

4. There's someone lurking in the shadows!

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[0 : 00] And we'd love to spend some time in conversation with you at the end.

We're going to dive in right away to our Bible reading, and we'll close with our hymn at the end of our lunchtime talk today. So if you need to nip away or get back to the office, then do feel free to make your way out at any point during the hymn.

Turn with me if you will. Chapter 2, that's on page 984 in the Blue Visitors' Bibles. I'm afraid we've got a change of preacher this week, but the same letter.

So we'll carry on where Terry very ably left off and see what we can do about tidying up the mess he promised to leave us in. Colossians chapter 2, and we're reading verses 6 to 19 today.

Paul has been giving thanks for the good order in which he heard that the church in Colossae was in, and for the firmness of their faith in Christ.

[1 : 16] That was how we ended the last section. The firmness of the faith in the gospel that they'd received from Epaphras, their original missionary and presumably a convert of Paul's from neighboring Ephesus.

And Paul continues in verse 6. Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy or empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of this world, and not according to Christ.

For in him, the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, 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.

[2 : 36] And you who were dead in your trespasses, and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands.

This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities, and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food or drink, or with regard to a festival, or a new moon, or a Sabbath. These are just a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism or worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason, by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

Amen. Let's pray for God's help. Father God, we thank you for the huge privilege of an open Bible. We thank you, Lord, for the chance to gather now and listen to what it has to teach us about the great riches that are to be found in Christ.

[4 : 08] Help us, Lord, to listen attentively, soften our hearts, and magnify the Lord Jesus in our understanding. We ask this in his name. Amen. Amen. Well, as we come this week to the heart of Paul's letter to the Colossians, there's something rather sinister lurking in the background all the way through this text.

It's been hard to nail down precisely what the problems were in Colossae, in this church. It's been hard to know precisely what we should call the agitators.

The Bible seems to bang on all the time about false teachers. The problem is that sounds a little bit distant to us, doesn't it?

Some of the scholars call these ones Gnostics or Proto-Gnostics or Judaizers and all sorts of other weird and wonderful names. The problem is we don't tend to meet many of them in our evangelical churches either, do we?

And more to the point, Paul doesn't identify them quite so precisely for us. What he does do though is give us a very good description of the kinds of things that they were teaching, the kinds of problems they were causing.

[5 : 27] And as it turns out, they are the kind of problem which we evangelicals might meet all too often in our modern churches.

Notice that Paul doesn't call the threat false teaching in the letter. But the language of verse 8 is certainly worrying. See to it that no one takes you captive.

He's describing them as the people who kidnap slaves to sell them on foreign markets. I suppose the closest thing we have to that today is someone who abducts children.

It's threatening language. But they don't look that sinister, do they? These are the men we met last week deluding the church, verse 4, with plausible arguments.

Plausible. The problem is coming from some of the most convincing spiritual Christians in our congregations. The ones we tend to admire and look up to and seek the approval of.

[6 : 36] The ones, as we'll see a little later in the passage, who seem so godly that they make us wonder if our own mere Christianity is genuine at all.

These may be men and women with broad smiles and smart suits preaching from pulpits and conference stages to audiences of good, sincere evangelicals and taking them captive.

So this passage is a warning cry from the Apostle Paul about the danger lurking as he puts it in verse 17 in the shadows. But as well as sounding the alarm, Paul is writing this as an encouragement to help us mere Christians who might be beginning to feel like lesser Christians.

The ones making you feel inadequate might well actually be missing out on something themselves.

the shadows they're obsessed with in verse 17 are contrasted to the absolute concrete substance on offer to us simple, ordinary Christians in the Lord Jesus.

[8 : 03] In every possible way, the passage we've reached is the heart of this letter. Firstly, verses 6 to 8 are the situational hearts of the letter.

It's where Paul really lifts the lid on what's going wrong in Colossae. We'll call it a spirituality which leaves you empty.

Then in verses 9 to 15 comes the theological heart of the letter. They tell the Colossians what they need to know about Christ if they're going to stand up to the threat that he is a saviour who lacks nothing.

And finally, in verses 16 to 19 we get the practical heart of the book where Paul applies that theology back to the situation facing the church. A Christianity which has substance.

So firstly, let's look a little more closely at what's going on in this church. Verses 6 to 9 a spirituality which leaves you empty. Paul begins by urging the church to grow deep roots in Christ to establish themselves in the straightforward gospel of the Lord Jesus that they'd received from trustworthy old Epaphras, their missionary.

[9 : 29] So Paul seems to know that this group of Christians is in particular danger of being uprooted, of being dragged away from what they were taught by these plausible sounding kidnappers.

So now, finally, it's as if Paul begins to unmask the troublemakers. If we just peek ahead to the end of our passage, we'll get a glimpse of the kind of stuff that they were pushing.

In verse 16, it seems as if they're into special religious observances, bits of Old Testament food laws and festivals. Verse 18 implies that they're known for what our translations call asceticism.

Other versions call it humility or having a very low view of yourself. But it's not genuine, is it? The truth is they're puffed up, says Paul, with pride.

So my guess is that they're making a big show of denying themselves with terribly pious fasting in public and that sort of thing. But on top of that, verse 18 implies they're obsessed with angels and prophetic visions and all that sort of supposedly very spiritual stuff.

[10 : 51] In other words, their claim is that they have what it takes to be full-blooded, real Christians. You've probably noticed that all the way along in this letter, he's been using the word full over and over again.

His prayer, for example, right at the start, was that the Colossians would be filled with the knowledge of God's will. And it seems like we found the reason why.

He's writing to people who are being made to worry that they're lacking in something. They seem to be surrounded by nice, plausible-looking Christians who claim that their sort of spirituality is a fuller, more complete version of Christianity.

But in verse 8, Paul shows us the truth. Far from offering completeness, peddling something more than Christ is just philosophy and empty deceit.

a load of wind. Their so-called spirituality is a promise of fullness which in the end leaves you empty.

[12 : 05] And worse than that, look where it comes from. Verse 8 gives us three key pieces of information. It's according to human religion, human tradition, the elementary spirits of this world, and not according to Christ.

In other words, it's simply a bogus man-made religiosity. Worse still, there's a hint there, isn't there, of something truly sinister. These people claiming to be sophisticated and spiritual are in fact in the grip of the utterly basic principles of this world.

Perhaps even the demonic powers of this world. Paul wants us to wake up to the fact that the devil can use charming, plausible-looking leaders and secure them positions in influential churches or even on Christian television and then use their overblown spiritual trickery to mock the true God.

God. Don't be fooled into thinking that just because something is called God TV, it's God who's behind it. With these men, it's the elementary spirits of this world.

The one thing this sort of mumbo-jumbo is not according to, verse eight, is Christ. Now, of course, it will be far more plausible than openly denying the Lord Jesus.

[13 : 42] It's subtle. You see, that little extra experience, you need to be a complete Christian, soon becomes the main experience and Jesus is quietly sidelined.

It's very revealing to have a look at the websites and the literature of the churches and conferences which push these sorts of empty promises.

I've read a few this week, all operating in and around Scotland, and one thing is very striking. The word Jesus barely appears at all on these websites.

Instead, what you see are words like power, success, the promise of all sorts of fullness, even claims to apostleship and prophecy.

prophecy. That might well seem a million miles away, friends, from our churches and our friends, but the reality is that even if you and I don't feel like we come into contact with this very much, this kind of thing is growing far faster in the UK than true evangelical theology.

[15 : 01] theology. The threat to the gospel now in this country is coming from people adding to Christ, not openly denying him the way liberal theology did.

While liberal theology has made its churches empty and frankly irrelevant now, every Christian student today will have to wrestle with this kind of thing, extreme Pentecostal and charismatic theology which adds to the Lord Jesus and his gospel.

For most of the world out there, it may be their only encounter with Christianity, something just like what was threatening Colossae.

Today's children don't sing hymns in school anymore. Their parents and teachers don't teach them the Easter story anymore. But every one of them with Sky TV has numerous supposedly Christian channels coming into their house, all of which, as far as I can see, are controlled by the elementary powers of this world.

Hour after hour of spiritual charlatans offering a fullness that doesn't accord with Christ. And yet it's dressed up in such pious language that sometimes it can be hard to spot the difference.

[16 : 33] Well, friends, if the focus is not on Christ, then it isn't Christian. If it's about success and not sacrifice, then it isn't Christian.

And we need to wake up to this, just as the Colossian church did. If your grandchildren are growing up Christian, then you need to help them see that these empty promises are just that.

We need to teach them not to buy in to the sort of sham which is passed off as Christianity on our televisions. We need to teach them that if they hear someone claiming to be an apostle or suggesting that the straightforward gospel they've received is lacking in something, then they should run for the hills.

If we want to be fulfilled, complete Christians, then the answer according to Paul is to stay rooted in Christ. Christ.

I'm an absolutely hopeless gardener. I've long since abandoned the struggle to the dandelions, which now make up about 85% of my lawn, I think. And the problem is that they have such long, tough roots that it seems even if I napalm the entire garden, the weeds have grown back long before the grass.

[18 : 00] Well, Paul is telling us to be a little bit more like those dandelions. We need to cling so resiliently to Jesus as we received him from trusted biblical friends that no one else is able to dig us up and satisfy us with something less.

Why? Because while these kidnappers are full of nothing more than empty promises, we saw last week verse 4 that in Jesus are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

So Paul moves on in verse 9 from warning the church about the charlatans to teaching the church about Christ. Verses 9 to 15 sum up the theology of this book.

It's what the Colossians need to know about Jesus to stand firm, that he is a savior who lacks nothing. Verse 9, in him, the whole fullness of God dwells bodily.

Every bit of it. That's a tautology, isn't it? I wonder if you noticed how Paul is almost saying the same thing twice. It's like saying that I'm a silly fool or that my sermon is predictably boring.

[19 : 22] the whole wholeness of God dwells in flesh in the person of the Lord Jesus. The God of the universe dwells in this man.

And the implication, I take it, is that there is no fullness to be found anywhere else, anywhere outside of him. There is no fullness in any empty promises that don't accord with Christ.

And this is how the logic of the whole letter works. Who and what Jesus is determines who and what Christians are. Because we're joined inseparably to him.

Verse 9, the whole fullness of the Godhead dwells in him. verse 10, and you have been filled in him. If Jesus is full and complete, then his people are full and complete.

They've been brought to fullness already. Denying that denies Jesus himself. Because what matters isn't how spiritual and special we are.

[20 : 33] It's who Jesus is and what he has accomplished. If we belong to him, we're joined to him with a bond stronger than marriage. So what he is, we have in him.

That's Colossians at its heart. Which is why that phrase, in him, dominates every verse of this paragraph. One writer calls it the scarlet thread that runs through the whole argument.

That's a beautiful picture, isn't it? So let's see how it helps quickly. Perhaps you can imagine a little house group in the Colossian church. Some of the group are mere Christians like you and me, and some of them are special Christians.

And the special ones have all sorts of signs to show the credentials of their conversions. Some of them say they can speak in tongues now, and unless you can too, then there's not a lot of evidence that God's at work in you.

some of them have special visions or messages from God put on their hearts, and the really posh ones have been circumcised as a sign of their full-on commitment to God.

[21 : 44] And little by little, they're making the mere Christians, like you and me, wonder if they're lacking in something. But one day, the leader of the house group reads out this letter from the apostle Paul.

And it seems to be addressed to them, to the mere Christians, the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae. And as verse 10 is read out, they begin to realize that if they're joined to this Jesus, then they must be okay.

In fact, says Paul, if he is the head of all authority, then there's no need to bow and scrape before angels or supernatural beings or impressive leaders or anyone else.

Then comes another surprise, verse 11. Paul seems to think that they have got a mark of belonging to Jesus too. Not a physical circumcision, but a spiritual one given to them by Jesus himself.

And they got it all those years ago when they believed the gospel, told them by Epaphras and were baptized. In fact, when that happened, as far as God was concerned, their old lives were dead and buried.

[23 : 09] Even the record book of the debt they owed, the ledger containing line after line of their sinful past, was nailed to the cross alongside the Lord Jesus as if to say, paid in full, cancelled.

Yes, the truth is their lives were totally inadequate, but it seems as if it's Jesus' life which counts. Those rulers and authorities of this present age are stripped of their power and their dignity and their ability to accuse the Christian and totally defeated.

And then as Jesus rose from the dead, in God's sight, verse 12, these mere Christians rose again as well to new life. Not yet bodily of course, but their condemned old human nature was gone.

And they were given a new heart and a fresh start. And I'd imagine as the reader got to the end of verse 15, there was a fairly hushed silence in the room.

If that is what it means to be a mere Christian, then it sounds pretty full to me. If Jesus has achieved all of that and all of that belongs to us already in him, then what more could we possibly add?

[24 : 43] If Christ lacks nothing, if the whole fullness of the Godhead dwells in him, if he has triumphed over every rival authority, then what can his people possibly lack?

Suddenly, those empty claims of the special Christians are sounding pretty hollow, aren't they? I think in coming years, we'll need to remember this paragraph, because fewer and fewer Christian teachers will be openly denying that Christ is God.

But if we want to help our Christian friends escape from the grip of this sort of theology, then we need to help them see that the whole fullness of God dwells in him and that if they belong to him, they have it all.

So finally, and very briefly, Paul comes back to tackle the situation facing the Colossians by applying what he's just taught them about Christ to their church and their situation.

If God has forgiven and accepted them so comprehensively, then verse 16, who is anyone else to pass judgment on them?

[26 : 02] The message of these last few verses, verses 16 to 19, is that unlike the empty spirituality of these new teachers, there is a Christianity which has substance.

The Christianity which genuinely fills and satisfies his faith which simply holds fast to Christ himself. Verse 19, the straightforward mere Christianity of Epaphras' converts.

You see, there's a terrible irony in all this bogus spirituality, isn't there? The people pushing it tend to pass judgment, in Paul's words, on the Christians who don't stick to their traditions.

They disqualify the ordinary Christians, verse 18, treat them like an athlete who's cheating or a forged coin, as if they're somehow less genuine believers.

If you don't make a big show of your humility, or don't have whatever spiritual gift this particular bunch obsesses with, then in their eyes you're probably not truly Christian at all.

[27 : 15] But the irony comes in verse 17. The truth, according to Paul, is that the things which mattered to them belonged to a previous age, the age before Jesus came in all his fullness.

They were just shadows of his kingdom. But now that the substance has come, who needs the shadows anymore? What possible need is there for special feast days to remind us of what God had promised now that he'd done it?

What possible need is there for God to speak by prophecy and visions now that he's spoken fully and finally by his son? The truth is that these poor fools who thought they were so spiritual, so sophisticated, are just splashing around in the shallow end.

We often say that charismatic theology claims too much, that it promises here on earth what the Bible doesn't promise till heaven. But Paul's point here is that it is claiming too little.

It's a pale, under-realized gospel, because it's clinging to those things that we just don't need now, that we have the fullness of the risen Christ and relationship with him.

[28 : 39] You can spend all day in a prayer cabin or brag about your prophetic art or your day of fasting, but it doesn't make you any more spiritual.

In fact, it's quite the opposite in verse 19. They're puffed up without reason. What counts is holding fast to the head, because if what we just read about him is true, then it's natural to conclude the way Paul does in verse 19, that all true Christian growth and life in the church is a growth which flows from him.

If our roots are firmly planted in the gospel of Christ so that we can't be pulled away, then our shoots of new growth and maturity and fullness will come from him too.

Any form of spirituality which loses sight of him is always going to be empty and half-baked. But if Jesus truly is all this, then mere Christianity is more solid and substantial and robust than we could possibly hope for.

So if you're a mere Christian, if like me, you sometimes feel inadequate and dry, and compared to others, your Christian life just seems a little mundane and ordinary, well, remember that you belong to the one in whom the whole fullness of the Godhead dwells, the one who disarmed the rulers and authorities of this world by triumphing over them at the cross and raising the dead to life.

[30 : 34] Friends, it doesn't get more spiritual than that. So who is anyone else to disqualify you? Let's pray.

God, we thank you so much that you have qualified us who trust in your son to share in the inheritance of the saints of light.

Thank you for delivering us from the kingdom of darkness and transferring us to the kingdom of your beloved son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Help us, Lord, to hold fast to him for your glory. Amen. Well, friends, let's close with the words of the hymn on the sheet.

In Christ alone my hope is found, he is my light, my strength, my song. Lord, to hold the heart, my hope is found, who is my light, my strength, my hope.

[31 : 51] Lord, to woman power, to all p