

Colossians 2:11-15
“What God Has Given Us in Christ”

Introduction:

In the previous passage Paul reminded his readers that because of their union with Christ they partook of the fullness of God that was found in Him. In this passage then, Paul went on to explain how it was that they came into that state of fullness. Because of this, in this passage, Paul placed an emphasis on what God has accomplished for believers through the redemptive work of Jesus. As Paul did this, he demonstrated that he was more interested in reminding his readers about the truths associated with the authentic Gospel than he was in cataloging the teachings of the heretics. In these verses Paul used an elaborate array of vivid metaphors to describe the importance of what Christ accomplished on the cross and in His resurrection. The metaphors Paul used were circumcision, death, burial, the impartation of life, the cancellation of legal debts, and military actions taken against defeated enemies.

I. Transformed Natures: (vs.11-12)

Paul opened this passage by writing, *“In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands”* (vs.11a). The twice repeated prepositional phrase *“in Him”* (found at the beginning of both this and the next verse) was placed in an emphatic position in these sentences to signal that Paul was leading the Colossians into a deeper understanding of the significance and implications of what it meant to be incorporated into Christ. The shift of attention to the believers in Colossae is dramatically highlighted by the presence, placement, and case of the personal pronoun *“you”* in this and the following verses. Through these grammatical devices, Paul wanted to highlight his move from general observations about God’s accomplishments in Christ, to instead focus on the benefits of these accomplishments for the believers at Colossae.

The first question that needs to be answered is why did Paul include this metaphorical reference to circumcision here? Some scholars suggest that he did this as a direct polemic against one aspect of the false teaching that was going on in Colossae, this is premised upon the belief that the false teachers must have sought to impose circumcision as an initiatory rite to their brand of Christianity. It is further suggested that in response to this, Paul explained here that all believers were circumcised spiritually when they were converted. Those scholars who hold this view point out that this would make what is taught here very similar to what Paul taught elsewhere, that spiritual rather than physical circumcision was what was important (Phil.3:3). This would mean that the focus of Paul’s reference to circumcision here was on what Christ accomplished on the cross rather than on the literal Jewish rite itself. Though this is a compelling suggestion it has one main problem, specifically, nowhere in this letter did Paul actually address the matter of the place of circumcision in the life of a New Covenant believer, nor does he argue against the practice of it by Gentile Christians (something he did do in his letters to the Galatians and the Philippians). Though it is clear that the false teachers were

advocating the observance of some elements of the Mosaic Law (see verses 16-23), there is no evidence that this included the teaching that the saints (particularly Gentiles) should all be circumcised.

A better explanation is that Paul employed this metaphor in harmony with what the Old Testament taught about the ultimate meaning of the rite of circumcision. This understanding would make his teaching here very similar to what he taught in his letter to the believers at Rome (2:25-29). In that letter Paul made the point that God ultimately desires that His people be obedient to Him, and that the rite of circumcision was given as an illustration of the change that was needed in the hearts of His people in order for them to give Him that obedience. Apart from such obedience, the physical rite of circumcision meant nothing. This teaching by Paul reflected the clear teaching of Moses when the Law was first given to Israel:

“And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.”

Deuteronomy 30:6

Therefore, even in the Old Testament it was taught that physical circumcision had value only when the heart was truly committed to God. With the coming of the Gospel, the message was that the work of Christ had so thoroughly exhausted the significance of the original ordinance (just as it had the entire ceremonial law) that the ordinance had been superseded. Paul’s choice of language here simply reflected this New Covenant understanding of what physical circumcision represented, and thus it was a perfect picture of what Christ accomplished for believers on the cross.

Next, Paul wrote about how this “*circumcision made without hands*” was accomplished, “*by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ*” (vs.11b). The Greek word translated as “*putting off*” is a compound word denoting two verbal ideas, first stripping something off and then casting it away. The basic imagery was rooted in the act of discarding a piece of filthy clothing that was no longer fit to wear. Here, this language of “*putting off*” the flesh borrows from the literal practice of circumcision where flesh was removed from the body. But the main question here is how are we meant to interpret this imagery? To what act or actions was Paul referring to in using this imagery? There are basically three different answers given to these questions by various Evangelical scholars. The various interpretations offered in regard to this imagery are:

1. It pictures the stripping off of a person’s physical body to free the believer so that he/she can ascend to Heaven
2. It pictures the death of Christ, where He took off His mortal form
3. It pictures the stripping away of an individual’s sinful tendencies when one initially comes to Christ

The first of these is fairly easy to dismiss because there is nothing in this passage that specifically relates to the idea of what needs to happen to the believer’s body to enable him or her to get into Heaven. Scholars have made better arguments for the second option, that it refers to Christ stripping off His physical body in death.

Those who take this position argue that this reference ties back to Paul's previous use of the word "*body*" in 1:22, and in that verse the word clearly refers to Christ's physical body. Therefore, they say it is logical to assume that Paul used the word in the same sense here since Paul did not clarify otherwise. They also argue that the genitive phrase "*the circumcision of Christ*" at the end of the verse also refers to His death on the cross, which involved Him divesting Himself of His body at death. It is argued that Christ's death best suits the imagery of circumcision because traditional circumcision involved the cutting off of a piece of flesh while Christ's death on the cross involved the sacrifice of his entire body, and it was His death that ultimately accomplished the removal of our sins.

However, in the end, this explanation requires us to believe that Paul used this imagery in a way that is very different from how he used it elsewhere. Also, it is very hard to imagine that Paul's readers would have understood the imagery in this way since it has no counterpart elsewhere in Christian teaching or in the teaching of the Old Testament. The correct interpretation that goes best with what is written in these verses is that Paul was referring to the stripping off of one's sinful tendencies. One thing that supports this conclusion is that much of what Paul wrote here is similar to what he wrote in the sixth chapter of his letter to the Romans. In that chapter we find the following statements:

"Or do you not know this many of us were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death, therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so, we also should walk in newness of life, for if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this that our old man was crucified with Him that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin"

Romans 6:3-6

There is a great deal of teaching that these two passages have in common. In both passages Paul wrote about the spiritual reality that believers have been crucified and buried with Christ, and that union with Him in these things is signified by one's baptism into Christ. Most importantly in both passages Paul wrote about how these truths about the believer's union with Christ should impact what the believer does in his/her body. Further evidence for this interpretation is that Paul used the same Greek word that is translated here as "*putting off*" later on in this letter (3:9), and in that later context this verb refers to stripping off the old sinful self in light of one's conversion (mirroring what Paul wrote here). Additionally, the pronoun "*you*" is the subject of the sentence, and grammar demands that it refers to the Colossian believers, not to Christ. Therefore, the circumcision done without hands, related to the Colossians at their conversion, not to Christ on the cross. This interpretation also makes better sense of the flow of thought. For the false teachers were advocating rules and aesthetic practices as a means of subduing the flesh. Against this, Paul was asserting that Christians have already experienced the stripping off of their sinful orientation, therefore no other practice or ritual was necessary to

accomplish this. Instead, the Colossians needed to exercise faith in these spiritual truths and exercise the newfound freedom they had to be obedient to God.

Some scholars have suggested that the language “*made without hands*” was a quasi-technical expression that was used in the Bible to refer to corporate new age realities in contrast to the institutions and rituals of the Old Covenant. Therefore, they argue that here it refers to the Church as God’s true temple, brought into being through Christ’s death and resurrection. However, that meaning of the phrase derives from the Book of Daniel as part of a description of apocalyptic dream imagery (Dan.2:34, 45), and even then, the imagery in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream does not refer to the Church, but to the coming of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, there is no real support for this conclusion. Besides this, the context is clearly about the work of Christ, it is not about the nature of the Church.

In regard to the phrase “*the body of the sins of the flesh*” this refers to fallen human nature that totally dominated believers prior to their salvation. After conversion, Christians have been cleansed of that sinful dominance and have been given a new nature created in righteousness. Though the flesh continues to be influenced by sin, the dominion it once had over the believer has been broken so that the Christian can choose to resist that influence and obey God.

In regard to the phrase “*by the circumcision of Christ*”, this genitive expression does not refer to a circumcision done to Christ, but rather to one done by Him. And here it refers to the spiritual circumcision that set believers free from their slavery to sin, the cutting away of that sinful nature.

In verse twelve we read, “*buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.*” The passive verbs in this and the previous verse point to God as the One who accomplishes these things in the lives of believers. Unlike what he wrote in his letter to the believers at Rome, here Paul did not include any specific reference to the believer’s death with Christ, writing only about how these believers were buried with Christ. But of course, this difference is stylistic, because the reference to burial incorporates in it the idea of death, because only the dead are buried.

Regarding the reference to baptism here, this raises the question, precisely what was Paul referring to? This needs to be answered because there are several types of baptism that are mentioned in the New Testament:

- Judaistic ceremonial cleansings (Heb.6:2)
- The baptism of repentance by John the Baptist, which anticipated the establishment of the Kingdom of God (Matth.3:2)
- The personal baptism of Jesus Christ (Matt.3:13-17)
- The baptism of suffering at the cross (Matt.20:22-23)
- The baptism in the Holy Spirit (I Cor.12:13)
- Christian water baptism in which believers identify themselves with Christ in His death burial and resurrection (Matt.20:19)

So, the question here is which of these baptisms was Paul referring to in this verse? Based on what Paul wrote in this passage, it is clear that here Paul was referring ultimately the work of the Spirit of God, though the reference may have also

included the water baptism these saints had received at the time of their conversion. From the very beginning of the Christian movement baptism was the ritual of initiation into the new community established by Jesus Christ. But it is important to note that the rite of water baptism is a metaphor for the action of the Spirit of God. In Paul's thought, it is the work of the Holy Spirit that incorporates believers into the body of Christ. In fact, this action of the Spirit can itself be termed a baptism (I Cor.12:13; Acts 1:5). Although there is little explicit emphasis on the Spirit elsewhere in Colossians, the work of the Spirit is implicit in the filling and fullness language that is used throughout this context.

The imagery of being buried and raised with Christ conveys the thought, not simply of burying an old way of life and rising to a new kind of life, but of sharing in the experience of Christ's own death and resurrection that makes the believer's death and resurrection possible. That Paul did not think of water baptism as actually affecting participation in that experience is made clear when he adds that the Colossians were raised through their faith in the power of God. The ritual of water baptism is not some sort of magical act, but an act of obedience in which we confess our faith and through our practice of the rite, symbolize the essence of our spiritual experience. Faith is the instrumental cause of that experience and apart from real faith water baptism is a meaningless ceremony. The words "*through faith*" maintains the balance between what was accomplished by the redemptive work of Christ and how the benefits of that work are appropriated by the individual believer. Therefore, faith is highlighted repeatedly as the critical, necessary, and sufficient human response to God's converting grace. The prepositional phrase "*in the working of God*" should be taken as an objective genitive, and the words "*of God*" as a possessive genitive. Thus, the power of what was accomplished by Christ is extended to those who put their trust in this particular manifestation of God's power. The Greek word translated as "*working*" (from which we get our English word "*energy*") refers to God's active power, which here is said to be the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. Therefore, the resurrection of Christ is held forth by Paul as the supreme demonstration of the power of God. Those who have been raised with Christ have been raised through faith in the Divine power which brought Him back from the dead. And from now on, that power energizes believers and maintains the new life within them, the new life which is nothing less than Christ's resurrection life flowing through all the members of His body. The theological assumption that lies behind baptism is that since the consequence of sin is death, Christ had to enter into death to eradicate its cause, which was sin. The believer then is summoned to enter into the death of Christ in order that through this co-crucifixion, sin and death might be undone by a co-resurrection with Christ (a subject that Paul addresses next). Therefore, baptism is not merely an analogy that pictures what happened to Christ, it pictures the believer's real participation in what happened to Christ.

Some Evangelical scholars have argued that it is the definite implication from Paul's argument here that the rite of water baptism has taken the place of circumcision for the New Covenant people of God. It is further argued that in the

context of this letter, baptism is specifically presented as a sign and seal of having been buried with Christ and having been raised with Him, it is accordingly a sign and seal of union with Christ and of entrance into His covenant. Based on this interpretation, these scholars have concluded that this connection between circumcision and baptism supports the notion of the baptism of infants since this New Testament rite corresponds to the Old Testament rite of circumcision, and the latter was practiced on both adults and infants. In response, it must be observed that it is not true that Paul equates baptism with circumcision in the sense that they represent a one-to-one correspondence to each other as entrance rites into God's covenants. It is true that they are both entrance rites to the two covenants (circumcision into the Old Covenant and water baptism into the New Covenant), however, that does not then automatically mean that they are to be practiced in precisely the same way, or that they have identical implications. Paul argues elsewhere (Romans ch.4) that there is continuity between the covenants in that in both God requires faith from those who wish to be His people. But there is no place in the New Testament that actually teaches that there is continuity between the practice and implications of circumcision and baptism. Therefore, such a conclusion is built not upon specific Biblical revelation, but upon theological bias. In this passage, Paul says that what circumcision pictured under the Old Covenant, has been fulfilled in the Baptism of the Holy Spirit under the New Covenant, and that this spiritual reality is pictured in the rite of water baptism. The stress on the necessity of faith in this passage precludes its application to infants who cannot exercise such faith.

II. Forgiveness: (vs.13-14)

Next Paul wrote, "*And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses*" (vs.13). Though some interpreters argue that the reference to "*uncircumcision*" implies that Paul was singling out Gentiles in what he wrote here, this should be rejected. For if this were true than nothing that Paul said about dying and rising with Christ, being filled with Him, and having a sinful inclination removed, would apply to the Jewish portion of the readers, since Paul has used the second person plural throughout this section. That Paul would ignore a segment of the fellowship in this way makes little sense considering the stress we find in his letters on the communal nature of the Church. Rather, since the thrust in the passage most certainly would apply to the Jewish readers as well, it is best to take this statement in a purely symbolic sense that would be equally applicable to both Gentiles and Jews. This is supported by the theological truism of the universal sinfulness of all humanity (Rom.3:10-11, 23). The point of the phrase lies in its use with the word translated as "*flesh*", it refers to the spiritual act of God whereby He strips away the sinful, physically oriented impulses that dominate non-Christians, which is accomplished by Christ. Since the rite of circumcision was meant to illustrate what would ultimately be a spiritual reality, it was only natural to refer to unbelievers (whose sinful tendencies had never been removed) as "*uncircumcised*".

This is consistent with Paul's overall teaching, because elsewhere (Rom.1:18-3:18) he insisted that Jews, who had received the divine law by revelation, and pagans who had not received it (not in the same form at least) were alike, morally bankrupt before God, and equally in need of His pardoning grace. Jews had disobeyed His will in the form in which they knew it (the law), while pagans had disobeyed it in the form they knew (the inner voice of conscience), but in light of their equal inability to atone for their sins, God graciously forgave them both through the means of faith in the redemptive work of Christ.

At this point in his flow of thought, Paul addressed the spiritual realities that defined these believers in the past. He explained that they, like all unbelievers, existed in the sphere or realm of spiritual death. To be spiritually dead means to be devoid of any awareness of what is around one. Therefore, to be spiritually dead means that one is unable to respond to spiritual stimuli, just as to be physically dead means being unable to respond to physical stimuli. It is to be so locked in the grasp of sin that one is unable to respond to God, and that they lack any real interest in doing so. Therefore, the Bible and spiritual truth make no sense to one in such a state, rather those who are spiritually dead are dominated by the world, the flesh, and Satan and possess no spiritual or eternal life. However, as part of their salvation, they had since received eternal spiritual life. The grammar of the verse reveals that Paul placed the object of the main verb at the beginning of the sentence. The object of the sentence is the participial phrase translated as "*you being dead*", while the main verb is translated as "*He made alive*". With this grammatical construction, Paul highlighted the significance of these saints being alive with Christ by fronting the condition from which that new life arose. The main verb itself is causative, meaning that God caused these believers to come to life from a condition of death, and undoubtably here the Holy Spirit's regenerative power is in view. Since Paul stated that God in Christ made the Colossians alive while they were unbelievers, clearly then, salvation is God's action on behalf of sinners while they're still sinners. God saved them while they were spiritually uncircumcised. This stresses that salvation is by God's grace and not in response to human merit. For Paul stated that though death comes about because of one's own transgressions, life comes about through one's unmerited union with Christ. What is important here is the idea that the reception of new life is impossible without God's initiative to restore a people to Himself.

Death, in the sense that Paul used the word here, refers especially to condemnation. The present state of affairs that afflicts all human beings 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 accompanied 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. So, it is natural for Paul to attribute the Colossians' original state of death to their sins and uncircumcised sinful natures. The reference to these saints having been made alive is synonymous with the idea of being resurrected (vs.12), and this resurrection is said to have been concurrent with the forgiveness they had received.

Contrary to the conclusions of some, the Greek term “*paraptoma*” (*trespass*) does not carry any essentially different sense of meaning than the more common term “*harmatia*”, therefore, the use of this less common term does not imply a subtle distinct meaning but simply reflects a verbal choice by the author.

Starting here and going through verse fifteen, Paul grammatically arranged three participial modifiers which expressed additional benefits that the believer receives in addition to being made alive in Christ:

1. “*having forgiven*” (vs.13)
2. “*having wiped out*” (vs.14)
3. “*having disarmed*” (vs.15)

Though some interpreters see these things as what results from being made alive in Christ, it is unlikely that Paul intended such a specific relationship between these things. It is far more likely that Paul only intended to convey that those who are made alive also receive forgiveness and victory over their enemies. Therefore, the action of the aorist participle “*having forgiven*” is understood to have occurred at the same time as the main verb “*made alive together*”, since forgiveness is one element of the complex set of actions that takes place at the time of conversion.

With these participles Paul used a series of metaphors to picture what God did in Christ to provide the saints with forgiveness of sins. In verse fourteen he wrote, “*having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.*” The Greek verb translated as “*wiped out*” was often used in Paul’s time to designate the washing out of a piece of papyrus so that it could be used again. Ancient documents were commonly written either on papyrus (a paper like material made from the bull rush plant) or vellum (which was made from an animal’s hide). The ink that was used at that time had no acid in it, so it did not soak into the reading material. Since the ink remained on the surface of the writing material it could be wiped off if a scribe wanted to reuse the material. Paul used this word in the form of an aorist participle. In Paul’s original writing, this participle is not connected to the preceding clause with a conjunction. This indicates that it should be interpreted as being subordinate to the previous participle translated as “*having forgiven*” upon which it is grammatically dependent. The action of this participle coincides with that participle and may also be understood as expressing the means by which the forgiveness was achieved.

But how are we to interpret the wording “*the handwriting of requirements*”? The first word in this phrase is rendered into English quite literally, as this is a compound word made up of the terms for “*hand*” and “*writing*”. It would refer to anything that was handwritten, like a document or a certificate. The second word in Greek, the one translated as “*requirements*” is the source of the English word “*dogma*”. The word basically refers to any organized and purposely arranged list of rules or codes. Therefore, the word itself is very general and could be used to refer to a wide variety of things that imposed rules, requirements or decrees. The question then is what exactly was Paul referring to here in using this descriptive phrase? Some interpreters suggest that Paul was referring to the decrees that the

false teachers were imposing on their converts. In support of this conclusion these interpreters argue that this same word was used with this meaning in verse twenty of this chapter. Since these two usages are so close to one another, they conclude that the word must have the same meaning in both verses. However, this argument is not as convincing as it might sound. Since the word had such a general meaning, it could naturally be used multiple times in the same context to refer to different lists of rules or requirements. The only way to know for sure is to see how the word is used in its context. If we examine its use in verse fourteen, it becomes clear that the list does not relate to something the false teachers were doing, it related to what Christ did on the cross. Clearly, the illegitimate requirements of these false teachers had nothing to do with what Christ had done on the cross. Because the idea is that His death on the cross erased whatever this list of requirements was. The context indicates that the erasing of this handwritten list had something to do with Paul's elaboration on the subject of the forgiveness of sins that believers had received through the death of Christ. The overwhelmingly best corollary in that culture to the picture Paul creates here is the idea of a bond of indebtedness (which was something similar to a modern IOU). These written bonds had to be signed by the debtor as an acknowledgment of his debt. The document was then given to the one to whom the debt was owed. This explains what Paul was using from his culture as a metaphor, but what was this metaphor meant to represent in Paul's teaching in this passage? The only answer that makes good theological sense is that this listing of the terms of indebtedness was meant to illustrate the claims of God's law against sinful human beings. Even though a strict identification with the Mosaic Law cannot be definitively proven from the text itself, it would definitely have been something that would have come to mind immediately for both Jewish and Christian audiences as the obvious source of the listings of humanity's moral obligations to God. In addition, this sort of reference fits perfectly within the pattern of Paul's teaching. Elsewhere Paul states that the law was the means by which God makes us conscious of sin (Rom.3:20), that the law is what brings wrath (Rom.4:15), that the law testifies to one's failure to fulfill God's will (Rom.3:23), it therefore could very easily be understood as a record of debt that testifies against us. In a broader sense, if applied in principle to Gentiles who had never heard the Mosaic Law, this certificate of debt could be said to represent the law to which their consciences assented, but which they themselves violated (Rom.2:14-15). But in this letter, written to professing Christian, this metaphor was certainly meant to bring to mind the Mosaic Law. Based on the customs of the day regarding how such documents were composed, this list of requirements would be equivalent to an admission of guilt in regard to having violated the terms of God's moral requirements. And this is precisely what is taught in various portions of the New Testament, that human beings have come under God's curse because they had not kept all of God's laws all the time (Gal.3:10; Jas.2:10). The idea pictured in the imagery is that all humans had, as it were, signed an IOU promising God perfect obedience, and this document has come to stand against us because of the commandments of God that we have failed to keep. When Paul wrote that the

handwriting of requirements was taken out of the way, he was not saying that the Law ceased to have its function as God's standard, rather he was saying that our violations of that standard had been erased, resulting in their being no charges of sin that remained. The imagery depicts the crucifixion of Christ that accomplished the full cancellation of our moral/spiritual debt to God, conveying that Christ took upon Himself the penalty that we were under because of our disobedience, and that His death fully satisfied God's necessary demand for due punishment of that disobedience.

In regard to this handwritten list of requirements, Paul added that it "*that was against us, which was contrary to us*". The second phrase "*which was contrary to us*" extends the former "*that was against us*" by emphasizing the open hostility of God that resulted from the violation of the list of requirements. This language emphasized the negative verdict of the list by stating it twice; it stood against us and condemned us (more literally was opposed to us).

In completing the thought, Paul wrote that "*And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross*" (vs.14c). In this metaphor, the thing that was nailed to the cross was likely a reference to the list of charges for which the criminal was being executed. In a sense, this list could be read as a statement that by crucifixion, the criminal's debt to society was cancelled since he was paying for his crime. And the continued application of the metaphor was that the sinner's moral indebtedness to God was cancelled by the redemptive work of Christ. Another possibility is envisioning the aforementioned list of indebtedness (pictured as a financial IOU) being nailed to the cross to illustrate in a very creative way that would help the Colossians internalize the reality of the forgiveness that results from Christ's death on the cross.

In this verse Paul was not speaking of two acts that were performed, first erasing and then taking away, but rather the two metaphorical ideas represent the overall salvation of an individual. This dual metaphor conveyed with emphasis the idea that the forgiveness that Christians enjoy in Christ is complete and definite.

God annulled the Law when His Son satisfied its demand of perfect obedience, bore its curse, and fulfilled its shadows, its types, and ceremonies. This does not mean that the moral teachings of the Law have lost their significance for believers. They still represent God's moral will. What has happened is that believers have been discharged from the Law viewed as a code of rules and regulations, as a means of obtaining eternal life, and as a curse threatening to destroy them.

III. Victory Over Our Enemies: (vs.15)

In this verse we read, "*Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.*" Reflecting a key concern in this letter, the verse brings this section to an end as it began, with a focus on the "*principalities and powers*". To allay the Colossians' fears of the threats and influence of evil angelic powers, Paul was declaring that God had triumphed over them in Christ. This passage represents the most elaborate description of Christ's defeat of the powers in all the letters attributed to Paul. It is not exactly clear just

why Paul chose to mention these principalities and powers in the present connection. It is possible that the immediately preceding statement of the abrogation of the Law as our impersonal accuser may have led to this reference to our personal accusers, namely the evil angels. That would certainly be a very natural transition, and similar to what we find in Romans chapter eight.

Though some interpreters suggest that these “*principalities and powers*” are good angels who accompany and praise Christ in His triumphal procession, this is highly unlikely as it would require that Paul was using the titles in a way that contradicts his use of these titles elsewhere in Colossians and in the letter to the Ephesians. In verse ten Paul had asserted simply that Christ was the head of these spiritual powers, but here he described an additional way in which these angelic beings were brought under Christ’s authority. God through the cross of Christ had won a victory over the rebellious powers. To some extent then verse ten and verse fifteen complement one another in the same way as do the earlier verses where the spiritual powers were featured. As the former verses established Christ’s supremacy over the rulers by virtue of creation (vs.16, 20) so in this latter verse Paul expressed the activity by which God through the cross of Christ had pacified those powers. In both texts a rebellion against God’s rule on the part of at least many of these spiritual beings is assumed. The Greek word translated as “*having disarmed*” is in the middle voice, but in this context, it is used to convey an active meaning (though often such forms carry a reflexive meaning) and this understanding is adopted in nearly every modern English version. In Biblical Greek, middle form verbs are often used equivalently to active forms. Since throughout these verses the assumed subject of the verbs is God the Father, and since what is being described relates to the salvation of the saints, it is clear that an active sense of the verb is intended here.

The verb *translated* as “*having disarmed*” literally means to take or strip something off of something or someone. There are no examples of this verb or its cognates being used to specifically mean “*disarm*”. In all three places where Paul used this word group in Colossians, the basic sense is always that of taking off clothes. But the above meaning makes sense in light of the culture of the day. The reference here is to something that was done to evil angels at Christ’s crucifixion. But what was it that Paul had in mind. Or put differently, in what sense were these demonic powers “*stripped*” at the crucifixion of Christ? The wording Paul used here, of stripping off clothes, in a military context, conveyed the metaphorical sense of stripping someone of his power. This metaphorical meaning derived from the practice of Roman generals of stripping captured soldiers of all their armor and clothing and parading them around naked to demonstrate that they were powerless before their Roman conquerors. Even in Old Testament times captives were stripped of most or all of their clothing. Because of this, this action came to symbolize defeat, and for the prophets it signified the judgment of God (Ezek.16:39). This practice then explains the choice to translate the verb as “*having disarmed*”. In the New Testament this idea moves into the realm of last things when the righteous will be clothed with white robes in contrast to the wicked who will stand

stripped and naked under God's judgment. Although Paul gives no explicit indication of the sense in which these angelic beings have been stripped, the implication is that they had been stripped of their power toward Christ and His body. At the same time, however, it is clear that Paul did not conceive of the powers as having been taken off the scene or removed from the day-to-day affairs of life. Neither did Paul see them as having been totally divested of all their power. The overall content of the letter leads us to conclude that the evil powers were impotent toward the Colossian Christians insofar as these Christians recognized and appropriated their authority in Christ. Therefore, the Colossian Christians had the possibility of living in a manner that would be pleasing to God and of resisting the influence and demands of the wayward teachers, even given the reality of supernatural demonic opposition. The fact that the Colossians feared these powers and were tempted to take up the beliefs and practices of the opposing faction implies that they were not automatically immune to the influence of these hostile beings. From Paul's perspective, the Colossians needed to grow in their awareness of their position in Christ, they needed to begin to appropriate this fullness by resisting the opposing teaching and by living a life worthy of Christ. There is a parallel here to something Paul wrote earlier in this passage. As Christians stripped off the domination of indwelling sin at conversion and are thus set free from its power (vs.11). And as Christians continue to strip off the old self to gain even greater experiential freedom from sin in their daily lives (3:9). In a similar way, we are told here that in salvation, God in Christ stripped these angelic powers of their power to exercise control over the saints. What is written here needs to be seen in close connection with what was written previously. God has forgiven all the Colossians' sins, and He has cancelled and removed their moral indebtedness to Him that had previously condemned them. By doing this God utterly and completely removed the ability of the principalities and powers to bring just accusations before the heavenly tribunal against us. Yet there is also the sense that they have been proven to be totally ineffectual to thwart God's redemptive activity. Therefore, through Christ's work on the cross He has demonstrated His supremacy over these angelic powers.

Paul also wrote that God had made a spectacle of these angelic powers (vs.15b). The verb translated as "*made a spectacle*" could simply mean to publicize, but in its only other NT usage (Matt.1:19) it clearly conveys the meaning of exposing to public shame, or to disgrace before others in order to set an example, and this is its meaning here as well. But there is debate over how the adverbial phrase in the statement that is translated as "*a public*" is to be interpreted. One view is that the short phrase introduces a slightly different idea, and the best rendering would be: "*expose publicly in a bold way*". A second view is that the phrase reinforces the idea inherent in the verb itself, and thus it should be rendered: "*expose publicly in a public way*". The second option seems to be the better one, as the idea in such spectacles was to make a dramatic demonstration to powerfully convey the idea of the victor's supremacy over the conquered. The idea in this verse is that God through Christ exposed the principalities and powers to public disgrace by

exhibiting them to the universe as His captives. The language here came from a common practice in warfare in the first century called a conquerors triumphal procession. In these processions, a victorious king or general would include in his victory parade, captives of war from the enemy he had defeated. They were exhibited in embarrassing ways to enhance the glorious reputation of that victorious king or general. In Paul's metaphor, the enemies are the spiritual principalities and powers which had been disarmed by God through the redemptive work of Christ. In a traditional Roman triumphal procession captives were led to their death, but the analogy here is not meant to be taken that far. The focus in the imagery is simply on the complete victory that God had won over the powers of darkness. The focus of Paul's discussion is not the fate of the "*principalities and powers*", but on how believers should not be deceived by these spirits. The Colossians were to understand that these beings had been stripped of their power and were thus no longer a threat. Therefore, to worship such defeated and humiliated beings would be the height of folly. The cross was the answer to the heretics and their insistence on worshipping angelic beings. Through the Lord Jesus and His work on the cross, God cancelled the believer's debt, and defeated Satan and his fallen angels. Though we still wrestle against the forces of evil daily, ultimately, they cannot be victorious over us because Christ, the crucified and risen Lord of all reigns supreme in the universe. To be united with Christ is to be forever free from Satan's dominion. The death of Christ brings transformation, pardon, and victory. That adds up to complete salvation with complete forgiveness and triumph. No wonder Paul said may it never be that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ (Gal.6:14).

This teaching suggests that a paradox played out on the cross. Jesus hung naked and disgraced, dying publicly for sinners. As this was unfolding, the evil forces assumed that they had triumphed. However, in reality through this act of both sacrifice and triumph God was disgracing these evil beings. God turned the tables on the demonic powers.

Different translations render the final words in this verse in different ways. The Greek phrase "*en auto*" is sometimes rendered as "*in it*" (NKJV, NIV, NRSV, NET) indicating a reference to the cross, while others render it as "*in Him*" (NASU, ESV, CSB, NLT) indicating that it refers to Christ. The better rendering is that the pronoun refers to the cross.

What seems to have been happening in Colossae is that the false teachers were feeding on a widespread ancient fear of various celestial spirits. In light of this, they were insisting that believers needed to follow legalistic rules in order to find freedom from the power of these spirits. In response Paul was insisting that God sent Christ to the cross as a final and definitive means to take care of the sin problem. Christ's death removed any power that these evil spirits might have had over us. The victory celebrated and displayed in the resurrection and ascension of Christ is what believers need to grasp. Christ's authority over the rulers and authorities is manifested in the powerful imagery in this verse.

The message proclaimed by Paul to the Colossians remains the one message of hope to men and women in frustration and despair. Christ, crucified and risen, is Lord of all: all the forces of the universe are subject to Him, not only the benign ones, but the hostile ones as well. They are all subject to Him as the one through whom they were created, but these hostile forces have also been subjected to the one by whom they were conquered. Therefore, to be united to Christ is to be liberated from their thralldom, to enjoy perfect freedom, to overcome the powers of evil through participation in His victory. The redemption that is in Christ Jesus is a cosmic redemption. The healing that it provides reaches out to the farthest bounds of creation, yet it is a personal and particular redemption as well. The conqueror who is enthroned at God's right hand, supreme above the universe, and filling it with His presence, is at the same time enthroned as king in each believer's heart.

Conclusion:

The threat that was going on in Colossae is one that faces all Christians. The nature of this threat can be illustrated by the difference between the legitimate use of advertising, and the abuse of it that takes place so routinely around us in the modern age. Legitimate advertising involves informing people about where they can find things they need or want. The abuse of advertising involves creating the desire in others for things they either don't need or shouldn't want (because gaining it would bring something harmful or destructive into their lives). In the same way, the demonic spirits in service to Satan seek to arouse in people things that will harm them both physically and spiritually. One way in which they do this is to convince people (even professing Christians) that they need some additional spiritual experience or resource in their lives to have a secure relationship with God. At the same time, they seek to convince them that what can be gained in Christ alone is in some way inadequate.

It is a part of fallen human nature to never be satisfied with what we have. Satanic forces through false teachers exploit the vulnerabilities people have because of their fears or desires). The deceptive schemes often involve substituting something good with an evil form of that very thing. Through such tactics these evil spirits convince people to engage in immoral affairs, to neglect their parental responsibilities, to injure others, to cheat others, or in situations like the one that the Colossians faced, to substitute spiritual truth with an attractive sounding lie. The warning for us in our time is to be aware that this threat is present around us, and to equip ourselves with a thorough understanding of the truth so we can protect our minds from spiritual falsehoods.