

Series: The Letter to the Colossians

Title: “Jesus’ Desire for His People, Part 2”

Text: Colossians 2:4-5

Date: August 6, 2023

Verse 4

Paul’s discussion concerning his heart for the churches of the Lycus Valley continued with him saying, “I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments” (Colossians 2:4). The word translated “this” pointed back to what the apostle said about Jesus in verses 2-3. Some think it referred to all he said concerning the mystery of Christ in 1:26-2:3.¹ Paul’s intent was to highlight the fact that Christ was the cornerstone of true doctrine. No matter how persuasive, appealing, and helpful the teaching of some may have seemed, it was of little worth to the souls of God’s people.

Paul’s word provided a precedent for churches of all ages. Christian doctrine is primarily concerned with Christ. Any spiritual teaching devoid of Christ should be rejected and relegated to the realm of inconsequential. It is for this reason that Paul told the Philippians, “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:8).

Paul was concerned that some in Colossae might “delude” his readers. The Greek word he used was a compound word that literally meant “to count aside.” It was used of one who cheated or deceived another.² It meant “to beguile...by a false reason.”³ Aristotle used the word to speak of fake gold.⁴ The papyri used the word of a state librarian who misused documents for a sinister purpose.⁵

Paul’s word choice reveals an important feature of false teaching. It often ensnares hearers through the way it bears a striking resemblance to the genuine article. That is, erroneous Christian teaching often succeeds in deceiving people because it carries some of the foundational elements of the true faith. One Puritan noted, “... many false things seem more probable than many true ones. And that happens, because false things are connected to true ones by their great likeness.”⁶ Think of the way in which the Mormon movement uses orthodox Christian terms while affixing different meanings to them.

¹ Beale, G.K. *Colossians and Philemon: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 158.

² Robertson, Archibald Thomas. *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume IV, The Epistles of Paul*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1931), 488.

³ Davenant, John. *Geneva Series of Commentaries: Colossians*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 368.

⁴ Davenant, 368.

⁵ Rogers Jr., Cleon and Cleon Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 463.

⁶ Davenant, 370-371.

In warning his readers, Paul referred to the false doctrines in Colossae as containing “plausible arguments.” The original language spoke of something that was not true, though it was presented in a way to make it seem like it was true.⁷ The papyri used the word in telling of a court case involving crooks who tried to keep what they had stolen by using persuasive argumentation.⁸ One has said that Paul’s original language was similar to our English expression, “to talk someone into something.”⁹

Perhaps the false teachers at Colossae implemented flashy, engaging rhetoric in order to mask their deceptive doctrines. Maybe they used flattery in their teaching in order to win over members of the church. They could have played on human emotions or entertained people with stories and emphases drawn from culture. Whatever the case, they aimed to please people so that they might ensnare them. Their teachings were not grounded in the person and work of Christ.

When writing to Timothy, Paul warned of the way such teachers will mark the church age (2 Timothy 3:1-13). In writing to the church at Corinth, he described the way he had a decidedly different approach to the teaching:

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:1-4).

Believers of all generations should take heed to Paul’s words. False teaching and erroneous views concerning Christ will abound until Christ returns. Vigilance is always needed in regard to truth. One has commented on the relevance of Paul’s words to our day:

In many ways the red flag Paul was raising almost 2,000 years ago has become one of the defining issues in the delusion that has been sweeping through the entire world since the dawn of the age of mass communication. There is no generation more skilled in the techniques and technology of communication, yet none that is less equipped to evaluate what is heard than the one of which we are a part. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that it is our generation that has felt so misguided by politicians, financiers and, yes, by religious leaders as never before. The slick methods used to get ‘the message’ across have too often served to empty ‘the message’ of any meaningful content.¹⁰

⁷ Friberg, Timothy, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller. *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 312.

⁸ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 463.

⁹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 463.

¹⁰ Johnston, Mark G. *Let’s Study: Colossians and Philemon*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 52.

Verse 5

Paul concluded his discussion concerning his ministry to the church by saying, “For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ” (Colossians 2:5). Paul’s reference to being “absent in body” was likely intended as a reply to possible criticism from his opponents. The apostle had never visited the church personally. As noted earlier, it seems the church was established through the preaching of one named Epaphras (Colossians 1:7). Quite possibly, the man had been converted under Paul’s preaching when Paul ministered in the areas surrounding Ephesus (Acts 19:10). Paul had heard about the state of the church at Colossae when Epaphras visited him during his Roman imprisonment (Colossians 1:8).

It seems Paul anticipated that his opponents could have ridiculed him for not having a personal knowledge of the church. Their reasoning could have gone like this: “Paul has never met us. He doesn’t know our congregation. Who is he to offer criticism of our beliefs and practices?” Expecting such a response, Paul said, “...I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit.” What did Paul mean by the words “with you in spirit?” Did he mean to speak of a mystical ability to teleport through the ether and spiritually attend the meetings of the congregation at Colossae? Though prophets in the Old Testament had experiences that involved similar activities (2 Kings 5:26; Daniel 8:1-4; Ezekiel 40:1-4), it seems Paul had a different meaning in mind.

It seems best to regard Paul’s reference to “with you in spirit” as a reference to the mystical bond that occurs between believers through regeneration (John 3:3; Ephesians 4:4-6). Paul meant to say that, though he was physically absent from the Colossians, he was spiritually with them through the bond of the Holy Spirit.¹¹ Paul previously alluded to such a mystical union in Colossians 1:2, 18, and 27. He will refer to it again in Colossians 2:6 and 7. In our current verse, Paul seemed to emphasize the way such spiritual union through the Spirit of God produces an abiding love amongst God’s people. He mentioned such love previously in Colossians 2:2. Elsewhere in the New Testament, he talked about how the Holy Spirit produces love in the hearts of God’s people (Romans 5:5; Galatians 5:22; 2 Timothy 1:7).

In the context of Colossians 2:5, Paul’s point was that he had an arduous love and concern for the believers in the Lycus Valley. His “in spirit” metaphor portrayed his strong affectionate regard for their spiritual well-being.¹² Though he was physically absent, as his opponents would have contended, he was spiritually united with the true believers in the churches of that region. The Holy Spirit had given him an earnest love for all. It was such love that moved him to write a letter of correction and instruction. His spiritual union with his readers should have led them to listen to what he wrote. Paul used a similar line of reasoning when writing to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 5:3) and Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 2:17).

¹¹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 463.

¹² Keener, Craig S. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), [CD-Rom].

Along with a love for the congregations of the Lycus Valley, Paul mentioned the way he was “rejoicing to see” spiritual progress amongst his readers. The apostle’s reference to “rejoicing” was evidence that he expected a positive response to his letter. Christian love compelled him to believe the best about his readers (1 Corinthians 13:7). Paul expressed a similar confidence in God’s people elsewhere in the New Testament (Philippians 1:9). Though he was certainly willing to speak up against destructive doctrines, he retained a faith that God’s people would respond favorably to his apostolic teachings.

Paul made mention of two responses he expected from his readers. He first spoke of “good order” within the church. The original language of the text employed language that was used in the Roman army. It was used of an encampment with well-ordered defenses in place.¹³ Paul’s term was derived from a Greek word that meant “unbroken” or “intact.”¹⁴ It carried ideas of “discipline.”¹⁵ Perhaps Paul meant to speak of the need for orderly arrangement of church membership and church leaders. Elsewhere in the New Testament, the apostle spoke against a lack of order in the affairs of local churches (2 Thessalonians 3:6). He also commended the practice of good order (1 Corinthians 14:40).

It seems his military metaphor in our current text was meant to say people needed to be properly arrayed and organized within the churches at Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. Perhaps false doctrine was spreading because of loose requirements for church membership and church leaders. The congregation needed to enforce a degree of order. Not just anyone needed to be allowed to join the church, teach, or lead. Maybe there was a need for church discipline (1 Corinthians 5:1-13) or enforcing of biblical requirements for church leaders (1 Timothy 3:1-12; Titus 1:5-9).

The second response Paul expected from his readers was “firmness of...faith.” The original language of the text employed yet another technical term from the world of the military. It depicted skilled soldiers standing strong against an enemy.¹⁶ While “good order” dealt with the proper arrangement of a Roman infantry, “firmness” depicted an arrangement of soldiers standing strong as a close “phalanx.”¹⁷

It seems Paul’s second expectation dealt with steadfastness in Christian doctrine. A cognate of Paul’s word for “firmness” was used in Acts 16:5 to speak of the way churches were “strengthened in the faith” because of Paul and Timothy’s ministry. Another cognate appears in 1 Peter 5:9, a passage in which Peter encouraged readers to stand against the attacks of Satan: “Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world” (1 Peter 5:9).

¹³ Melick, Richard R. *New American Commentary: Volume 32*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), [CD-Rom].

¹⁴ Robertson, 489.

¹⁵ Wright, N.T. *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*. (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 159.

¹⁶ Robertson, 489.

¹⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 463.

As used in Colossians 2:5, the word for “firmness” expressed Paul’s desire for his readers to stand strong against false teaching. He wanted his readers to stick to the message and mission of Christ. He had mentioned their strong faith earlier in Colossians 1:4. Though they had previously exhibited faithfulness, they needed to continue and press on in the faith. They needed to deal with those who tempted them toward defection.

Paul knew the exhortation of Elijah at Mount Carmel — “How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him. And the people did not answer him a word” (1 Kings 18:21). He would have agreed with the assertion of James — “a double-minded man is unstable in all his ways” (James 1:8, KJV). Thus he encouraged his readers to be “all in” on the content of Christian doctrine. He wanted them to avoid the temptation to switch back and forth between the truth of the Lord and the philosophies of the world. Calvin rightly noted, “...it is an empty shadow of faith, when the mind wavers and vacillates between different opinions.”¹⁸

Instead of fluctuating between different religious opinions, Paul’s readers needed to stay settled on the doctrine of Christ. It is for this reason that Paul used the words “in Christ” to qualify the nature of the Colossians’ faith. Believers in Colossae were being tempted to back away from the gospel they had heard at first. They were being tempted to adopt a religion that was marked by ceremonial customs (Colossians 2:16-17) and prayers to angels (Colossians 2:18). Paul wanted them to stick to the person and work of Christ. His argument was the same as the one espoused by the author of Hebrews. When writing to Jewish believers who were being beckoned to return to elements of ceremonial Judaism, that author said, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). To be spiritually strong, Christians must make the person and work of Jesus their main focus. Robert Letham has said, “Our sense of worth as persons is to be found in Christ and nowhere else.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul The Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948),177.

¹⁹ Letham, Robert. *The Message of The Person of Christ*. (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity Press 2013), 220.