. Singing baptismal hymns on other occasions other than a baptism can remind people of the ongoing

⁵² Schmeling, pg 120-1.

⁵³ Lange, pg 499. See also Schmeling, pg 78.

⁵⁴ Das, pg 64-71.

⁵⁵ Das, pg 71.

⁵⁶ Luther notes this connection in his *Small Catechism*, Fourth of Baptism.

⁵⁷ The paschal candle is the large candle lit during every worship service from Easter to Ascension, symbolizing the light of Jesus’ resurrection. It is then lit for every baptism and every funeral.

importance of their baptism.⁵⁸ We can look for ways in sermons to point people to their baptism as a reassurance of God's mercy and their true identity in Christ, that, as baptized believers, we are alive in Christ.

13 καὶ ὑμᾶς νεκροὺς ὄντας [ἐν] τοῖς παραπτώμασιν καὶ τῇ ἀκροβυστίᾳ τῆς σαρκὸς ὑμῶν, συνεζωοποίησεν ὑμᾶς σὺν αὐτῷ, χαρισάμενος ἡμῖν πάντα τὰ παραπτώματα.

And you, when you were dead in your transgressions, that is, the uncircumcision of your flesh, he raised you to life with him, by forgiving all your transgressions

(NIV) When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins,

(ESV) And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses,

Paul explains further what it means to be buried and raised through baptism. He emphasizes that this applied to the Colossian Christians by placing the direct object (ὑμᾶς) at the front of the sentence and then repeating it again after the main verb. He again uses a little play on words by picking up on the word νεκρῶν from the previous verse. Here he applies this deadness to the Colossians' past situation (νεκροὺς ὄντας, aorist active participle).⁵⁹ The lack of an article with νεκροὺς stresses the lack of life and activity in someone who is dead. We were dead in our transgressions ([ἐν] τοῖς παραπτώμασιν). We have repeatedly stepped over the line of God's laws. The emphasis is on active disobedience against specific laws. Our spiritual deadness is found in that disobedience.

Our spiritual deadness is explained as “the uncircumcision of your flesh” (καὶ τῇ ἀκροβυστίᾳ τῆς σαρκὸς ὑμῶν, explanatory). Paul goes back to the thought of verse 11. There he spoke of the circumcision of the body of the flesh done by Christ. This was the putting off of the old sinful flesh which first happened at our baptism. Here Paul is speaking of the opposite status which we had before we were baptized. We were spiritually dead because the flesh had not been cut off.

In this one participial phrase, Paul presents the complete truth of our problem. We are born dead in sin.⁶⁰ With a reference to circumcision, Paul forces us to think about the source of our sinful flesh. It is inherited from our parents, going all the way back to Adam and Eve. It is passed on through birth. The mention of circumcision, the surgical removal of a useless piece of the male anatomy, traces the beginning of our sinful condition to the source of life.⁶¹ We are born spiritually dead because our sinful flesh has not been circumcised. That is why Moses encouraged the people, “Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.”⁶² Later, he elaborated on that thought. “The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.”⁶³ Our spiritual deadness begins in our heart at birth.

But we are also “dead in our transgressions.” That spiritual deadness also shows itself in active disobedience of God's holy laws. In thought, word and action, we tread all over God's commands. We actively show that we are dead with our sinful living. The traditional confession of sins used in the

⁵⁸ *Christian Worship: Supplement 7*, “God's Own Child, I Gladly Say It,” is especially instructive, personal and powerful.

⁵⁹ This is almost identical to Eph 2:1.

⁶⁰ Ps 51:5.

⁶¹ These thoughts are expressed in Wayne Laitinen's sermon on Col 2:13-15 in the 2010 NPH Lenten series.

⁶² Dt 10:16.

⁶³ Dt 30:6.

liturgy emphasizes both of these thoughts. “Holy and merciful Father, I confess that I am by nature sinful.” There is the “uncircumcision of our sinful nature. “And that I have sinned against you in my thoughts words and actions. I have done what is evil and failed to do what is good.”⁶⁴ There are the transgressions against God’s will. We begin by confessing what we are. What we are shows itself in what we do wrong and fail to do right.

That was our status. Then God intervened. We were dead in our transgressions. He raised us to life with Christ (συνεζωποίησεν ὑμᾶς σὺν αὐτῷ, aorist active). The verb is different from the previous verse (συνηγέρθητε), but synonymous. Συνεζωποίησεν has more of a causal idea. God is the cause of this new life. He made it happen for us. He had to because we were dead, lifeless, inactive and incapable of life. He chose to make us come to life with Christ (σὺν αὐτῷ).⁶⁵ Paul again draws us into the thought of our baptism when we were buried and raised with Christ, who died and was raised to life.

Paul is getting excited about what he is writing. He continues to pile up the clauses and phrases in describing the new life God has given us. God makes us alive by forgiving all our transgressions (χαρισάμενος ἡμῖν πάντα τὰ παραπτώματα, aorist active participle). Paul shifts to the first person plural to show that he is in the same boat as the Colossian Christians. When he was dead in his transgressions, God had made him alive with Christ by forgiving all his sins. Paul certainly remembered his sins of persecuting Christ’s church. The word for forgiveness (χαρισάμενος) has the idea of granting a favor, as opposed to the more common word for forgiveness (ἀφίημι), put aside. The emphasis is on the attitude toward the person that results in forgiveness.⁶⁶

That this forgiveness flows from a gracious attitude is seen in how thorough and all-encompassing it is. All our transgressions are forgiven. If even one sin remained, we would still be spiritually dead. We would be separated from our God.⁶⁷ But he has graciously pardoned all of our disobedience. He did this when we were spiritually dead, with no ability to earn or merit forgiveness. This forgiveness is a gift from God. This forgiveness is an accomplished fact. This forgiveness has happened. That is why we can proclaim to God’s people with such confidence, “As a called servant of Christ and by his authority, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁸

14 ἐξάλειψας τὸ καθ’ ἡμῶν χειρόγραφον τοῖς δόγμασιν ὃ ἦν ὑπεναντίον ἡμῖν, καὶ αὐτὸ ἤρκεν ἐκ τοῦ μέσου προσηλώσας αὐτὸ τῷ σταυρῷ·

by obliterating the record of debts against us with decrees which were hostile to us, and he has taken it away from our midst by nailing it to the cross;

(NIV) having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.

(ESV) by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

⁶⁴ *Christian Worship*, pg 15, 26.

⁶⁵ What Paul writes succinctly in this verse he expands on in Eph 2:1ff.

⁶⁶ It is really the verb form of χάρις (Kittel).

⁶⁷ Is 59:2.

⁶⁸ Using the Trinitarian formula in the absolution is a purposeful connection between baptism and confession.

Paul adds another participle to explain how this gracious favor of forgiveness happens (ἐξαλείψας τὸ καθ' ἡμῶν χειρόγραφον, aorist active participle). God has obliterated or wiped out the record of debts that stood against us. ἐξαλείψας is the same word used in Revelation 7:17 where the angel describes the believers in heaven who have their tears wiped away. Peter uses this word in his sermon to the crowd in the Temple courts in Acts 3:19 to describe how God had wiped out or eliminated their sins in Christ. Here he describes the obliteration of the record of debts that stood against us. Literally, this would be a handwritten statement of financial debts. This is what we have racked up because of our disobedience that earns death, physical, spiritual and eternal.⁶⁹ This accrued against us because of our failure to meet the legal demands of God's law (τοῖς δόγμασιν ὃ ἦν ὑπεναντίον ἡμῶν). These legal demands were not our friends. They are not helpful to us in attempting to have a relationship with God other than to point out our deadness and helplessness.

It is interesting how Paul uses a number of different ways to describe our sinfulness and our forgiveness. He speaks of the uncircumcision of the body of our flesh, deadness in our transgressions, and now the record of debts we owe because we have failed to keep the legal requirements of God's law. All of these look at our problem – its cause, its evidence and its result – from slightly different perspectives. But they all lead us to the same conclusion. We are in trouble by nature. We need God's saving work in Christ. We are entirely passive in the work of salvation.

Likewise, Paul uses a number of different ways to describe how God saves us. He speaks of the circumcision done by Christ, the putting off of the body of our flesh, the burial and resurrection with Christ through baptism, the gracious favor of pardoning our transgression, and here the obliteration of our record of debts. For each description of our sinful condition, there is a description of God's work of reversing our problem. In just a few short verses, we see many different pictures of how God works for us and in us to save us and forgive us. He does not confine himself to just one way of saying it. The immensity of his gracious activity is not limited in scope. The way he tells us about it is not limited. Nor should the way we proclaim it.

Paul adds another thought. He uses a finite verb to describe what God has done with that record of debts so that he has obliterated it. He does not just take one of those magic erasers to it. He does not put it through a shredder. He took it away from our midst by nailing it to the cross (καὶ αὐτὸ ἤρκεν ἐκ τοῦ μέσου προσηλώσας αὐτὸ τῷ σταυρῷ, aorist active indicative; aorist active participle). Paul, in a unique way, is describing in similar terms what Isaiah prophesied.⁷⁰ When Jesus was pierced by the nails and had the life crushed out of him on the cross, he was not just an example of justice gone awry. He was not the poster child for the violence of Roman rule. He was bearing the sins of the world. He was taking away our sins. They were removed from us and placed on Jesus. We had incurred a record of debts through our disobedience of the legal requirements of God's law. That debt had to be paid. We were incapable of paying it because of our spiritual deadness. Jesus paid the debt through his crucifixion. God has obliterated our record of debts by punishing Jesus instead of us. Every hammer blow of the Roman soldiers driving nails through Jesus' hands and feet was also God's hammer blow driving the nails our record of debts into the physical body of his own Son.

Again, take note of who is active in all of this. God is wiping out our record of debts. God is taking it away. God is nailing it to the cross of Christ. There is no cooperation on our part. It is 100% God's work. And notice how he does this work. It all comes back to the specific cross of Christ (τῷ σταυρῷ). We cannot have forgiveness of our sins or life with God apart from the cross and all that it entails. We are only truly alive in the Christ who was really crucified on Calvary's cross. So the message of the cross

⁶⁹ Ro 6:23.

⁷⁰ Is 53.

of Christ has to be front and center in our preaching, our teaching, our worship, even our church architecture and decor. May we always say with Paul, “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”⁷¹

15 ἀπεκδυσάμενος τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας ἐδειγμάτισεν ἐν παρρησίᾳ, θριαμβεύσας αὐτοὺς ἐν αὐτῷ.⁷²

when he disarmed the rulers and authorities, he put them to shame in public, by triumphing over them in him.

(NIV) And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

(ESV) He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

Paul piles on one more thought, one more picture of God’s absolute saving victory. He brings into the picture the demonic spiritual forces that are arrayed against us and that caused the problem of sin in the beginning. The record of debts against us, the transgressions we have committed, the deadness of our sins are all the result of Satan’s work. God has obliterated this record of debts. He has forgiven our transgressions. He has made us spiritually alive. And he has done all of this in Christ, by the cross of Christ. By doing all of this, he has disarmed and disrobed Satan and his evil forces (ἀπεκδυσάμενος τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας, aorist active participle). Paul uses the same word (ἀπεκδυσάμενος) he used when he spoke of stripping away the sinful flesh. He also uses the same phrase (τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς ἐξουσίας) he used to speak of those over whom Christ is the head. Context has to determine if Paul is using that phrase in a more narrow sense to speak of different ranks of angels,⁷³ the spiritual forces of evil,⁷⁴ governmental powers,⁷⁵ or all rule and authority in all creation, visible or invisible.⁷⁶ Here Paul is clearly speaking about the devilish forces lined up against God and his people.

God disarmed them at the cross. On that dark Friday, a cosmic struggle was taking place in the spiritual realms.⁷⁷ Satan mustered his forces. He pulled out all the stops. He got the Jewish leaders to plot against Jesus. He successfully tempted Judas to betray Jesus. He preyed on the weaknesses of Peter and the other disciples, so that Jesus was without the support of his friends. He got weak-willed Pilate to succumb to the wishes of the crowd. He employed the Roman soldiers to abuse, mock and crucify the Son of God. God’s chosen Christ was nailed to a tree. The One, in whose body dwelled all the fullness of the Deity, died. Had Satan won? Was evil triumphant? Let Paul Gerhardt provide us the answer in his Easter hymn.

⁷¹ 1 Co 2:2.

⁷² Aland, Barbara ; Aland, Kurt ; Black, Matthew ; Martini, Carlo M. ; Metzger, Bruce M. ; Wikgren, Allen: *The Greek New Testament*. 4th ed. Federal Republic of Germany : United Bible Societies, 1993, c1979, S. 526

⁷³ For example, Eph 3:10. “His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.”

⁷⁴ For example, Eph 6:12. “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

⁷⁵ For example, Ti 3:1. “Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good.”

⁷⁶ For example, Col 2:10. “And you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.”

⁷⁷ See Rev 12:7-12. This is the Second Lesson for the Festival of St. Michael and All Angels.

The foe in triumph shouted
 When Christ lay in the tomb.
 But lo, he now is routed;
 His boast is turned to gloom.
 For Christ again is free;
 In glorious victory
 He who is strong to save
 Has triumphed o'er the grave.⁷⁸

The participial clause is probably best taken as a temporal idea. God did indeed disarm the forces of evil by nailing the record of our debts to the cross. That is a done deal. When that happened, God disgraced them in public (ἐδειγματίσεν ἐν παρρησίᾳ, aorist active). In Roman times, when the army won a victory, there was a procession, either through the captive city or through Rome. At the end of the procession were the captured and wounded soldiers of the defeated army, stripped of their weaponry, disrobed of their armor. The point of the procession was to make it clear to all in a very public way exactly who won and who lost. The losers were identified as losers in public.

This passage is often cited as a reference to Jesus' descent into hell.⁷⁹ 1 Peter 3:18-19 gives us the clearest description of Christ's descent into hell. "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison." This certainly presents the picture of the victorious and risen Christ descending into the abode of the damned and proclaiming his victory. The fact that he would do this on the devil's own turf presents a picture of public disgrace.

We miss a fuller picture if we limit this passage in Colossians to just Christ's descent into hell. It is an oblique reference to be sure. But this public disgrace really refers to all of Jesus' exaltation, beginning with his descent into hell, but also including his resurrection where he proclaimed his victory over death and hell to the world; his ascension, which really was another victory parade of sorts because Jesus was returning to his Father's side after successfully carrying out his mission;⁸⁰ and his continuing rule in glory at God's right hand where he controls all things and limits the damage that Satan can do.⁸¹ This public disgrace will reach its ultimate culmination when Jesus returns in glory to raise the dead and judge all people on the Last Day and Satan's defeat is sealed forever.⁸²

Paul adds one more participial phrase (θριαμβεύσας αὐτοὺς ἐν αὐτῷ, aorist active participle). He adds one more time that this public disgrace of the forces of evil was God's work in Christ. In a sense, this continues the word picture of the victory procession which publicly disgraces the defeated enemy. Key to this thought is ἐν αὐτῷ. While the NIV makes an interpretation with its translation, "by the cross," it is better to have a more general understanding, "in him," meaning Christ. All that Christ is and all that he does is how God triumphs over our old evil foe. It involves more than the cross. That is how God obliterated the record of debts which stood against us because we disobeyed the legal requirements of the

⁷⁸ *Christian Worship* 156:2.

⁷⁹ The "Kuske" Catechism, *The People's Bible*, and Lenski all make this connection. Lange refers to Col 2:15. Schaller mentions Col 2:15 as an auxiliary text. Hoenecke and Pieper do not mention this passage at all in their discussion of Christ's descent into hell.

⁸⁰ Consider Eph 4:8-10. "This is why it says: 'When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.' (What does 'he ascended' mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.)"

⁸¹ See Rev 20:1-3.

⁸² See Rev 20:7-10.

law. But God's triumph over Satan also includes the incarnation, the righteousness of our Savior, his powerful Word and promises, his humiliation, his sacrifice to take away the sins of the world, his exaltation, his ongoing rule, and his return in glory.

Because God did this "in Christ," we who were buried with Christ and raised with him through baptism, who have been circumcised by Christ, who have been given the fullness of blessings in him, who are rooted and built up and strengthened in him, who are overflowing with thankfulness, who continue to live in him, who have received him in faith – we share in his triumph. We share in his victory right now. We are alive in Christ, now and forever. We are part of the long procession of believers marching confidently behind our crucified and risen Lord, proclaiming the message of the cross, bearing our crosses patiently, yet victoriously. We will experience that victory to its fullest in eternal glory when we will sing our praises to the Lamb who was slain but now lives and reigns for all eternity.

This is a sight that gladdens –
What peace it does impart!
Now nothing ever saddens
The joy within my heart.
No gloom shall ever shake,
No foe shall ever take
The hope which God's own Son
In love for me has won.

Now I will cling forever
To Christ, my Savior true;
My Lord will leave me never,
Whate'er he passes through.
He rends death's iron chains;
He breaks through sin and pain.
He shatters hell's dark thrall;
I follow him through all.

He brings me to the portal
That leads to bliss untold,
Whereon this rhyme immortal
Is found in script of gold:
"Who there my cross has shared
Finds here a crown prepared;
Who there with me has died
Shall here be glorified."⁸³

Homiletical Thoughts

This entire section is the Second Lesson for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost in the *Christian Worship* lectionary, Year C. It is part of a series of readings from Colossians, so it does not fit the main theme of the Gospel of the Day. One could preach on this text as part of a series on portions of Colossians. Preaching on the entire pericope would present some challenges because there is so much packed into these verses. A vivid preaching of the law would be there with the emphasis on our spiritual deadness, the uncircumcision of the flesh and the record of debts we have incurred. The fact that our sinful nature

⁸³ *Christian Worship* 156:3-5.

naturally wants a religion of works could be pointed out in reference to the “basic principles of the world.” The result is spiritual emptiness and deceit. The gospel is specifically proclaimed in the person of Christ, the fullness of blessings God gives to us in Christ, the life-giving work of God through baptism, the gracious pardoning of our sins and the wiping out of our debts by the cross of Christ, and the triumphant victory God has won over the spiritual forces of evil. Exhortation toward sanctified living is seen in the encouragement to continue living in Christ. We would also have the opportunity to teach the ongoing need to remain in the Word for the strengthening of our faith and Christian living. We would also warn against the dangers of false teaching that strips away the saving work of Christ.

This year’s Lenten series used Colossians 2:13-15 with the theme, “No Longer Dead, But Alive.” The sermon provided a nice balance of law and gospel. The first part of the sermon focused on our spiritual deadness. It is not only seen in our disobedience of the Ten Commandments (the sermon gave a quick rundown of ways we disobey the commandments). It goes back to our natural spiritual condition. This is where circumcision was mentioned. The second part emphasized the miracle of resurrection God has worked in each of us. Christ and his cross are clearly proclaimed. His exaltation was also brought into the picture, including a paragraph about his descent into hell.

Portions of this section could also have other uses. Verses 6-7 (and maybe including verse 8) could make a great sermon for confirmation or a Christian education focus. The various word pictures would provide some vivid illustrations. Verses 6-7 could also be used on Thanksgiving, with an emphasis on how our walk with Christ in this world is a way we express our thankfulness for his saving work. Verse 9 might even find use at Christmas. The fullness of the Deity was lying in the manger.

I had occasion to preach on Colossians 2:6-7 for the 150th anniversary of First German in Manitowoc. The verses had been chosen as the overall theme for their celebration. It was a neat opportunity to remind people of how many Christians over 150 years had their faith rooted in Christ through the Word faithfully proclaimed and the sacraments rightly administered in this congregation (over 9,000 baptisms; almost 6,000 confirmations; nearly 4,000 funerals). Encouragement was also given to continue building on Christ through the Word. Finally, exhortation to confidently trust God’s promises as the congregation moved into the future carrying out the mission Christ has given to his church.

“Overflowing with Thankfulness”

1. For the past blessings
2. For the present realities
3. For the future promises

✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠

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