

**Series:** The Letter to the Colossians

**Title:** “Alive in Christ, Part 3”

**Text:** Colossians 2:11-12

**Date:** September 3, 2023

### **Verse 11**

To continue his discussion concerning the Christian life, Paul implemented two metaphors. He used these metaphors to provide a picture of the radical, life-transforming power of conversion. The first metaphor was that of circumcision. The apostle said, “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ” (Colossians 2:11). In the Old Testament, physical circumcision was a symbol of the Lord’s covenant with the descendants of Abraham. In the New Testament, circumcision is not required for salvation. However, circumcision was used as a metaphor for the heart change that takes place at regeneration.

#### *“In Him”*

Notice that verse 11 began with the words “In him.” Within the flow of chapter 2, the words pointed back to Christ Jesus, the one Paul talked about in verses 8-10. Once again, the apostle wanted to highlight that all spiritual salvation and sufficiency is found in Christ. The idea of believers being “in” Christ has already appeared on more than one occasion in Paul’s letter (Colossians 1:2; 2:6). The phrase “in Christ” constitutes one of Paul’s most famous phrases in all of the New Testament (Romans 1:7; 8:27; 12:13; 15:25-26, 31; 16:2, 15; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 6:1-2; 14:33; 2 Corinthians 1:1; 8:4; 9:1, 12; 13:12; Ephesians 1:1, 15, 18; 2:19; 3:18; 4:12; Philippians 1:1; 4:21, 22; Colossians 1:4, 12, 26; 3:12; Philemon 5, 7; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:10; and 1 Timothy 5:10). It represents the doctrine of union with Christ. Through regeneration, believers enjoy a standing of oneness with Christ through which they receive life-giving spiritual strength and energy.

#### *“Circumcised”*

In the context of Colossians 2:11, the phrase “in him” was used to speak of a spiritual circumcision that happens in the hearts of God’s people. Through such a circumcision, one receives unity and oneness with Christ. Discussion concerning circumcision was relevant to Paul’s original readers. Such may seem strange, since Colossae wasn’t necessarily a Jewish region. However, history attests that there was a large Jewish population living in the area at the time of Paul’s writing.

Josephus told of how around two thousand Jews were transported to the Lycus Valley from Mesopotamia and Babylon by Antiochus III before the time of Christ.<sup>1</sup> Given these realities, it is not hard to believe that a good number of ethnic Jews were a part of the congregation at Colossae. As such, they had be reared according to Jewish customs and ceremonies. Luke 2:21-39 gives witness to the prominent practice of

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<sup>1</sup> Johnston, Mark G. Let’s Study: Colossians and Philemon. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 60.

circumcision amongst first-century Jews, telling of the way Jesus' parents had him circumcised.

Along with the Jewish converts, there were also Gentile believers in the church at Colossae. These individuals would have been uncircumcised physically. Paul would seemingly allude to this reality later in verse 13. Despite the Jewish/Gentile mix in the congregation at Colossae, Jewish legalists were exercising influence over the entire congregation, compelling all to be circumcised. The church was being coaxed to believe that Jewish ceremonial observances were necessary for faithful Christian living (Colossians 2:16).

Paul provided a rebuke of the heretics by holding up Old Testament circumcision as a type of a New Testament reality. In the field of Bible interpretation, a type can be regarded as "...an event, a series of circumstances, or an aspect of the life of an individual or nation, which finds a parallel and a deeper realization in the incarnate life of our Lord, in his provision for the needs of men, or in his judgments and future reign."<sup>2</sup> The Bible used several different label for types. Paul would use one in Colossians 2:17, when he spoke of Old Testament ceremonies as "a shadow of things to come."

Types are Old Testament realities that represent greater New Testament realities. The corresponding New Testament reality is not of the same substance as the Old Testament reality. An example can be seen in Jesus' reference to himself as "the bread of life" (John 6:35). Jesus used the manna God gave the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 16:11-36) as a type, or shadow, of the spiritual nourishment his life provides for believers. Jesus wasn't of the same "substance" (Colossians 2:17) as the Old Testament manna, but the manna did point to the way the person and work of Jesus would provide soul-satisfying salvation.

Circumcision was the sign of God's covenant with the Israelites. It served the purpose of providing a foreshadowing of the work Christ would perform in the hearts of God's people. Paul explained such things when writing to the church at Galatia, another church that had been infected with Jewish legalism. Writing to that congregation, he said:

I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love (Galatians 5:3-6).

In saying "every man who accepts circumcision...is obligated to keep the whole law," Paul meant to say that his readers couldn't pick and choose which parts of the Ceremonial Law they wanted to retain in the New Covenant. If circumcision was still required, the whole of the Ceremonial Law should have been required, since

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<sup>2</sup> Beale, G.K. ed. *The The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 366-367.

circumcision was the foremost command of the Ceremonial Law.<sup>3</sup> However, no Christian should have felt compelled to keep any portion of the Ceremonial Law. Such things were a foreshadowing of the work of Christ. Once Jesus offered himself on behalf of sins, they were no longer needed.

Paul also highlighted the typology, the interpretation of symbols, associated with Old Testament circumcision when writing to the Romans. In chapter 4, he spoke of Abraham's circumcision:

He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised (Romans 4:10-12).

Even with Abraham, the rite of circumcision did nothing to earn salvation or righteousness. The man was justified before God because of his faith (Romans 4:9, 22). He was regarded as right with God even before his foreskin was removed. His experience stood as a memorial for both Jews and Gentiles that circumcision ultimately doesn't procure the righteousness of God. Circumcision was simply a ceremonial foreshadowing of the work of Christ for those living under the Mosaic Covenant (Deuteronomy 30:6).

In saying, "In him also you were circumcised" in Colossians 2:11, Paul used strong language. By its position in the original language, the word "circumcision" maintained an emphatic position.<sup>4</sup> It referred to a past event. Paul meant to stress the reality of spiritual circumcision. The genuine believers at Colossae had been circumcised in a spiritual sense and they didn't need physical circumcision. Their hearts had been transformed by the work of Christ and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. They had no need for ritualistic observances of the Ceremonial Law.

Paul spoke of the spiritual circumcision belonging to the New Covenant when writing to the Philippians: "For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh" (Philippians 3:3). Whereas Old Testament circumcision was accomplished by the use of sharp knives made from stones (Joshua 5:2), New Testament circumcision is accomplished by the sharp sword of the Spirit. When the Word of God is proclaimed, a supernatural cutting takes place in human hearts. It is powerful to regenerate souls and circumcise spiritual hearts (Romans 1:16; Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12).

It is important to note that Paul did advocate for circumcision on rare occasion. In Acts 16 we read, "Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that

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<sup>3</sup> Davenant, John. *Geneva Series of Commentaries: Colossians*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 433.

<sup>4</sup> Wright, N.T. *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*. (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 104.

his father was a Greek” (Acts 16:3). Though the apostle strongly forbade the practice of circumcision as a means of earning salvation or favor with God, he did encourage the practice in the case of Timothy. The reason for circumcision in that situation was simple. Paul knew the man would be unable to preach the gospel in certain Jewish places if he was not circumcised. Paul’s advocacy for the rite in Acts 16 was not because he waffled on his understanding of the gospel. Instead, it was simply a situation in which he aimed to “become all things to all people” for the sake of Great Commission ministry (1 Corinthians 9:22).

### *“Made without Hands”*

What was the shadow involved in the Old Testament type of circumcision? Notice how Paul described the circumcision of which he spoke. He said it was “made without hands.” The literal meaning of Paul’s words were “unhandmade.” The apostle’s intent was to indicate that he wasn’t talking about the physical circumcision of the Old Testament. He was talking about a spiritual circumcision. The circumcision prescribed to Abraham and Abraham’s descendants (Genesis 17:1-11) was a type and shadow of a spiritual reality in Christ! While Old Testament saints received a physical circumcision, New Testament saints receive a spiritual circumcision. This was part of Paul’s meaning when he used the words “made without hands.” He wanted the believers at Colossae to know that he was talking about a spiritual work, not a physical one.

Handmade products are often thought to be of greater value than machine-made products in modern society. In God’s economy, humankind needs an “unhandmade” work in order to be reconciled to God. Remember the context of Paul’s words in Colossians 2:11. He was writing against a legalistic form of religion that made much of human works (Colossians 2:16-17; 20-23). The apostle intended to emphasize the need for a different type of work. Instead of relying on human works of religion that were mere types and shadows of greater realities, the church at Colossae needed to rely on what Old Testament circumcision actually represented — a change of heart by the regenerating work of Christ (John 3:3).

Even in the Old Testament, the Lord told the Israelites that physical circumcision pointed to a spiritual reality. In Deuteronomy 10:6, he said, “And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.” It is for this reason that Paul told the Romans, “For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God” (Romans 2:28-29). The Jewish legalists in the Lycus Valley were wrong. Old Testament circumcision was never intended as a means of earning righteousness before God. It was a symbol, type, or shadow that pointed to the heart-changing work that would be accomplished in the future by the long-promised Messiah (Genesis 3:15; 49:8-12; Ezekiel 36:26).

### *“By the Putting Off of the Body of Flesh”*

Paul explained the scope of regeneration by describing the way New Testament circumcision of the heart does something to put “off the body of the flesh.” The Greek word translated “putting off” in verse 11 was a compound word that contained a

preposition; thus, it spoke of "...a complete putting off and laying aside."<sup>5</sup> Paul wanted to emphasize the permanency of Christ's work. The circumcision of the heart at regeneration does something to completely alter the soul of the child of God. The Spirit's cutting of the heart performs a permanent work. When one is born-again, "...the power of the old sinful world over the Christian" is completely obliterated.<sup>6</sup> Paul would use the same Greek word later in his letter to convey a similar idea, saying, "Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices" (Colossians 3:9).

The Greek word rendered "flesh" (sárx) was one that was often used in the ancient world to speak of literal human flesh (Revelation 19:18). However, the word was used frequently in early Christian theology to speak of the residing principle of sin within humanity. In this way, the term depicted our human bodies as being in bondage to the power of sin. Because of Adam's first transgression, all are innately corrupted. Thus, our flesh can be regarded as "the willing instrument of sin."<sup>7</sup> Calvin said the term denoted corrupt human nature.<sup>8</sup> Another has defined it as referring to "...that which is a part of the old, corrupt world."<sup>9</sup>

Paul's point in speaking of "the body of flesh" in Colossians 2:11 was to highlight the way regeneration (spiritual circumcision) does something to alter the power of sin in the life of the believer. Because of the Spirit's seal at salvation (Ephesians 1:13-14), one receives supernatural power to overcome the promptings of the flesh (Galatians 5:16). The old man is crucified because of the work of Christ (Galatians 2:20).<sup>10</sup> One is liberated to live in a new type of way (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Perhaps Paul used the word in a tongue-in-cheek fashion. He knew some of his readers were obsessed with the rite of circumcision. They regularly encouraged others to perform a work involving literal human flesh. The sermons and lessons from the false teachings in the Lycus Valley utilized the Greek word for "flesh" a lot. Paul used the heretics word against them. Instead of engaging in physical circumcision, his readers need to experience a spiritual circumcision — a circumcision of the heart!

The ceremonial observances of the Mosaic Law were nothing more than a foreshadowing of marvelous Christian truths. Why would one make something like circumcision a requirement for godliness? Paul wanted his readers to know that they

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<sup>5</sup> 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), 464.

<sup>6</sup> Beale, 191.

<sup>7</sup> Gingrich, F. Wilbur and Frederick W. Danker. *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 179.

<sup>8</sup> 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), 184.

<sup>9</sup> Beale, G.K. *Colossians and Philemon: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 189.

<sup>10</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 464.

needed to rely on a circumcision of the heart, not a mere physical ceremony. Without a new heart, one has no real experience of salvation. Furthermore, one has no ability to live a life that subdues sin and pleases God.

### *“The Circumcision of Christ”*

Paul concluded verse 11 by speaking of New Testament circumcision as “the circumcision of Christ.” His language employed a genitive case noun that indicated what kind of circumcision he was talking about.<sup>11</sup> Thus, he meant to say that the circumcision of which he spoke was all about the work of Christ in the hearts of God’s people. In the New Covenant there is no longer a need for physical circumcision.

### **Verse 12**

After talking about circumcision, Paul used a second ceremonial observance as a metaphor for the Christian life. He said, “...having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.” Notice that baptism is the focus of verse 12. It is significant that such a subject came on the heels of Paul’s discussion of circumcision. The apostle’s verbiage linked the two actions together, depicting them as being contemporaneous actions.<sup>12</sup> At salvation, believers experience a figurative/spiritual baptism and circumcision. While circumcision figuratively portrayed the way the power of sin is broken at salvation, baptism figuratively portrayed the way believers receive new life by the Holy Spirit’s indwelling.

### *“Buried with Him in Baptism”*

In speaking of “baptism” in Colossians 2:12, Paul didn’t mean to refer to the literal act of being immersed in water, as prescribed for the New Testament church (Matthew 3:13-17; Matthew 28:18-20). A.T. Robertson has rightly noted, “Paul does not mean to say that the new life in Christ is caused or created by the act of baptism. That is grossly to misunderstand him.”<sup>13</sup> Instead of speaking literally of water baptism, Paul used baptism as a picture to metaphorically describe the way the power of sin is put to death when one places his or her faith in Christ for salvation.

Paul spoke of baptism in similar terms in his letter to the Romans, saying, “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). See Galatians 3:27 for another figurative use of baptism. At the moment of regeneration and justification, the old man is “buried” — i.e. the power of sin is put to death (Galatians 2:20). In addition, the believer is spiritually “raised” — i.e. he or she is endowed with new life, eternal life from God (John 10:10; 17:3).

### *“You Were Also Raised”*

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<sup>11</sup> Robertson, Archibald Thomas. *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume IV, The Epistles of Paul*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1931), 492.

<sup>12</sup> Beale, 192.

<sup>13</sup> Robertson, 493.

Paul spoke of the spiritual resurrection that takes place at regeneration (figurative baptism) by saying, "...you were also raised..." As an aside, it is interesting to note that Paul's words demonstrate that first-century baptism likely involved immersion underneath water. How can one be "buried" and "raised" through the act of sprinkling? It seems that the ancient church followed the same mode of baptism that our Lord observed (Mark 1:9-11). They probably baptized in lakes, rivers, pools, or other bodies of water, completely immersing new believers underneath water.<sup>14</sup>

The apostle knew that the believer's union with Christ involves a joint crucifixion and resurrection in a spiritual sense. At salvation, the sinful nature of humanity is crucified spiritually (Galatians 2:20). In addition, one is raised to live a new type of life (Romans 6:4). Baptism paints a picture of these realities. One has said, "The rite of baptism typified the reality of death and resurrection. Death is the negative side, resurrection is the positive."<sup>15</sup> Paul spoke similarly of the association between baptism and regeneration when writing to Titus: "... he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior" (Titus 3:5-6). Through Christian redemption, there is a sense in which believers have figuratively died, been buried, and been raised with Christ. Baptism paints a picture of such realities.

#### *"With Him"*

Notice that Paul used the phrase "with him" twice in verse 12. The phrase was yet another reference to the believer's union with Christ. According to Paul in verse 12, believers were both "buried" and "raised" with Jesus at salvation. In unison with him, they experienced the death of their old life and the resurrection of a new life. Peter spoke of the way believers are unified with Christ's death and resurrection through the new birth: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness" (1 Peter 2:24). He spoke similarly when writing to the Ephesians: "...[God]...even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:5-6).

#### *"Through Faith in the Powerful Working of God"*

All of this is accomplished "through faith in the powerful working of God." Saving faith is a trust in God's ordained means of forgiveness and reconciliation (Ephesians 2:8; John 3:16). It accompanies the Lord's work of regeneration in the life of the believer. The Bible teaches that the righteous person is one who lives by faith (Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38). It also explicitly teaches that salvation is through faith. In giving the Great Commission, Jesus said, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16). Paul told the Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8).

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<sup>14</sup> Davenant, 441.

<sup>15</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 464.

In our talk of the role of faith in salvation, it is important to note that faith is not a good work. Over and over again, faith is contrasted with good works in the New Testament (Romans 4:5; Ephesians 2:8-10). Unfortunately, some believers have a way of thinking of faith in such terms. They sometimes assume that faith is their part in salvation. They imagine God did fifty-percent of the work of redemption by sending Jesus to die for sins and that they did the other fifty-percent of salvation by trusting in Jesus. Such thinking inevitably leads to a man-centered form of pride.

Paul debunked such conceptions of faith through his use of the clause “in the powerful working of God.” The apostle’s language denoted the origin of saving faith. The Greek word for “powerful” is related to the word from which we get our English word “energy.” Paul used it earlier in Colossians 1:29 to say, “For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.” In that context, Paul meant to speak of how the power of God made Christian service and ministry possible. In the context of Colossians 2:12, he used the same language to speak of how the power of God makes Christian salvation possible. His point, as one has said, was that “God had power to raise Christ from the dead...and he has power (energy) to give us new life in Christ by faith.”<sup>16</sup>

The powerful working of God convicts one of sin and reveals the need of trust in Christ. Jesus spoke of such things when he told of the Holy Spirit’s role in salvation. Speaking to his disciples, he said, “And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8). None can boast about his or her faith in Christ. Faith is the opposite of good works. Some seem to misunderstand this. Martyn-Lloyd Jones has said, “...our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is not our righteousness; our faith does not constitute our righteousness. Faith is simply the instrument by which we receive the righteousness. Or, again, take it like this: our faith does not justify us. If you begin to speak like that, you see, you turn faith at once into works.”<sup>17</sup>

The power of God working in our lives is a prerequisite for our expressions of faith. This is true because of our sinful estate. There is nothing good within us that could have created saving faith. In 1 Corinthians 2:14, Paul said, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” The people at Colossae needed a reminder of such realities. Religious pride was causing some to think that they were righteous because of their ceremonial religious works. Paul wanted his readers to remember that salvation was accomplished by the grace and power of God.

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<sup>16</sup> Robertson, 493.

<sup>17</sup> Lloyd-Jones, D.M. *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 1, the Gospel of God*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), 306.