

**Series:** The Letter to the Colossians

**Title:** "Alive in Christ, Part 5"

**Text:** Colossians 2:15

**Date:** September 17, 2023

### Verse 15

In Colossians 2:15, Paul continued his discussion concerning life in Christ by talking about a subject that may seem completely unrelated. The apostle delved into the subject of angels and demons by saying, "He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him" (Colossians 2:15). The pronoun "He" at the beginning of the verse most likely referred to Christ, the one spoken of in verses 13-14. Paul continued his train of thought concerning the work of Christ by talking about how Christ's work at the cross had implications on the angelic realm.

A discussion concerning the angelic realm may seem superfluous to a discussion concerning the person and work of Christ, especially for modern believers. However, such a discussion was pertinent to Paul's original readership. Believers within the church were being coaxed into believing that the path to interacting with the supreme being flowed through the angelic realm. Instead of praying to God the Father through Jesus Christ, Christians were attempting to pray to God through angels (Colossians 2:18). Such thinking was rooted in ancient paganism that envisioned a host of divine angelic beings who provided counsel to the most high "god." The Greek pantheon of gods, as well as the gods of other polytheistic worldviews, was a product of such ancient superstition. A primary purpose in Paul's letter to the Colossians was to correct the folly of such views. At the time of his writing, certain professing Christians were propagating an inferior form of Christianity that mixed such pagan beliefs with the Christian faith.

#### *"Disarmed"*

The word translated "disarmed" commonly meant "to strip." In the first-century world, it was used of one removing clothing.<sup>1</sup> In this verse, the verb appeared in the middle voice of the original language of the text; thus, it referred to Christ performing an action on himself. What action did Jesus perform on himself in reference to "rulers and authorities?" Before we can answer that question, we must first define what the terms "rulers and authorities" meant.

In the New Testament the language was often used of angelic beings (Ephesians 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; 1 Peter 3:22). The word conveyed the idea that there is a hierarchy amongst the angelic realm. Paul previously referred to ranks of angels in Colossians 2:8 and 10. He would do so later again in Colossians 2:20. In the context of Colossians 2:14, it seems Paul had this idea in mind, since the Gnostic heresy maintained the necessity of praying to a rank of angels that descended from the great, supreme being. Paul debunked such philosophy by flatly stating that Christ disarmed the angelic realm through his work on the cross.

Since "rulers and authorities" referred to angelic and demonic beings, we know that the word "disarmed" referred to Christ stripping himself in some regard in relation to the spirit realm. But in what exact way did Jesus do this? By studying the New Testament, it seems that Paul meant to allude to the way Jesus overcame Satanic temptation throughout his ministry. One has encapsulated the meaning of Paul's words by saying, "Christ divested Himself at the

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<sup>1</sup> Beale, G.K. *Colossians and Philemon: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 200.

cross of the evil power which had struggled with Him so strongly during His ministry in attempts to force Him to abandon the pathway of the cross."<sup>2</sup>

But how did Satan and demons struggle with Jesus during his earthly ministry? Scripture teaches that Satan and his cronies continually tempted Jesus while he was on Earth. Matthew 4:1-11 perhaps contains the best description of such tempting. In that passage, we learn that Satan enticed our Lord in reference to the three basic wicked values he uses to tempt all humanity — the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16). Satan used such tactics when he deceived Eve (Genesis 3:1-7). He also used them in alluring the Kings of Israel and Judah away from the Lord's will (Deuteronomy 17:14-20).

What's important for our current study is to note that Jesus overcame all the Devil's temptations. He lived a perfectly sinless life. He offered himself gladly on the cross of Calvary for our sins. Through his work, he defeated Satan and all of Satan's co-conspirators. The word rendered "disarmed" in verse 15 is one that was used of a conquering general who stripped conquered soldiers naked, divesting them of their armor and weapons. Such defeated foes were humiliated and unable to fight back. Such is a fitting picture of what Jesus did to the powers of hell.

It is true that there are ranks of angels in the Lord's created order. Such is seen through the book of Daniel. On one occasion, the prophet prayed fervently to the Lord. After a delay in response from the Lord, an angel appeared to him and said, "Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words. The prince of the kingdom of Persia withstood me twenty-one days, but Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I was left there with the kings of Persia" (Daniel 10:12-13). The message Daniel received indicated that there is a rank amongst angelic beings. The title "Legion," as used by demons who encountered Jesus, quite possibly referred to an angelic ranking system as well (Mark 5:9). Despite these things, Paul's readers at Colossae were misguided in praying through ranks of angels. Jesus had secured freedom and life. They had no need in interacting with angelic beings.

A lesson is found for believers of all generations in Paul's words — an inordinate fascination with the angelic realm often distracts from the person and work of Christ. The believer's strength and sufficiency in life comes from Jesus, not through peering into the mysteries of the spirit realm. Though believers were previously captive to the Devil (Ephesians 2:2; 2 Timothy 2:26), Christ's resistance of the Devil's temptations has done a work to vanquish the Devil and all his demons. The author of Hebrews said, "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil" (Hebrews 2:14).

#### *"Put Them to Open Shame"*

The verb translated "put them to open shame" was used of a first-century athletic victor who displayed his trophies or awards for all to see. It was also used of a conquering force who put imprisoned slaves on public display for the purpose of invoking shame.<sup>3</sup> In some contexts, it carried the meaning of "to make an example of."<sup>4</sup> The background of the word reveals the Paul's meaning. He meant to emphasize the way Jesus humiliated Satan and Satan's demons

<sup>2</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), 465.

<sup>3</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 465.

<sup>4</sup> Robertson, Archibald Thomas. *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume IV, The Epistles of Paul*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1931), 495.

through the cross. Though the cross was an object of shame in first-century culture (1 Corinthians 1:18), it ultimately did not bring shame on Christ. Instead, it had the effect of bringing shame on Satan, Satan's forces, and all of Satan's plans for stealing glory from God.

At the beginning of time, Satan, who was previously Lucifer, led a host of angelic beings to rebel against the Lord. Though they originally ministered in the holy presence of God, and though they were originally untainted by rebellion and self-glory, they conspired against the Lord, desiring glory for themselves. Isaiah depicted their prideful rebellion when he compared Nebuchadnezzar's self-glory to Satan's self-glory (Isaiah 14:14-17). In his fallen and rebellious estate, Satan lashed out against the crown of the Lord's creation — humankind. He deceived Adam and Eve into violating God's Law (Genesis 2:16-17; 3:1-7). Soon after the fall of mankind, the Lord announced a plan of redemption for humanity. He would send one from the womb of the woman who would crush the head of Satan and reverse the consequences of sin (Genesis 3:15). Adam and Eve believed God's promises. Though they were expelled from the Garden of God, they spiritual life through faith in the Promised One who would give life (Genesis 3:20-21).

Incensed by God's plans of redemption and restoration, Satan immediately began lashing out against God's people. He first coaxed one of Adam and Eve's sons to murder their other son, thinking he could outwit God's plans (Genesis 4:1-16). Despite these things, humanity continued to trust in God's promise of the Anointed One. Though expelled from the Garden of Eden, they prayed and sought the Lord by faith (Genesis 4:26). Satan raged in his fury against such things. He continued to work behind the scenes to stir up sin and hostility against God. He again tried to thwart God's plan of sending the Redeemer through the seed of woman by polluting the bloodline of the righteous (Genesis 6:1-8). In response, the Lord initiated a covenant with Noah through which he promised to preserve humanity (Genesis 8:20-22). When the time was right, God sent his son to Earth to defeat sin and Satan (Galatians 4:4). It is through the incarnation that the Lord put Satan and Satanic forces to "open shame."

#### *"By Triumphant Over Them in Him"*

The word rendered "triumphant" was a military term. When a victorious general would return home from a long campaign, he would typically show off prisoners he had gained through war.<sup>5</sup> Customarily, the conquering leader would ride in front of his conquered enemies on a horse, or a horse-drawn carriage of sorts. Crowds would line the streets and cheer as they welcomed the victorious general home. Paul used such a cultural occurrence to metaphorically speak of the work of Christ.

It is important to view Colossians 2:14 in light of Colossians 2:15. How exactly did Christ triumph over the angelic realm? Verse 14 tells us. The cross was the means by which he stripped the power of the demonic realm. The instrument that was meant as a shame for Jesus became a shame for Satanic forces. Through his death, burial, and resurrection, Jesus exercised power over the angelic realm. Satan and his demons can be likened to a chain gang of first-century military prisoners. Christ has rendered the devil and every demonic force powerless over the lives of God's people.

Earlier in Colossians, Paul talked about how Jesus' work at the cross had an impact on the angelic realm, saying, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:19-20). In Paul's metaphor in verse 15, Jesus' cross was figuratively the chariot in which he rode as a victorious conqueror.<sup>6</sup> Though the cross had a

<sup>5</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 465.

<sup>6</sup> Beale, 201.

#### Commented [1]:

Example: The closest thing we have to this today is a sports parade for world champions who return to their city with a prized trophy.

stigma of shame in the first-century world, Jesus used it to parade his victory over Satan, sin, and every demonic force.

Paul spoke of such things on other occasions in the New Testament. When writing to the Ephesians on more than one occasion. In Ephesians 1, he spoke of the way the Lord raised Jesus “from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come” (Ephesians 1:20-21). The original language of Ephesians 1:20-21 use words for angels that are found in Colossians 2:15. Paul’s intent was to depict the way Jesus’ resurrection rendered him superior in power to the angelic realm. He would speak of the same realities again in Ephesians, saying, “But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore it says, ‘When he ascended on high, he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.’ (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things)” (Ephesians 4:7-9). According to Paul, Jesus’s descent to Earth through the incarnation did something to subdue and defeat all angelic forces that are hostile to God and God’s people.

It was folly for Paul’s readers to fall for a teaching that made praying to angels necessary for Christ. They needed to be focused on the Victor, not spirit beings. Through the cross, Jesus secured the defeat of Satan and every minion of hell. One day, all evil angelic forces will be relegated to the Lake of Fire forever. In the book of Revelation, John gave witness: “...and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Revelation 20:10).

Though Paul’s words in Colossians 2:15 dealt with a specific problem in the first-century church at Colossae, they have application for us. First, they remind us that there is indeed a host of spiritually dark forces that seeks to distract and deceive us. Peter warned concerning this matter: “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). God’s people should always be on the lookout, knowing they often don’t “wrestle against flesh and blood” (Ephesians 6:12).

However, believers never need to live with an ordinate fear of their enemy. The apostle John once said, “Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). None need to live in paranoia concerning the forces of darkness. One Puritan noted, “Christ hath spoiled and taken away the powers hostile to us...For although the devil, sin, and our other foes, may appear to press upon us; yet they cannot conquer, because they are restrained by the authority of Christ our Leader.”<sup>7</sup> Christ has rendered a victory that seals God’s children and keeps them safe from all the forces of hell. Ultimately, Christians aren’t called to live in fear concerning demons and the Devil. They are called to live by faith in Christ. It is for this reason that Paul would later tell the Colossians “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Colossians 3:1). Power in the Christian life is found in the faith-filled gaze on Christ, not speculation concerning the spirit realm.

This leads us to the most direct application of Colossians 2:15 for us. Don’t get out of balance in your biblical beliefs. Yes, demonic forces are powerful. The continual assaults on marriage, unborn children, gender, and human sexuality in our cultural are the result of an invisible war. One has said, “The great battle the faithful church of Jesus Christ faces today is

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<sup>7</sup> Davenant, John. *Geneva Series of Commentaries: Colossians*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 475.

not ultimately with humanism, secularism, gender confusion, or aggressive atheism. Behind all of these aberration lies 'the god of this age, 'Satan, who has 'blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.'"<sup>8</sup> Satan has always raged against God's plan for marriage, the home, and sexual intimacy, because he knows that such things are the vehicle of his defeat. The Lord used marriage and the reproductive processes as the means of sending the Anointed One to Earth (Genesis 3:15).

Yes, there is a spiritual war all around us, but Christians should be careful they don't get out of balance doctrinally. This was precisely the problem in Colossae. Believers were becoming more enamored with the spirit realm than Christ. As a result, their lives lacked the spiritual vitality that comes from union and communion with God the Son. Modern believers are not immune to these things. Many often miss the proverbial forest because of the proverbial trees. They fixate their gaze on secondary and tertiary matters of the faith — doctrines concerning angels, demons, the end times, the age of the Earth, or distinctions between human responsibility and divine sovereignty — and they thus fail to have an appropriate regard for Christ. Inordinate fascinations with secondary matters of the faith are often harmful to one's spiritual progress. Christ is to be primary!

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<sup>8</sup> Hamilton, Ian. My Father is Always at Work. *The Banner of Truth Magazine*: 692, May 2021. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust), 2.