The Fullness of Christ's Salvation

Colossians 2:12-15

May 31, 2026

We return to Colossians 2 this morning, which has been such a rich study in the ground of Christian assurance and the ground of Christian assurance is outside of ourself. It's in Christ and Christ alone, and that's what Paul is rejoicing in, in Colossians chapter 2.

The occasion for Paul writing to the Colossians, as we have repeated throughout our study, is the threat of false teaching. False teachers were troubling the church. They intended to draw Christians away, captivate them with enticing doctrines, and then ensnare and capture as many of those Christians as they could.

And though Paul, he's used strong language in Colossians 2:8 to describe vividly the grave threat that is facing the church and these Christians in the Colossian church, they are in danger of being carried off as captives, like spoils of war.

That's the language he uses in Colossians 2:8. And though he uses that language, you need to understand, obviously, this is not a kinetic operation. This is not physical, literal warfare in that sense. Also, they don't take these captives against their wills.

That's an interesting feature of the warfare that we're involved in, a spiritual warfare. There are much clever tactics, more subtle methods that are used to intimidate Christians and to stir up fears, or on the other hand, to appeal to pride or vanity or sensuality, to entice and pull them away.

So it's by means of intimidation that this warfare happens, that this attack comes to us, or by means of enticement, that weak, unstable church members are drawn away from their true strength and their source of stability, which is found in Christ and Christ alone.

Whether it's by fear that they're made to think that what they have is not powerful enough, or whether it's by their pride or their vanity or their sensuality, maybe they've come to think that what they've been taught in Christ is not sophisticated enough. Either way, the result is the same.

Professing believers wander away, and they are willful in their wandering. They are willing in their wandering, and in their wandering, they land in the open arms of these spiritual miscreants, these false teachers.

They've been intimidated, yes. They've been enticed, certainly, but they are, in their escape from Christ and satisfaction in Christ, they flee from what they think is trouble into a greater doom, and they are doomed to be used as tools, trophies of the triumph of false teachers, the triumph of their false doctrines, and really just set on a shelf.

So Paul warns them, here, in Colossians 2, Don't do it. Don't be fooled. Keep your eyes open. Fix your heart on Christ, and be discerning about the people who are talking to you. Because as we've said before, the false doctrine does not come as an abstraction. False doctrine comes through people who talk: relatives, friends, coworkers, neighbors. It's by influence of relationship that these false doctrines come. Paul says, you have everything there is to have. You have it all in Christ. Don't be moved away.

Take a look at the text, and we're going to start reading in verse 6, and we'll read through the end of that section in verse 15. "Therefore, as you've received Christ Jesus the Lord,

so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and being built up in Him, and having been established in your faith- just as you were instructed- and abounding with thanksgiving.

"See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells bodily, and in Him you have been filled, who is the head over all rule and authority; in whom you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

"And you being dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive with Him, having graciously forgiven us all our transgressions. Having cancelled out the certificate of death consisting of decrees against us which was hostile to us, He's also taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them in Him."

I want to draw your attention, as we've just read that, draw your attention to two aspects of the warning that Paul gives, first, by going back to verse 8. And his concern is to guard the Colossians against empty deception packaged in philosophical speculation, and yet it is presented to them as reasonable.

Look back at verse 4. He says, "It comes in the form of a persuasive argument." So it's a person that you know, a person with whom you are acquainted, you could say a person you trust, a person you're friends with, and they try to persuade you. They make reasonable sounding arguments. But it really, if it's departing from Christ, if it's adding to Christ, if it's somehow saying Christ is insufficient, it's a speculative philosophy and an empty deception.

Now, what is it that makes speculative philosophy in any age, what makes it sound so persuasive? What makes it influential? What is, in the end, so empty and futile, pointless, groundless, arbitrary? Why does it come off to be so credible? How is it that this kind of thing moves us?

Well, quite simply, it's because it comes to us packaged in familiar forms, uses the language of the culture that we know so well, in which we were born, raised, nurtured, enculturated. In

other words, it just, it just makes intuitive sense to us. It just feels right.

What was passed on to the Colossians was "according to the tradition of men," familiar teaching, things, language, and forms and, and themes that they knew that weren't surprising. They were "according to the elementary principles of the world," and these were the things in their culture that had narrative power, that held sway over the moral and the social imagination of the culture.

And Christians also, having grown up in the culture, they needed to learn to think intentionally and critically about their assumptions. They needed to stop and pause almost in every conversation and think about the language that's being used, think about definitions of terms, think about distinctions that are either made or not made, and considered in contrast to Christ.

They had inherited intellectual assumptions. They had an operating paradigm of life. They had things that just made sense to them spiritually, morally, socially, intuitions about what seems right and what feels right. And beloved, I just want to say we're not any different than that. We, too, have been

enculturated. We, too, have things for us that just feel right, seem right.

What won the day in the whole argument over gay marriage? The homosexual activists say this openly now. They say it had nothing to do with making philosophical arguments, nothing to do with going to Christians and helping them to understand that they've got the Bible wrong. They tried that. What really won the day? Sitcoms: turning old Christianity and Christian thinking and old traditions, making them look foolish, stupid, getting people to laugh at them.

What else won the day? Relationships. As homosexual young people appealed to their parents and their grandparents and their great-grandparents and said, look, we just want love like you do, like you and grandpa have. And they would appeal to the nurturing heart of a woman and try to soften the target and say, look, I just want to be happy like you are.

It came through feeling, sentiment, and now nobody talks about arguments for gay marriage anymore. In fact, most homosexuals will tell you they don't even care about marriage. They don't care about the institution. They don't want that for themselves. They don't want the same things. They want legal protections. They want tax benefits, sure. But do they want

covenants before God to keep them faithful? This is how it comes across, by intuition, by what feels right, seems right, which is just intuitively a sense we have.

The second aspect of Paul's warning comes at the start of this dense summary overview of soteriology in verse 10, and then you see it again at the end in verse 15. Notice the repetition, there, of two terms. In verse 10, Paul assures them, "In Him you have been filled, who is the head over all rule and authority."

And then in verse 15, Paul assures them "God in Christ has disarmed," again, there's the terms, "the rulers and the authorities, making a public display of them, having triumphed over them in Him."

So taking the first point, joining it to this second observation, what made intuitive sense to everyone in this time and to the Colossian believers as well? What appealed to their native thinking and their native feeling? Certain beliefs about all rule and authority, certain assumptions about particular rulers and authorities.

As we talked about a couple weeks ago, they had inherited a false cosmology. And the elementary stuff of the physical world,

earth, water, fire, air, each physical element had its spiritual counterpart.

So there were deities behind the physical, material elements that had to be acknowledged and worshipped and appeased. They were, as we said, polytheists. The whole Gentile world was like that.

Isn't it interesting that here in the West it's no longer like that? It's a testimony, really, to the cultural force of Christianity and 2,000 years of narrative power, particularly in the West, that really obliterated all rule and authority, forcing all these so-called gods to bow the knee to Christ. So it's kind of laughable if anybody says they believe in many gods.

So we read this text today, don't we, as thoroughgoing moderns? We're enculturated into a different ideology: modernity. We enjoy the benefits of progress. There's an endless, ever-flowing stream of benefits coming to us.

There's bounty in technological development that lightens our loads and heals our diseases and entertains us and takes us where we want to go, brings us stuff we want to eat and consume

and drink at the click of a button. It holds forth the promise, really, of everlasting life.

Have we now been delivered from intimidation and fear and anxiety? Is that us, an unanxious people? Are we now immune from enticing allurement of false teaching? Look, our errors are not their errors. Polytheism has been supplanted by, first, monotheism and then Christian theism, now by atheism. And really what's taken shape, and if you're not an atheist, is some kind of benign form of theism, like a deism. Christian Smith and his researchers called it, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.

But this benign theism has to do with a God we can control, bowing down to him when we feel like it. This antiquated pre-modern cosmology now looks quite foolish in the age of scientific discovery and advancement.

And yet are we any better off? Are we superior to the Colossians and their polytheistic ways? According to George H. C. McGregor, he says, "We are still conscious that apart from the victory of Christ, man is a helpless victim in a hostile cosmos. We still ask how a man is to triumph over an evil heredity or how he can be free and victorious in a world of rigid law and scientific necessity. We still suffer from

astronomical intimidation, terror at the insignificance of man and the vastness of the material universe encompassing him.

"Mankind, whether ancient or contemporary; whether pre-modern or modern; whether polytheist, atheist, agnostic or highly religious; whether living in a primitive hut on some remote island or in some undiscovered cave, or in a multi-million-dollar high rise in New York City or a $25 million penthouse in Dubai, no matter where he lives in space, no matter when he lives on the timeline of history, man is plagued with the same metaphysical questions.

"Who am I? What am I? How did I get here? Where's history headed? What's going to happen when I die? What's wrong with the world, and what's wrong with me? How do I remedy what's wrong? How do I live a life to the fullest? How do I live free of malady and corruption and guilt and shame?"

As the western world has shifted from polytheism to monotheism and even Christian theism, in the enlightenment hubris of the West, they've dared to try to kill God and and then deify and worship the self; and in so doing, they've really committed cultural suicide.

So no matter where man lives in space and time, he's still left with only two options. Just two, it's the religion of human achievement, or it is the religion of divine accomplishment. The first, the religion of human achievement, promotes human pride, and so it's even more deeply enslaving. There is no way of getting out of that trap.

The second, the religion of divine accomplishment, is the only true religion, the revealed religion from God and based in truth, grounded in his righteousness, and therefore it is the only saving religion.

It's the only religion that deals with man at his depth and deals with his deepest need, which is sin and guilt before God and the shame that comes from that. Only God can set man free, answer every question, physical and metaphysical, moral and ethical.

Only God can explain to man how he is created, what he is, what makes him go, how he should live, how he should live in freedom and dignity, how we should bear the image of God. So Paul preaches the latter, not the former. He warns against the former; and now that the Colossians are Christians, now that they understand the religion of divine accomplishment, he seeks to more securely, more deeply fasten them into the truth.

And all of us, too, all of us need this strengthening, this deepening of our roots, the securing, holding fast of our anchor in the true religion of divine accomplishment because it's only what God has done in and through Christ. Only that will last, only that will save, only that will set free. It's only what he's done that fills us, that fulfills us, and that gives us new life in Christ.

So no matter what makes intuitive sense to any culture at any given time in any given place, it's only by walking in Christ, holding fast to him, that will always be relevant.

We studied Colossians 2:11 last time, which is about spiritual regeneration, about having a brand-new heart in Christ. And as we then look ahead to verses 12-15 this week on conversion and salvation, we see the start of our brand-new life in Christ comes by spiritual union with Christ. That's the key concept that runs through verses 12-15, union with Christ, deep spiritual union with Christ.

Again, God is the author of this new life. Just as he is the author of our spiritual circumcision, our regeneration, he's the author of our new life. He's the one who has given this new life to us, and the one who has lived this new life is Christ. It's new to us. It's very familiar to him.

The agent of this new life and the reason for our participation in this new life is the Holy Spirit of God. He's the one who effects this union, causes it, makes it happen.

Let me give you three points for our exposition today. I'm going to start with this, and they all have to do with our fullness in Christ. So here's the first point, number one, the fullness of our union with Christ. The fullness of our union with Christ.

We're going to get a running start to this point, going back to verse 10. "In Him you have been filled, who is the head over all rule and authority." That's kind of the beginning bookend, and we come to the end of that bookend at the end of verse 15, again repeating "rulers and authorities."

But "He is the head of all rule and authority. And in Whom you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of flesh by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead."

Paul fired the first shot at the dominant cultural narrative of polytheism back in Colossians 1:16, when he said,

"In him all things were created," and then he said, all things meaning, "whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities."

So by virtue of his being their creator, Christ is therefore head over all rule and authority, including the angelic forces that some wear enticing them to worship in verse 18. Christ is head of them all.

No one, though, whether it's the Colossians and their polytheistic culture, or whether it's us in our atheistic, agnostic scientism, science falsely so-called, but no one will turn away from our cultural intuitive thinking apart from a deep spiritual work taking place, one that is accomplished not by us, but by God and God alone.

And so Paul is pleased to tell the Colossians and to tell us it's God who filled us in Christ, verse 10. It is God who caused us to be spiritually circumcised, verse 11, who regenerated us by the Spirit, who grants us a new heart in Christ.

And so in verse 12 also, it is God who united us to Christ. It's God who buried us with him in baptism, and it's God who

raised us up with Christ. It comes by his grace alone and through faith alone.

Now there are some who look at this passage, Roman Catholics committing a very serious error, here. They distort and confuse a beautiful passage like this and others like it, which is about the ground of Christian assurance in God's initiative and God's work and God's power through the work of Christ alone.

And they distort it into a sacramental view of baptism. What I mean by that is that Roman Catholicism says the act of baptism, the ritual of water baptism, regenerates the one who's baptized. It's by water baptism that regeneration takes place.

In baptism, God removes original sin, that’s the cleansing part, they say, and he infuses grace, that’s the life-giving part, they say, which begins a process in the Roman Catholic system to make this individual righteous by means of his own works, joined with Christ's works, by his practicing of the sacraments, all joined to the work of Christ and work of the saints. And all combined together, God will justify him in the end, in the end, which can come after thousands and thousands of years, burning off the sin in purgatory.

That's a strong, strong version of sacramentalism. Lutherans teach a weaker version of this sacramental view. They still say baptism regenerates, but rather than saying God removes original sin and infuses grace, they say it's by word and sacrament that God creates faith in the individual by which he justifies the individual, and he does so in the waters of baptism, but not apart from the waters of baptism.

And so for Catholics and for Lutherans, faith is in the equation, yes, but both believe water baptism is the means by which regeneration happens. They use a Latin phrase, *ex opere operato*, "by the work worked," and by that phrase they turn baptism into the channel that conveys God's regenerating grace.

Now there's also the Reformed view, the Reformed view for Presbyterians and for Baptists that is distinctively different, distinguished from that sacramental view. Neither the Presbyterians or the Baptists holds to a sacramental view of baptism, that regenerating grace comes *ex opere operato,* "by the work worked" regeneration happens.

We don't say that. Presbyterians don't say that. Instead, the Reformed view, which I believe is the biblical view, says that water baptism is an outward sign of an inward reality. That's what you've all come to believe. That's why you're here,

because you believe that baptism is an outward sign of an inward reality.

That is to say that after regeneration, which God does by his Spirit invisibly, powerfully, working within you, taking his initiative after your conversion, where he joins you to Christ and you are dead in Christ and then raised to new life in Christ. We say that water baptism, then, is such a fitting sign to portray that, to signify this spiritual union that we have in Christ.

Notice that Paul speaks, verse 11, of "a circumcision made," what does he say, "without hands," right? That is to say, it's a spiritual reality. You see the same language again in verse 12, "Having been buried with him and being raised up with him." Spiritual realities once again. Not physical realities, not physical realities in the past. The baptism he speaks about is a metaphor. It points to the Spirit's inward work, uniting us spiritually to Christ.

This is the baptism that John the Baptist spoke of when he was going around baptizing and preparing the way for the Lord. Luke 3:16, he says, "I baptize you with water, but one comes mightier than I, who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

So is that "baptism with the Holy Spirit" that he speaks of a water baptism, physical, literal? Is that what he's talking about? If so, what about the baptism by fire? Is that literal, too? If anyone wants to try it, I'd recommend the fire baptism comes first, followed immediately by the water baptism.

Jesus told his Apostles to expect the baptism of the Spirit in Acts 1:5, contrasting John's baptism by water with his baptism, not by water, but by the Spirit. John baptized with water. He told them that "you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

That happened, you remember, not only to the Apostles, but to the crowd listening as they received the Word through Peter's preaching; and then after that they were baptized with water as a sign.

When the Gentiles responded to Peter's preaching, they were subsequently baptized by the Spirit in Acts 11:16. Peter's telling the Jews about it, and he said to them, "I remember the word of the Lord, how he used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'"

Listen, the ritual of water baptism we practice as Christians, it's precious to us. It is a fitting and appropriate

sign of what happened spiritually to us. It's as Greg Beale says, "It's merely a symbolic act, signifying, not actually conveying the reality of dying and rising with Christ in Spirit baptism."

It's important. "It's merely a symbolic act, signifying, not actually conveying." That language is to say we are not spiritually regenerated in the physical waters of baptism. That's, at best, the Lutheran view. At worst, it's the Catholic view. It's the sacramental view. The baptism that Jesus promised is a spiritual one. It's a picture of union with Christ in his death and in his resurrection.

When we reflect on this reality, when we consider what actually has happened to us in spiritual baptism, being immersed in Christ, that's what the word *baptizmos* means, here, is to be dipped down into or to be washed thoroughly or totally immersed in Christ. We find out how thorough the work of God is, how profound our union with Christ is.

The two most profoundly significant events in the life of Christ, of which he himself was cognizant, I realize that it was profoundly significant that he be incarnate, and yet it is incarnation, he was a zygote, right? He was joined to Mary by the Holy Spirit. It was miraculous. That happened to him; he

wasn't cognizant of it though he grew into his cognizance of his understanding of who he was.

But the two events profoundly significant in his life of which he was cognizant were his death and his resurrection. In dying, his time of humiliation came to an end. In his death, his time of humiliation was over; death, the greatest indignity, the greatest humiliation.

And in that time of humiliation, ended by death, he was never to be returned to that state of humiliation, because in rising from the dead, that's when his glorification commenced, never to be rescinded.

As Paul said in Romans 6:10, "The death that he died, he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God." It's a new life, a glorified life. And then in verse 11, Paul connects the historic death and resurrection of Christ to our own union with Christ. And it's through this spirit baptism, "Even so, consider yourselves, reckon yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus." Listen, our union with Christ

in Spirit-baptism is the definitive and permanent end of our old self, buried with him in baptism. It's also the

definitive, permanent start of a brand-new life. "In baptism you were also raised up with Him."

Notice at the end of verse 12, this union was put into effect by God, put into effect at the first breath of our regenerate nature as we were born again by the Spirit, verse 11. And then God affected a spiritual union with Christ, raising us up with him through, as it says there in verse 12, "through faith in the working of God who raised Him from the dead."

So he speaks of faith in the working of God and our union with Christ, our being raised up with him; that's a spiritual reality that happens now. But look what it's based on. Our faith in the working of God, the powerful working of God, the energy, the almighty power of God, who raised him from the dead.

It's grounded in an objective, historical, physical reality, recorded in Scripture for us, witness to, testified to, and it's changed the world. We put our faith in God, who actually did something, raised him from the dead.

Now you may say, as I think all of us have wondered, living today, how is it that we are joined to his death and resurrection, which physically, literally, historically happened 2,000 years ago? How does that happen?

Listen, we become partakers of his work, his atoning death for our sins, his resurrection life for our justification; God makes all of this happen by his grace through our faith, not through the waters of baptism, but through believing, through faith.

I like how Greg Beale summarizes this. He says, "Our union with him by faith in our own time is an outworking of our identification with his redemptive work in his historical time." We're joined, united to him by faith, which joins our time. Wherever we are in the timeline of human history, wherever we are on the face of the globe, we're joined, transported back by faith and united to him.

God recognizes us that way. God sees us that way. And if God counts that as reality, it's good enough for me. Do I understand how that happens intellectually? Do I comprehend the fullness of it? I do not. But that's how God works, right? That's exactly how God works all through Scripture, from cover to cover. He fulfills promises by his grace.

But in his dealings with us, he involves us, involves us so that his promises of grace are fulfilled by means of and through the conduit of our believing in him, not doing something, as the sacramental view of baptism teaches, not doing something as

Abraham and Sarah tried to do and produced through Hagar, Ishmael, leading to a very real conflict that remains with us to this day in the Middle East. It will not cease until Christ returns again.

This comes by means of and through the conduit of our believing in him and not doing something, but by means of our trusting in his Word, exercising faith, resting in his promises, knowing that he'll do it in his way, his time.

Now, why is this so important? Because only those who are regenerated by the Holy Spirit, only those whom God has circumcised in Christ with a circumcision made without hands, only they have been enabled to believe. Having a new heart, they enter into a new life in Christ. New heart, new life.

So listen, take comfort in this, beloved. If you believe in the mighty working of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, through faith God has joined you to Christ by the agency of his Spirit. You have now become one with him, one with him in his death, burial and resurrection. You are now made a partaker of God's power in resurrection life.

And it's a life that is never to be relinquished, never rescinded, never withdrawn from you. It's permanent. It doesn't

change or diminish. It changes only in the sense that as we realize what is available, we grow stronger in that life. That life comes to greater fruition, fullness in us, but it is all there, never to be taken away.

And faith is the means by which you receive this new life in Christ. Faith is the means by which God united you to him. And therefore faith is the means by which you continue to share in the new life in Christ. It's in Christ, it's with Christ that you have and you continue to have, and you will continue to share his life forever through eternity.

So union with Christ is everything. It's everything. It's a foundational reality that holds us and secures us forever, not because we're wrestling our way to it, because we rest in faith, because he has done it all.

So in union with Christ, as we think back to what's facing the Colossians and what faces us, we're inoculated against any and all attempts to intimidate us over what we supposedly lack. Why? Why are we inoculated, because if we just go back to the source material, we realize we lack nothing. We're good. We are full, filled to the brim and overflowing. There's nothing they can add to that. In union with Christ, as we discover all that God has done for us, what could entice us?

I mean, he's captivated our hearts. He holds us fast by his love, and that love and that affection for him as we come to appreciate all that he's done, it repels any and all attempts to entice us with any better offer. It's as if there were such a thing, to seek some better gospel, to search out some new philosophy, some new and better way. There is no such thing.

As we move into a second point, we find another aspect of fullness in Christ, in verses 13 and 14, number two, the fullness of our forgiveness in Christ, the fullness of our forgiveness in Christ.

Look at those verses, verse 13 to 14, "When you were dead in your transgressions, in the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him having forgiven us all our transgressions, having cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us. He's taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross." Oh, it's good news. I mean, it's only good news if you've sinned. I have. It's really good news to me.

Paul answers several questions in verses 13-14, but the key word at the heart of his answers, it's tucked between those two verses, end of verse 13, it's the verb, having forgiven, having forgiven. Typical word for forgiveness in the New Testament is

the verb *aphiemi*, which means, to release or let go or pardon. And that's used for forgiveness exclusively in the Gospels. It's common throughout most of the New Testament epistles, as well.

But Paul prefers a different term, another term, *charizomai*. C*harizomai,* it's a, it's a word that is formed from the word *charis*, which means grace. So *charizomai* is a word for forgiveness that highlights the reason for our forgiveness, which is *charis*, the grace of God. So since *charizomai* means to forgive freely or to forgive graciously, you just write the word, grace to the side of verses 13 and 14, because every word there, every line there, every phrase, every clause is grounded in the mercy and in the compassion, in the saving grace of God.

And so we see several things, here, just to list these out. Running through the passage, we see the depth of God's grace because it was when we were dead and uncircumcised, God forgave us. We couldn't have been farther from him, and yet his grace is deeper still.

The strength of God's grace. He made you alive by the exercise of this infinite, almighty power. Notice the breadth of God's grace, "having forgiven us all our transgression," not just some, not even just most, but all of them.

Notice the impartiality of God's grace. Notice that, how Paul goes from the second-person plural, you, he goes to the first-person plural, when he talks about forgiveness, us. He speaks of forgiving us. It's not only you Gentiles who need God's forgiving grace; it's us, too. Us Jews, we need it too. I, Paul, I need his grace.

Notice the justice of God's grace, "having cancelled out the certificate of debt," the decrees of law. God dealt with the law. He didn't bypass it. He didn't skirt around it. He didn't go under it, over it. He went through the law. He's just.

And then finally, the finality of God's grace, taking it out of the way, nailing it to the cross, never to be brought up again. What do you do with dead bodies at the cross, things you nail to the cross? You bury them and forget them. They're gone. It's final.

In this section, Paul is preparing to address all the questions that trouble the human heart, even believing hearts. False Christians, false teachers exploit the questions of the heart, intimidate Christians by fouling up good air with questions that choke us in doubt. They muddy clear waters, hoping to keep us from drinking deeply of the truth. They

suggest things like, You? Forgiven? You're too dirty to be cleansed completely. More is needed to atone for your sins.

Or, Yeah, Christ's atonement took care of past sins, did away with original sin. But listen, what about today's sins? Eh? What about tomorrow's sins? I've watched your life. You need to do penance, you need to keep the sacraments, you need to keep on doing your best. Do your best and God will make up the rest with his kindness. He'll add the works of the saints, he'll add the works of Christ. He'll add the treasury of merit. He'll bring you over. But you've just got to keep trying harder. Don't give up. We're doing it, too.

Others raise doubts by questioning the nature of God's work, questioning the nature of the atonement itself, questioning the injustice in Jesus. The Righteous One having to bear the sins of the unrighteous? How's that fair? they say. Sounds like, some have termed it "cosmic child abuse" for the Father to put his own Son up on the cross and nail him there even though he's righteous and did nothing to offend.

All that intimidation, all find their answers in Christ as we trust in what God has actually accomplished for us in him. We started in faith. We continue in faith. We reason from faith. When faith and believing is our attitude, when believing is the

disposition that frames our thinking and our reasoning, we can ask about anything. It's all open to us. We don't need to be intimidated by anything, enticed by anything. We find answers to all questions in Christ.

Lots of questions, but let me boil it down to two basic ones. And the first question is this: How can we be sure of God's favor? How can we be sure of God's favor? That is to say, in light of how bad we are, in light of how dirty our lives are, how foul our sins are, in the sight of a thrice-holy God who is holy, holy, holy, how could we be sure of his favor?

Paul answers, because of the depth of God's grace, verse 13, "When you were dead in your transgressions, in the uncircumcision of your flesh." It was when you were at your most repulsive and at your lowest, at your very worst, that's when "He made you alive together with Him," not later, not after you cleaned up your act a little bit.

"Dead in your transgressions," that speaks of actual sins, definite trespasses, violations of law. "Dead in the uncircumcision of your flesh," that refers first, here, to Gentile status, as a physical uncircumcision that signifies their alienation from God.

Paul said this in Ephesians 2:11-12, Remember that formerly you, Gentiles in the flesh, uncircumcision, you were called uncircumcision by the Jews. You were at that time without Christ. You were alienated from the citizenship of Israel. You were strangers to the covenants of promise. You had no hope. You had no God in the world. In all your polytheism, you were godless.

They were Christless, without a mediator to plead for them before God. They're vagrant, without any home or country or kingdom. They're friendless, no covenant of grace that they knew of, no peace, no love, no hope, hopeless, godless, without revealed truth, without any coherent theology, no meaningful cosmology, no dignified anthropologies, no hope in eschatology but by "the uncircumcision of your flesh."

Paul draws attention not just to their Gentile status, but to the status of anyone, Jew or Gentile, that's in that spiritual condition, being cut off from God. "Paul draws attention," as Doug Moo puts it, "to the sinful impulse that dominates the body of the non-Christian."

It's a good way of putting it, "a sinful impulse that dominates the body of the non-Christian." That was me before Christ. And I know full well what that sinful impulse, a

dominating impulse in the mind, in the heart, in the lust and the affections and the desires, I know exactly what that's like. And so do you. It's the sin nature, it's the carnal disposition that had yet to be stripped away, yet to be cast off, cast away.

So Paul says to the Colossians, look, you were dead on all accounts because of actual and definite sins, transgressions against God's law, trespasses, crossing the line, but also because of a sinful, carnal nature that keeps you sinning, causes you to continue in sin, because of an enmity toward God that you have. And so because of your sins, death dominated.

They waded in death. They were submerged in death, drowning in death, saturated by death. Because of death, they stank to high heaven with that putrid, rancid stench. And that is precisely when God came to the rescue, when he reached his holy, pure hand down into the defiled pollution and rancid, putrid stench of death, and plucked us out of it, and by his touch, purified. He made you alive together with him, alive together with Christ.

And so, devil, you may charge me with being too dirty. Unbeliever, false religionist, you may charge me with being too filthy, too foul. I'd answer, you're right. I am such, but God is gracious, God is gracious.

Paul says, "He's forgiven us all our transgressions," all that made us dirty and filthy and foul. He's erased death's stench, overpowering everything that offends with the sweetness of the aroma of life in Christ. Not just past sins either, but present sins, too, because all our sins were future to Christ when he died upon that cross. So you can throw in your present sins and your future sins as well. When he died on the cross, his death paid the penalty, as Paul says right here, "for all our trespasses." All of them.

Now this brings us to another question, something else that troubles the mind. And this question really comes across more as a charge because when you boil it down to its essence, that's exactly what it is, is a charge and accusation against God.

But here's the question: How can God be just in forgiving us? Sounds like a reasonable question to ask, and in the right spirit it is a reasonable question. It's a good little puzzle to figure out that Scripture does explain to us, but in many contexts that's more like a charge against God, to say that that graciousness and that forgiveness apart from any human works, they want to assign blame to him and say he's being unjust.

So the charge is: Does grace circumvent law? Does grace spurn lawful rules of crime and punishment by which the world

operates, which God himself revealed in the law? These Christians, Paul's gospel, teaches the flouting of justice, they say. They teach, this gospel that Paul brings, teaches that God bypasses justice and he grants clemency to wicked sinners. How can that be?

Notice that there is, according to verse 14, "a certificate of debt." You know what that means? That means God does take note of human guilt. He does keep a record of offenses against his righteous law. He doesn't overlook like some benign grandfather or grandmother that says, Oh, that's okay, dear.

No, he keeps a record. He records it. The term actually refers literally to a handwritten document, and so it's portraying God as personally recording debts owed to him, and he records it by hand. F. F. Bruce says, "There is a mountain of bankruptcy that we have no hope of discharging. And by the way, we have no hope that our divine creditor will ever forget it."

So God knows the concept of justice. In fact, he's the one who revealed the concept of justice, a justice, a standard grounded in his righteous character when he gave men his law. He inscribed the law on every human heart, Romans 2:14 says.

He wrote the law on stone tablets, as Exodus reveals. He gave it to Israel through Moses at Sinai, written by his hand. He gave every human being a conscience. Romans 2:15 says he holds each individual human being accountable, gives him "a conscience that either accuses or excuses him, according to that law written in the heart," according to that law written on tablets of stone.

So this is the certificate of debt consisting of the decrees of the written law, certificate of debt marking down every violation of that law. Certificate of debts consisting of decrees, decrees referring to the commandments, ordinances, precepts, statutes given to us, given to us originally for life.

As Paul says in Romans 7:10, "But because of our sins, that law which was meant to give life to us has resulted in death." So Paul says that God's good decrees have turned against us, as the text says. They've become hostile to us not because they in and of themselves are hostile enemies against us. No, they're for us. It's our sin. Let's turn the law against us.

Then God did something about it, cancelled out the certificate of debt. He took that certificate out of the way. That verb, there, means to wipe out, blot out, totally erase, and that comes to the heart of the challenge that is in this

objection or in this question that's asked from those who object to this salvation by divine grace alone.

The strength of the objection is found in the principle of divine justice itself, the one that God himself revealed in the law and in the decrees. It says, summarized in Proverbs 17:15, points out this seeming contradiction. Proverbs 17:15 says, "He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous, both of them alike are an abomination to Yahweh."

Okay, so there it is in black and white, written by God's own hand. How can God justify those whom he himself counts as wicked? How can he do that? How could he do that without abominating himself? How can he erase this certificate of debt, which he himself has written by hand? How can God be just and show mercy to the one who deserves to be condemned?

Listen, this is the heart of the gospel, isn't it, that God is free to show divine mercy because he satisfied for himself, by himself, the demands of divine justice. And he did so in a surprising, unexpected way, revealed in that expression, there, that "God took this handwritten certificate of debt out of the way, removing it from His sight forever." How? "Having nailed it to the cross."

Emphatic word picture, isn't it? Nailed his own certificate of debt, charges against us, all the violations of the law, all the record of our guilt, thought, word, and deed, sins of omission and commission. For some of you, that may be a short list; I know my own life, that's long.

"Nailed it to the cross." This word picture points to the historic penal substitutionary atoning work of Christ, doesn't it, what he accomplished for us on the cross, doesn't it? J. B. Lightfoot says, "Not only was the writing erased, but the document itself was torn up, cast aside, and the law of ordinances nailed to the cross, rent with Christ's body, destroyed with his death."

That means the record of our sins is gone forever. Why? Because, because they've been set aside, our sins, our offenses? No. Because they've been punished fully, completely in the cross of Christ. The record of our sins is now gone, and gone forever.

And Paul is as vivid as he is emphatic, here, he repeats the point, he stacks up the metaphors, "having graciously forgiven," "having cancelled," "he's taken it out of the way," "having nailed it to the cross." He wants us to get the point.

Why does he want us to get the point? Why does he keep repeating? Because we are so prone to forget. We need the images. We need the pictures. This is the fullness of our forgiveness in Christ. God has provided a deep and abiding and unshakable assurance of our forgiveness, because it's grounded not in anything arbitrary. It's not some make-believe legend or myth.

Forgiveness is historic reality. It shows God to be just, punishing all our sins in the crucifixion of his son, nailing him to a cross of wood. And it also shows him to be merciful, justifying him who has faith in Christ. So his grace is deep, strong, broad, impartial, just, final. And now we come to a

final verse in this section in verse 15, a final point, and it's a short point for today. I'll expand on it later because this point in verse 15 does receive a fuller and more fitting emphasis as Paul unpacks the implications of that reality in the next section.

But our third point is this, number three, the fullness of our triumph in Christ. The fullness of our triumph in Christ. Paul doesn't come to this section that we've just been through, he doesn’t come to this section to provide a summary of

soteriology for academic purposes. He doesn't come to this with just an abstraction.

He's making a practical point. His theology in the soteriology, the doctrine of our salvation, is driving at something, here. He's leading his readers to a necessary conclusion, driving them to a verdict and the necessary implications of the doctrine of regeneration and conversion and salvation by union with Christ.

He wants them and he wants us, beloved, to settle our hearts, stir our affections, steel our spines. And once that happens, he wants us to turn around, do an about-face and go to war, go to combat with these false teachers and demolish every high and pretentious thing that elevates itself against the doctrine of God and his Christ.

Got to get your combat boots on. You got to get kitted up. You got to load your weapon and point it at these enemies because they're destroying souls. They're taking people captive. They could do it from our midst.

So why should the Colossian believers listen to any of their persuasive arguments when God has so finalized his victory? Why should they be intimidated at all when their

Savior, the Christ, as verse 15 says, he's "disarmed the rulers and authorities"?

"The rulers and authorities," here refers to the hostile, malicious forces, angelic beings, fallen angels. So we call them demons. It's the devil and his angels that are in view, here. The devil and his angels, these demons were served by the Phrygian Gentiles of the Lycus Valley for centuries, and all the deities of the pantheon to which they paid homage, to which they observed and offered rites to and went to temples for.

And Paul assures the Colossians that God has disarmed all of that. And he started with the chief demon, the arch-demon, the devil himself at the cross, snatched out of his hands his chief weapon of mass destruction, which is death, by which he intimidated and terrified and enslaved all of humanity.

The devil used to wave that certificate of indebtedness at us, gleefully laughing and rubbing our noses and our faces in all of our faults and parading all of our offenses before God in heaven, jeering at us. Look at them. Look at them, how guilty they are. Why do you favor them? Put them to death. He's jeering at our ensuing death, our trouble.

It's a scene portrayed very vividly; you just want to write this down. I'll read it to you, but it's Zechariah 3:1-5. It's such a beautiful picture. "And then he showed me Joshua the high priest, standing before the angel of Yahweh, and Satan standing at his right hand to accuse him. And Yahweh said to Satan, 'Yahweh rebuke you, Satan! Indeed, Yahweh, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is this not a brand delivered from the fire?'

"Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments and standing before the angel. And he answered and spoke to those who were standing before him, saying, 'Remove the filthy garments from him.' And he said to him, 'See, I've made your iniquity pass away from you. I'll clothe you with festal robes.' And then I said, 'Let them put a clean turban on his head.' So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him with garments while the angel of Yahweh was standing by."

It's a good picture of what God has done for us in Christ. It's a good picture of how he's silenced the devil in his accusations. It's a good picture of how God is on our side, and it's a good picture of what the devil is there to do. "Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who

justifies," Romans 8:33-34. "Who's the one who condemns?" If he justifies, who condemns? How dare you? Shut your mouth.

In forgiving us, God shamed the devil in the process. God "made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through him," and perhaps instead of, through him, it could be translated, through the cross, because the dative there, can refer to Christ as the agent of the triumph, or it could refer to the cross as the means by which Christ triumphed.

Either way, it's the same point, isn't it? He triumphed over the devil through the cross or through Christ on the cross. Either way, same thing. The point is this: God utterly embarrassed the rulers and authorities. He completely subverted their intentions in the cross. God mocked the rulers and authorities, and he did so publicly and boldly by brazenly raising Jesus from the dead.

Now human unbelievers didn't see that. Believers did. They saw his post-resurrection appearances. Human unbelievers didn't see. The Sadducees and the Pharisees, they didn't see. Herod and his guard and Pilate and his people, they didn't see.

You know who saw, clearly, plainly? The devil and his angels. The demons saw him rise from the dead, and they

shrieked. They could do nothing to stop it. He raised Jesus from the dead, mocking the rulers and authorities. God shamed them in a public triumph.

The use of that word paints a picture of the Roman custom that honored victorious generals with what was called a triumph, and it was a parade through the streets of Rome after a great victory in battle, after winning a war.

They went back to Rome with some of the prisoners, and usually high-ranking generals and commanders took the field of battle. They took them back to Rome, killed everyone else or enslaved them, sold them into slavery. But they took these generals, these leaders back to Rome, and they went on a big parade in the streets of Rome.

Victorious general riding in the chariot, fanfare, cheering crowds, citizens, slaves, all lining the streets of Rome, cheering and jeering. It was intended to mock and humiliate foreign powers and foreign generals, to allow the citizens to pour forth scorn on these once-dreaded enemy generals and commanders and leaders.

These mighty foreign generals who were once defiant of Rome, they were led through the streets in a parade, and they

followed their conqueror, who was in the chariot stationed ahead of them, following him in shame, yanked ahead by the chains secured around their necks, chains attached to the conquering general's chariot as he rides ahead in victory, as he's elevated in honor. And that parade only terminates at the death of these prisoners, with the citizens watching, jeering, cheering, wondering what had ever made them afraid.

That's us, beloved. That's the Colossian believers. They're to look at all that would intimidate and all that would entice and say, What? What am I doing? Why would I listen to you for one iota? My, my God has triumphed over you in Christ. You're nothing. Your end is judgment, to be cast into the lake that burns with fire.

I like F. F. Bruce's closing summary of this section. I'll draw this scene to a fitting close. He says, "The very instrument of disgrace and death by which the hostile forces thought they had them in their grasp, and had conquered him forever, was turned by him into the instrument of their defeat and disablement.

"As he was suspended there, bound hand and foot to the wood in apparent weakness, they imagined they had him at their mercy. They flung themselves on him with hostile intent. Far from

suffering their attack without resistance, he grappled with them and mastered them, stripping them of their armor in which they trusted, and held them aloft in his outstretched hands, displaying to the universe their helplessness and his own unvanquished strength.

"Such is the picture in these words. Had they but realized the truth, those rulers of this age, as they and as Paul puts in another letter, had they known the hidden wisdom of God which decreed the glory of Christ and his people, 'they would not have crucified the Lord of glory,' 1 Corinthians 2:8.

"But now they are dethroned and incapacitated, and the shameful tree has become the victor's triumphal chariot, before which his captives are driven in humiliating procession, the involuntary and impotent confessors to his superior might."

Isn't that good? And so it is that the scene of the cross of Christ is utterly and totally subverted, as the rulers and the authorities are themselves denuded, not Christ, but they are denuded, they are stripped naked, they are laid bare, shamed, completely disarmed.

And now fitting scorn pours forth against them. Unfitting, inappropriate scorn was poured forth on Christ at the cross. Now

fitting scorn pours forth against them, as all their intentions as rulers and authorities in the spiritual places comes to nothing, because it's in Christ and by his death sins are forgiven, the enslaving devil is enslaved, and death dies at his own hand.

So could he ever make us afraid? What? Paul says in verse 16, "Let no one judge you." In verse 18, "Let no one keep on defrauding you of your prize." Enjoy it. Enjoy your freedom in Christ. Enjoy your liberty. You have Christ, beloved. In him you have been filled to overflowing, and don't you ever forget it. Let's pray.

Our Father, what can we say in response to this but thank you? Oh, and give us a full heart and a faith that believes strongly. Strengthen our faith and build it up so that we never doubt, that our questions never lead to troubling our minds and our hearts and disturbing us, but instead, our questions are just a means and a tool of you enlarging our understanding and deepening our affection for you, to see more fully the cross of Christ and all of its glory, to see Christ in all his majestic triumph, and to see all that opposes and all that tries to intimidate us and entice us and draw us back into slavery.

Let us see it for what it is. Let us never turn back, but let us keep on pressing on ahead with hearts full, assured in the perfect work of Christ. It's in his name we pray and thank you. Amen.