

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

The “in Him” Christ Hymn of Colossians 2

Colossians 2:9–15

Let’s take our Bibles together and turn to the book of Colossians. We are continuing our verse-by-verse study of this book. Our series is entitled “Preeminence.” And we come today to one of the most christological and theologically rich sections of the book of Colossians.

If you want to emphasize something, you... repeat it. Right? Take a look at the emphasis that Paul lays down for us in Colossians 2:9–15.

1) 2:9 – “For *in him* [in Christ, just so we are clear] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily”

2) 2:10 – “and you have been filled *in him*”

3) 2:11 – “*in him* also you were circumcised”

4) 2:12 – “having been buried *with him*.” Okay, that’s a new wrinkle... we’ve got “with him.”¹

5) 2:12 – “you were also raised *with him* through faith”

6) 2:13 – “God made [you] alive *with him*.”

7) 2:15 – “by triumphing over them [the rulers and authorities] *in him*.”

By my count, that’s seven times in seven verses that Paul emphasizes this “in him” or “with him” language. That’s emphasis, folks.²

Last week, I called this section of text the Christ hymn 2.0. And that’s not technically correct. This is not a hymn, like Colossians 1:15–20 is a hymn. But it is poetic. And it is Christ-centered.³

Paul was warning the Colossian church in Colossians 2:8 about the “philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, and not according to Christ.” And instead of talking more about those kinds of deceits and human traditions, he just goes on an extended oration about how awesome Christ is in comparison to those other things—those philosophies of empty deceit!⁴ And he goes from verse 9 all the way to verse 15 describing the goodness of Christ and the goodness of what it means to be in Christ.

But let me make one distinction between the Christ-hymn of Colossians 1 and what I’m calling “The ‘in Him’ Christ-hymn of Colossians 2.” In Colossians 1, the Christ-hymn was more about he. This is more about what it means to be “in him.” Does everyone follow?

¹ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 160–1: “The resulting combination of ‘in him’ and ‘with him’ is stylistically but not theologically awkward: they are both common and overlapping ideas in Paul anyway; and precisely the same awkward combination occurs in the parallel Eph. 2:6—συνήγειρεν ... ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ.”

² Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 201: “Paul is deploying his typical redemptive-historical theology to counter the false teaching in Colossae, false teaching that appeared above all to be insisting on adherence to ascetic-oriented rules as a means of conquering the fleshly impulse, appeasing the hostile powers, and thereby securing final forgiveness for sins. All these, Paul insists, are provided the believer ‘in Christ.’”

³ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 154: “The impression of hymnic form is sustained (see the introduction to the comments on 2:8–15), with the language continuing to express something of the extravagance of worship and with the ‘in him’ structuring maintained into 2:12, where it is supplemented with a sequence of συν-compounds (2:12–13). In short, 2:11–15 were probably intended as an elaborate attempt to describe the importance of what Christ accomplished on the cross and in his resurrection by means of a sequence of vivid metaphors (circumcision, burial and resurrection, death and giving life, forgiveness and cancellation of legal bond, public triumph).”

⁴ He will expound more on these “deceits” later in Colossians. But not as much as we might like. The Colossian heresy remains cloaked in mystery. Perhaps that’s for the best, so that we don’t limit the application of these warnings to narrowly.

If I could get technical with you, **Colossians 1** was about Christ as the subject, the nominative case. He is... He is... He is...the firstborn of all creation, etc., etc. This section in **Colossians 2** is about Christ in the dative case. It's what *we have* "in him."

And so Paul has moved from who Christ is in **Colossians 1** to what Christ has done for us in **Colossians 2**. That's the emphasis of this "in him" Christ-hymn of **Colossians 2**.

So, what *has* Christ done for us? We know who he is. That's settled. We've looked at that already. What has he done for us? Write these down. Four things.

1) In him, we are **made complete** (2:9–10)

Look at **verse 9** with me.

⁹ For⁵ in him the whole fullness of deity dwells⁶ bodily,⁷

Is Christ God or is Christ man? Is he deity or is he humanity? He's both. And he will always be both for eternity. Let me be super technical and precise so as to avoid error. Christ, the second person of the Trinity, *was* and *is* God eternally. He existed in eternity past with God the Father.

But at the time of the incarnation, he added humanity to his deity. The full deity of God was poured into the human flesh of the incarnate Son, and the second person of the Trinity became *both* God and man.⁸ And that *both-ness* continued all throughout his life, his death, his resurrection, and will continue at his return, his millennial kingdom, and on into eternity. He is eternally the God-man.⁹ In Jesus, "the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily."¹⁰

By the way, most of the ancient and modern cults attack Jesus's humanity or his deity. This is where most heresy emerges. Ebionism attacks Jesus's deity. It asserts Jesus was merely a human prophet, not divine. Adoptionism says that Jesus was a man whom God adopted as his Son. Arianism says that Jesus was the highest created being, but not fully God. Socinianism denies Christ's preexistence and deity. Jehovah's Witnesses teach that Jesus is a created being (identified with Michael the archangel), not Almighty God. Unitarianism rejects the Trinity and Christ's full deity. Mormonism affirms Jesus as divine in a different sense than historic Christian orthodoxy and denies the classical doctrine of the Trinity. Those are (some of) the heresies that attack Jesus's deity.

But then there are also heresies that deny Jesus's full humanity. Docetism (also Manichaeism) teaches that Jesus only appeared to be human, but his physical body was an illusion.¹¹ Gnosticism taught

⁵ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 193: "The 'for' (*hoti*) at the beginning of this verse ties the argument of vv. 9–15 to v. 8, and especially to the last phrase of v. 8. In effect, these verses elaborate the negative 'not according to Christ' by detailing the flip, positive side: in Christ, and Christ alone, is found 'the fullness of God' (v. 9); and believers have been made 'full' in him (vv. 10–15)."

⁶ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 193–4: "This language of 'dwelling' probably alludes to Old Testament teaching about the dwelling of God in the Temple (esp. Ps. 68:16)... God in his fullness has not taken up residence in and therefore revealed himself in a building but in a body. Characteristic of the new covenant administration is the replacement of the Temple with Christ as the focus for God's presence and as the nucleus of God's people."

⁷ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 103: "Verse 9 is perhaps the most definitive statement of Christ's deity in the epistles. It is the rock upon which all attempts to disprove Christ's deity are shattered."

⁸ PHILIPP MELANCHTHON: "But as I understand Paul, he is not only saying that God is truly with Christ. He means that the divine nature put on a human body and became flesh." Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*. RCS, 184.

⁹ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 103: "That nature of God that continually abode in Jesus Christ was not some divine light that merely lit Him up for a while, but was not His own. He is fully God forever. And as the One possessing all the fullness of Deity, Christ is the head over all rule and authority. He was not one of a series of lesser beings emanating from God, as the false teachers maintained. Rather, He is God Himself and thus the head over all the angelic realm."

¹⁰ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 194: "The verb *katoikei* is in the present tense, also suggests that this indwelling of God in Christ is permanent."

¹¹ AUGUSTINE: "This is the whole scheme of our salvation, by which the one who as God had made man himself became man, for the sake of finding lost man. This is the whole matter of Christ shedding for the forgiveness of our sins true, not false, blood, and with his blood, 'obliterating the bond of our sins.' All this these damnable heretics strive to drain of all meaning. All this, so the Manichaeans believe, as it appeared to human eyes, was spirit and not flesh." Quoted in Gorday, ed. *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy*,

that matter is evil, so Christ could not have truly become flesh. Apollinarianism asserts that Jesus had a human body but not a fully human mind.

Nestorianism divides Christ's two natures in a way that threatens the unity of His person. Modalism denies personal distinctions within the Trinity and fundamentally alters who Christ is. Oneness Pentecostalism affirms Jesus's deity, but it rejects the historic doctrine of the Trinity, resulting in a different understanding of Christ's person.

All of these cults and divergent sects and heresies fail to take **Colossians 2:9** seriously or literally: "For in [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily."¹² And Paul's not breaking new ground here. This is just a summary statement of what he's already said in the Christ-hymn of **Colossians 1!**¹³

Paul uses that summary statement in **verse 9**, to get to the payload of **verse 10**. This is the power of "in him" in action.

¹⁰ and you have been filled in him,

You know Jesus? That person whom the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily? You have been filled in him.¹⁴ You being "in him" is more amazing than you even realize.

Because,

[he] is the head of all rule and authority.

There's no angel or authority over him. Michael the archangel and the angel Gabriel answer to Christ. He is the head, not just of the church, but of all rule and authority. If the Colossian church was being encouraged to worship angels and pursue other authorities outside of Christ, **they were barking up the wrong tree**. There ain't no authority or rule apart from Christ!¹⁵

Now, let's talk about this statement, "you have been filled in him" in **verse 10**. What does it mean to be "filled" in Christ? It means, that we are made complete.

It doesn't mean that we are made God like Christ is God. That would lead us to another heresy.¹⁶ It means that our humanity is perfected because Christ as the perfect God-man has perfected us.¹⁷ We have been filled in him with righteousness and holiness. We are the best versions of ourselves. We are *de facto* sinless humans who can stand before a righteous God because we stand "in him."¹⁸ Apart from him we are hopeless.¹⁹

Titus, Philemon. ACCS, 34.

¹² Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), 255: "The expression is unusual, but the God-man relationship cannot be expressed well in human language. The fullness of deity was Paul's way of stating that Jesus is every bit God. On the other hand, Paul avoided modalistic language. The fullness refers to the completeness of the divine nature, but it does not mean that Christ is all there is of God. In fact, the word for God chosen by Paul expresses deity, not divine nature. Jesus is every bit God but does not exhaust the dimensions of deity. Father and Spirit are equally divine."

¹³ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 151: "In 2:9, apart from the change in tense, the only modification to the language of 1:19 is the addition of τῆς θεότητος and σωματικῶς, both *hapax legomena* in biblical Greek."

¹⁴ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 195: "The Colossians will have no interest in listening to the false teachers once they realize that they are already 'filled.'"

¹⁵ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 104: "All true believers are complete in Christ and do not need the teachings of any cult or false teacher."

¹⁶ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 163: "The connection with v. 9 is clear as both verses use the same word group: believers are to be satisfied fully because they 'have been filled' in the one who contains 'all the fullness' of deity. This connection cannot be pressed, however, since believers are not filled with the full deity as Christ is. Rather, it is because of Christ's full deity that believers, having been filled in him, can experience full salvific assurance and benefits."

¹⁷ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 152: "The language is, of course, rhetorical and hyperbolic (see also 2:9). It presumably means simply that in Christ they have been granted a completeness and fulfillment which they could not find or achieve anywhere else: 'you have come to fullness of life in him' (RSV/NRSV)."

¹⁸ In a different context, Paul prays for the Ephesian church to "know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:19). Ostensibly there is a way to be filled, but to still not experience fully the impact of that fullness as a Christian. The corollary might be the abide language of John 15. We are told to abide in Christ, in whom we are already abiding. This is the theological distinction between positional union with Christ and experiential communion with him.

The Greek word for “filled” here is πληρόω (*plēroō*). And it means to “fill” or “fulfill” or “make complete” or “finish.”²⁰ That verb is often used in the NT to talk about how the OT was fulfilled in Christ. And I would just say that in a similar way to the way that Messiah Jesus fulfilled the OT Scriptures, he has fulfilled us. He has completed us.²¹

Here’s another way for us to think about this—the perfect God-man has made imperfect, sinful human beings perfect by bringing us into himself. It’s another way to frame imputed or vicarious righteousness.²² “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).²³

I think there might also be a secondary reference here in **Colossians 2:10** to the Holy Spirit.

¹⁰ and you have been filled in him,

Paul doesn’t talk explicitly about the Spirit here. But that verb πληρόω is used in the NT to talk about how believers are filled with the Spirit (e.g., Acts 13:53). **How do we know that we are perfected (i.e., made complete) in Christ Jesus? Answer: We are filled with his Spirit.**

Write this down as a second point in your notes. In him, we are made complete. Also...

2) In him, we are **raised** to new **life** (2:11–12)

Stay with me here, because Paul’s argument in these verses is going to get complex. Look at **verse 11**.

¹⁹ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 104: “As a result of the Fall, man is in a sad state of incompleteness. He is spiritually incomplete because He is totally out of fellowship with God. He is morally incomplete because he lives outside of God’s will. He is mentally incomplete because he does not know ultimate truth. At salvation, believers become ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Pet. 1:4) and are made complete. Believers are spiritually complete because they have fellowship with God. They are morally complete in that they recognize the authority of God’s will. They are mentally complete because they know the truth about ultimate reality. To maintain, as the Colossian errorists did, that those who were made complete in Christ still lacked anything is absurd.”

²⁰ See *DBL: Greek*, #4444. See also *BDAG*, 827–9.

²¹ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 195: “Paul may use the language of ‘fullness’ in Colossians because he is directly countering a claim of the false teachers. ‘We,’ they perhaps were saying, ‘offer you the means to attain real spiritual fullness, to move on from Christ to a deeper spiritual experience.’ Their claim would then fall into line generally with the kinds of claims that false teachers throughout the centuries have made. And against those claims Paul asserts again the exclusivity of Christ. In him, and in him alone, God has decisively and exhaustively revealed himself. All that we can know or experience of God is therefore found in our relationship with him.”

²² PHILIPP MELANCHTHON: “Paul goes on to give an account and definition of Christian righteousness, by saying, ‘In Christ you are complete.’ What he means is this: Christian righteousness is of a kind that satisfies God, and which justifies before God. But people’s works do not satisfy God. It is Christ who has satisfied him. Therefore, the only people who are righteous are those who are complete through Christ. That is, those people who believe in Christ, and who believe that through him satisfaction has been made to the Father, and whom Christ sanctifies through his Holy Spirit... *Through him you are complete* has a further bearing, that when the Holy Spirit has been received, one is perfected, renewed and made a new creature.” Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*. RCS, 185–6.

²³ GREGORY OF NYSSA: “Since then it was impossible that our life, which had been estranged from God, should of itself return to the high and heavenly place, for this reason, as the apostle says, he who knew no sin is made sin for us and frees us from the curse by taking on him our curse as his own. Having taken up and, in the language of the apostle, ‘slain’ in himself ‘the enmity’ which by means of sin had come between us and God (in fact sin was the ‘enmity’) and having become what we were, he through himself again united humanity to God.” Quoted in Gorday, ed. *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*. ACCS, 30.

¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands,²⁴ by putting off²⁵ the body of the flesh,²⁶ by the circumcision of Christ,²⁷ ¹² 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.²⁸

Interesting statements here. Paul is alluding to two of the most important rites in the Bible: (1) circumcision and (2) baptism. But in both instances, he is not talking about the literal rite. He's not talking about literal circumcision—the circumcision made with hands, if you will. And he's not talking about literal baptism—the dipping of a person underwater after salvation.²⁹ He's talking about spiritual baptism.³⁰ And he's talking about spiritual circumcision—a circumcision of the heart.³¹

Let's talk circumcision first and then we can talk baptism. Circumcision was the OT rite of the Israelite people that God enacted with Abraham, the father of the Israelites. It was the physical symbol of God's covenant with Abraham and his people. It involved the cutting off of a male's foreskin. Every Jewish male was circumcised in infancy. And it's not an accident that this covenant-making sign involved a man's reproductive organ.³²

²⁴ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 165: “the Greek word rendered ‘not performed by human hands’ (ἀχειροποιήτω) may also evoke the long anti-idol tradition in Israel. The related term “made by human hands” (χειροποίητος) in the LXX is almost always used in reference to the idols made by human hands (Lev 26:1, 30; Isa 2:18; 10:11; 16:12; 19:1; 21:9; 31:7; 46:6; Dan 5:4, 23; 6:28; cf. Wis 14:8).”

²⁵ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 164: “While v. 10 uses the positive metaphor of filling up, this verse focuses on the negative metaphor of stripping off.”

²⁶ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 107–8: “The body of the flesh refers to the sinful, fallen human nature totally dominating believers before salvation. Christians have been cleansed of that sinful dominance and been given a new nature created in righteousness, having been circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, that is, not physical but spiritual.”

²⁷ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 200: “‘The circumcision of Christ’ is a metaphor for the conquering of the power of sin that takes place when a person comes to Christ.”

²⁸ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 162: “‘God who raised him from the dead’ is a piece of confessional formula regularly echoed in Paul (Rom. 4:24; 8:11; 10:9; 1 Cor. 6:14; 15:15; 2 Cor. 4:14; Gal. 1:1; 1 Thes. 1:10; Eph. 1:20; Kramer 20–26... As such it reminds us how fundamental belief in the resurrection of Christ was for the first Christians.”

²⁹ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 108–9: “Water baptism is no more in view in 2:12 than physical circumcision was in 2:11. Both verses speak of spiritual realities.”

³⁰ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 202 disagrees: “The reference is certainly to water baptism (as opposed, e.g., to ‘baptism in the Spirit’).” But his understanding of Paul's argument concerning circumcision is similar, “Paul's logic runs like this: you have been spiritually ‘circumcised.’ This ‘circumcision’ took place when you were buried with Christ and raised with him. And this burial and resurrection with Christ happened when you were baptized.”

Why water baptism here instead of Spirit baptism? How does Moo reconcile this theologically? Moo basically conflates the two, or more generously thinks that Paul conflates the two: “The New Testament connects our coming to Christ (being converted and initiated into the new covenant community) to faith, to repentance, to the gift of the Spirit, and to water baptism, in various combinations. Any of these, in a kind of metonymy, could be used to connote the whole experience—implying, of course, in each instance, the presence of all the others. Water baptism, then, as a critical New Testament rite intimately connected to our conversion experience, could be used as shorthand for the whole experience.”

I appreciate Moo's attempt here to link Paul's language to water baptism and avoid the danger of a works-based salvation. But I think the problem of the text is assuaged if we think of Paul's statements in terms of Spirit-baptism instead of water-baptism. The language of circumcision in this section is symbolic not literal, metaphysical not physical. The same should be said of baptism.

³¹ Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, NAC, 257: “His discussion is Christological and spiritual, rather than physical and legal.”

³² Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 154: “The simple fact of the matter is that in the world of this time circumcision was regarded by both Jews and Gentiles as distinctively and characteristically Jewish. This is at first surprising since others were known to practice the rite (Egyptians and others: Herodotus 2.104.2–3; Strabo 17.2.5). But circumcision had always been central to Israel's self-understanding as the people of God (at least from the formulation of Gen. 17:9–14). And the Maccabean crisis had made it a crucial mark of national and religious identity and loyalty, the mark which most clearly distinguished Judaism from Hellenism (1 Macc. 1:15, 48, 60–61; 2:46; 2 Macc. 6:9–10; Josephus, *Antiquities* 12:241). Thus Josephus saw circumcision as God's way of preventing Abraham's posterity “from mixing with others” (*Antiquities* 1:192). And the point was well taken by outsiders such as Tacitus: “They adopted circumcision to distinguish themselves from other peoples by this difference” (*Historiae* 5.5.2).”

Here's what John MacArthur says about that: "The cutting away of the male foreskin on the reproductive organ was a graphic way to demonstrate that man needed cleansing at the deepest level of his being. No other part of the human anatomy so demonstrates that depth of sin, inasmuch as that is the part of man that produces life—and all that he produces is sinful. That is the biblical view. From the beginning, circumcision was used symbolically to illustrate the desperate need man had for cleansing of the heart."³³

What MacArthur states there is true. God's intention all along was heart-transformation not just flesh-transformation. And we see that in passages like **Deuteronomy 10:16**: "Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn."³⁴ And we see that in passages like **Jeremiah 4:4**: "Circumcise yourselves to the Lord; remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem." "God was always concerned with the heart, not [strictly] with the physical rite."³⁵

And what Paul is saying here in **Colossians** is not unlike what he said in the book of **Galatians** over a decade earlier: "**Physical circumcision is not what's ultimately important.³⁶ It had its purpose for a time.³⁷ But Jesus has transcended that and can cleanse hearts. So don't be concerned about the circumcision of the flesh made by human hands and a flint knife... [thank goodness for that!]... be concerned about the permanent change of your heart that Jesus brings. Spiritual circumcision trumps physical circumcision.**"³⁸

I can't help but think the false teachers promoting the Colossian heresy were probably advocating for circumcision among the Gentiles, just like the Judaizers that Paul was dealing with earlier in Galatia.³⁹ Why else would Paul include this section? And this is Paul's way of saying, "**Don't listen to those ridiculous people out there who want to add circumcision to Christ as necessary for salvation.⁴⁰ You have a true and better circumcision in Christ! Put the flint knife away!**"⁴¹

³³ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 107.

³⁴ See also Deuteronomy 30:6 and Romans 2:28–29.

³⁵ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 107. In the NT, Stephen accused the religious leaders of his day of being stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart (Acts 7:51).

³⁶ For more on Galatians, see the series entitled "AWOL from Grace" at Messiah Bible Church: <https://www.messiahbible.org/galatians-awol-from-grace>

³⁷ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 106: "The Colossian heresy was a mixture of pagan philosophy with Jewish legalism. Not surprisingly, the Colossian false teachers, like the Judaizers Paul confronted in Galatia, were teaching that circumcision was necessary for salvation."

³⁸ For a better understanding of OT circumcision and its purpose in the Israelite nation, see Genesis 17:1–14; Exodus 4:24–26; 12:43–49; Leviticus 12:2–3; Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Joshua 5:2–9; and Jeremiah 4:4; 9:25–26. For NT passages that address circumcision and how it is unnecessary as part of the New Covenant, see Romans 2:28–29; 4:9–12; 6:3–11; Galatians 5:6; 6:15; Ephesians 2:11–22; and Philippians 3:2–3.

³⁹ This wouldn't be that surprising. Colossae isn't far geographically from the region of Galatia. And Judaizing was an issue throughout the entirety of Paul's ministry (see Acts 15:1–29; Gal 2:11–21; Gal 3:1–14; Gal 5:1–12; Rom 3:20–31; Rom 4:9–12; Phil 3:2–9; Col 2:11–17; Titus 1:10–14).

⁴⁰ CHRYSOSTOM: "Circumcision is no longer performed with a knife, Paul says, but in Christ himself; for no human hand circumcises ... but the Spirit. The Spirit circumcises the whole man, not simply a part." Quoted in Gorday, ed. *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*. ACCS, 31–2.

⁴¹ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 197 is skeptical that this is what Paul is doing. Instead, he thinks, "Against the false teachers' advocacy of rules and ascetic practices as the means of subduing the flesh (2:16, 18, 20–21), Paul asserts that Christians have already experienced "the stripping off of the body of flesh" (my own literal translation) in their union with Christ. No other practice or obedience to a rule is needed."

Now let's talk baptism. Because unlike circumcision, baptism is something that is still expected of Christians in the NT era... not as necessary for salvation, but as a necessary testimony to the world that you have been saved.⁴² As I've said before, water baptism is the outward sign of an inward work.⁴³

So after his statements about circumcision, Paul says in **verse 12**,

¹² *having been buried with him in baptism,⁴⁴ in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.*

Listen, when you get saved, you are buried with Christ in spiritual baptism. You died to yourself. Your old man is dead! And that's great. But that's only the half of it.

You are also at the same time raised with him to new life because Christ didn't stay dead. God the Father raised him from the dead. And you have new life in Christ Jesus through faith.

Notice also that statement at the end of verse 12. You don't have faith in your own working. You have "faith in the powerful working of God!" Everyone see that? He does the *working*. You do the *faith-ing*. Everyone with me? *Sola fide*. It is "through faith" that you have died and been resurrected to new life in Christ.

And by the way, that's why we don't baptize babies here at Messiah Bible Church. There's no faith yet in a baby. There's cuteness. But there's no faith. When you baptize a baby, all you get is a wet baby. When you baptize a confessing believer, you baptize someone who has put their faith "in the powerful working of God, who raised Christ from the dead!"

From what I've read, Sam Houston, the first president of Texas, got baptized later in life. And he was baptized in a little creek outside of Independence, Texas (just north of Brenham). And when he came up out of the water, they said, "General Houston, your sins have been washed away!"

And General Houston said, "God help the fish downstream."⁴⁵

Now that's a playful way to think about your sins being removed. But that's not really the case. Your sins don't get literally removed or flushed by water when you get water-baptized. That happens when you are Spirit-baptized. But we symbolize the removal of sin in the waters of baptism. We symbolize death to self and new life in Christ through water baptism.

When I put someone under the water and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, I am symbolizing your death to self. You are buried in Christ. If I kept you under water you would actually die. But don't worry, I don't keep you under the water. I bring you up. And that symbolizes the new life that you have in Christ. You have been raised to new life sinless in Christ. The old has gone and the new has come.

And that symbolism is powerful! Don't dismiss the symbolism. Because what we are symbolizing in that moment is what Paul writes about in Colossians 2—we are buried "with Christ" in baptism, and we are raised "with Christ" through faith!

We don't baptize people here in the name of their parents. We don't baptize people here in the name of Martin Luther or the Apostle Paul.⁴⁶ We don't baptize people here in the name of their favorite

⁴² For the view that baptism replaces circumcision as the sign of the New Covenant community of faith, see the comments by John Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli, and the Belgic Confession in Gregory B. Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*, ed. Graham Tomlin et al., vol. XI, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 188–91. I can certainly agree with these reformers that baptism is the sign associated with NT faith as circumcision was associated with OT faith. Neither circumcision nor baptism are salvific. But I cannot agree with them that baptism should be initiated in infancy like OT circumcision.

⁴³ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 160: "We need look no further than a Baptist tradition which spoke of water baptism as a metaphor for the action of the Spirit (Mark 1:8 pars.)."

⁴⁴ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 108: "When viewed as a rite necessary for salvation, baptism is as superfluous as circumcision. Some see support in 2:12 for baptismal regeneration, but Paul would hardly replace one rite with another (cf. 1 Cor. 1:13–17)."

⁴⁵ See Abby Ohlheiser, "Texas Gov. Perry Baptized in Same Creek as Legendary Sam Houston," *Washington Post*, April 29, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/texas-gov-perry-baptized-in-same-creek-as-legendary-sam-houston/2014/04/29/f8ef4810-cf28-11e3-b812-0c92213941f4_story.html. See also "Sam Houston's Baptism," *Discover Texas*, November 19, 2022, <https://www.discovertexasonline.com/2022/11/sam-houstons-baptism/>.

⁴⁶ Paul's question in 1 Corinthians 1:13 (were you baptized in the name of Paul?) is meant to receive a resounding "No!"

movie star or their favorite historical character or their favorite preacher.

I read this last week about a cult in South Korea that actually baptizes people in the name of the church's founder. That's ridiculous. That's blasphemous! We baptize people in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, because that's what Jesus told us to do. The Father sent the Son. The Father raised the Son from the dead. And the Son empowered us with the Holy Spirit. We are Spirit-baptized with Jesus and raised to new life by faith. And we signify that new life before the church body with water baptism.

And by the way, we don't baptize pets. Probably I don't need to say that here, but I read this last week about a church that actually baptizes pets. That's absurd. Your pets are not made in the image of God, and they cannot be raised to life in Christ Jesus. I'm sorry.

I can't think of anything more ridiculous or more uncomfortable than trying to baptize one of my cats in that baptismal tank over there. They would rather me drown them than baptize them in that tank. Even they know how ridiculous that is.

Let's move on. Write this down as #3 in your notes. In him, we are made complete. In him, we are raised to new life. Thirdly...

3) In him, we are **forgiven** (2:13-14)

Paul says in **verse 13**,

¹³ And you, who were dead⁴⁷ in your trespasses and the uncircumcision [literally: foreskin]⁴⁸ of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us⁴⁹ **all** our trespasses,

How many of our trespasses? Some of our trespasses? No, all. And all means all—past, present, and future trespasses. We were dead in sin. God made us alive in Christ. And now all our sin is forgiven. All of it!

Notice too that Paul uses the first person "our" here. Paul's included in this.
having forgiven us **all our** trespasses,

Paul was a sinner too. His trespasses were great indeed! Paul called himself the chief of sinners (**1 Tim 1:15**). But all of Paul's sins were forgiven in Christ. **And if all of Paul's sins were forgiven in Christ, then all of our sins can be forgiven in Christ too.**

Let me emphasize the two great realities of this statement in **verse 13**. Because these are absolute statements. Not only were *all* your sins forgiven, but also, before Christ, Paul says that you were *completely* dead. Everyone see that in the text?

It's not like, "Yeah, I was mostly dead before Christ." That's not what it says.

And also you can't say, "Yeah, most of my sins were forgiven by Christ." No! Feel the totality of this. Before Christ, you were *totally* dead.⁵⁰ And after Christ, all your sins were *totally* forgiven. Don't minimize either of those statements here.

⁴⁷ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 206: "This 'death,' in the sense that Paul uses the word here, refers especially to condemnation, a present state that afflicts all humans in their natural state because of Adam's 'original' sin (Rom. 5:12, 18-19). Physical death is included only in the sense that the pain and loss that now accompany death are the outcome of spiritual death. The association of death and sin is, of course, a basic teaching of Scripture, from the creation story onward."

⁴⁸ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 206: "'Uncircumcision' translates a word (*akrobystia*) that means, basically, 'foreskin,' but that came to be used among Jews, by a natural extension, of people who possessed their foreskins, that is, who were uncircumcised."

⁴⁹ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 164: "The awkward transition to 'us' is characteristically Pauline, betraying here (as in Eph. 2:5) an element of self-correction: it constitutes not a denial that such transgressions are to be attributed to Gentiles but rather a recognition that all, Jews as well, are equally guilty of such transgressions and equally in need of forgiveness. The point is not developed here, but behind it we can see the fuller argument of Rom. 1:18-3:20; 5:12-21 (where 'transgression' occurs six times); 7:7-12."

⁵⁰ Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 78: "Without Christ, we can do nothing to get life. There must be a sovereign communication of life from God. When Elijah stretched himself upon the dead boy, his heart beat against the stillness of the boy's chest until it kindled life. Even so, Christ must lay his full life on our deadness—and then comes life!"

In the early church, there was a debate that emerged between the British monk and scholar Pelagius and the church father, Augustine. And many of their arguments revolved around how dead was a person before they put their faith in Christ. Pelagius said, “sick, but not totally dead.” Semi-Pelagians said later, “mostly dead.” But Augustine said, “dead-dead.”

Pelagius said, “Man can generate goodness on his own and earn God’s favor.” Augustine said, “No sir. Man without Christ is absolutely dead. No life. No righteousness. No way to please God.” Pelagius saw a patient who needed help. Augustine saw a corpse that needed resurrection.

And the church rightly affirmed the Biblical teaching of Augustine and dismissed Pelagius. And that’s in large measure because of verses like this in Colossians 2:13. Without Christ, you are dead, dead, dead, dead, dead.⁵¹ You are dead in your trespasses and sins. You are lost. You are unsaved. You are condemned for eternity.

But in Christ you are made alive. And you aren’t just made alive with the same old problems you had when you were dead. You are not a walking zombie full of sin and trespasses before a holy God. No, your trespasses have been totally and completely forgiven.

By the way “trespasses” is a colorful word. It’s a synonym for sin, but it’s more vivid.⁵² In Greek the word is παράπτωμα (*paraptōma*), which means literally a “fall by the side” or “a false step.” In Christ, all of your false steps are removed. All of your misdeeds are forgiven.

And to add a little more heft to this statement, Paul writes in verse 14,

¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands.⁵³ This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

The reality is that our sins, our trespasses, aren’t just forgiven willy-nilly. That’s not possible for a God who requires perfect justice. Those sins are forgiven, but only in the sense that they are paid for by another. Because there is a legal demand for punishment. There is a debt to be paid. There is an I.O.U., and Jesus paid that debt.⁵⁴

Listen up, everyone. Let me hammer on this for just a bit. Your debt, Christian, isn’t paid by your good intentions. And it’s not paid for by your good works. And it’s not paid off with a payment program.

But also, it doesn’t just disappear into thin air. In Paul’s language here, it’s nailed to the cross. The legal demand was met, and it was met at the cross. And so, nailed to an empty cross is a sign that says, “Paid in full.” My debt and your debt *haven’t* just disappeared, they’ve been retired. Jesus’s bloody and brutal death on the cross paid the debt that we owed. Don’t ever, ever forget that!

Tell me if you’ve heard this before. Maybe you recognize this.

My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!

My sin, not in part but the whole,

Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more;

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, o my soul!

Horatio Spafford wrote that hymn circa 1873. He wrote it with an understanding that his own sin no longer has any hold on him. We don’t have to bear it. And we don’t have to bear the penalty for it. It’s

⁵¹ MacArthur, Colossians, MNTC, 109: “To be spiritually dead means to be devoid of any sense, unable to respond to spiritual stimuli, just as to be physically dead means to be unable to respond to physical stimuli. It is to be so locked in sin’s grasp that one is unable to respond to God. The Bible and spiritual truth make no sense to one in such a state. Those who are spiritually dead are dominated by the world, the flesh, and Satan and possess no spiritual, eternal life.”

⁵² Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 206: “This word originally had the sense ‘false step,’ and Paul uses it in several texts to refer to human sinning. It is doubtful, however, whether the word here has any different sense than the more usual *hamartia* (Col. 1:14).”

⁵³ CHRYSOSTOM: “See to it that we do not again become debtors to the old contract. Christ came once; he found the certificate of our ancestral indebtedness which Adam wrote and signed. Adam contracted the debt; by our subsequent sins we increased the amount owed. In this contract are written a curse, and sin, and death and the condemnation of the law. Christ took all these away and pardoned them.” Quoted in Gorday, ed. *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*. ACCS, 33.

⁵⁴ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 211: “All we humans had, as it were, ‘signed’ an IOU promising God perfect obedience, and this document has come to stand against us “because” of God’s “decrees” that we have failed to keep.”

been paid for. It's been atoned! That's why his soul was at peace. That's why he sang, "It is Well with my Soul."

And that's why verse 15 is so powerful. That's why Paul would argue the following... write this down as #4 in your notes.

4) In him, we are **triumphant** (2:15)

Paul writes,

¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing⁵⁵ over them⁵⁶ in him.⁵⁷

Those rulers and authorities, both Jews and Gentiles, who thought that they had eliminated Jesus as a threat to the regime... they thought they had gotten rid of him... they only made him more powerful by crucifying him. His crucifixion disarmed them. And he rose triumphant over them.

The "rulers and authorities" mentioned here in **verse 15** are probably another reference to angelic beings—in this case demonic beings. God shamed them and triumphed over them. Christ rules over them and triumphs over them.

The language of disarming and putting them to open shame evokes the image of a Roman general parading into town with his enemies beaten and bound behind him as prisoners.⁵⁸ This is Christ victorious over his enemies. Someday we will actually see every knee bow before King Jesus. That event awaits a future coming. But **verse 15** is framed in the past tense. This has already, in a sense, happened. Christ is victorious already, even though we anticipate the not yet.

By the way, the "in him" at the end of **verse 15** could be read "in it." The same Greek pronoun is used for masculine and neuter pronouns—*αὐτός* (*autos*). So this could be saying that Christ triumphed over them "in the cross" or "by means of the cross."

In the end it doesn't really matter. The point is the same. The cross is the means by which Christ conquered evil and made salvation and forgiveness possible for us. And because of that, "in him," we are triumphant. **In Christ, we are triumphant! In Christ, we are forgiven! In Christ, we are raised to new life! And in Christ, we are made complete!**

Let me close with this. A few years ago I heard a pastor tell a story about an eagle that was captured and held in captivity in Australia. And this large majestic bird that could spread its wings and soar with grace and beauty had a rope tethered to his foot. And it was just sad to see this great bird trapped and grounded like that.

⁵⁵ AUGUSTINE: "And where the devil could do something, there he met with defeat on every side. While from the cross he received the power to slay the Lord's body outwardly, it was also from the cross that the inward power, by which he held us fast, was put to death. For it came to pass that the chains of many sins in many deaths were broken by the one death of the One who himself had no previous sin that would merit death. And, therefore, for our sake the Lord paid the tribute to death which was not his due, in order that the death which was due might not injure us. For he was not stripped of the flesh by any obligation to any power whatsoever, but he willed his own death, for he who could not die unless he willed doubtless died because he willed; and therefore he openly exposed the principalities and the powers, confidently triumphing over them in himself." Quoted in Gorday, ed. *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*. ACCS, 36.

⁵⁶ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 170: "To treat the cross as a moment of triumph was about as huge a reversal of normal values as could be imagined, since crucifixion was itself regarded as the most shameful of deaths."

⁵⁷ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, NIGTC, 169: "The final *ἐν αὐτῷ* [is] the fifteenth 'in him' in the letter."

⁵⁸ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 214-5: "The verb has the sense 'expose publicly' (cf. the only other New Testament occurrence, Matt. 1:19, where Joseph chooses to divorce Mary quietly rather than 'expose her to public disgrace'). This idea of public display is strongly accentuated with the participle *thriambeusas*, which alludes to the Roman custom of awarding victorious generals a 'victory parade.' Behind the general as he rode in splendor through the city would follow, in chains, prisoners from the successful campaign just concluded. It is this activity of 'leading in triumphal procession' that the verb refers to, as its one other occurrence in the New Testament reveals. In 2 Corinthians 2:14, Paul compares his service to Christ with being 'led as captives in Christ's triumphal procession.'"

And the public outcry over this injustice became so strong, that the bird-owner eventually had to untie the bird and free him to fly away. But you know what the bird did? I'm sure you can guess. The bird had been conditioned to not fly. It just hopped around that property and refused to use its wings.⁵⁹

I think some of us live our Christian lives like that. We hop, hop, hop around in our sinfulness, and we refuse to fly. God has freed us from the power of sin, but we still think we are tethered.

And I might say this morning, "in Christ, you are made complete." And you say, "I know, Pastor Tony, but I don't feel complete."

And I might say to you this morning, "in Christ, you are raised to new life." And you say to that, "I know, but I don't feel like I've been raised to new life."

"In Christ, you are forgiven." "I don't feel forgiven."

"In Christ, you are triumphant." "I don't feel triumphant."

I get it. The distance sometimes between your head and your heart is like a thousand miles. If that's you this morning, then you need to let the truth of Scripture transform your mind and take hold of your heart.

No, you are *not* triumphant, forgiven, raised to new life or made complete in yourself. Those things aren't possible apart from Christ. But "in him" you have all of that and more. Let your emotions be informed by the truth of Scripture. Repeat these things to yourself if you have to. Say them out loud.

In Christ, I am made complete.

In Christ, I am raised to new life.

In Christ, I am forgiven.

In Christ, I am triumphant.

And here's something that helps—you can sing it. Sometimes the instrument that God uses to bridge the chasm between your head and your heart is music. You can say these things out loud. Or, even better, you can sing them.

Or, here's another thing that we can do. We can take communion and remember what Christ has done for us. Let's do that now. Pray with me.

⁵⁹ Christopher Ash, Sermon: "Romans 6 - Not Under Law But Grace" Preached 12.17.08:
<https://resources.thegospelcoalition.org/library/romans-6-not-under-law-but-grace>.