

There's someone lurking in the shadows!

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn now to our reading for this morning. Rupert is going to be preaching in Colossians, chapter 2. If you have one of our church Bibles, you'll find that on page 984.

Page 984, Colossians, chapter 2. I'm going to read from verse 28 of chapter 1 and then down to verse 19 of chapter 2.

And notice just how many times the words him or in him comes up in this passage. Paul begins by saying, him, that is Christ, we proclaim, warning everyone, teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. For though I'm absent in the body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

[1 : 49] Therefore, as you receive Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him and be built up in him, established in the faith just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the 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, for the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ.

In him, that is also you were circumcised, having been buried with him in baptism. In him, reading it slightly different here, but this is how it should be, in him you were also raised through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

[2 : 59] And you who were dead in your trespasses and 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 a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and 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. And may God himself bless to us this, his word. Well, friends, turn with me back to Colossians chapter 2.

[4 : 31] And we're looking this morning at chapter 2, verses 6 to 19. It's on page 984. And let's ask for God's help.

Father God, we thank you for that mystery so wonderfully unhidden to your children, of Christ in us, the hope of glory. And we ask, Father, that as we open again, these scriptures which reveal him, that Paul's longing for his readers would be your gift to us, that we be encouraged in heart, united in love, with all the riches of full assurance, because we know and understand Christ himself.

Help us this morning to believe that every treasure is found in him, so that no one else can ever satisfy us with less.

Amen. I tried and I tried to warn them. That memory haunted one Jewish soldier after his release from a Polish prisoner of war camp.

I wrote letters, he said, urging my wife to take the child and move in with a family we could trust. And for a while, she seemed to heed the warnings.

[5 : 59] But after two weeks, she went home to her father. The threat just didn't seem that real. And so I lost the most faithful and dearest part of my life.

How often do warnings go unheeded because the danger just seems distant and exaggerated, overblown?

This week, we're looking at the heart of Paul's letter to the Colossians. And once again, there's a rather sinister threat lurking in the background.

Once again, the New Testament is banging on about some sort of false teaching. And once again, the readers will have to decide whether the threat is real or whether Paul is just crying wolf.

The trouble is that the threat in Colossae just didn't look that dangerous. It came from men we first meet directly in verse four of chapter two.

[7 : 10] Men deluding the church with plausible arguments. Plausible. The danger was coming from some of the most convincing spiritual Christians Christians in the congregation.

The ones we tend to admire and look up to and seek approval from. The ones, as we'll see a little later on, who seem so godly that they make us begin to doubt whether our own mere Christianity is genuine at all.

There might be men and women with broad smiles and nice suits sharing the conference stage with good, well-respected evangelicals and taking them captive.

It's tricky even nailing down precisely who the troublemakers are in this letter or what their agenda was. Some of the scholars call them Gnostics or proto-Gnostics or Judaizers, all sorts of other weird and wacky names.

The trouble is I'm sure that sounds just as remote to our modern evangelical ears as it did to the Colossians.

[8 : 28] And more to the point, Paul himself doesn't label them quite so neatly for us. Instead, what he does in this letter is expose the kinds of problems they were causing.

And as it turns out, there is nothing remote about them at all. So just listen to Paul's language in verse 8 as he describes these apparently harmless, respectable Christian men.

See to it that no one takes you captive. He's describing them like the pied pipers who would kidnap slaves to sell on foreign markets.

The closest thing we probably have to that today is a child abductor. It's brave language, isn't it? Colossians 2 is Paul's warning cry about the danger lurking, as he puts it in verse 17, in the shadows.

But it's important we see that it's also his encouragement to us mere Christians who might be beginning to feel like lesser Christians.

[9 : 40] You see, 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.

In every possible way, this passage is right at the heart of the letter. first, the verses 6 to 8 are the situational heart 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 comes the practical heart of this book where Paul applies that theology back to the situation. a Christianity with real substance.

[10 : 56] So firstly let's look a little more closely at what's going on in this church. Verses 6 to 8 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've received from trustworthy old Epaphras their local missionary.

It seems as if Paul knows that this group of Christians are in particular danger of being uprooted of being dragged away from what they were taught by these plausible sounding kidnappers.

So now is the point in the letter where Paul begins to unmask them for us. If we just peek ahead to the end of our passage we'll get a glimpse of the kind of stuff they were pushing.

In verse 16 it seems as if they're into special religious observances bits of Old Testament food law and festivals. Verse 18 implies they're known for what our Bibles call asceticism something other versions translate as humility or having a low view of yourself.

But it's not genuine is it? the truth is they're puffed up with pride. So it seems they make a big show of denying themselves with terribly pious fasting and all that sort of thing.

[12 : 29] And on top of that, verse 18, they're obsessed with angels and prophetic visions and all that sort of supposedly very spiritual stuff.

In other words, they claim that they have what it takes to be real, full-blooded Christians. Now, if you've been following along in this letter, you might have noticed that Paul has been using the word full again and 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 now we've found the reason for that.

He's writing to people who are being made to worry that they are lacking 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.

[13 : 48] It's a load of wind. Their so-called spirituality is a promise of fullness, which in the end leaves you empty.

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

In other words, it's simply a bogus man-made form of religiosity. Worse still, there's a hint of something truly sinister there. These people claiming to be so sophisticated are in fact in the grip of the utterly basic principles of this world.

It looks spiritual, that stuff, but the truth is it is utterly worldly, perhaps even a tool of the demonic powers that work in this world, those elementary spirits.

Isn't that startling? If Paul is right, we need to wake up to the fact that the devil can take charming, plausible looking Christian leaders and use all of their overblown spiritual nonsense to make a mockery of true Christianity.

[15 : 18] What better way than by securing them positions in influential churches or on internet hubs or even on Christian television? So don't be fooled into thinking that just because something is called God TV.

It's the true God and not a pretender who lies behind it. The one thing this sort of mumbo-jumbo is not according to verse 8 is Christ.

Now of course it will be far more plausible and subtle than openly denying the Lord. Christ. But the little extra experience that you need to be a complete Christian soon becomes the main experience and Jesus is quietly pushed to the side.

It's very revealing just to have a little look at the websites and the literature of the sort of prominent evangelical churches which push this kind of thing.

I've had a look at a couple over the last month all working in and around Scotland close to home and one thing is very striking.

[16 : 32] The word Jesus barely appears at all. Instead what you see are words like power.

The promise of all sorts of fullness. Even claims to apostleship. And prophecy. Now that might seem a million miles away to our church and our Christian friends.

But the reality is that even if you and I don't come into contact with it, churches which teach this kind of thing are growing far faster in the UK than classical evangelical churches.

The threat to the gospel now is coming from people adding to Christ. Not open denying him the way liberal theology has for so long. It won't be liberalism which threatens the Christian students arriving in Glasgow over the next few weeks.

Praise God that's been banished from Christian unions. and liberal churches are busy making themselves empty and irrelevant. But every one of our students today will have to wrestle with how they respond to this sort of Pentecostal or charismatic theology.

[17 : 50] theology. And the truth is that like most false teaching down the ages, the more Christian it looks, the harder it is to spot.

For most of the world out there, this may be their only encounter with so-called Christianity. Something just like what was threatening the Colossians.

You see, today's children don't sing hymns in school anymore, do they? They don't learn the Easter story from their parents and their teachers. But every one of them with Sky TV has numerous supposedly Christian channels being beamed into their houses, all of which, as far as I can see, are controlled by the elementary spirits of this world.

Hour after hour of spiritual charlatans offering a fullness which doesn't accord with Christ. Now, what a tragedy that is, that a whole generation's impression of Christianity could be formed by that.

And, of course, most sensible pagans can see through it in a flash, can't they? They'll switch the channel immediately. And yet it's all dressed up in such pious language that sometimes well-meaning Christians can find it hard to tell the difference.

[19 : 22] Well, if the focus isn't on Christ, then it isn't Christian. If it's about success and not sacrifice, then it isn't Christian.

And friends, we need to wake up to that just as the Colossians did. If your grandchildren are growing up as Christians, then we need to help them see its empty promises for exactly what they are.

We need to teach them not to buy into the sham, which is so often passed off as Christianity today. We need to teach them that if they hear someone claiming to be an apostle or suggesting that the straightforward gospel they received is lacking, then they should run for the hills.

If we want to be fulfilled, complete Christians, then the answer, verse 6, is to stay rooted in Christ and keep walking in obedience to him.

I'm an absolutely hopeless gardener, and I've long since abandoned the struggle with the dandelions, which make up most of my lawn, most of my driveway, in fact.

[20 : 37] The problem is that they have such deep, tough roots that even if I spray the whole place with napalm, as I did once again yesterday afternoon, the weeds grow back long before the grass.

Well, Paul is telling us to be a little bit more like those resilient dandelions. We need to cling so determinedly to Jesus as we received him from trusted, biblical Christians that no one else can dig us up and satisfy us with anything less.

Why? Because while these kidnappers are full of nothing more than empty promises, all the wonderful treasures of true wisdom and knowledge are on offer to us already, verse 4, in none other than Jesus himself.

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 the letter.

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

[22 : 09] Every bit of it. That's a tautology, isn't it? Do you notice how Paul's almost saying the same thing twice? The whole fullness. It's like saying that I'm a silly fool or that this morning's sermon is boringly predictable.

The whole wholeness of the God of the universe is found in the person of Jesus Christ. And the implication, I take it, is that the whole fullness of deity dwells only in him.

There is no fullness in any empty deceit that doesn't accord with Christ. Without Jesus Christ at its center, this universe is an empty, meaningless place.

And this is the way the logic of the whole letter works. Who and what Jesus is determines who and what Christians are. Because we are 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.

[23 : 28] They've been brought to fullness already. And denying that denies Jesus himself. Because what matters, you see, isn't how spiritual and special we are.

It's what Jesus is. If we belong to him, then we're united to him with a bond stronger than marriage. So what he is, we have in him.

Which is why that phrase, in him, dominates every verse of this paragraph. One writer calls it the scarlet thread, which runs through the whole argument.

So let's see how it helps. Perhaps you can imagine a little house group in the Colossian church. And some of this 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.

[24 : 31] And unless you can too, well, there's no proof that God's really and work at you, at work in you at all. Some of them have special visions or special messages from God put on their hearts.

The really posh ones have even been circumcised as a sign of their full-on commitment to the God of Israel. And little by little, they're making the mere Christians worry that 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, the mere Christians, to the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae.

And as verse 10 of our chapter is read out, they begin to realize that if they are joined to this Jesus, then they must be okay.

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

[25 : 46] And comes another surprise, verse 11. Paul seems to think that they have 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. Perhaps the younger ones in Colossae didn't even remember it.

One Sunday, one ordinary Sunday, their believing parents brought them along to church, church, and they got a little bit wet. Almost as if the emphasis wasn't on them at all, but on what Christ was giving them.

And in that unshowy, low-key act, something extraordinary was signified. As far as God was concerned, they were now so united to a dead and buried Christ that their own old lives were dead and buried alongside him.

Even the record book containing the debt they owed, verse 14, that enormous ledger containing line after line of every sinful deed, was nailed to the cross alongside the Lord Jesus, as if to say, paid in full.

[27 : 16] Canceled. Those rulers and authorities of this present age are stripped of their power and their dignity and their ability to accuse the Christians.

They are totally defeated. Yes, the truth is that the lives of these mere Christians were inadequate, inadequate, but it seems to be Jesus' life which counts.

And so as Jesus rose from the dead, verse 12, in God's sight, these ordinary believers rose to new life as well. Not yet bodily, of course, they're still waiting for that, just like us.

But their old, condemned human nature was gone, and in Christ they're 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 stunned silence in the room.

Because if that is what it means to be a mere Christian, well 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 possibly be added in this world?

[28 : 39] If Christ lacks nothing, if the whole fullness of God dwells in him, if he has triumphed over every rival authority, then what more could his people possibly lack?

Suddenly those empty claims of the special Christians are sounding pretty ludicrous, aren't they? I think in coming years, we'll need to remember this paragraph.

Fewer and fewer Christian teachers will be denying that Christ is God. But if we want to help our Christian friends to escape from the grip of this sort of teaching, then we have to help them see that the whole fullness of God dwells in him.

that if they belong to him, they have it already. Now we all know, don't we, only too well, that we'll never win them back by talking like unappealing, ultra-reformed know-it-alls who just love a good argument.

We know that, don't we? But we also can't afford to be naive anymore. Paul's a great example to us, isn't he? His approach is to warn the Colossians plainly, while also lovingly showing them that they have it all already in Christ.

[30 : 09] So finally, in verses 16 to 19, Paul comes back to tackle the situation facing the Colossians by applying what he's just taught them about Jesus. If God has forgiven and accepted you so comprehensively, then, verse 16, how can you let anyone else pass judgment on you?

The message of these last few verses is that, unlike the empty spirituality of these new teachers, there is a Christianity with real substance.

A Christianity which genuinely fills and satisfies is a 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 of this bogus spirituality. The people pushing it tend to pass judgment on these ordinary Christians who don't stick to their traditions.

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

[31 : 30] believers. If you don't make a big show of your humility or you don't have whatever spiritual gift this particular bunch is obsessing with, or you speak about Jesus in plain English, rather than some sort of pseudo spiritual Christianese, well then, in their eyes, you perhaps aren't truly Christian at all.

But the irony comes in verse 17. The truth, according to Paul, is that those things which mattered so much to them belonged to a previous age, the age before Jesus came.

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

What possible need is there for God to speak to us through prophets and visions, now that he's spoken to us once and for all by his son? The truth is that these poor fools who claim to be so spiritual and sophisticated are just splashing around in the shallow end.

people are just saying, we often say that charismatic theology claims too much. It offers something here on earth, which the Bible doesn't promise until heaven.

[33 : 02] Paul's point here is that it's claiming too little. gospel. It's a pale, under-realized gospel, because it's clinging to things that we just don't need, now that we have the fullness of the risen Christ in us.

So you can spend all day in a prayer cabin, or brag about your prophetic arts, or your day of fasting, but it doesn't make you any more spiritual.

In fact, it's quite the opposite in verse 19. This lot were puffed up without reason by their own sensuous or fleshly minds. It's worldly.

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 Christ.

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

[34 : 20] We grow and mature only as we're nourished by him. So any form of spirituality which loses sight of him is always going to be empty and half-baked.

But if Jesus truly is all of this, then mere Christianity is more solid and substantial and robust than we could possibly hope for.

friends, if you're a mere Christian, if like me, you sometimes feel a little inadequate and spiritually dry, and compared to others, your Christian life just seems a little mundane and ordinary, well remember this, you belong to the one in whom the whole fullness of the Godhead dwells, the one who disarmed every ruler and authority of this world by triumphing at the cross and raising the dead to life alongside him, it does not get more spiritual than that.

So who is anyone else to disqualify you? Let's pray. Father God, thank you that you have qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints of light.

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

[36 : 12] Help us, Lord, to hold fast to him as your church for all of our growth and for your glory. Amen.