

# Complete in Christ

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## **Text:**

Colossians 2:8-10

“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.”

## **Introduction:**

As our previous passage contained the central exhortation of the letter, so this passage contains the central warning. Paul has exhorted them to continue living according to all that they had received in Jesus Christ, now he is warning them to not be misled by anything that is not “according to Christ.” These warnings were given in a specific context. There were real people among them who were teaching things that would mislead them, and if they were misled they would lose the joy and the hope of the gospel, and lose their effectiveness as God’s people. The threat to the Colossians seems more potential than real. Unlike the Galatians they do not seem to have accepted the false teaching, but its very presence among them gives rise for concern.

The passage we are considering contains the warning: “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”, and the reason for the warning: “for (because) in him (Christ) the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.” It is on the reason for the warning that I want to concentrate. We are warned to not let anything lead us away from Christ. As we saw last time, this means all that Christ is, and all that Christ taught; Christ as he was delivered to us and as we received him. The reason for this, Paul says, is that all that God has for us is in him, on the one hand, and that, on the other hand, we have everything we need in him. Verse 10 is characterized by the double use of “in him”, and the double use of the word “full”, “fullness”. All the fullness of deity is in Christ, and we have been “filled” in him. There is nothing lacking. All that God has for us he has communicated to us in Jesus Christ, and we experience the fullness of God’s favor and blessing by being in him, and by our obedience to him. To depart from him in any way is to put ourselves in danger.

The word “fullness” was probably a catchword for the false teachers. As stated earlier, we can’t be certain of the nature of the false teachings, but there are things in the text of Colossians that do give us some hints. One of them is Paul’s insistence on Christ’s creation of, and absolute authority over all spirit beings. This corresponds to what he says here when he says that “all the fullness of deity” dwells in Christ. One of the ideas that was current in the first century world and was probably a part of the false teaching in Colosse was that God, who was perfect spirit, could not have directly created the material world, but that there were a series of emanations from him each containing some of the divine qualities, but none of them being equal with deity, who were eventually responsible for the creation of the world. That may seem like a strange idea to us, but it was a problem in the early church. Paul emphasized this idea in a different way when he says in I Timothy 2:5: “There is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus.” This passage contains one of the strongest affirmations of the deity of Christ in the New Testament, for it clearly states that all the fullness of the divine nature, or essence, resides in Christ.

## I. Paul’s experience

We may illustrate the truth of what Paul is saying by his own testimony. We read that testimony in our responsive reading from Philippians chapter 3. Remember he has told us that we are completed, or fulfilled in Christ. What he means by that is that our lives have a meaning, that we are here for a reason, and that we only find that reason, and sense of fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Paul, himself, had sought to be fulfilled or completed through his own efforts. This is what he tells us in Phil. 3 when he says that if anyone has reason to boast in his own achievements he does. If it were possible to be fulfilled by human effort he says, I would have been.

The great change came to Paul, as it does to all of us, through an encounter with the living Christ. For Paul it was dramatic. He came to see that all of his efforts were useless; that Christ was everything. This is the reason he says in Phil. 3 that he considered everything that he had considered important before his conversion as nothing, but had willingly renounced it all to have Christ, and to be found in him. Indeed, he says that his one goal in life is “to know Christ”. All he has comes from Christ; all he does is for Christ. Can we wonder that he pleads with us not to be lead astray by anything that is not of Christ.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century German theologian and New Testament scholar Frederic W. H. Meyer tried to express the centrality of Christ for Paul in a book-length poem entitled *St. Paul*. Here are the first and last stanzas:

Christ! I am Christ's! and let the name suffice you,

Ay, for me too he greatly hath sufficed:

Lo with no winning words I would entice you,

Paul has no honour and no friend but Christ.

Yea thro' life, death, thro' sorrow and thro' sinning

He shall suffice me, for he hath sufficed:

Christ is the end, for Christ was the beginning,

Christ the beginning, for the end is Christ.

## II. Blaise Pascal

Many witnesses could be called who would give resounding "amens" to what Paul says about Christ. Allow me to call just one. A man, who like Paul, was one of the most brilliant and gifted men of his age, who like Paul, went to great extremes to be filled without Christ, only to discover, after an unexpected encounter with Christ, that only Christ is the solution to man's problem of existence. Blaise Pascal dominated his century, the 17<sup>th</sup> (1623-1662). To this day his writings are studied in not just one field of learning, but three, mathematics, philosophy, and theology. Among other achievements he invented the first calculating machine, and the first public transportation system.

Pascal is often quoted as having said something that takes us to the heart of our subject, and to the heart of his spiritual experience: "There is a God-shaped vacuum in every man that only God can fill." This cannot actually be traced in any of his writings, even though it is frequently quoted, but it is a concise summary of what he says very eloquently in *Pensée* 425. Here is a part of it:

"All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and others avoiding it, is the same desire in both attended with different views. They will never take the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even those who hang themselves.

And yet after such a great number of years, no one without faith has reached the point to which all continually look. All complain, princes and subjects, noblemen and commoners, old and young, strong and weak, learned and ignorant, healthy and sick, of all countries, all times, all ages, and all conditions.

A trial so long, so continuous, and so uniform, should certainly convince us of our inability to reach the good by our own efforts. But example teaches us little. No resemblance is ever so perfect that there is not some slight difference; and hence we expect that our hope will not be deceived on this occasion as before. And thus, while the present never satisfies us, experience dupes us, and from misfortune to misfortune leads us to death, their eternal crown.

What is it then that this desire and this inability proclaim to us, but that there was once in man a true happiness of which there now remains to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present? But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself.

He only is our true good and since we have forsaken Him, it is a strange thing that there is nothing in nature which has not been serviceable in taking His place; the stars, the heavens, earth, the elements, plants, cabbages, leeks, animals, insects, calves, serpents, fever, pestilence, war, famine, vices, adultery. And since man has lost the true good, everything can appear equally good to him, even his own destruction, though so opposed to God, to reason, and to the whole course of nature.”

Now Pascal first sought happiness in his scientific achievements, which were great. Later he came to an intellectual conviction of the existence of God and made a great effort at being religious, but he was still filled with pride and himself, as can be demonstrated from his writings prior to his conversion. Then suddenly on the night of November 23, 1654, eight years before his death at 39 years of age he experienced the grace of God and the conversion of his heart to Jesus Christ. He recorded it, but never spoke of its details to anyone during his life time. The written document which is known as “memorial” was found sewn in the lining of his jacket by a servant after his death. It states:

“The eve of Saint Chrysogonus martyr and others.

From about half-past ten in the evening,

until about half-past midnight.

Fire.

The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.

Not of the philosophers and intellectuals.

Certitude, certitude, feeling, joy, peace.

The God of Jesus Christ.

My God and your God.

Forgetfulness of the world and of everything except God.

One finds oneself only by way of the directions taught in the gospel.

The grandeur of the human soul.

Oh just Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you.

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.

I have separated myself from him.

They have abandoned me the fountain of living water.

My God, will you leave me?

This is eternal life, that they know you the one true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ.

I have separated myself from him. I have run away from him, renounced him, crucified him.

May I never be separated from him.

One preserves oneself only by way of the lessons taught in the gospel.

Renunciation total and sweet.

And so forth.”

Allow me to point out two or three things in this text recounting Pascal's conversion that illustrate what Paul is telling us in our text. First, at the end of himself, Pascal discovers Christ in the same way that Paul had on the road to Damascus. Here is what one of his biographers says:

“Consciousness of his sinfulness leads Pascal straight to the Redeemer, surely the most moving words in the “Memorial” – if not in all literature – are the simple words ‘Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ.’ Encounter with these central existential realities of God’s grace in Christ wrings from Pascal the spontaneous prayer, ‘let me never be separated from Him!’ It would be the fundamental prayer of all his remaining days, the last words his lips would phrase as he lay on his deathbed eight years later. And he is careful to add – as a sequel to an earlier thought in this remarkable transcript – that ‘we keep hold of Him only by the way taught in the gospel.” (Albert N. Wells, *Pascal’s Recovery of Man’s Wholeness*, p. 96)

Wells points out two things that are noteworthy in light of what we have been seeing in Colossians. First, that it is in Christ that we find peace and salvation. Second, that we maintain that relationship with Christ, and the peace of Christ through faithful obedience – “As you have received Christ, so walk in him.”

Finally I would point out that as in the case of Paul and all true conversions that bring joy and resolution and meaning and orientation to life, Pascal recognized in his conversion a pure act of grace. He understood that it was something beyond him, beyond nature, that he had no inherent powers by which he could come to a heart knowledge of God. God must reach out to him, and he had in Jesus Christ. He explains this later in *Pensée 793* where he demonstrates that the difference between the spiritual or supernatural order and the intellectual order is as great as the difference between the physical order and the order of thought. He begins by saying:

“The infinite distance between body and mind is a symbol of the infinitely more infinite distance between mind and charity; for charity is supernatural.”

After giving numerous examples to illustrate his point he closes by saying:

“All bodies, the firmament, the stars, the earth and its kingdoms, are not equal to the lowest mind; for mind knows all these things and itself; and these bodies know nothing.

All bodies together, and all minds together, and all their products, are not equal to the least feeling of charity. This is of an order infinitely more exalted.

From all bodies together, we cannot obtain one little thought; this is impossible, and of another order. From all bodies and minds we cannot produce a feeling of true charity; this is impossible, and of another and supernatural order.”

### **Conclusion:**

It is interesting that Pascal spent much of the last part of his life defending the Christian faith. He did this both by opposing the false teaching of the Jesuits in the *Lettres Provinçales*, and by giving a reasoned defense of the faith in the *Pensées*. His motivation was not unlike that of the Apostle Paul in our text. He had come to understand that it is only in Christ that we find wholeness – we are “complete in him” and nowhere but in him. Once he had understood that, he, like the Apostle Paul, expended all his remaining energy defending the truth of Christ and the truth of the Gospel, and his work continues to bear fruit even to the present.

Do you see what I am saying? You cannot make up your own faith. Do not let anyone lead you astray. The truth is in Jesus. All of God is in him, and all that God has for you, he communicates to you through him. It is only as we know him and walk in his ways – “As you have received Christ, walk in him” – “one preserves oneself only by the lessons taught in the Gospels” – that we experience healing from sin, and the wholeness for which we were created. Do not let anyone lead you astray by anything that is “not according to Christ”.