

“Rooted”

*So then, just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in him, being **rooted** and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, and overflowing with gratitude (Colossians 2:6-7).
Colossians 2:1-23 (read vv. 6-14) ¹*

I am not much of a horticulturalist. In fact, I am not a horticulturalist at all. My Dad loved to grow trees, corn, cotton, and rose bushes. My Mom loved to grow flowers and house plants. Jill loves to grow vegetables and herbs. Nathan loves to grow rose bushes. Anna loves to nurture animals on their little farm. But those affinities are not in my skillset.

I do have some vague ideas about growing things. I know most plants need water, sunshine, and proper nutrients. But many of my vague ideas are poorly formed. I learned just this week, for example, that the root system of most trees is far wider than it is deep, debunking the impression I'd had previously.

According to “Dr. Google,” most trees do not have a tap root, and their root systems seldom penetrate more deeply than a foot or two into the soil, though their shallow root systems often reach a diameter several times larger than the canopy above ground. Did you know that? Apparently the root system of most trees looks a lot like the tree that forms the background of this week's *PowerPoint*.

While most (but not all) plants have roots, we sometimes speak of ourselves as having “roots,” too, don't we? We might think of Alex Haley's famous work by that name.² We might remember Tevye's famous line in *Fiddler on the Roof*: “Traditions tell us who we are and what God expects of us.”³

We might think about the ways in which African and Semitic peoples keep track of generation after generation of their family trees, and of genealogical work that has been done in our own families. We might even think about Paul's letter to the church in Colosse:

*So then, just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in him, being **rooted** and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, and overflowing with gratitude (Colossians 2:6-7).*

You didn't think of that one?⁴ Well, that's okay. We're going to talk about that one this morning.

We've arrived at Colossians in our Journey through the Bible, and I discovered this week that I've never before preached from the second chapter of Colossians. And I was reminded why I haven't. The second chapter of Colossians is complicated. It's also important, so I invite you to keep your Bible open while we ponder Colossians 2 for a while this morning.

From start to finish, Paul's letter to Colosse is jam-packed with theological significance, with chapters one and three being the most familiar. Chapter two, though, contains the meat of why it was that Paul wrote this letter in the first place. We're going to look at it one section at a time, so you'll want your Bible.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 9, 2020.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roots:_The_Saga_of_an_American_Family#Plagiarism

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fiddler_on_the_Roof

⁴ See also Ephesians 3:17.

Colossians 2:1-3

¹ For I want you to know how greatly I am struggling for you, for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me in person. ² I want their hearts to be encouraged and joined together in love, so that they may have all the riches of complete understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery — Christ. ³ In him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Colosse and Laodicea were towns in the Lycus Valley of what we know as central Turkey. Paul had never been to either town, but he had heard about them from his friend, Epaphrus, who was from Colosse. Epaphrus had apparently come to know Jesus through Paul's preaching in Ephesus and had carried the Gospel back to his town and to neighboring towns. Paul wrote this letter in response to news from Epaphrus that some false teachings were making headway among the believers in Colosse, and this letter is his effort to straighten things out.

Chapter 2 begins with Paul's affirmation of his intense pastoral concern for the well-being of these congregations. He's trying to both encourage them and to correct them, and verses 2 and 3 give clues to the nature of his concern.

The words, "treasures," "understanding," "knowledge," "wisdom," and "mystery" were buzz words that had to do with the teachings of Gnosticism in the first century. Gnostics—the word is a transliteration of the Greek word for "knowledge"—taught that they, and only they, had the secret knowledge and wisdom necessary for understanding the mysteries of life, secret knowledge that would be imparted only to the initiated.

Such ideas are found among humankind in every age. The secret meetings of Masons and Shriners and similar groups might be current examples. When Paul wrote, "*In [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,*" he was launching his argument against such teaching.

Colossians 2:4-7

⁴ I am saying this so that no one will deceive you with arguments that sound reasonable.

⁵ For I may be absent in body, but I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see how well ordered you are and the strength of your faith in Christ.

*⁶ So then, just as you have received **Christ Jesus as Lord**, continue to walk in him,*

*⁷ being **rooted** and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, and overflowing with gratitude.*

In verse 4, Paul warns of the danger that false teachers might try to lead them into spiritual error with "fast talking" that "sounds reasonable." If you are a timeshare owner, I don't know how you feel about yours, but as far as I'm concerned, our timeshare is the result of being deceived with arguments that sounded reasonable at the time. (And if you'd like a timeshare on Hilton Head Island during the 4th of July week, I can make you a deal.)

Verse 5 uses a military metaphor to give the impression that while the congregation may be in danger, they have resisted effectively up to the present time. Verses 6 and 7 are really Paul's thesis statement, and it is here that we encounter the "rooted" metaphor. Paul's admonition is to "Remember what you believed and how you believed it when you first met Jesus, and keep on doing that."

A key phrase in verse 6 is “*received Christ Jesus as Lord.*” This was the confession that Jesus asked of His disciples.⁵ It was the confession Peter asked of those who would follow Jesus.⁶ This confession was the center of Paul’s preaching, and was the basis for salvation and was the confession of faith at baptism.⁷ From the very first day of the Church until today, the confession of those who follow Jesus is this: **JESUS CHRIST IS LORD!**

Paul then uses four participles to describe various dimensions of what he meant when he said, “Keep on doing that.” Those participles are “rooted,” “built up,” “established,” and “overflowing.” The first of these, “rooted,” is in the perfect tense, representing a permanent situation of being grounded in Jesus. The other three are present tense, indicating ongoing action.

That is, while our “rootedness,” our “born-againness,” is a one-time experience, just as being born physically is a one-time experience, our spiritual growth “has only just begun” at that point, and God intends for it to continue so long as we have breath.

“*Overflowing with gratitude*” in verse 7 is a characteristic Pauline phrase. Paul says something similar nearly thirty times in his letters. For Paul, gratitude and thanksgiving are litmus tests of spiritual health. Gratitude to God is one of the first things to go when we take a wrong turn on the spiritual journey.⁸

To build on Paul’s argument, if we have confessed “Jesus Christ is Lord,” and if we continue to confess that; and if our participles are working—*rooted, built up, established, and overflowing*—then we will experience what Jeremiah was talking about when he wrote that

⁷ *The person who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence indeed is the Lord, is blessed.*

⁸ *He will be like a tree planted by water: it sends its roots out toward a stream, it doesn’t fear when heat comes, and its foliage remains green. It will not worry in a year of drought or cease producing fruit (Jeremiah 17:7-8).*

Paul goes on:

Colossians 2:8-10

⁸ *Be careful that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit based on human tradition, based on the elements of the world, rather than Christ. ⁹ For the entire fullness of God’s nature dwells bodily in Christ, ¹⁰ and you have been filled by him, who is the head over every ruler and authority.*

We don’t know precisely what the false teachings were in Colosse, but we can infer some things. The structure of verse 8, when combined with verses 18-19, sounds as though a particular individual was teaching things foreign to the Gospel of Jesus. Paul wasn’t speaking against any and all philosophy, but about this particular teaching filled with “*empty deceit.*” Paul uses strong language to suggest that this false teaching is intentional and deceptive, with enslavement as its goal.

Reading “between the lines,” it sounds as though the Gnostic teaching about “emanations” was part of the problem. Gnostics taught that the Supreme God was immaterial Spirit, and that material things were evil. They thought that there was a multi-leveled string of “emanations,”

⁵ Mark 8:27-30

⁶ Acts 2:21, 36, 38, 15:17

⁷ Acts 8:16, 37, 22:16, 18:5; Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:11; 1 Corinthians 12:3; James 2:7; Luke 6:46; Matthew 7:21. See also 1 John 2:22, 3:23, 4:15, 5:5-13.

⁸ See Romans 1:21 ff.

or spiritual beings, that descended from God to the nether regions of material existence, and that the key to a successful life was proper relationship to these emanations through the possession of secret knowledge available only to the initiated.

Paul is saying, in effect, that “There are no emanations. There is only Jesus of Nazareth, God’s Messiah, who is fully and completely God in human flesh.”⁹ When the Colossians got to these verses in chapter 2, they had already encountered these powerful words in chapter 1:

15 [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For everything was created by him, in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities— all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and by him all things hold together. 18 He is also the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to reconcile everything to himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross (Colossians 1:15-20).

Wow. I get goose bumps every time I read those words. Paul says again here in chapter 2 that Jesus possesses an “**unshared Supremacy.**” Paul is saying that every power in the cosmos was created by Jesus, through Jesus, and for Jesus, and that Jesus is LORD over every power at every moment, both now and forever. Paul is telling the Colossians that “There is nothing deficient in your salvation or in your Savior that requires anything AT ALL added to it. So don’t try! Don’t buy into this guy’s malarkey!”

Paul moves on:

Colossians 2:11-12

11 You were also circumcised in him with a circumcision not done with hands, by putting off the body of flesh, in the circumcision of Christ, 12 when you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Scholars debate just what Paul meant here, but I think the gist of it is pretty clear. This false teacher, whom we can now surmise is Jewish, is teaching that physical circumcision—a preeminent sign of Jewish identity—is essential for proper relationship to the emanations and to God.¹⁰

In response, Paul doesn’t discount the need for circumcision to mark those who belong to the Redeemed Community, but he follows the wisdom of the Older Testament in emphasizing the “**circumcision of the heart,**” a gender-neutral or gender-fair mark of identity that takes place when we put our faith in Jesus the Messiah. Christians, both male and female, are spiritually circumcised when we are united with Jesus by faith when we are “born again”—at the time of our salvation.

Paul points out that the “visible sign” of spiritual circumcision is baptism—immersion of the believer in water—which symbolizes a clean break with our previous lives. We are *buried with [Jesus] in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.*

⁹ John 1:1-14

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 10:16, 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4, 9:25-26; Ezekiel 44:9; Acts 7:51; Romans 2:17-29, 6:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:13-17, 7:19, 10:2; Galatians 3:27, 5:6, 6:15; Ephesians 2:11, 4:5; Philippians 3:2-3.

Colossians 2:13-15

¹³ *And when you were dead in trespasses and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, he made you **alive** with him and **forgave** us all our trespasses.* ¹⁴ *He **erased** the certificate of debt, with its obligations, that was against us and opposed to us, and has taken it away by nailing it to the cross.* ¹⁵ *He **disarmed** the rulers and authorities and **disgraced** them publicly; he **triumphed** over them in him.*

I love this part. While Paul doesn't buy into the "emanations" idea, he does sometimes refer to "rulers," "authorities," "cosmic powers," and "evil spiritual forces,"¹¹ by which he means the angelic beings who rebelled against God in the time before time, and who are, I think, imprisoned on our particular planet. (Lucky us.)

It is these powers who have worked to deceive and to entrap humans, one by one, since the very first lie in the Garden of Eden. And, by so entrapping us, their purpose is to bring upon us the same judgment that will fall upon them when this age has come to an end.

These powers are, as I'm sure you know, very good at their game, because every single one of us has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, earning the wage that they themselves have earned, spiritual death.¹² And, as you also know, the Good News of Jesus is that, while "*the wages of Sin is death, the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us!*"¹³

That's what Paul is talking about in the letter to Colosse. While we were dead in our Sin, God forgave our trespasses, made us alive with the Eternal Life of Messiah Jesus, and took the certificate of debt that the powers intended to bring against us in the Judgment and nailed it to the Cross! Not only this, but at the Cross Jesus disarmed and disgraced those powers and annulled their power over us! This, my friends, is shouting ground!¹⁴

Woo-Hoo!!!!

Colossians 2:16-19

¹⁶ *Therefore, don't let anyone judge you in regard to food and drink or in the matter of a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day.* ¹⁷ *These are a shadow of what was to come; the substance is Christ.* ¹⁸ *Let no one condemn you by delighting in ascetic practices and the worship of angels, claiming access to a visionary realm. Such people are inflated by empty notions of their unspiritual mind.* ¹⁹ ***He** doesn't hold on to the **head**, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and tendons, grows with growth from God.*

Here Paul makes reference to more characteristics of this false teaching. It has to do with the necessity to follow the Jewish "days" and the Jewish "diet" prescribed in the Law of Moses—in other words, the same kinds of things, together with circumcision, that the New Testament folk we call "the Judaizers" frequently tried to enforce on Paul's converts and churches.

Verse 19 makes reference to a single person in this respect, which by this time we may conclude was a Jewish man influenced by Gnostic teaching, and who may have been active

¹¹ Ephesians 6:12

¹² Romans 3:23, 6:23

¹³ Romans 5:8, 6:23

¹⁴ This is the theological idea known as "Christus Victor." Matthew 6:12, 18:23; Romans 3:19, 7:1-6, 8:38, 2:14; Galatians 3:13, 24; Romans 10:4, 7; John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11; Ephesians 1:20-21, 2:15, 3:10, 4:8; Hebrews 2:14; Luke 10:18, 11:14-22; 2 Corinthians 2:14; **1 Corinthians 2:6-8**

in the Colossian church, though perhaps unredeemed. Paul charges that this man has lost connection with the Head, that is, Jesus, either by never having been born again, by having rejected his previous faith, or, more likely, by becoming befuddled and confused by having been tricked and enslaved by the powers. It is such befuddlement and confusion from which Paul is trying to protect the church in Colosse.

Well, time moves on, and so must I. **What does all this have to do with you as you** participate in this service of worship? Here are seven things that I hope you can take from this study. Don't worry. They'll be quick.

1. Now, as then, pursuing such things as astrology, superstition, occult magic, and games that approach the occult (such as *Ouija* and *Dungeons & Dragons*), opens doors to the unseen world that are better left shut.
2. While giving attention to spirit beings such as angels may be no more than wishful thinking like the genii in *Aladdin*, such attention can also open doors that should not be opened.
3. Our current propensity for the amalgamated mush called "spirituality" cuts us off from the Head, who is Jesus.
4. Our preoccupation with self-actualization, self-this and self-that, which is often not much more than a Gnostic-like effort to possess special knowledge and insight, is very much like what the fellow who plagued the Colossians was promoting.
5. Like that fellow, there are many groups today who pretend to be "Christian" but view Jesus as insufficient without the special knowledge they broker. Examples would be groups that call themselves "Christian Scientists," "Jehovah's Witnesses," "Latter-Day Saints," and "Scientologists," among many others.
6. Today's emphasis on "FOMO"—Fear of Missing Out—seeking constant stimulation and "the Next Big Thing," makes us vulnerable to false teaching that promises novel insight that isn't Jesus.
7. In Colossians, Paul reminds us that **only Jesus** is God's beloved Son (1:13).
 - a. **Only Jesus** is the full embodiment of Deity and of God's purposes (1:19, 2:9).
 - b. **Only in Jesus** do we have a share in the Kingdom of Light, redemption, the forgiveness of sins (1:13-14; 2:13-14), and the hope of glory (1:27).
 - c. **Only in Jesus** are we reconciled to God (1:20, 22, 2:11).
 - d. **Only Jesus** reigns supreme over all created beings, visible and invisible (1:16; 2:10).
 - e. **Only in Jesus** can we triumph over all the powers and authorities whom He defeated on the cross (2:15; see Romans 8:38-39; 1 Peter 3:22).
 - f. **Only Jesus** gives us the power to live morally in this life and to live eternally in the Next (Colossians 3:1-3).

IN CHRIST ALONE

Keith Getty & Stuart Townsend

In Christ alone my hope is found,
 He is my light, my strength, my song
 This Cornerstone, this solid Ground
 Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
 What heights of love, what depths of peace
 When fears are stilled, when strivings cease
 My Comforter, my All in All
 Here in the love of Christ I stand.

In Christ alone! - who took on flesh,
 Fullness of God in helpless babe.
 This gift of love and righteousness,
 Scorned by the ones He came to save
 Till on that cross as Jesus died,
 The wrath of God was satisfied
 For every sin on Him was laid
 Here in the death of Christ I live.

There in the ground His body lay,
 Light of the world by darkness slain:
 Then bursting forth in glorious day
 Up from the grave He rose again
 And as He stands in victory
 Sin's curse has lost its grip on me,
 For I am His and He is mine
 Bought with the precious blood of Christ

No guilt in life, no fear in death,
 This is the power of Christ in me
 From life's first cry to final breath,
 Jesus commands my destiny
 No power of hell, no scheme of man,
 Can ever pluck me from His hand
 Till He returns or calls me home
 Here in the power of Christ I'll stand.

**That's what ROOTED looks like, my friends.
 That's what ROOTED looks like.**

Amen, and Amen.