

THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

COLOSSIANS 1-2

The last pagan emperor of Rome was Flavius Claudius Julianus. He died in 364 AD. And his dying words were revealing, "You have conquered, Galilean."

Julian's words were a reference to Jesus... *and an admission of defeat.* The Emperor realized that in just 300 years, Christianity had overwhelmed paganism and had prevailed as the religion of the Empire.

Pagan Rome had become Christian Rome.

Who would've thought that today - in the early years of the 21st century - we would witness a revival of ancient, Roman paganism. It's making a comeback...

Paganism is the attempt to tap into and manipulate the power of God *without any real allegiance to God.*

It's *amoral spirituality.* It requires no love or loyalty.

There's no such thing as orthodoxy, or truth, or right belief. God is reduced to a blessing dispenser. You plug in the right prompt and get out a desired result.

Today, paganism goes by the title, "The New Age." It claims all kinds of spiritual techniques for self-betterment: *astrology, crystals, meditation, positivity, channeling.* Paganism is the promise of special knowledge apart from Christianity and the Bible.

Remember the wise words of King Solomon in Ecclesiastes, "There is nothing new under the sun."

We'll learn today that much of our modern spirituality actually originated in the first-century town of Colosse.

The Bible exposes New Age religion as not new at all. *The New Age is simply a repackaging of an old lie.*

Chapter 1 begins, "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colosse: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Colosse was a small Greek village in what is today western Turkey. It rested on a hill 100 miles up-river from Ephesus. Colossians was the only letter Paul wrote to people he'd never visited.

The Church in Colosse was probably a byproduct of Paul's ministry in Ephesus. One of the converts was a man from Colosse, named *Epaphras*. After he became a Christian, Epaphras went home to start a church.

The Colossians' faith flourished *until a false doctrine put a chokehold on their growth.* Pastor Epaphras, himself a new Christian, realized he needed help, so he traveled 1000 miles to Rome to consult with Paul.

So, from a Roman prison, Paul pens this defense of Christian orthodoxy dissecting the Colossian heresy - a form of paganism later known as **Gnosticism**.

He continues in verse 3, "We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you..." And here's the greatest gift you can give a person: **prayer**. Paul was praying for the Colossians, "since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints;

because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven.”

Notice, *faith, hope, love*.

Commentator, RC Lucas refers to “*faith, hope, and love*” as apostolic shorthand for genuine Christianity. These are the marks of a real relationship with God.

The Colossians were flirting with dangerous doctrine, but this didn’t nullify the good and godly in them. Paul saw *problems*, but he also saw *potential*. He writes to correct, but first, he acknowledges what was right.

Notice verse 6, the Colossians had rested their hope on the Gospel. He says, “*of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel, which has come to you, as it has also in all the world...*” The year was 62 AD. Just 30 years had elapsed since Jesus’ resurrection... Of course, this was before the days of motorized travel, printing presses, radio, film, internet.

Jesus had left the Gospel in the hands of a few fishermen all gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem.

What kind of progress would you have expected?

Amazingly, Paul says that in three short decades no corner of the Mediterranean world was untouched by the Gospel. According to verse 6, everywhere it went it was “*bringing forth fruit, as it is also among you since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth; as you also learned from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant who is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf, who also declared to us your love in the Spirit.*” When believers *embrace grace*, spiritual fruit results...

Verse 9, “For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you...” *And pay attention to how Paul prays for the Colossians...*

“And to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power...”

We usually pray for a person’s health and happiness. Our praying focuses on their physical and material welfare... *But Paul prays for their spiritual condition!*

Not for *thrills*, but to know *God’s will*. Not to *walk safely*, but to *walk worthy*. Not for *fluff*, but for *fruit*. Not for an *increase in income*, but an *increase in insight*. Not for *possessions*, but for *power*... If you pray for me, I hope you mimic this prayer for the Colossians!

Also pray, “for all *patience and longsuffering with joy*...” Ask God to help you endure difficulty - and *not* begrudging - but with a smile on your face - “*with joy!*”

“Giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be *partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light*.” We’re not on probation with God. He’s qualified us for His blessing... And “*He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love*...” The imagery is of a victorious general who relocates his conquered foes.

You and I have been conquered by Jesus. Now He’s transferred us from darkness into His Kingdom of love.

Verse 14, “In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.” In ancient Roman slave markets, people were bought and sold. But on occasion, a benefactor would purchase a slave to set him free.

As slaves of sin, this is what Jesus did for us. He offered His blood to *settle our debts* and *set us free*.

But Paul is getting ahead of himself... To correct the heresies in the church at Colosse - before he extols what Jesus did, he first expounds on who Jesus is.

From verses 15-19, Paul provides us one of the Bible’s most majestic descriptions of the deity of Jesus.

In fact, if we were reading in the original language, we’d notice a rhythm. Scholars believe these verses made up a well known hymn sung in the early church.

These truths were so vital Paul put them to a catchy beat so they’d be easier to recall and memorize.

And each of Paul’s points shoots down a different pagan heretical assertion. To appreciate *what Paul is teaching*, we need to understand *what he’s fighting...*

For starters, one of the pagan ideas in Colosse was that of *dualism* - that both good and evil are eternal.

Roman pagans believed the material world was evil, while the spiritual world was good. Thus, since God is spirit and holy, He would never handle anything material and evil. This complicated the creation...

Since the Creator couldn't touch anything tangible, He created by proxy. God sent out "*emanations*" - or *personifications* of Himself - to do the dirty work.

These reverberations or revelations of God were like a rock splashing into a lake and creating ripples. Each ripple was a little less divine than the one before it, until finally a ripple evolved that didn't even know God - it was completely evil - and thus, could create the world.

The heretics in Colosse believed the "*pleroma*" of god - his nature - the divine essence - *that which makes god God* - was chopped up like a fine pepper and sprinkled out over the entire religious spectrum.

Jesus was one of many different emanations - along with other gods, and angels, and gurus, and holy men. The Colossians said there was nothing unique about Jesus.

He was just one of many links to God.

The heretics in Colosse believed god could be found anywhere - in anything. *Sounds like today's New Age.*

And because spirit is good and matter is evil, if Jesus was the Son of God He could've never created the physical universe **or inhabit a fleshly body**. This is why the heretics opposed the humanity of Jesus.

No one living in the first century denied Jesus lived. There was too much evidence, but they said He came as a ghost or phantom. They concocted fanciful tales of Him walking on the beach but leaving no footprints.

John also addressed this idea when he wrote, “That which was from the beginning, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life.” Jesus did come in human flesh. John touched Him.

In 1 John 4:3, John joins Paul in directly refuting this heresy, “and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ is has come in the flesh is not of God.”

And we can see where this heresy is going. If Jesus didn't come in flesh, He couldn't have been crucified.

They denied the cross' role in our salvation. This is why Paul wrote of our “*redemption through His blood.*”

Rather than salvation by the cross of God's only Son, the heretics in Colosse believed salvation came through *spiritual enlightenment* or “*gnosis*” - the Greek word for “*knowledge.*” They taught a person needed the hidden knowledge of God's many emanations.

In later years, the Colossian heresy would grow into what was called “*Gnosticism.*” Jesus was not the end-all revelation but merely a starting point in a quest for spiritual discovery. They refused to see Jesus as Lord.

Like many people today who follow New Age religion, *the Gnostics looked for god in all the wrong places.*

Yet in verse 15, Paul is clear in His understanding of Jesus. He begins, “*He is the image of the invisible God.*” The term “*image*” means “*exact representation.*”

Not just alike in form, but in substance. A stone statue is similar *in shape* to its human subject, *but stone isn't flesh.*

The two objects are not comprised of the same stuff...Jesus though was not only God's look-alike, He was of the same substance as the Father.

What God is, Jesus is. Jesus is fully God.

And He was **"the firstborn over all creation."** The chief Gnostic theologian was a heretic named Arius.

In the third century AD, Arius used this verse to infer that Jesus was a created being - and not truly divine.

Arius said Jesus was **"first-born"** - thus, to be born meant he was created - and if created; He couldn't be Creator - and if not the Creator; then He wasn't God.

Today, **Jehovah's Witnesses echo the Arian heresy.**

But the **early church fathers, at the Council of Nicea, headed by Athanasius, correctly explained** the term **"firstborn"** referred more to status than to birth order.

Exodus 4:22 called Jacob the **firstborn** even though he was born after Esau... In **Jeremiah 31:9,** Ephraim is called **firstborn** over his older brother Manasseh...

Biblically speaking, **firstborn is a title of authority and preeminence.** Thus, as **"the firstborn over all creation,"** Jesus is not part of God's creation, but over it all.

Jesus occupies the first position. In NASCAR terms, He sits on the pole. Jesus is the CEO of all God's creation...

Verse 16, **"For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers."** What we see through either a microscope or telescope was created by

Jesus. As one theologian puts it, "There is not a square inch of creation about which Jesus does not cry out, *This belongs to me!*"

And I love the next line, "All things were created through Him and for Him." Have you ever wondered, "Why you were created? *Why do I exist?*" Here we're told. We were created *through Jesus...* and *for Jesus.*

If I drove my truck into the ocean, I wouldn't get very far... For my truck was not made for underwater travel.

If I drove it off a cliff, I would crash... for my truck isn't made for in-air flight... But on the freeway, my truck does fine, because that's what it was designed to do.

And likewise, you were not designed to simply *work, and play, and party, and earn, and spend, and save, and sleep, and eat, and toil, and try, and sweat, and cry, and eventually die.* You were designed for more...

You were created for Jesus, and you'll never know real fulfillment apart from a relationship with Him.

Verse 17, "And (Jesus) is before all things, and in Him all things consist." Jesus is not only the *Creator* of the universe, but it's *Sustainer*. He holds it together.

Coulomb's law of physics states "like charges repel."

Yet at the nucleus of every atom, there's a cluster of protons - with like charges. *What binds them together? What is this mysterious atomic glue?* The Bible says it's Jesus!... He holds all things together, *and not just atomically* - He's holding together my life, my family, my sanity, my schedule, my health, my ministry!

2 Peter 3:10 tells us that one day “the elements will melt with fervent heat.” In the future, the Sustainer, Jesus, will release His grip, and the physical universe will vaporize. It ushers in a new heaven and new earth.

“And He is the head of the body, the church...” *Who is the head of Calvary CSM?* Not the pastor, or elders, or the congregation - not even the church secretary!

Jesus is our CEO. *And why wouldn't we want Him to be?* I'm a human with clay feet - *He's God.* I can't get grass to grow in my yard - *He's the Creator.* I get tired walking up a steep hill - *He sustains all things.*

“Who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead...” In the Bible, a number of people are miraculously raised from death, but Jesus is the only person to be resurrected never to die again. *He's overcome death.*

“That in all things He may have the preeminence.”

Add it up and Jesus isn't just a ripple from the original splash. He's the big splash. Jesus is the Rock.

And He needs to be treated as such!

Look on the top shelf of your life, and if there's anything there other than Jesus *knock it off!* It doesn't belong there. Clean off the top shelf and make certain nothing is crowding out or rivaling your loyalty to Jesus!

Verse 19, “For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell...” Here again the word “fullness” is “pleroma.” The heretics taught the fullness or essence of God

was sprinkled out, but Paul says no, it's found in one place - in fact, one person - Jesus!

Jesus is the sum total of all that God is.

The knowledge of God isn't scattered about. All the knowledge of God is found in one location - *in Christ*.

“And by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.”

Verse 21, “And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death...” As I explained, Greek Dualism rejected the idea of God assuming human flesh. Yet for Jesus to *pay our debt* and *reconcile us to God*, He needed a body that would bleed. By His blood He “present(s) you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight.”

“If...” and yes, this is a big if! Your salvation is conditional. It's “If indeed you continue in the faith...”

Notice verse 23, it's not just that you have faith, it's that you “*continue in the faith!*” Faith is not a one time profession, it's an attitude in which we must persist.

You can't avoid this verse and others like it. Saving faith isn't just a faith that believes once and fades. It's a faith that keeps on believing. True faith perseveres.

Believers should be, “grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister.”

Verse 24, “I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church...”

Here’s a verse that’s meaning is greatly debated.

Roman Catholics use verse 24 to support the idea of purgatory. That somehow the cross of Christ isn’t sufficient for our salvation. We have to help complete or “*fill up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.*”

In purgatory, we suffer for sins in this life and are purified in preparation for heaven. But to this idea, all the NT disagrees, including Paul later in Colossians!

Here’s my take on the meaning of verse 24... Recall when Paul met Jesus on the Road to Damascus. The Lord asked, “Saul, why are you persecuting ME?”

Paul was hassling the church, but Jesus took it personally. And this is where Jesus still suffers today.

He no longer suffers *physically* - *as he did on the cross* - but He suffers in empathy with His Church.

Persecution continues even today around the globe, and we “*fill up*” - or help Jesus bear His sufferings - when we show concern for His persecuted Church.

Paul speaks of the Church, “of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints.”

The Church is the unveiling of a mystery - that in Christ we are united to God and united to one another.

“To them (that is, “us”) God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

And here’s Christianity’s most stunning feature - this is what sets it apart from other religious ideologies. Christianity is not a philosophy I learn - or a set of rules I obey - *it’s an occupation of the human soul*. Christ comes to live in me! *It’s not imitation, but impartation...*

I can watch Lebron dunk a basketball a million times, and never be able to do it myself. I’m not going to become like Lebron through careful *imitation...* But what if you took the spring in his legs and put it in mine - *impartation*? At least, I’ll be dominating 50-and-overs.

And likewise, it’s impossible for me to consistently live the Christian life by simple imitation. If I don’t have it in me, I won’t consistently live it out. Christianity is more than *imitation*. Christ in me is *“the hope of glory.”*

Paul adds in verse 28, “Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.”

This term *“perfect”* means *“mature.”* Paul isn’t saying we can be *flawless*, but we can grow up. We can lay aside heresy and walk in truth. This was Paul’s goal for the Colossians. “To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.”

Chapter 2, “For I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh...”

Colosse and Laodicea were sister cities - in close proximity. Paul trusted they too would read his letter.

He hopes “that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” Remember the heretics claimed they were the secret-keepers of God’s mysteries. *Paul disagrees.*

Wisdom and divine knowledge aren’t found in *eastern mysticism*, or *Jewish legalism*, or *Roman paganism*, but in Christ! “*In whom are hidden all the treasures...*”

William Randolph Hearst was one of the richest men of his day. He had a vast, expensive art collection.

One day, he was thumbing through a magazine when he saw a painting he considered exquisite. He coveted the masterpiece. He sent his aide armed with millions of dollars to purchase it and add it to his collection.

After an extensive search, his aide returned with the painting. Hearst asked, “*How much did it cost?*” He replied, “*Nothing, we found it in our warehouse.*”

Hearst had the painting all along but never realize it. And so it is with God’s treasures of knowledge and wisdom. In Christ, we have all God’s riches in-reach.

Yet the false teachers were telling the Colossians they lacked divine resources. Paul says, “*no way!*” In Christ, we lack nothing! *We are complete in Christ!*

Verse 4, “**Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words.**” Deceivers use big terms and sophisticated arguments that sound impressive.

Don’t be gullible. Lofty language doesn’t make it true.

Years ago, a Junior Higher won first prize at the Idaho Falls Science Fair by showing how conditioned people are to believe anything labeled “**science.**”

In his project, the young man urged people to sign a petition demanding strict controls on the chemical “**dihydrogen monoxide.**” *And for numerous reasons...*

It can cause excessive sweating and vomiting, its a major component in acid rain, it can cause severe burns in its gaseous state, accidental inhalation can kill you, it can cause erosion, it decreases the effectiveness of automobile brakes, it’s found in cancerous tumors.

Folks were alarmed. 86% of people polled supported a ban on the chemical... Only one person realized “**dihydrogen monoxide**” is another name for *water*.

Sadly, some believers are just as naive with spiritual rhetoric. Just because a man uses spiritual-sounding verbiage - or *holy hype* - doesn’t make it true. **Complicated and convoluted** isn’t the same as “*deep.*”

If an idea is not clearly taught in the pages of the Bible, reject it - no matter how spiritual it might sound!

Paul continues, “For though I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ.

As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving.” Christian maturity is being rooted in the basics. Learning to walk by simple faith. “*As you received Christ, so walk in Him.*”

Yet rather than stick with the truth about Jesus, the heretics in Colosse collected a diversity of spiritual experiences - *they'd expanded their religious horizons.*

They sampled elements from all religions to build a faith that suited their own tastes. Rather than possess a simple and pure faith, they arrogantly felt they were among the spiritual elite. They'd *out-grown* Christianity.

Yet Paul writes, verse 8, “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.” This new spirituality cheated believers out of a real relationship with God. It was steering Christians away from Christ.

Any ritual, or philosophy, or tradition, or spirituality that exalts itself above Jesus is a rip-off from Satan.

“For in Him (in Christ) dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.” Rather than sprinkling the “pleroma” -

the essence of God - across creation - God put all the eggs of revelation in one basket. Listen, Paul says *all of God is found in Christ!*

And if Christ is in you and you are in Christ, then you have *all access* to everything God *through faith in Jesus Christ*. You never have to go outside Christ...

You are complete in Him! And so much so that no amount of ritual or good works can add to that status.

The Colossian believers were gentiles, but the false teachers were Jewish - and Judaism majored on rules and rituals. Legalism was part of their heretical mix.

Especially circumcision. God required His people, the Jews, to circumcise their males. It was a symbol of commitment. At the primary physical pleasure center of a man's life, he bore a mark of loyalty to his God.

But the false teachers in Colosse were making physical circumcision mandatory for gentile believers.

Paul disagrees, verse 11, "In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ..." Christians don't need to be physically marked; for there is a spiritual circumcision.

A "*circumcision made without hands*" occurs when Christ transforms our desires - when His Spirit cuts off our fleshly longings and replaces them with His love.

For Christians today, this gets illustrated in baptism.

Paul writes in verse 12, “Buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.”

Baptism is now a symbol of what circumcision foreshadowed. The old life is **cut off** in circumcision or **buried** in baptism... We rise with new life in Christ.

Verse 13, “And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.” Our salvation occurred on the cross!

When a person was nailed to a Roman cross, the tribunal would nail a list of the laws that he'd violated.

Here, Paul says the entire Law was nailed to Jesus' cross. He died to satisfy all its demands, and in so doing, put an end to the Law so we'd never be guilty of breaking it again. He ended life for us under the Law.

It's not rules that make us right with God, but Jesus.

When Kathy and I married, we didn't agree to a list of rules. She didn't sign up to always scratch my back at night, nor did I agree to always take out the garbage.

We took a vow to live in a committed relationship and give our all to each other, not follow a set of rules.

Now she does scratch my back (I think she plans to do it tonight), and *I do take out the garbage* (I definitely plan to do it tonight) - but we do it, not because of some rule, but it's in our hearts to love each other.

This is how God wants us to live - not by rules, but in a committed relationship with His Son Jesus.

A lot happened on the cross. Verse 15 tells us, “**Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.**”

The cross was God’s decisive blow against Satan. Jesus disarmed the devil - stripped him of his authority. Now the only power Satan has is what we allow him.

When a Roman general returned from victory, he led his defeated foe in tow. His enemy was made a spectacle - a trophy of the general’s triumph. And that’s what happened to Satan. He fell because he refused to glorify God, yet at the cross, his defeat did just that!

Verse 16, “**So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths.**” And people will try. Seventh-Day Adventists teach if you don’t worship on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, you’re headed to hell. **Paul says we should know better!** *What we eat and when we worship* don’t get us closer to God. We cross over from death to life, from wrong to right, through the sacrifice of Jesus.

The Jewish feasts and Sabbaths were merely pictures of the work of Christ. They were symbols.

In verse 17 Paul refers to them as “**a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.**” When I finally get home after a long trip I don’t hug and kiss my wife’s shadow. *I hug the real thing!* If I only hugged Kathy’s shadow you’d think I was a shady person...

And the same is true with people who get caught up in observing certain days or diets. They're focusing on the shadow. Let's **hug the Savior, not the symbol.**

“Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels...” The Gnostics taught that angels were ripples of God's revelation.

But Paul sees an obsession with angels as a distraction. *All of God is found in Christ - not angels.*

People who fixated on angels are “intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.” We're complete in Christ! We grow in Him.

Sadly, some Christians always going off on tangents. *Walking with Jesus is never enough for them.* They need a hobby horse - angels, or fasting, or feasting. Hey, don't forsake Jesus for anyone or anything else.

Verse 20, “Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations - “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” which all concern things which perish with the using - according to the commandments and doctrines of men?”

If we died with Christ, why live by dos and don'ts?

“These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.” A lot can

make us appear spiritual without being spiritual. Religion is full of ways for people to show-off spiritually without being more kind and loving.

This kind of spirituality is a step back from Christ. We are complete in Him! We grow-up by simple faith.