

Complete In Christ – Part 1

Colossians 2:8-10

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I'm going to read the text, Colossians 2:8-10.

Paul says, "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. For in Him..."—that is, Christ—"...dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in Him, which is the head of all principality and power."

One of America's great Bible teachers, Donald Grey Barnhouse, from a former generation, was for many years the pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He grew up there as a boy. He tells the story that when he was young, he and a friend would go into Philadelphia and pull a prank on people by standing on a busy street corner in downtown Philadelphia and they would stare up into the sky. One of them would say, "Yes, it is." The other one would say, "No, it isn't." The other one would say, "Yes, it is." And the other one would say, "No, it isn't." They would stand there doing that until a crowd began to gather around them, looking up into the sky also. They would get this huge crowd of people standing there looking up into the sky and they would slip out of the crowd and lean against the building and would get a good laugh watching the show of people staring up into the sky at nothing.

Barnhouse goes on to say, "That little incident is a good illustration of all the earth-born religions. People talk about having faith, and they tell you to look in a direction where there is absolutely nothing. Some people are so desperately in need of seeing something that they will look until they are almost blind, yet they never catch a glimpse of anything that is real."

At this point in Paul's letter to the Colossians, he begins to express his concern that the believers be not led away from Christ. The danger was very real. They could be pulled away or taken captive or carried away from their faith in Jesus Christ by speculation as opposed to focusing on divine revelation.

In this passage in these simple verses—but simply profound—Paul does two things. First, he issues a warning in verse 8. He says, "Beware lest any man spoil you," or as the Living Translation says, "Don't let anyone capture you." The second thing Paul does, in verses 9-10, is he prescribes the safeguard. Paul first warns us not to be carried away captive, and then, secondly, he prescribes the safeguard or what we need to understand in order to prevent being led astray or being spoiled. In verse 9 he says, "For in Him..."—that is, "Jesus Christ"—"...dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily."

I want to unpack these two points: the warning and the safeguard. Look at the warning in verse 8. "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world..."—and here's the important point—"...and not after Christ." This is not after Christ.

He starts with the word “beware.” It’s in the present, active imperative. In other words, it says to be constantly, continually, ongoing, habitually watching out. Beware. It’s a command in the Greek, so he’s commanding us that we need to have our eyes open and beware and look out.

Kenneth Weise renders this, “Be constantly looking out. Keep a watchful eye.”

Jesus warned of wolves that would come in sheep’s clothing. In the Old Testament and on into the New Testament there are all these warnings about false prophets, false teachers and people who will lead you astray from the truth. Paul, writing to the Philippians in chapter 3, verse 2, said, “Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the concision,” or the “mutilators of the flesh.” They were Judaizers that made Gentiles become Jewish in order to be saved. They said you had to keep certain dietary laws and you had to be circumcised and follow the law of Moses in order to be a Christian. Paul said, “No. Beware of them.”

Notice Paul says in verse 8, “...lest any man.” That’s because Satan uses people to spread his lies. So be constantly aware. Be on the lookout. Realize that anyone, any man, any woman, any teacher, any preacher, evangelist, pastor—whoever it might be—has the capacity to lead you astray by their lies. So it’s our job and our responsibility to be alert. Watch out.

But let me bring some balance to that. Be alert. Watch out. Be careful. But don’t be unloving. Always be loving and kind and compassionate. Some people say that when you expose a false teacher that’s not loving and you shouldn’t do that. It’s not really in vogue or popular today to say, “That man’s preaching is in error” or “What he’s telling isn’t true” or “That’s a cult group.” People say, “Well, you shouldn’t judge them. You shouldn’t condemn them. You shouldn’t say that.”

It’s true that Jesus said in Matthew 7:1, “Judge not, that ye be not judge.” But Jesus is talking about a critical, fault-finding, censorious attitude. We don’t want to do that; we don’t want to be critical or fault-finding. But we do want to be discerning.

It says to me that there are many Christians who are so gullible. They don’t know the truth, and they don’t know God’s Word. Many times they are being led astray. So we need to “speak the truth in love.” Love without truth is hypocrisy; truth without love is brutality. We need to have both blend together. We need to be loving but standing firmly on the truth. We need that balance.

We don’t want to be critical or fault-finding. Some people are like “Gospel Gestapos.” They’re like the “Holy Ghost police.” They go around rebuking people. We need to be loving, but we also need to be discerning and careful. We need to be careful that we don’t follow error and let it spoil us from our devotion to Christ.

Why is it so important that we stay alert? Verse 8, “...lest any man spoil you.” The phrase “spoil you” literally means “to be carried off as a captive.” It’s a word picture. It’s used to describe an army going to conquer another land or another nation, and they would take captives or slaves, would chain them and march them in a line out of that nation. It’s the idea of

being kidnapped or taken away.

The cults prey on weak believers. They also prey on false professors. They go to homes, knock on the door and say, “We’re Christians. We love Jesus. Can we come in? We’d like to give you a Bible study.” Undiscerning Christians, many times, will be sucked into that and they will be kidnapped or taken captive, figuratively speaking, and carried away.

I don’t remember how many years ago it was; it’s a blur. But many years ago, I was actually kidnapped. I was in Los Angeles getting ready to take off on a flight. We went outside the airport—not a good idea. We should have stayed inside the airport—to a restaurant. It was late on a Sunday night. And we came out of the restaurant and were abducted in the parking lot at gunpoint. For about three hours, they held guns to our heads, held our vehicle, robbed us and kidnapped us. So I know the feeling of being kidnapped and the helplessness of having a gun held to your head and not being able to get free and go where you want and do what you want. It’s a terrible experience. But Paul was talking about in the spiritual realm. Don’t be taken captive and led away from your devotion to Christ, because that will really spoil you.

How do false teachers capture weak and undiscerning believers? What are their methods? Paul lists five ways in this one verse, verse 8, that they use to capture you. Through “philosophy.” Also through “vain deceit.” What is this “philosophy” he is talking about? The word literally means “love of wisdom.” Now Paul isn’t condemning a love of wisdom; he’s condemning a worldly wisdom, a humanistic, man-centered philosophy. Most philosophy today is humanistic. It has man at the center and God is out of the picture. That is what Paul is warning us of here: to not love wisdom for wisdom’s sake. The Bible says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

You may have a high IQ and you may have an education, but “The fool said in his heart there is no God.” I don’t care how educated you are, I don’t care what degrees you have—if you’ve rejected God, the Bible says you are a fool. Without God you have no real purpose in life. So the fear of the Lord brings that wisdom.

But be careful, because these false teachers use humanistic, man-centered philosophy. This philosophy is not found in the Word of God. By the way, this is the only place where the word “philosophy” appears in the Bible. It’s in the negative context of don’t let your faith be spoiled by this love of wisdom. Be discerning.

Then the false teachers capture weak and undiscerning believers by “vain deceit,” verse 8. I believe this is a further description of the philosophy. “Vain deceit” is a description of the kind of philosophy that Paul is warning us about: vain, empty or deceptive. It’s void of spiritual truth or power or real hope. It’s like looking up into the sky, and there’s nothing there.

J.B. Phillips renders this “high-sounding nonsense.” I love that. I’ve listened to people preach sometimes, and it sounds so deep and intellectual, they use these big words and it sounds so spiritual, but it’s actually nothing. There’s nothing there. There’s no truth, there’s no Biblical

content and there's no substance to what they are saying. It's just impressive speech. So it's humanistic philosophy that's vain or empty.

In 2 Timothy 4:2-4, Paul commanded Timothy to “Preach the Word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering...”—or “patience”—“...and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine...”—or

“teaching”—“...but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears. And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.” You turn away from the truth unto fables. It's just vain and empty. How sad that is.

Then false teachers use “the tradition of men,” verse 8. So we have philosophy, vain deceit and the traditions of men. These are the methods of these false teachers. Jesus warned us of replacing God's Word with man's tradition. The Bible says, “Honor your father and your mother....” But the Pharisees of Jesus' day found a loophole for that. They said, “My substance—my money, my gifts, my possessions—are devoted to God. Corban. They are dedicated to God, so I don't have to help my parents.” So by the traditions of men, they circumvented obedience to God's Word. Listen to me very carefully. God's Word is the authority, not man's traditions.

Now there are some traditions that are wonderful. There is a lot of me that is quite traditional. As we were singing I Surrender All today, it was hard for me to hold back the tears backstage, because I've heard that since I was a little boy. I love that song. How powerful to have a congregation singing that song from their hearts. Lord, I surrender all. I love the traditional hymns. And there are things about traditional church that I appreciate. But the authority is not tradition; it's God's Word.

When we're talking about tradition, we're talking about man's ideas that are handed down—many times orally or by tradition—that aren't in the Word of God. There are Biblical traditions that are good, but there are non-Biblical traditions that are not good. What we need is to be discerning, beware. Don't place more importance on man's tradition than on God's divine revelation or truth in His Word. That's where a lot of churches go awry; they disregard the Word for their tradition. “This is the way it's done. This is the way we've always done it. It doesn't matter what the Bible says, we're going to do it this way.” So we need to be careful. We need the wisdom that comes from divine revelation found in God's Word.

Notice fourthly, in verse 8, Paul refers to “the rudiments of the world.” Of the five, this is perhaps one of the hardest phrases to understand in this verse. It's used of anything which is in a row or appeared in a row or a sequence or in a series. It was used for letters of the alphabet. It came to be used for the A-B-Cs or the basics of the alphabet. So some feel that Paul may be saying that to turn from divine revelation to humanistic philosophy is like going back to the A-B-Cs. It's like going back to the elementary principles instead of following Christ. Some feel that the idea of the elementary spirits there is a reference to the false teachers' focus on angels and the worship of angels and the worship of spirit beings and emanations that come out from God

that you have to work your way back up to God.

Notice in chapter 2, verse 18, there is an indication there that the false teachers were promoting this idea of humbly “worshipping of angels” that were unworthy to come directly to God, so we pray to angels or we pray to spirits. We go through other mediators. Paul says that’s wrong. The false teachers taught a combination of Greek philosophy, Jewish legalism and eastern mysticism. By the way, that is seen today in what is known as Cabala, which means “received tradition.”

Several years ago, the rock singer, Madonna, popularized Cabala. It is Judaism mixed with the occult. It’s Judaism mixed with eastern mysticism and occultic practices. So you need to be careful, and you need to be aware so you’re not led astray in these things.

Then Paul summarizes this in verse 8 by saying, fifthly, “not after Christ.” These things are “not after Christ”: the philosophy, the vain deceit, the traditions of men, the rudiments of the world. That is so important. Christianity is Christ. Don’t forget that. I think it’s interesting that he doesn’t say, “not after Christ’s teachings.” Christ’s teachings are important, but do you know that you can keep Christ’s teachings and not be saved? You can do everything Jesus told you to do and still not be saved. It’s not the teachings of Christ that save us; it’s His death and Resurrection, and it’s faith in the person of Christ that saves you.

You know what a Christian is? A Christian is a person who knows Christ. You got that? A Christian has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. He actually “knows” the Lord. I know that non-Christians think we’re crazy when we say that. “Hey, do you know the Lord?” [A blank stare in return.]

“You know the Lord? You actually ‘know’ Jesus?” they ask incredulously.

“Yes; He’s actually my best friend. He’s my Savior. He’s my Redeemer. [singing] He walks with me and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own. And the joy we share, as we tarry there, none other has ever known.” I know Jesus Christ. Not only can I say that He’s my Savior and my Redeemer, He’s also my dearest friend. I love Him.

That’s what a Christian is. It’s not doing Christian things or going to a Christian church. You may be at church now, but that doesn’t make you a Christian. If a mouse gets into a cookie jar, it doesn’t become a cookie; right? When you go to McDonald’s you don’t become a Big Mac. Praise God for that. Unless that’s all you eat every day and then you get Mac’d out. But coming to church doesn’t make you a Christian. It’s knowing Christ personally. I love the fact that Paul closes this personally, in verse 8, by saying that it’s “not after Christ.” Christianity is knowing Christ, loving Christ, walking with Christ.

Whenever you hear someone preach, give them the “Christ-test.” Ask yourself if the teaching accords with the truth as it is revealed in Christ. In 1 John 4:2-3 it says that if anyone says that Christ has not come in the flesh, they are not of God. The only one that is of God is one who confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. What does that mean? It means that Jesus

Christ is God incarnate. We'll see that in verse 9-10; that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh. If they reject that, we reject them as being heretical, false teachers.

So the safeguard is Jesus Christ, which introduces us to the second main point, in verses 9-10. This is the safeguard. Paul says, "For." This is the reason we need Christ. "For in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And ye..."—as a believer—"...are complete in Him, which is the head of all principality and power"—that's spiritual beings: angelic beings, both good and bad, fallen angels, which are demons. Christ is the head over the spirit realm.

Paul makes three profound affirmations about Christ. Number one is Christ's full deity. Notice it in verse 9: "In Him..."—that is, "Jesus Christ"—"...dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." Paul was saying there that Jesus Christ is God. The fullness of the Godhead dwells in Jesus Christ. The word "dwelleth" means to "dwell permanently." Jesus is the eternal God.

The second affirmation, found in verse 9, is Christ's real humanity. "For in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead..."—How?—"...bodily." This is talking about the incarnation; that "God became flesh and dwelt among us." Literally that means that He pitched His tent among us.

Let me break it down like this: Jesus was God in His preincarnate glory. That means that before He was born of a virgin and became a man, He was the eternal God; always has been and always will be. He coexisted with God the Father and the Holy Spirit from all eternity past. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," John 1:1. This was Jesus in His preincarnate glory.

Secondly, Jesus was God in His incarnate humility. In His preincarnate glory and in His incarnate humility. When Jesus Christ was here on earth, He was God in the flesh. That's why He "spoke like never a man spoke," that's why He said things and performed miracles and He did things that no one has ever done before. It's because He is God. That's what's conveyed here: His real humanity.

But you could add, thirdly, that Jesus is God in His glorified majesty. Right now, in heaven, Jesus is "seated at the right hand of God the Father," in His glorified, immortal, eternal body. He is a prototype of our future bodies.

So Jesus Christ was God in eternity past. He was God when He was here on earth. He is God still in heaven, glorified, in majesty, "at the right hand of the Father." So preincarnate glory, incarnate humility and glorified majesty; full deity and real humanity.

Now notice the third affirmation in verse 10: Christ's complete adequacy. Did you know that Jesus Christ is adequate and sufficient and able to take care of everything you need? Verse 10 says, "And you are complete in Him, which is the head of all principality and power." So you have full deity, real humanity and complete adequacy, because as believers, we are in Christ. We are complete in Christ. Every spiritual need is fully met in Him. Possessing Christ, we possess everything.

In Ephesians 1:3, Paul says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who hath...”—past tense—“...blessed us...”—“Christians”—“...with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.” Do you know that you are blessed in Christ?

Now there are a few fundamental things I need to say about this doctrine of being complete in Christ. The moment you were born again—The theological word is “regenerated.” It means you were given new life—you went from death to life, darkness to light, despair to hope. You were taken out of Adam; out of sin, death and condemnation. Then you were placed into the last Adam, Jesus Christ, where there is salvation. That happened the moment you were saved.

It happens to every Christian. There aren’t some Christians who are in Christ and some who are not in Christ. I’ve had people argue with me and say, “Well, not all Christians are in Christ.” You can’t be a Christian if you’re not in Christ.

Being in Christ means that you are complete. You don’t need addition; you just need appropriation. You don’t need to add anything. You just need nourishment; you need to know who you are and begin to read God’s Word, learn and grow and rely upon the Holy Spirit. Christian growth takes place not by addition—because you are complete in Christ—but by nutrition or by appropriation.

We have a new grandson. His name is Hans. Our daughter has come over a few times to hang out with us. What a blessing he is. He’s about two-and-a-half months old. The other day he rolled over and everyone freaked out. “He rolled over! He rolled over! Awesome!”

But when Hans was born and my four children were born, they had everything. All they needed was nutrition. All they needed was to be fed and grow. When a kid is born it doesn’t have any teeth. Did you ever notice that newborn babies have no teeth? But you don’t have to freak out; they’ll come. I can see a first-time parent saying, “He’s got no teeth! He’s got no teeth! Ahhh!” Our first three were girls and they were all bald for about three years. We had to tape bows on their heads so people knew it’s a girl! “She’s got a dress and a bow taped on her head. What do you mean it’s a boy?!” Slap you. “It’s my daughter.” Eventually the hair came and did it come. There’s hair all over the house. Brushes all over the house. Three girls in the house. But I didn’t freak out and say, “Oh, no! Our girls are bald!” The teeth came. The hair came. They grew and they matured. All they needed was nourishment and love and encouragement.

When you were born into God’s family, you were born in Christ complete. The word “complete”—and this is the theme of my series in Colossians. This is our theme text, by the way. The word “complete” is a nautical term. Don’t miss that. What it conveys is that you are shipshape or fully rigged. I’m more of a surfer than a sailor, but I think sailing is cool. I’ve often thought that if my body doesn’t let me surf anymore, I want to take up sailing. To be able to feel the wind at your back and the sail fill with wind, tacking against the wind and skimming over the water—that’s awesome.

But when you go out on a boat, you want a boat that’s not going to leak. You want to make sure

the sail is working. If someone had a boat and said, "Hey, you want to ride in my boat? Let's go to Hawaii in my boat. It has some leaks in it, but let's go."

"No, thank you." You want a boat that's shipshape, that's fully rigged and ready to sail.

This nautical term means that in Christ you are fully rigged, ready to sail in life. You have everything you need to be the Christian God wants you to be. Everything you need to be the husband God wants you to be. Everything you need to be the wife and the parent and the child He wants you to be. And to be a worker and to be a server and to be a pastor. Christ is sufficient. This text speaks of the adequacy and the sufficiency of Christ.

Charles Wesley wrote in his well-known hymn:

Thou, O Christ, are all I need.

More than all in Thee I find.

How wonderful.

I can't tell you what joy filled my heart many, many years ago when the truth began to become real to me and I understood that I'm in Christ, I'm forgiven and I'm free. I'm complete and I'm on my way to heaven, Jesus loves me and I don't have to try to perform to be good enough to get God to accept me. I've been saved by grace, I'm kept by grace and I'll be in heaven by God's grace. Jesus is "the way, the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through Him."

My question in closing is: Are you in Christ? Are you really a Christian? Have you been born again? Are you just a professor or are you a possessor? It's one thing to come to church; it's another thing to come to Christ. It's one thing to say you're a Christian; it's another thing to be a Christian. A Christian is a person who has the life of God dwelling in their soul. I want to give you an opportunity now. God brought you here. You're not here by accident. I don't want to miss this opportunity to say that if you don't know if you're a Christian—that you don't know that if you died you'd go to heaven, you don't know that your sins are forgiven—I want to give you an opportunity to be born again. Old things can pass away; all things can become brand new. You can have new life in Jesus Christ.

If there is any question in your mind, if there is any doubt or concern—"Have I really been born again? Do I know Jesus Christ? If I died right now, would I go to heaven, or would I go to hell?" If there is, then open your heart right now to Jesus Christ. Invite Him to come in and forgive your sins and to be your Savior. If you haven't made that commitment, I want to give you that opportunity now.