

CHRIST'S COSMIC VICTORY

Studies in Colossians

Study 2

Trevor Faggotter

COLOSSIANS 2

2:1 For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face. 2 I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

4 I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments. 5 For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ. 6 As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. 8 See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. 9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, 10 and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. 11 In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; 12 when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

13 And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, 14 erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. 15 He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

16 Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. 17 These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. 18 Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, 19 and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God. 20 If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, 21 "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch"? 22 All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. 23 These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.

BACKGROUND BRIEFLY

The Apostle Paul writes from prison (4:3; 4:18) to the faithful brothers and sisters in Colossae (in modern day Turkey). The reason for his deep concern has probably been made known to him by Epaphras (4:12; 1:7), a local, who has been instrumental in establishing the church. It appears from the letter that false teachers have been insisting on the worship of angels (2:18), and elitist visions and esoteric practises. Paul is clear that their faith in God is through the work of Jesus Christ alone. He is to be regarded as the pre-eminent one, in all things. He holds first place.

F. F. Bruce writes:

“Against the implied denial of the biblical doctrine of creation, Paul has already insisted that the universe was brought into being in and through, and for Christ. Against the enticing offer of a higher wisdom, he has emphasised that all treasures of

wisdom and knowledge are accessible in Christ. Against the belief in an indefinite series of intermediaries between God and our world, he sets forth Christ as the personal embodiment of the fulness of deity. Against the idea that these intermediaries should receive some need of homage from those who have to approach God through them, he affirms that they have all been conquered by Christ and can no longer claim the allegiance of those whom Christ has redeemed. The whole body of teaching which the Colossian Christians were being urged to accept was a refurbishing of old patterns of thought and life which Christ had rendered obsolete; it should receive no countenance from men and women who had died with Christ and risen with him to newness of life.”¹

Let's take a look at what the problems seem to have been:

8 See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. 9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, 10 and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority (Colossians 2:8-10).

LIFE IN THE COSMOS

Humanity's understanding of the world—the cosmos—and of our role within it comes to us through revelation. God speaks: Humanity hears. That revelation consists of purposefulness—including marriage and procreation—and a participation in vocational fruitfulness (Genesis 1:28), within the plan of God. This way of life is given to human beings from the outset, and is indeed innate within the creation:

19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse (Romans 1:19-20).

Sin's entry into the world (Genesis 3:1ff.), and its detrimental effects upon the human race is an all-pervading matter. It has affected our lives so fully. It is rebellion against the plan of God, and it involves deep sadness, shame, guilt and confusion, causing a deep darkness in the human heart, where a false way ahead is constructed—an exchange of the truth for a lie. Guidance is sought from the darkness:

21 for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools (Romans 1:21-22).

In rejecting the knowledge of God, human beings opt for a distorted view of life, where images (idols) of life reign. It takes the Holy Spirit's revelation of the wonder of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, to break the hold of satanic evil power over the minds and hearts of a sinful human race. Our view of the world is changed when we see Jesus is the Lord of life and death, and that he is far above all things, and our saviour from idols, for our good. *All things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things* (Colossians 1:16b-17a).

¹ F. F. Bruce, TNICOTN, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1984, p. 97.

In a book entitled *Lords of the Earth*, by Don Richardson² there is a very sad, but true story, about the ancient religious traditions of the Yali tribe in the jungles of Irian Jaya. A small lovely young girl, named Nindik, accidentally intruded upon the sacred ground of the *kembu* spirits, and her punishment was, that she must be hurled to her death, into the Heluk River below—or *Kembu's* blessing would be withdrawn from all the activities of the tribe. Their plans to kill and eat the flesh of a human being from the neighbouring tribe across the other side of the river would also be thwarted, if her life was spared. She was thus hurled into the Heluk River, to her death. Into this cannibalistic tribal community, came Stanley Albert Dale, a missionary with the news of the true God's great grace towards humanity, in Jesus Christ. In 1966 Stan Dale laid down his life, unto death, in order to bring Christ's love to bear on the Yali people, and to bring about freedom from their horrible bondage to evil *spirits*.

In a world where *New Age* practices and mystery religions have made a resurgence people continue to indulge their hearts in association with occultic evil powers. We are faced with 6 major *world views*³ in which people find themselves participants. Even atheist, materialistic world views are filled with idols, and idols here are links with powers which deceive people to live by *false images* of utopian hopes, and mere dreams of pleasure and enjoyment, in the immediate future, apart from God. In this way, all become slaves to the *elemental spirits of the universe*.

Christ is the living *image* of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15).

ELEMENTAL SPIRITS OF THE UNIVERSE: *STOICHEIA*

What are these *elemental spirits of the universe*? (NRSV) It is also translated *the rudiments of the world* in the KJV. The Greek word is: στοιχειον, *stoicheion*, or *stoicheia* (Colossians 2:8, 20). There seem to be two interpretive options (which may ultimately be melded into the one):

1. A false system of 'elementary teaching' regarding basic Jewish or pagan taboos for living. (We could consider our own behavioural do's and don'ts).
2. A false cult which held people in bondage to cosmic evil powers, by thinking in terms of fate, and the placating of powers through certain practises.

Ralph Martin says: 'The basic meaning of *stoicheia* is objects which stand in a row or which form a series . . . The most natural example of these objects is letters of the alphabet, which stand together in a line to make continuous writing.'⁴

² Don Richardson, *Lords of the Earth*, Regal Books, 1977.

³ David A. Noebel, *Understanding the Times*, Summit Ministries, 2006 lists the other 5 major world views we, as Christians, contend with each day:

1. Islam
2. Secular Humanism
3. Marxism-Leninism
4. Cosmic Humanism (Hinduism; Buddhism)
5. Post-Modernism.

⁴ Ralph Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, New Century Bible, Oliphants, 1974, p. 10.

Reference is also made, elsewhere, to the rank and file of the armed forces, all lined up. We can also think of them, as the ABC's, the building blocks of the universe. Some thinkers include the notions of *earth, fire, water and air*.

In Galatians 4 we find the same phrase:

3 So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the **elemental** spirits of the world.⁵

8 Formerly, when you did not know God, you were **enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods**. 9 Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly **elemental spirits**? How can you want to be enslaved to them again 10 You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years. 11 I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted.

One could gain the wrong idea, that a person must almost become a Jew as a Christian. Circumcision was being deemed necessary. Paul shouted, 'No!'

In Galatians the problem was that Peter and other people who were Christians were confusing the issues of grace, and law, and it was seeming almost implicit that new Christians had to virtually become like Jews. They had to get their building blocks of life all lined up, in the correct order: *stoicheia*.

This was an affront to the message of God's grace alone. Grace was and is, all-sufficient for a person to receive by repentance and faith, and so relate to God. What sources then, may be attacking this new Christian freedom? Demonic powers?

Behind the bullying effects of law for some attempt at self-justification, is this idea of what we call 'getting your act together'. Getting your act together, can only be giving the appearance of wisdom (Colossians 3:23).

Ralph Martin: 'To the very real problem of man's relation with the cosmic powers in the first century, represented by the cult of astrology, one answer was given in terms of a placating of the star-deities and a purification by ascetic practices'. These 'regulations' (cf. 2:20) held out the possibility for a person to escape the mesh of inevitability and to break from imprisonment in 'matter' and ascend to the higher regions of 'spirit':⁶

If with Christ you died to the **elemental** spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations (Colossians 2:20).

If we worship idols, we are having fellowship with demons. It is implicit.

Phrase: Circumcision of the heart (Deuteronomy 30:6; cf. Colossians 2:11), of Christ.

Christ disarms the power of demonic bullying in terms of legal failure (2:13-15). As we worship Christ, as pre-eminent, we have fellowship with the living God.

⁵ Angels. Reference is made in Galatians to the law being 'ordained through angels by a mediator' (Galatians 3:19).

⁶ Martin, pp. 11-12.