

# Protect Yourself

*March 16, 2025*

## Lesson Summary

### **Main Passages**

Colossians 2:4-23

### **Session Outline**

1. Warning (Colossians 2:4-8)
2. Truth (Colossians 2:9-15)
3. Transformation (Colossians 2:16-23)

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### **Theological Theme**

To protect ourselves from false teaching, we need to understand the truth of the gospel and what Jesus has done for us. When we know the truth, we can more easily spot the lie.

### **Call to Action**

We are surrounded by empty philosophies and manmade religions, so we need to be aware. Can we identify them? Do we know what they are? Do we know how they lead us away from the gospel, and do we see how they fall short to provide what we need most and what only Jesus has provided for us in the gospel?



## Leader Guide

# Protect Yourself

### Introduction

On a 2019 Avianca flight, a passenger (allegedly) sustained an injury when he was “struck by a metal serving cart.” He sued. When his lawyers filed a response in 2023, they dutifully cited six different cases to show precedent, including *Shaboon v. Egypt Air* and *Varghese v. China Southern Airlines*. In a world where McDonald’s gets sued for coffee being hot, this sounds legitimate, right?

Unfortunately, it wasn’t. The court found that the cited cases didn’t exist, and their filing contained “bogus judicial decisions with bogus quotes and bogus internal citations.”<sup>1</sup> It turns out that one of the plaintiff’s lawyers had used ChatGPT to research, and the AI chatbot hallucinated the supporting cases.<sup>2</sup>

The lawyer, like many professionals, had been encouraged to explore the usefulness of AI, but he hadn’t fact checked its responses. He assumed what ChatGPT told him was true, and in turn unintentionally presented the court with false information.

He trusted the wrong source and got burned. Not only was he misled, but he also almost misled a lot of other people by giving out information he thought was factual. Misinformation is, unfortunately, a big concern in this digital age, but it’s not a new phenomenon. The Colossian believers faced a similar problem. They heard false information, and they needed to recognize it wasn’t true, not only for the sake of their own faith but also for the sake of anyone they might share the gospel with. They needed to know the true gospel. Paul sought to help them better understand.

- ❓ How might misinformation still be a problem in the church today?
- ❓ Why is this such a danger?

## Session Summary

In our passage today, Paul continued to help the Colossians understand the difference between the truth of the gospel and the lies they heard from false teachers. He warned them that some arguments that sound good and plausible aren't and emphasized the truth of Christ and the gospel.

### 1. Warning (Colossians 2:4-8)

- ❓ Paul mentioned being deceived by "arguments that sound reasonable" (v. 4). Do you think that is still a problem for us today? Why or why not?
- ❓ What does it mean to be taken captive by deceit and false arguments (v. 8)?

The header in the *CSB Study Bible* for this section of text is "Christ versus the Colossian Heresy." This header wasn't a part of Paul's original letter—it was added later as a helpful study tool—but it is the perfect summary for our text today. Paul was dealing with this issue in the Colossian church: countering the heretical teachings the congregation heard with the truth of the gospel of Christ.

"Heresy" can be defined in different ways but often refers not just to the spread of false biblical information but implies intent to deceive. We certainly get the impression of intent based on accounts we read in the New Testament. The false teachers in Colossae seemingly wanted to turn the believers there away from the true gospel. We don't know for sure the nature of this teaching, but commentators have made educated guesses:

**Hellenistic Teachings:** This Greek influence included the Gnostic school of thought. They believed the world was not created by God and that the physical body was evil, but the spirit was good. The latter was especially problematic because their belief conflicted with the truth that Jesus was both fully man and fully God.<sup>3</sup>

**Jewish Teachings:** There was a problematic movement in the early church that taught Gentiles would first need to convert to Judaism to become Christians. One sticking point we read about in the New Testament is the issue of circumcision. The Judaizers advocated that Gentiles had to first be circumcised according to Jewish law to become Christians, but this was not necessary. We don't and can't earn our salvation through our works. We are saved through grace by faith in Jesus alone (Ephesians 2:8-9). The Colossian church was mostly comprised of Gentiles, which could have put them at higher risk for believing this false teaching.<sup>4</sup>

### Jesus is God

Paul wanted to make sure the Colossians did not follow those who set forth Christ as merely an important visionary or religious leader. Christ is uniquely divine and preeminent.

Paul had explained the truth of the gospel to help prevent the Colossian congregation from believing persuasive false arguments they encountered.

For Paul to be with them in spirit (v. 5) was no doubt a comfort. Paul praised them for still being “well ordered” (v. 5). We get the sense that, though they were in spiritual danger from the threat of the false teachers, they had not yet given in. They were still showing faith in the gospel.

Paul’s proclamation that they “received Christ Jesus as Lord” (v. 6) was a profound debunking of false teaching. The Jews who did not accept Jesus as Messiah denied that He was God. The Gnostics, with their skewed physical body versus spirit beliefs, did not believe Jesus could have been fully human. Both were wrong. Christ Jesus was fully man and fully God. Paul encouraged the Colossians to continue to walk with Jesus in some specific ways (vv. 6-7):

**“Being rooted and built up in him”:** Remember Jesus’s teaching about the vine in John 15? In this analogy, He is the vine, and we are the branches. The branches can only exist and produce fruit when connected to the vine. We must be rooted in Jesus to make that happen. Paul presented a similar idea to the Ephesian church in Ephesians 3:17. When we are rooted in Jesus, He’s the first place we go and our number one priority.

When we are firmly rooted in our Savior, God builds up our faith and works powerfully in our lives. As branches on Jesus’s vine, lovingly tended by the Father to produce fruit in abundance (John 15:2), we are built up continuously. We grow and grow under His care. We don’t ever “arrive”; this is a life-long choice and pursuit.

**“Established in the faith”:** When our faith is established, we are like the house built on the rock from Matthew 7. When our foundation in Christ is firm, we can weather storms that will come our way with the comfort, peace, and perspective that comes only through knowing Jesus. The Colossian believers were in their own storm, and Paul wanted their foundation firm enough to weather it.

**“Overflowing with gratitude”:** Giving gratitude to God is seen in many places in the pages of Scripture. It is a solid practice, and one that Paul also recommended in 1 Thessalonians 5:15-16 and Ephesians 5:18-20. God has given us all good things, and we should thank Him for it regularly.

Modern science has identified that gratitude alters your brain chemistry positively.<sup>5</sup> Gratitude is good for us. We show the Lord gratitude because we understand the generous and undeserved gift of what He has done and

continues to do for us and because He deserves it, but we also receive a benefit from showing that gratitude.

Paul gave another warning against the false teaching. Paul's reference to "philosophy" was probably a direct reference to the type of beliefs the false teachers were hoping to spread in this case. He told them to be careful and used the analogy of being taken captive. When we fall into the trap of false teaching, it is like being taken captive. It is hard to break free from.

- ❓ Application: What intentional steps can we take to become more rooted and established in our faith, like Paul mentioned in verse 7? What does this look like in daily life?

## 2. Truth (Colossians 2:9-15)

- ❓ Paul made a couple of points to combat the Colossian heresy in this passage. What do you notice and how did these points serve to reinforce the truth of the gospel?
- ❓ What did Paul say about salvation?

Paul continued to fight the battle of Christ versus the Colossian Heresy. Paul's approach to evangelism and ministry is an example for us. Do you notice his strategy? Paul knew the best defense in the face of lies was the truth, and he explained this in a way that combatted the false teaching they had heard. There's no name calling or mudslinging, just truth.

Paul repeated the point that Jesus is God (v. 9). This combats the Gnostic idea that the body was "evil" and the Jewish belief that Jesus wasn't divine. His note that we have been filled by Jesus (v. 10)—referencing his teaching around the centrality of Christ from chapter 1—means Jesus is all we need. Some translations say, "you have been made complete" (NASB) in Jesus. When we are "filled" by Jesus, we lack nothing. The false teachers could offer no understanding that the Colossians needed.

Paul went on to present truth against the Jewish circumcision argument, a major conversation in the early church. Circumcision was an Old Testament law practiced by Jews. It was mandated by God to set His people apart from the pagans around them. Now that Jesus had come and died on the cross, it was no longer necessary to follow traditional Jewish laws like this one. Remember this congregation was primarily made up of Gentile believers, so many of them would not have been circumcised as children like the Jews. Instead, Paul spoke of the circumcision they did undergo, not of the physical body but of the heart (Romans 2:25-29).

He also referenced baptism. When Jesus issued the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20), his command to baptize showed a break from the Old Testament Law. They didn't need sacrifices, purification, or circumcision anymore. Jesus ushered in something new. It is important to note baptism isn't necessary for salvation—it's an outward sign and declaration we make when we accept the gift of salvation Jesus offers us—but it is commanded for believers as a step of obedience in following Jesus.

Paul went on to paint a beautiful picture of what Jesus did for us on the cross. Before we knew Him, we were dead, living a life of slavery to our sin. Think about the picture that paints for us. We were dead and enslaved. But God had a better plan for us—freedom and forgiveness through Jesus. Once we accept the gift He freely offers, we go from being dead to being alive and free in Him. Jesus paid for all the debt we racked up and the debt we continue to rack up because of our sin. Because Jesus died on the cross for us, our sin is forever and freely forgiven.

- Application: What does Paul's approach teach us about sharing the gospel and making disciples? How can we share similarly in our lives?

### 3. Transformation (Colossians 2:16-23)

- What specific ideas did Paul warn the Colossians against?
- What does it mean to die with Christ but still live as if we belong to the world (v. 20)?

When we become believers, fully rooted in and walking with Jesus, it should transform us and affect the way we live. Paul advocated for this transformation in the Colossian congregation. They knew the truth, and this was to affect the way they reacted to the false teachings they heard.

Paul first spoke against the Judaizers. He told the Colossians Christians not to let anyone judge them for not following Old Testament law that was no longer needed. These laws were a bridge, or “shadow” (v. 17), holding us over until Jesus came. Jesus was always the plan. The “substance” (v. 17) came through Jesus (Matthew 5:17-20).

Paul went on to teach against mysticism (probably mostly Gnostic ideas).<sup>6</sup> Paul warned against the worship of angels, which the false teachers advocated for. Gnostics particularly emphasized “special visions,”<sup>7</sup> which Paul alluded to here. These ideas had no validity, and these people had no authority over the church. Jesus is the head of the church (1:18), which is why understanding Him and what He has done is so important. They were to remain rooted in this truth.

Paul again tackled the idea of earning salvation by satisfying a checklist of items. This legalistic attitude is still a threat in the church today. We can't earn our salvation this way, or at all; salvation is always a gift we don't deserve. Our focus should be less on what we can't do, and more on what we should do—seek and follow Jesus. When we walk with Him, are fully rooted and established in Him, and seek His will for our lives, good works are a natural result.

- ❓ Application: Where do you see opportunity for legalism in the church today? Are there any ways you struggle with this personally? Explain.

## Conclusion

- ❓ How can we tell sound teaching from false teaching? What are some ways we prepare for this?
- ❓ How can encourage one another to walk with Jesus in our everyday lives (v. 6)?
- ❓ Revisit the way Paul described the gospel in verses 13-14. What language can we pull from this passage to share the gospel with another person today?

## Prayer of Response

*Thank God for sending Jesus to die on the cross for us. Thank Him for the truth found in the pages of Scripture and for everything we can learn from it. Ask Him to help you reflect on what you learned today and see how you can make changes based on the truth you studied. Ask Him to give you continued understanding as you continue your journey through Colossians.*

## Memory Verse

*So then, just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in him, being rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, and overflowing with gratitude. — Colossians 2:6-7*

## Additional Resources

- *Exalting Christ in Colossians & Philemon* by Danny Akin
- *Be Complete* by Warren Wiersbe
- *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* by Douglas Moo

## Disciples Multiplying Disciples





# Historical Context of Colossians

## Purpose

Paul wrote to counter the “Colossian heresy” that he considered an affront to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The false teaching is identified as a “philosophy” (2:8), presumably drawn from some Hellenistic traditions as indicated by the references to “his fullness” (1:19); the “elements of the world” (Gk *stoicheia*, 2:8, 20); “wisdom” (2:3, 23); and “self-made religion” (2:23). In addition, the false teaching contained Jewish elements such as circumcision (2:11; 3:11); “human tradition” (2:8); Sabbath observance, food regulations, festival participation (2:16); the “worship of angels” together with “access to a visionary realm” (2:18); and harsh human regulations (2:21–23). Paul addressed this syncretistic philosophy by setting forth a proper understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ and by noting appropriate implications for Christian conduct.

## Author

The Apostle Paul is identified as the author of Colossians (1:1; 4:18). The church fathers unreservedly endorsed Pauline authorship (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, 3.14.1; Tertullian, *De Praescr. Haer.*, 7; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.*, 1.1; cp. Justin, *Dialogue*, 85.2; 138.2). A close reading of Colossians reveals a considerable number of lexical, grammatical, and theological similarities with the other Pauline writings (1:9, 26; 2:11–14, 16, 20–21; 3:1, 3, 5–17). Also favoring the authenticity of Colossians as a letter of Paul is its close connection with Philemon, an epistle widely regarded as Pauline.

## Setting

During his ministry in Ephesus (Ac 19:10), Paul sent Epaphras to spread the gospel in the Lycus Valley. Epaphras subsequently established the church at Colossae (1:7; 4:12–13). The city’s population consisted mostly of Phrygians and Greeks, but it also included a significant number of Jews. The church, likewise, was mostly composed of Gentiles (1:21, 27; 2:13), but it also had Jewish members (2:11, 16, 18, 21; 3:11). When Epaphras (Phm 23) informed Paul of certain heretical teachings that had spread there, Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians as a theological antidote.

## Special Features

Paul’s letter to the church at Colossae is one of the prison letters (along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon). Paul’s desire with this letter was to correct the false teachings that were cropping up in the church. In doing so, Paul presented a clear picture of Jesus Christ as supreme Lord of the universe, head of the church, and the only one through whom forgiveness is possible.

## Extended Commentary

### Colossians 2:4-23

Christ Is Divine (2:6–15)

Paul wanted to make sure the Colossians did not follow those who set forth Christ as merely an important visionary or religious leader. Christ is uniquely divine and preeminent. This is the foundation for true spirituality. The exhortation to live in him [Christ] is surrounded by themes that are clearly a response to the false teaching that threatened them. The context emphasizes “as you received Christ Jesus” and “as you were taught.” Paul obviously considered the false teachers a real threat to the church. He warned, “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy”.

The right antidote for false teaching is right teaching about Christ, in whom “all the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form.” In Christ believers have received all they have and all they need. Christians are not subject to any forms of legalism, nor does legalism do them any good spiritually. Jesus Christ alone is sufficient for our every spiritual need, for all of God’s fullness is in Him. The believers’ covenant relation, their lives, their freedom, and their victory are all in Him.

Captive to Christ (2:16–3:4)

The spiritual life has its dangers and its warnings. Paul warned the church against those who would make the Christian life just a set of rules. The basis for resisting legalism involves focusing on the believer’s relationship with Christ. Believers no longer are captive to religious tradition or human bondage. Instead, they are captive to Christ. In view of this privileged identification with Christ, the church must realize its great responsibility: “Set your minds on things above”.

The life in Christ is a profound reality (see Gal. 2:20). It is a life that draws its existence from the very center of all reality, Jesus Christ Himself. The admonitions that follow are controlled by the thought of the full life that belongs to all who are in Christ (see Rom. 6:4–5).<sup>8</sup>

## References

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2. Bohannon, “Lawyer Used ChatGPT.”
3. Steve W. Lemke, “Hellenism,” in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand et al. (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 746–748.
4. Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Colossians,” in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1892.
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6. Thomas Constable, "Notes on Colossians, 2024 Edition," Soniclight.com, accessed January 8, 2024, <https://soniclight.com/tcon/notes/html/colossians/colossians.htm>.
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8. *Holman Concise Bible Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998).